

Sub-standard practice

There's little doubt about the adjective most frequently applied to sub-editors. Bloody. Editors edit, writers write, subs... well they hack copy to bits. At least that's what a fair number of journalists will tell you. So what's it all about, this sub-editing business, and why does no one aspire to be one?

Let me explain it like this: reporters generate words. They may be processed ones these days, but they're no more elegant than if they'd come off a typewriter. Yet within a very short time those words will be on a paper or magazine page, in a particular typeface, replete with headlines, intros, pretty pictures and, with luck, looking good enough to read.

The bit in between these two states is the territory of the sub-editor, or sub. And there's no use denying that there's something of a black art involved. For which read knowledge and talent.

But the writers are professionals, aren't they, so why not just let them write a headline and run with that?

Because it's bad business. Newspapers and magazines are there to make money. You make money by having people see the ads. The grey texty stuff has two functions: to keep those ads apart and to woo readers into the publication so they see them. What woos the readers is the idea that there's something in those words that they should know about.

What gives them that idea? Because the publication speaks with authority on its subject and takes itself seriously.

Now suppose one article says: "The car industry is well aware of the growing number of women consumers and that it should be involved in designing them," and another: "CAN networks are increasingly used to interconnect the growing amount of electronics sued in vehicles" — both are 100% genuine examples from professional journalists' copy — then it's funny. Right? But does it smack of authority?

Make your mind up time

Then suppose sometimes the Government's attitude is reported, while at other times the government has a view. Then add 8 or nine or 20 incongruities in style and a few grammatical and factual errors and readers in the southeast, the North West; in fact all over the UK and Northern Ireland will be calling the Editor with most major complaints.

It's important, what readers think. That the publication is serious and authoritative? Not taken seriously means not read, means not selling ads, means bad business.

Task number one, then, for the subs' desk, is to impose quality and consistency on everything that goes on to the editorial pages. The idea that a disparate group of writers could do it themselves is simply a pipe-dream. It has been tried by some magazines desperate to trim costs. It was, I gather, a disaster.

A sub's task is to approach a story as the first "uninvolved" reader, for whom it has to make sense. The facts must stand up, the names must be right, the arguments must be coherent and silly mistakes must be avoided. If a piece fails on any count it must be corrected.

Then it will be worked over for spelling errors, general grammar and for any potential

Sub-editors carry the can for most errors and idiocies that get into print. Who needs them? All of us, says
Terry Gault

legal problems, most particularly defamation.

After that comes the chief weapon in the subs' box of tricks — the style sheet. This is a publication's list of how potential inconsistencies are to be dealt with. It may say, for example, that the word government always gets a capital G if referring to the British government of the day, that acronyms must always be spelled (or it may prescribe spelt) out in full on first mention, with listed exceptions such as Nato or MoD. It may say that the numbers one to nine are written out in full, whereas 10 and upward are numerals; that numbers and abbreviated units should be separated by a space, as in 20 mm; that people are always referred to by fore and surname on first mention, thereafter only as Mr, Mrs or Miss X (with no full point after the abbreviations); that job descriptions, such as managing director do not take initial caps; that references to towns must be accompanied on first mention by a county; and so it goes on and on.

Writers often assume, wrongly, that this process is about determining a right and wrong use of language *per se*. It's not, although it should remain consistent with proper use of

English. It's about ensuring that the readers avoid any inconsistency that might deflect them from the story and hint, even subconsciously, at a lack of care or interest by the publication.

It's also why subs often seem innately conservative about language, battling against words such as "major", changing "company spend" to "company expenditure", avoiding chairpersons or people-hours, shunning as many acronyms and much technobabble as possible. For such things can mean readers noticing the language rather than the message.

With the copy now "clean" it generally makes a detour to the designer, who hands it back some time later on the QuarkXpress page

where it will live for the rest of its passage to the repro house. But before that happens, there's still a lot for the subs to do.

For a start, the designer hasn't managed to fit 26 lines of copy into the space she's allocated to text. That's the overmatter. And it's got to be cut. The art, of course, is to do that without damaging the piece. And herein lies the source of many writers' downer on the subs' desk, for all have, at some time, had their copy cut by a second-rate sub who lost vital facts, simply chopped from the bottom or inaccurately pre-cised a couple of paragraphs to make one.

The subs' task is clear: to polish and enhance writers' copy while retaining those writers' creative styles. Subs are not there, though not all realise it, to impose their own writing style or to mess with copy they don't understand. A good sub can often chop 300 words out of a 1,000-word feature with the writer pretty much unable to notice on a read-through where they've gone.

When the copy fits, the marketing begins. Someone once came up with a figure for how long readers will give a page to grab their attention before turning over. It was a fraction of a second. If all those small words are to be given a chance, then a headline or picture or caption — something that can be absorbed at a glance — must bring the reader's thumb to a standstill.

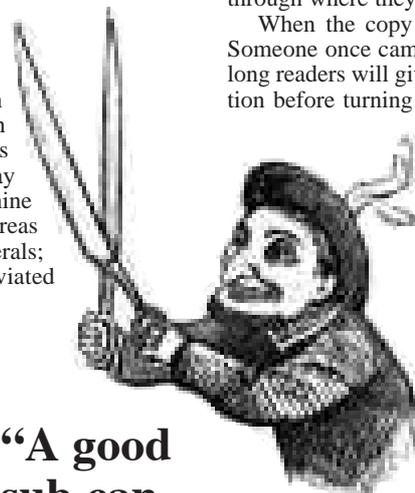
It falls to the subs, then, to make the arrest with the "page furniture" — all the extras over and above the main text.

Defining what makes a good headline is hard. Like the Shake & Vac commercial, it's sometimes the groaners that are most memorable. "Gotcha" or "Freddie Starr ate my hamster" may have been outrageous, but did they do their job? Headlines don't all have to be like that, of course. But they should be arresting, within the spirit of the publication. And that will be very different for a learned journal, a tabloid or a trade magazine.

The same principles apply to pictures. Good pictures invite readers to look, to read the caption and from there be lured to learn more from the text. This also explains why publications often like pull-out quotes, sidebars (or boxed text), crossheads: they make the text seem less dense and include more words in big letters that can be absorbed at a glance.

Trouble is, done well, no one notices anything except the quality of the story. The writer will be happy to bask in the praise. But if the subs foul up at all, it's a case of egg on their faces and an angry writer demanding to know why they've screwed up his or her credibility.

OK. I've remembered why no one aspires to be a sub.



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