



# An editing job improved my writing

A former newspaper editor shares lessons she's put into practice as a freelancer

**W**riters love to bash editors: “They destroyed the lead of my story.” “They took out my favorite sentence.” “They cut the story in half!”

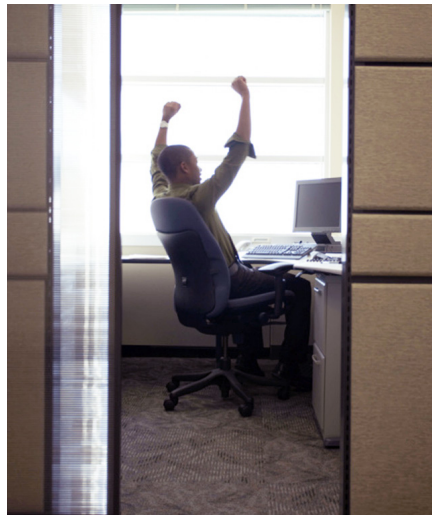
I know those whines well. I used to recite them myself until I spent some time on the Other Side. After 18 years as a newspaper reporter, I became an editor in 2004, overseeing a team of education writers at *The Boston Globe*. No longer would I share war stories with other writers about those darn editors. I was now one of “them.”

For three years, I coached and edited other writers, then returned to writing. The editing stint gave me these invaluable lessons:

**Leave your ego at home when editing begins.** Early in my career, I bristled more than listened to editors. How could an editor fault a lead I had rewritten at least a half a dozen times? Why did the editor mercilessly strike out quotes? So shaken at times by criticism, I fled to the bathroom to hide my disappointment.

After stepping into an editor's shoes, it became easier to stick my ego on a shelf. Good editors, I realized, are collaborators, not story-destroyers. Nothing is awry if a story travels between editor and writer several times. Good editors invest in a story as much as the writer. They want it to sing.

The reality is that most of us do not get it right on the first try. We need another set of eyes to check stories for logic, flow and word choice. One of my best editors showed me the beauty of using a thesaurus, a book I once saw as a writer's cheat sheet. As an editor, I sometimes pulled out the thesaurus as a writer sat next to me, and together, we



**Thinking like an editor can get your story on the right track. Polishing your work up front will keep you and your editor happy.**

picked out the word that fit best.

A reporter on my education team taught me how to become a better student of the editing process. She took notes every time we spoke, jotting down ideas for structure and tightening. She circled back to me with questions as she revised, and she offered her own suggestions—a gift to an editor. She sometimes shed tears out of frustration when a story needed work, but her tears were not about ego. They stemmed from a determination to succeed.

**Show respect for an editor's time.** I used to fume when an editor took more than an hour to respond after I sent in my story. I met deadline. Why should I have to wait so long? What else did an editor do besides assign and edit stories?

I now give editors a reasonable waiting period before expecting a response. In the case of a newspaper editor, a reasonable wait could be hours or a few days. In the case of a magazine editor,

three to four weeks or more may be a decent grace period. I was too patient with one magazine, though. A story submitted on speculation apparently landed in the spam bucket. When I checked on the story's status three months later, I learned the magazine had never received it.

Editing involves far more than assigning and editing. The typical assistant city editor at a newspaper reports to several bosses and works with several departments; life for a magazine editor, I understand, is not that different. Story editors have to coordinate with editors in charge of photos, graphics, and online components. Most editors now not only review a story, but also must review content of companion digital recordings, videos or blogs.

They sit in meetings setting up story lineups. With budget cuts, editors oversee more people than ever before. Editors, like writers, have to prioritize. Stories due first get the first read.

**Remember your readers.** Every morning, for three years, I sat in news meetings and listened as each assignment editor rattled off her story list. Then, the metro editor posed the big questions. Why should anyone care? What does it mean to Joe Reader? Do

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we really need another animal story?

I learned how to play to the audience, whether it was the readers of *The Boston Globe* or a magazine. My story pitches as a writer became more pointed, more relevant. I practiced what I worked to in-



still in the reporters I led. Research the subject before pitching a story. What was written previously? What do bloggers say about this topic?

Readers of many magazines and newspapers love profiles, for example. But they also should have a reason to read about that person at a given time. I picked up the *Globe* the other day and saw a profile of CNN's John King, a Boston-area native who has been a national news celebrity for years. Why did the newspaper run the piece now? King had just been named to replace CNN anchor Lou Dobbs. The profile, lively written, was timely.

The more a writer delves into a topic, the more a writer can drift away from readers. As an education writer, I became familiar with education lingo and acronyms. When I became an editor overseeing education, I spent some time nudging writers to translate jargon into conversational language aimed at everyone, not just teachers, professors and administrators. I comb my own stories for jargon and upon spotting any, hit the delete button.

**Tighten each article as if you are the editor.** I was invested in the stories I assigned to reporters and edited, but only to a point. My ultimate priority was meeting the story length agreed upon by the writer, the top editors and myself, so if deadline loomed, I trimmed quickly and efficiently.

A three-sentence quote? Two sentences can say it just as well. Three paragraphs of background? Try two. The description of the coat, shoes, hat and scarf of the main subject? Does it add anything to the story line? Ah, it was so easy to trim others' stories.

Now, I try to think like an editor during revisions of my own work. I set my passion aside for a second and remove any overwrought creative darlings. I hunt for common culprits of wordiness, including long quotations, passive verbs and adjectives.

I read the article aloud. Sentences

that make me gasp for breath need the most finessing. As a writer, my style is to let the words flow during that first draft. If a story lands near the set length on the first try, terrific. If not, then I become an editor again.

**Find the focus of your story early, so meeting deadline is a given.** I began my reporting career with the Associated Press, which has some of the shortest deadlines in the news business. Meeting deadline has never been a major problem, but my skill at achieving deadline improved after time as an editor.

I remember clearly one evening during my time as editor: The night editor's face was stern. It was 8 p.m., and I should have sent the reporter's story in a half hour ago. The reporter's story, though, came in at least an hour after our agreed-upon deadline and needed work. Scowling, the night editor stood at my desk and ran through the litany of how this late story would hold up first-edition production.

Copy editors need time to screen the story for style, spelling and grammatical errors, and for flow. They need time to grasp the story enough to write a headline. Then, the slot editor must read the story, and the layout editor cannot hit send on his page until the story is in. Deadlines are not arbitrary. Late stories cause problems for everyone.

I worked with writers who were habitually late with stories and helped them figure out what slowed them up. One reporter took gads of notes during interviews and needed too much time to review the notes later. We talked about getting a better idea of what her story was about before interviewing anyone. The stronger her focus, the more efficient she could be in note-taking and writing. We chatted, too, about the importance of talking her story through with an editor or another writer before she started. If no one was around, she could sketch out a story plan on paper.

The tips I gave to reporters, I use for myself. I rarely write out questions be-

fore an interview, but I have a sense of what I want to ask and why. I review my notes immediately and mark the highlights. I also create a separate document and jot down notes about where I think the story is going as I am reporting it.

The biggest impediment to deadline is often our mind-set. We get stuck on the lead or obsess over the right ending. I still fall victim to time drains, but also envision that night editor hovering at my desk. Rather than miss deadline, I usually beat it.

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**Let others besides your editor take a look.** Editors are busy, fallible and human. Some have the talent to help a writer achieve incredible heights. Others can tighten but not beautify prose, while others have great ideas and little else. Yet, most editors can teach each of us something about improving our work.

Now a freelancer, I no longer have one regular editor. So I apply one of the most important lessons gleaned from my years as an editor. I create my own network of extra sets of eyes, including fellow writers. In the end, I can only whine at one person if a story falls short—me.

### **Linda K. Wertheimer**

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