

Editing the Column Copy

UNIFORMITY

Column editing includes checking for parallelism in the form of question-answer matter, group interviews, and other copy where uniformity is desirable. The result is easier reading. Brevity also adds force. But watch for unintentional repetition of similar words in opening sentences of paragraphs, or adjoining sentences. Such repetition is to many people as grating as sand in the celery.

IT IS PROBABLY NO EXAGGERATION to say that most personal columns in small papers could be improved considerably by careful editing. For lack of incisive and creative work with an editor's pencil, a column paragraph or essay may lack the unity and clarity which would permit it to speak in clearer tones. Wordy English is muffled composition. To say less may be to say more. To say only approximately what one means will not win any bravos from readers. Yet most of us constantly struggle for words to express imperfectly matured thoughts.

The fundamental purposes of editing include these:

1. Correcting errors of fact.
2. Correcting errors of grammar.
3. Eliminating bad taste.
4. Guarding against making of actionable statements involving laws of publication.
5. Marking for desired typographical effects.
6. Fitting a given space, if this is required.
7. Improving the column in detail and in structure.

This list is not as formidable as it appears. An experienced newspaper man will do most of these things almost instinctively and simultaneously, especially in handling news copy. Editing column material is more exacting in that choice of a word or phrase may not only involve accuracy, but effect. The columnist sets his own standard of excellence in most cases because he alone dares make changes in copy as personal as humorous paragraphs, verse, etc.

There are no errors of fact which are peculiar to the column. However, some columnists who would withhold rumors and hearsay items from news stories yield to the temptation to mention them in the more informal climate. And inasmuch as these writers inevitably assume an air of some infallibility, their making an error is especially irritating to readers, and to themselves. There are some tests which a columnist must make for himself, but careful reading by another person is desirable. And editing out errors in proof is unsatisfactory and costly.

Second readers are likely to be more alert than a writer is to errors in grammar and expression. Some mistakes may arise in straining for literary effects, but most of them are traceable to the haste in which most newspaper work is done. Constant use of standard reference works is a must for every journalist. Reproducing the statements of others, especially those telephoned, is a major source of errors.

Bad taste is not as easily detected as might be imagined. It often is a matter of opinion. What is regarded as unpardonable in one set of people may be considered sophisticated and smart in another. Of course there are clear-cut offenses: the risqué joke, racial and religious intolerance, ill temper, and flagrant displays of egotism. Yet who knows when he has used "I" and "us" too often, mentioned his family too frequently, or over-publicized his club? It is easy to offend an advertiser, a political candidate, or an

WORD LENGTH

The informal language of most columns does not invite use of multi-syllable, unfamiliar words. In fact, columns generally rate high in both readability and readership. Rather than worry about word length, small-town writers probably should concentrate on using better style and more descriptive language, in polishing their story-telling ability, and in developing patterns of column organization. Long words may be acceptable if familiar to readers; short ones may be less acceptable because they are known only to certain professions or to the well-read. A columnist who habitually uses long words probably is not using his conversational vocabulary, but one reserved for talking to strangers or sophisticates. If he keeps his readers in mind as he writes, stuffed-shirt talk will not develop.

CHARACTERIZATION

In every situation, at every scene, there are details which may be expressed in a few words—if they are the right words. In addition to the key words, such as nouns and verbs, there are descriptive words and expressions. Some of these may be used to fill out leads and headlines. The column, having few or no headlines, must grab and hold readers by clever phrasing placed near and at the beginning. In the editing process, the characterizing words should be given close attention. Fast writing preserves the spirit of the moment and improves style, but careful editing weeds out weak characterizing words, supplies others, and sharpens punch lines. It also guides the pace by shortening or lengthening sentences and paragraphs.

ardent sports fan. The prayer of a careful columnist is that, when he does these things, they shall be deliberate and in his advance knowledge. Yet, human nature being as it is, he knows he will unknowingly give offense now and then, and will have to make amends as best he can.

The columnist remembers, too, that some readers are sensitive to the slightest criticism and that others “can’t take a joke.” In this respect he may have a mental black list of not-to-be mentioned individuals. He remembers, too, certain individuals who regard his lighter remarks as trivial; that others think his profound observations are stuffy. Probably he will ignore these when he writes his day’s output, but will remember some of them when he passes a black pencil over the copy.

In regard to legal entanglements, columnists have to remember that the costs of winning an action may be only slightly less than those of losing one. And even threats against a paper may cause it to take costly precautions.

The laws and regulations involved include:

1. Libel.
2. Contempt of court.
3. Copyright.
4. Plagiarism and piracy.
5. Postal regulations.
6. Miscellaneous federal and state prohibitions.
7. The common law, under which actions for damages may be brought, or restraining orders obtained.

Libel actions under criminal law, prosecuted by a government, are rare and are of little concern to the columnist. He isn’t likely to advocate a breach of the peace or scandalize an instrument of government. But civil libel, instituted by individuals, is an ever-present danger. Because of space limitations, only some of the more pertinent aspects of libel can be presented here.

Columnists recognize these dangers, as defined variously in state laws:

1. Imputing a crime, loathsome disease, unchastity, dishonesty, or other defamatory characteristics, to a person in printed matter.

2. Making any person an object of ridicule, scorn, or hatred.

3. Injuring a person in his profession or business.

4. Damaging a business firm, which can sue for pecuniary redress.

5. Damaging the reputation of the dead, which usually affects the social and business or professional standing of living relatives.

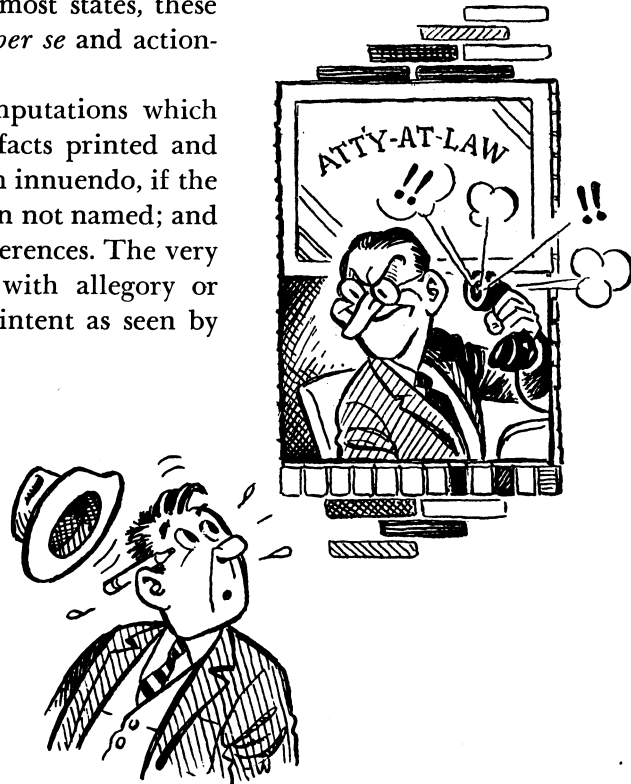
Writing in anger, a columnist might accuse a professional man of malpractice or negligence, refer to a lawyer as a shyster, call a physician a quack, question the moral standards of a coach of athletics, hint at corruption or bribery in a public office, question the trading practices of a firm, or challenge the professional ability of a craftsman. In most states, these allegations by a paper are libelous *per se* and actionable.

Other libels may result from imputations which can be drawn from associations of facts printed and facts already known by readers; from innuendo, if the plaintiff can be identified, even when not named; and from slurring and contemptuous references. The very fact of trying to disguise a libel with allegory or anonymity may indicate malicious intent as seen by the jury. And malice, whether of the garden variety or the result of pure carelessness, forfeits most of the defendant's defenses except truth.

Defenses against libel actions, which are not absolute, include:

(1), the truth, when it can be proved; (2), legal privilege,

. . . libel actions may result.



subject to limitations set up by the state laws; and (3), the right of fair comment and criticism, which varies state by state. Additionally, defendant papers may cite in mitigation those facts and circumstances which tend to sustain its claims of public service and good motives, and to question whether the plaintiff was damaged and whether by his actions he invited the publication involved. And evidence of retractions and corrections may be introduced.

The fear of libel may be more damaging to a paper than libel itself, and newspapers constantly take calculated risks. But it is unwise to take risks based on the presumed — but not yet proved — guilt of the accused, on his being an apparent down-and-out vagrant, on the remoteness of the person or firm accused, and on popularly believed guilt of persons deceased.

The columnist must learn to differentiate between a *comment* upon matters of public concern and public entertainment, and an allegation of a personal nature derogatory to the person mentioned. It may be proper to describe an act, accurately and fairly, but not to judge it in terms of *general professional competency* or private morals.

And most writers know that in printing a column, letter, or advertisement a newspaper assumes joint responsibility and may even be exclusively sued by a plaintiff.

CONTEMPT

While few columnists expect to be charged with interfering with administration of the courts, a militant writer might be held in contempt for refusing to reveal the source of printed charges, for lowering the public's confidence in a court, and for grossly inaccurate reports or comment on a court trial. Newspapers are constantly asserting their right of fair comment and criticism on public matters, including the courts. A point at issue is whether justice is obstruct-

QUESTIONS

Some columnists are over-fond of rhetorical questions. These can be irritating. Amateurs like them because they take the place of harder-to-write leads. On occasion, nothing else is as good; save them for that time. . . . Questions asked but not answered constitute a form of insult. They carry insinuations and innuendo. Worst of all, perhaps, is that venerable question, "Have you quit beating your wife?"

ed by comment before, during or after hearing of a case, and pending appeal. Newspapers claim the constitutional right of comment while a case is of public concern, and in several states have been upheld in recent tests.

COPYRIGHT

A fact is public property, but the manner of expressing it in words, photographs, and art work can be protected under provisions of federal law. Titles cannot be copyrighted as such, but a court might restrain use by another person under some circumstances as unfair competition.

Strictly speaking, a columnist cannot use any copyrighted material without permission except on risk of infringement. By custom, however, fifty words or less are used in reviews of books, plays, etc. It is safer to get written permission.

Copyrighted data cannot be protected as facts, but unusual theories, bodies of statistics presented in unique ways, and other information obtained through much expense or effort cannot be appropriated by others with impunity.

A columnist might wish to copyright a poem, a puzzle, or an essay because of presumed merit in the wording or arrangement. The procedure is to obtain the required form from the Register of Copyright, Washington, D. C.; print the notice of copyright ("Copyright, 19—, by _____") thereon, and send in printed copies and fee as required. Such copyright, lasting 28 years, can be renewed for 28 more; at the end of 56 years, or 28 if not renewed, the material becomes public property. Matter printed without copyright goes into the public domain immediately.

Newspaper syndicates have reported rather widespread infringement of copyright on feature material sent with advertising services.

ERRORS

Reading copy for detection of mistakes is not a job for a person gripped by one of the livelier emotions. Concentrating on one category of possible errors may at times be advisable. Such limited readings may include only accuracy, or whether questions are raised but not answered, or whether there are grammatical and style errors. Again, libel may be the main fear. We think it is no exaggeration to say that few columnists are complete critics and wholly capable correctors of their own copy. Other minds more quickly detect ambiguities and fact errors.

PLAGIARISM AND PIRACY

Literary piracy is unauthorized use of another's production, often involving sales. Plagiarism is taking the work of another and passing it off as original. In the world of fiction, property rights customarily are protected by copyright. In the columnists' world the issues are more confused in that copyrighting is infrequent and ethical considerations are more involved.

SENTENCE LENGTH

Long sentences are bookish, and for leisurely and concentrated reading. Columns are read at a faster pace. Column sentences average as few as fifteen words and, acceptably, as many as twenty. Subject matter makes a difference. Columnists who think much and write slowly are likely to qualify many statements. Those who like description let sentences lengthen. But writers with strong convictions and those who prefer narrative prose use shorter sentences. . . . Not the average length, but variety of sentences which make up that average is important. Watch averages, but don't overrate them. Use two-word sentences now and then. Or three, or four. Study the total effect.

Although a columnist may wish to claim no property rights in his output, he does expect credit for his work when he sees it reproduced with or without his consent. Plagiarism is clearly unethical. Yet filler material, including humorous paragraphs, jokes, fact items, and brief verse, is widely reprinted without credit to the sources. Sometimes the matter is merely credited to "Exchange." The prevalence of the practice has been inversely proportional to the size of the papers; small papers have needed much filler. Perhaps one distinction has been the fact that readers have not regarded the pickups as original with the small papers.

It is especially irritating to see one's uncredited work in a paper in the nearby territory. One mid-western editor put it this way:

All newspapers have a newspaper exchange list. This is for three particular reasons. First, there is a chance to get advertising suggestions; second, it is nice to see how other papers do it; third, there is a chance to pick up some news. . . . This newspaper, when it finds items we desire to reprint, always gives credit to the paper from which we clip. That is customary and common courtesy. We note, however, that one newspaper has reached the habit of clipping news and then not giving credit. . . . That's a cheap way to do business.

Adapting of editorial and business ideas of another non-competing paper to one's own needs is approved and even facilitated by press associations. But there are other practices which are in the shadowy border-

line of ethics. One of these, so widespread that nothing probably can be done about it, is the re-writing of column material. In most cases there is nothing illegal in the action because exact wording is not duplicated. Certainly the practice is more ethical than running items without credit.

A humorous paragraph soon becomes the substance of a radio gag, a joke, or a comic strip caption. An uncredited brief may be credited to the one who clipped it. The experience of a Missouri columnist is not unusual. One of her paragraphs was picked up, with proper credit, by a daily newspaper, then by a magazine. Later with few words changed, it was reprinted by another national magazine and credited to a big city paper.

Of course the proof of such rewriting is not always implicit in the mere fact of finding an idea credited to another source. When a paragrapher writes a rather obvious gag about a news event he must concede that others might do the same. Headline writers, who also think alike, have been known to write identical headlines on the same news story.

POSTAL REGULATIONS

The federal government and most states prohibit publication of matter concerning lotteries, except the bare announcement of winners, and of matter deemed obscene. Sending of the prohibited matter through the mails may cause barring of an issue or suspension or loss of a mailing privilege.

Mention of bank nights, turkey shoots, and other lotteries is sometimes seen, but the law forbidding such details is clear. Lotteries involve chance, a consideration, and a reward, but even the need to be present at the time of drawing is by definition a consideration.

Columnists sometimes support through favorable mentions the promotions, clearly lotteries, of church

TRANSLATIONS

Everyone uses double-talk. It may be false or literally truthful. Usually it conceals facts and conditions. People in trouble turn to it to soften public criticism. "We are doing everything possible to locate the trouble" may really mean that "We know what the trouble is but there is nothing we can do about it at the moment and we hope you will forget the whole matter." Translating public statements, with levity or satire, is a favorite device of many columnists. . . . Finding himself guilty of double-talk, the columnist can eliminate it while polishing his offering.

and fraternal organizations. While some postmasters pay no attention to these "worthwhile" games of chance, others demand that regulations be followed.

OTHER PROHIBITIONS

In the editing of columns and other material, copy-readers also must remember the taboos on altering of official weather reports, accepting advertising of fraudulent stocks and illegal mail schemes, and reproducing pictures of stamps, certain legal documents and money—except as provided by law. Reprinting of matter used by another publication is no defense. Cold war regulations affecting national security are little less troublesome than the voluntary censorships of wartime. Some columnists have erred in printing letters from men in military service—letters which revealed troop movements, use of certain materiel, etc.

Another purpose of editing a column is to mark it for the printer. It is not necessary to indulge in the typographic orgies sometimes seen. But effective yet sparing use can be made of initial letters, indentions, bold-face type, etc. All marks necessary for these innovations and for insertion of illustrations should be carefully made and checked for error. Linotype operators, never made happy by typographic frills, lose valuable time when instructions are confusing. At the same time, it can be ascertained that the column is long enough, and flexible enough, to fit the space allowed for it.

Of course the larger task is improvement of the column in detail and in over-all structure. The amount of pruning is likely to be proportional to the experience of the writer; the experienced columnist does most of his editing in his head and before committing it to paper. For many persons, however, the better practice is to write at top speed, using the

If ever there was a wet blanket and a spoilsport, it's a consciencel — Justin Hammond, Corona (Calif.) Independent.

language of the moment and trying to make full use of one's creative inspiration. Later, this enthusiastic but wordy and somewhat lame account is sharply edited . . . cutting a word here, a phrase there . . . substituting a word . . . inserting a clause . . . supplying connectives . . . smoothing continuity. Then it may be necessary to rewrite to clean up the copy.

A second way is to make a rough outline of the intended essay, then write it paragraph by paragraph on half-sheets of copy paper, rewriting each page as often as necessary to polish each bit as it is written. Finally, the sheets are gone over for consideration of all the factors previously mentioned here, if involved. Paragraphs are of course written and perfected one by one.

The copyreader, usually the columnist, also takes an arm's-length look at the whole piece. He will read it in its entirety, and quickly, to get the impact it may have on the readers. He realizes that this is the last legitimate chance to edit the column deeply. Is there anything in it in bad taste? Is he "in character" or has he pontificated a bit today? Does he end on a pleasant or effective note?

When a column has been written in anger, or in full voice for any reason, this question is always in order: DOES THIS STATEMENT MAKE THE WRITER, AND THE PAPER, APPEAR RIDICULOUS?

In some cases it may be advisable to put the column on ice for 24 hours. If it doesn't cool off, the writer may. The resultant revisions may save a situation, a libel suit, or some friendships. A real editor is . . . one who really *edits*.

Civilization doesn't always time things right. Lipstick would have wiped off the old celluloid collars. — Princeton (W. Va.) **Observer**.

. . . take time to cool off.

