Chicago Tribune accuracy guidelines

A newspaper's reputation rests on its accuracy. That means everyone who provides content for the paper not only by reporting and writing stories, but transferring statistics to tables, creating graphics, editing copy, writing headlines, collecting caption material, or researching facts must take responsibility for the accuracy of that work. If you gathered the item or keyboarded the item or edited or manipulated the item in a layout, you are also responsible for maintaining its accuracy throughout the process.

Once newspaper copyediting systems were full-service guardians of accuracy. They acted as fact-checker, arbiter of style and usage, smoother of wrinkled prose, fine tuner of nuance, and champion of good writing. Technological change splintered these editing duties into specialized functions (source editors and current desks) and removed some safety nets altogether.

Because pagination will be even more demanding, some basic accuracy checks and copyediting skills become requirements for everyone who works in the editorial department.

Desk editors begin by knowing the players. Who's a freelancer? Who among the staff has special problems or circumstances, e.g. bad speller, bad fact checker, behind on grammar, new to the subject or beat. Experience teaches them writers' strengths and weaknesses. When it's your own work, assess your own skills and work on your own weaknesses. If you're a bad speller, for example, look up everything you're unsure of if no good spellcheck is available—and do not rely entirely on the spellcheck, because it misses many errors of proper names and titles, homonyms, repetition, omission and grammar.

Read the stylebook and memorize the parts you use regularly. It is the first reference when you have a question of style or usage. Second is a good dictionary of recent vintage that will answer all the questions not addressed in the stylebook. You can save time and energy if you make your own cheatsheet of frequently misspelled words or grammatical rules you always have to look up.

Learn the department, the pace of work. We all like to take our time, but if we miss deadlines, it impacts on someone else. And on a desk, certain amounts of work must be done in a given shift, so a rim person or assistant editor must pace him or herself to finish the work allotted – 8 or 10 or whatever stories. That's why there is sometimes too little time for a desk editor to check someone else's facts or arithmetic.

Some time-tested techniques editors use are equally valuable tools for writers and other creators of content to check their own work for accuracy. Give every piece of information you create, manipulate, or otherwise change for the newspaper at least three reads whenever possible.

A. FIRST READ: Content. Listen to your instincts. If it isn't clear or doesn't sound right to you, it won't sound better to someone else. Read for transitions, structure, parts you stumble over and have to go back and reread, parts that make you doze off, parts you don't understand. Does the piece sound written for the reader or the sources (a problem with specialized material sometimes). Is it full of multisyllabic words and multiword verbs or clear and concise? Is it full of jargon or an alphabet soup of acronyms, or is it written in standard English with unusual terms spelled out or defined?

In an ideal world, the source editor would back up the creator by the same process. The source editor's huge assignment ensures a piece has structural and logical order, that it meets an approximate designated length, in consultation with the writer. Source editors point out

omissions of fact and reporting and problems of content that require major revision or fact checking by the writer.

Fact checking: If you don't know if something is true, find out. Consult a reliable source for the answer—stylebook, dictionary, encyclopedia, grammar book, reference work in area of coverage. Use, but be aware of the dangers of, the archive clips in the Save system, Internet sites and person at next desk. All can and will be wrong at some time, even if they bail you out most of the other times. Proceed with caution.

Arithmetic in a story: check it three times. Use a calculator if it's complicated. Dial phone numbers whenever possible to check accuracy and double-check addresses in a street guide.

B. SECOND READ. Style. Does the item or story conform to rules of grammar, spelling, punctuation and usage as set out in the Tribune stylebook, dictionary and standard usage manuals? Do subjects and verbs agree, are addresses and dates in Tribune style? Are people's names spelled consistently throughout? Do all pronouns have clear antecedents, etc.

C. THIRD READ. Proofing. Spell out every word, look for doubled words, missing words, etc. Sadly, often these days there is no time for this one on the various desks, making it imperative that writers and content providers do the same process to their own work. Use spellcheck to back yourself up. When should an editor call the writer? If there is time, whenever a fact is missing or a meaning unclear, when new leads need construction or a story is heavily in need of restructuring or a major trim of more than 5 or 10 percent.

If there is no time to call, ask someone on the desk who has knowledge of the subject, or write around it whenever possible.

It's still a good idea for writers et al. to CQ in notes odd names, facts, spellings or items you had to look up yourself. Saves angst and double effort by the next person down the line. Also, if you can't confirm a fact when you're writing something, don't put it in the story. If you can't confirm it, odds are the next person down the line can't either. Certainly if there is any doubt about a vital fact, describe the problem in a note. Never assume that anyone down the line will just catch something, fix something or check something unless you can call attention to it. And then it may be edited out if the desk runs out of time. Try not to leave unchecked facts in stories unless they are breaking stories, and even then be aware of the danger and clearly mark the fact in question.

Trimming. In general, don't trim from the end. Most stories and graphic packages have (or should have) beginnings, middles and ends. And don't trim all the quotes. Find a section, graf or sentence, depending on the length that must come out, that can disappear without hurting the main thought of the piece. Look for repetition of ideas or repetition between paraphrase and a real quote, anecdotes or quotes that may be interesting but aren't germane to the subject. Then, before you delete, read the transition to see if it makes sense. If it needs more than minor work to fix, you may not be trimming the right thing.

A good editor tries to keep the mood and the style of the writer intact. It's not a good idea to rewrite someone else extensively (except in deadline or group efforts), and it's not a good idea to shorten stories by taking ALL the color and writerly touches out. Writing and editing are art forms at heart.

Conversely, writers should not confuse the reader with overly complex descriptions and flourishes. As you work with writers, including yourselves, you will learn to act as a reader. Ask yourself how a reader would react, not just could a reader struggle through it, but what could be

done to make the process easier and more interesting. Just because we publish something doesn't mean anyone will actually wade through it.

Be careful not to trim first references when you shorten a story. Use your Find key to make sure first references remain if you have any doubt. Remember that columnists and critics are given much more freedom than other writers. One does not rewrite or significantly change their copy without a nod from a slot or those particular writers.

It's easy to trim writers who put everything they know into a story. It's hard to trim writers who have edited their research and chosen only the best quotes, examples, etc. and whose story is built on the strong backbone of a single theme.

Keeping up with the job: Read the Tribune thoroughly every day. That doesn't mean read every word, but read the section you work for more or less word for word and read at least the section fronts of the other sections, both news and features. Before starting a project, check the Save system for previous stories on the subject and consult the paper clips when appropriate for stories with longer histories. It will help you keep from repeating what has been done before and give you some background and context.

Read other papers whenever possible and read at least one specialized publication (preferably a primary source) in the field in which you work. In case that's a new term for you, a primary source is one aimed at the practitioners or experts in the field. A secondary source is a newspaper or other periodical that covers a subject for a lay audience.

Specialists and the editors they work with obviously read more than one primary source. And editors or writers who move into a new area should do as much as they can to develop expertise in that subject.

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