The Elements of Editing

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What Makes A Good Magazine Editor?

The ability to generate good, audience-appropriate ideas.

The ability to communicate those ideas effectively to writers.

An eye/ear for vivid language (cover lines and display copy).

Subject depth knowledge.

The ability to “work copy.”

Getting Started

Write a thorough assignment memo.

Tell the writer what you *think* the focus of the story should be, but be flexible enough to allow her to surprise you what she finds during her reporting.

Your assignment memo should:

- Remind the writer of the tone of your publication.
- Suggest sidebar possibilities
- Suggest sources

If you are working with a young or inexperienced writer:

- Ask him to check in during the reporting
- Ask him to submit a tight “nut graph” or “deck” of no more than 30 words before he begins writing.

What's a "nut graph"?

It's the "so what" graph – the graph that summarizes the story.

"Something is up in major league baseball: velocity. By any name – cheddar, cheese, heater, hummer, dead red, express, number one – the almighty fastball fascinates us like never before, thanks not only to the ubiquity of those throwing it but also to the ubiquity of those clocking it and displaying it. Welcome to Radar Nation, where the ideal velocities resemble temperatures in Phoenix in July."

from "Radar Love" – *Sports Illustrated*, April 4, 2011

“When it comes to Matthew McConaughey, most people’s minds seem made up now, as if there’s nothing to discover… He is the guy without the shirt, a guy who had it too easy…Now after two years off, he’s back with three movies that ought to get him kicked off the Kate Hudson express once and for all.”

From “Damn, It’s Good to See Matthew McConaughey Again,” *Esquire*, April 2011

Working Copy – Dos and Don’ts

- Edit in passes
- Keep the “detached reader” first and foremost in your mind.
- Never make changes because a piece is not written in YOUR voice.

Two Levels of Editing

Macro or “developmental” editing: Also called a “top edit.”

Copy editing or line editing : Nuts and bolts copy correction.

Edit for the “Three Cs”

Clarity

Continuity

Correct

Vigilantly Look For…

Style glitches

Passive Voice

Inconsistent Verbs

Word Echoes

SVO construction

Passive Voice

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Word Echoes

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Subject, Verb, Object Construction

Walking through the forest, he banged his head on a low-hanging branch.

He banged his head on a low-hanging branch while walking through the forest.

Write a detailed revise memo

- If there's no nut graph, fashion one for the writer.
- Provide an outline to help with structure and continuity.
- Offer additional reporting suggestions (don't ask for the needle in the haystack)
- Use the "praise sandwich" format.
- This helps the writer retain a sense of ownership.

Classic Feature Story Structure

The Lede

A scene or anecdote; a concept that will illustrate your theme or angle

Kill the “detached lede”

Most first drafts come in with the wrong lede. Writers get married to a scene or image and rarely have the discipline to ditch it. Your job is to find the “real” lede. It is often buried in the story.

The Nut Graph/Section

In a short piece it states your angle or focus.
It also states the “news” in the piece.
In a longer story, it hints at events to come.

"Until a few years ago, America's military focused on tactics any veteran from World War II could recognize: Identify an enemy, apply all available weapons to kill that enemy, and then withdraw, leaving the nation-building to politicians.

"In the 21st century, though, America's enemies have made an abrupt shift. On a battlefield crowded with civilians, the military struggles to even identify the enemy. Its high-powered, long-range weapons can't distinguish a radical madrassa student from his moderate classmates. So counterinsurgency's aim is not to wipe out the enemy, but rather to drive a wedge between the population and the insurgents. This creates space for a legitimate government to flourish and isolates the extremists for a more surgical kill. And that, in the end, creates fewer enemies."

-from "Is This Any Way to Fight a War?" *Men's Journal*, Jan. 2011

Get the reader invested

Build on the nut graph. Front load the section after the nut with details that give the story context, establish its significance. Find an establishing quote.

“We’ ve essentially turned much of the United States military into a mix between a constabulary force designed to police unhappy Muslims, and a nation-building corps,” says ret. Col. Doug Macgregor.

Background

This is the narrative.

It tells the reader how we got here.

Begins with the earliest, most-relevant point and takes the reader to the present.

Maintain temporal coherence: Let the chronology be your friend.

Only focus on events that are pertinent to the story you're trying to tell.

How do we keep the background section from being a dull, turgid history lesson?

Use anecdotes: Show, don't tell.

Suggest that your writers ask subjects what they DID during a particular episode or event, not what they FELT or THOUGHT.

Kicker

Typically a quote that either sums up the story or gazes into the future.

In longer, narrative pieces, the kicker takes the reader back to the opening scene or anecdote.

In any event, the kicker needs to be as compelling as the lede