

Addressing concerns of smaller staffs



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Tackling Training

Managers at the nation's mid- and small-sized newspapers would all like to send each editor to an eight-week training program — but forget the cost, who's going to cover the desk while the editor is gone!

Yet that doesn't mean training is impossible ... or should be ignored. Here are some ideas to work in training when there's no time and not enough bodies.

1. TRAINING ON THE FLY

Here are just a few examples of things you can do to train people when you only have a few minutes here and there. (Tip of the hat to Jack Mulkey at the Daily Breeze/Los Angeles Newspaper Group for sharing many of the top 5 tips.)

- 1) Take five to 15 minutes when there's down time to meet with an individual employee and go over one or two aspects of their work, offering suggestions for improvement. Save three or four examples of their work, and discuss how you improved them or would improve them. These sessions are especially valuable with new copy editors.



- 2) Once in awhile, gather as many copy editors as you can for a "Take Ten" session on a particular subject. Zero in on one area that can be covered in about 10 minutes so everyone can get back to work and not feel like you've kept them from making deadline. Examples: How to write a jump headline that pulls in readers; top 10 mistakes that get through the desk. These sessions may take an hour or two to prepare, but those 10 minutes with your staffers will pay off.
- 3) Even the busiest supervisor at a smaller newspaper or publication can do an e-mail style/grammar/usage/design newsletter every now and then. As you edit or proof, squirrel away errors as you run across them. And give grammar/style newsletters to everyone in the newsroom, not just copy editors.
- 4) A short electronic "tip of the day" can be helpful. Just one or two lines in a message will do.
- 5) Tearsheets on editing and design issues do help. But if you're busy, you don't have to do them all yourself – train others you trust how to prepare them.

2. SCOUT OUT LOW-COST TRAINING

In many areas of the country, there is low-cost training available. Start by getting involved with the ACES regional chapters. Many have one-day fall seminars that don't require your publisher to spring for a plane ticket.

Other examples:

Midwest: The Mid-America Press Institute offers at least one editing or design weekend a year (in St. Louis). <http://www.mpinews.org>

South: The Southern Newspaper Publishers Association hosts seminars through the SNPA Foundation. For information on its Traveling Campus, go to <http://www.travelingcampus.com/>

State Press Associations: Many state press groups offer training. For example, the New Jersey Press Association and Pennsylvania Newspaper Association offer one-day training seminars throughout the year and cost is always under \$100. Or the Virginia Press Association offers seminars in copy editing basics.

3. DO A SEMINAR WITHOUT LEAVING THE BUILDING

ONE AT A TIME: Cheap training is out there — it's online.

News University's online training programs allow you to train in downtime because they are self-directed and you can keep coming back to finish ... 10 minutes here and 10 minutes there.

Particularly helpful for young copy editors, or as a brush-up for seasoned vets, is "Cleaning Your Copy." And guess what, it's mostly all free. <http://www.newsu.org>

Or trying training through the Emergency Grammar System.

<http://jcomm.uoregon.edu/~russial/grammar/grambo.html>.

FOR THE WHOLE STAFF: The Internet is loaded with resources you can use to plan an in-house seminar. Be sure to develop handouts, just like the pros do.

In-house seminar tips:

Keep sessions to about an hour, or shorter

Select a comfortable location; don't plan it on deadline.

Consider springing for lunch or bring snacks.

Don't do all the work yourself ... the effort will fall flat. Let senior editors be facilitators; let everyone pick topics.

Other good online resources:

ACES resources: <http://www.copydesk.org/words/>

Institute for Midcareer Copy Editors: <http://www.ibiblio.org/copyed/>

44 tips for greater accuracy: <http://www.unc.edu/~ffee/teaching/accuracy.htm>

The Slot: <http://theslot.com/>

Newsroom 101: <http://www.longleaf.net/newsroom101/>

American Press Institute copy editing site:

http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/pages/toolbox/copy_editing/

Tackling Planning

Planning is essential to a quality newspaper, and will enable the copy desk to do a better job. You may have to take the initiative to get the planning process going in your newsroom. (Special thanks to Lisa McLendon of the Wichita Eagle for sharing some ideas.)

Is there a set “planning meeting” at your paper?

If so, make sure the copy desk is involved.

Also consider having a weekly meeting just for the desk. This meeting can be 15-30 minutes and should not include issues outside of planning. This is a good time to talk about special projects coming up, special sections, times of short staffing, stories in the pipeline, etc..

The 15 minutes you take out of your schedule now could save you hours later. If the planning meeting is for the entire staff, the copy desk benefits from this by getting an idea of what’s coming up and having a chance to offer input on story angles, design elements, etc. Another perspective or a few incisive questions can help out lots of stories. And it can alter the desk to things that area better worked on off deadline instead of on.

Does the copy desk get big stories — and the art — in advance?

If so, put someone to work on it early. It’s much better for reporters, too, since they’ll have time to thoughtfully and thoroughly answer any questions that arise about stories.

If not, politely insist that to give a special story the special treatment it deserves, the copy desk needs the package earlier than five hours before deadline.

Take time out at the beginning of each shift to prioritize

Decide on the top priority every shift. Of course, meeting deadline is on top, but what comes after that.

Can you spend time working up a package at the expense of time spent reading the story? Is there so much wire space that you’ll need to devote extra time (or is there so little that editing everything down is going to take extra time). Is a special section looming that trumps page 4B?

You’ll rarely have time to do everything exactly the way you want, so you’ll have to decide what’s more important, and then stick to your decision and forge ahead.

The right person for the right job

One thing that can help you prioritize is to make sure the right people are doing the right jobs.

If you have a design/editing desk, put your design-minded people on the big Sunday packages and other stories that can benefit from a more creative approach to layout.

Put your math-minded people on the complicated bond issue/tax increase stories. Assign features pages to those people who most enjoy the topic.

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 copy and better pages.