

Small-Papers Track:

Doing It All



11th ACES National Conference, 2007

Victoria Ballard, South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Gerri Berendzen, Quincy (Ill.) Herald-Whig

Heather Bremer, Florida Today

10 tips for balancing editing and design duties on a hybrid desk

Copy editors who work on hybrid desks know it's easy for the job of editing to fall victim to the job of pagination. The press has to start at a certain time, and if the desk is short-staffed, all of the resources may need to go into the pagination side just to get the paper out on time. But the hybrid copy desk shouldn't let editing take a back seat to design.

Here are some strategies to win back time for editing:

1. Play to your strengths

When time is tight, let the people who are better — and faster — at design do that job. It will free up time for other people on the desk to edit copy.

Put your design-minded people on the big Sunday packages. Put your math-minded people on the complicated bond issue/tax increase stories. As much as possible, having people work on what they are interested in — or getting them interested in what they are working on — will produce better pages and better stories.

2. Design an “edit-only” shift whenever possible

While the staffing level and workflow on your desk might make it necessary to have copy editor/page designers, whenever possible schedule your desk staff so that one person focuses exclusively on editing.

Experiment with separating the duties in one shift, so an editor spends a shift doing nothing but reading copy and writing heads. Or try to at least create larger blocks of time devoted to one task. Editors won't have to change their focus as much, which should improve copy quality and cut down on errors.

3. Make every editor edit

Don't let the “designers” on your desk get too specialized. Make them take shifts where editing is their primary responsibility — it builds their editing skills, which in the long run improves the newspaper overall.

4. Cross train

Ever have one of those days when the only person who has ever coded the stock markets is gone — and it takes another copy editor three times as long to get the job done? When that happens too often, time for editing copy is reduced. For a small staff, when everyone is trained to do every job, the overall flow of work on the desk should improve. And time saved is more time to edit.

5. Get control of deadlines and copy flow

If your newsroom doesn't have story and page deadlines, establish them and enforce them. Lack of deadlines, or lack of deadline enforcement, means hurried editing. And that's bad editing. Get the managing editor on board, then assign someone the task of being the copy flow monitor. A side benefit — when the non-breaking news is taken care of early, you'll have more time to deal with breaking news.

6. Have a weekly planning meeting

Yes it's another meeting. But this one will save you time and stress later.

What this meeting should include is what stories reporters are working on (non-breaking stuff), what's "in the pipeline," what ideas editors have for possible stories and what art elements are planned. The copy desk benefits by getting an idea of what's coming up and having a chance to offer input on story angles, breakout text, design elements, etc. The meeting also has a traffic cop function — making sure too many big things aren't on tap for one day. Planning helps everyone get an idea of what's coming, and if more people share ideas, chances are better that stories and designs will improve.

7. Communicate with the reporters, assigning editors and photographers

One advantage to a smaller staff is a better interaction between all parts of the newsroom. If a reporter is at a meeting that may or may not produce a story on deadline, does that reporter call in to the desk to let copy editors know the status of the story? Or can the copy desk call the reporter to ask? Communication across the lines in the newsroom improves the editing process.

8. Develop a design stylebook

A design stylebook is a good idea on many levels. It promotes consistency in design, so no one is going off in an odd direction. And in the time battle between editing and design, a design stylebook makes sure editors don't have to constantly reinvent the wheel — or constantly bother other editors to get the proper design specs. If editors on a hybrid desk don't have to fight the little battles each day, they'll have more time for editing. A design stylebook is also an invaluable tool for new hires.

9. Set design priorities

Each desk needs priorities for proper allocation of time and resources. Not all pages deserve a "wow" type of presentation that takes an eight-hour shift. By figuring out which pages and projects need the extra time, and which don't, you'll better balance the time needed for editing and design.

10. Take time out for training

Make sure you do staff training on both an in-house and out-of-house level. Use the expertise you have on the premises for short training meetings and for on-the-fly training designed to improve your desk's editing (and design) skills.

Plan brown-bag-lunch discussions of editing issues and use incentives to get people excited about improving headline writing and editing skills, and the overall quality of your publication.

Keep a good desk library, and make sure everyone on the desk knows how to use the Web properly for research.

Send editors to events to events such as the ACES conference, and make sure those editors bring the knowledge back to the staff.