

Unit Introduction

The ability to copy edit is the cornerstone of all public affairs products, whether it's the installation publication, a news release for the external media, public affairs guidance, the unit Web site or any other product your shop produces. Every time you produce a product, you are putting your credibility on the line -- your credibility with your commander and your customers, those who use your product.

When the paper looks bad and contains a lot of errors, the trust is gone – both from your commander and all of your various audiences. Stories are harder to come by because potential sources are afraid to talk to you. When you need subject matter experts to brief the news media or handle a tour through their units, they may be less inclined to support.

You, as public affairs officers, are normally the last line of defense when it comes to ensuring that there are as few mistakes as possible in the products you produce. You are the one the commander will call when there are mistakes.

Because of that, you need to learn to write in a manner that conveys what you want to say quickly and clearly. And to do that, you need to be able to copy edit.

Unit Objective

- Copy edit products for print using the AP stylebook

Unit Overview

- PAOQC journalism mission
- ABCs of copy editing
- Polishing and improving writing
- Common grammar issues

The ABCs of journalism

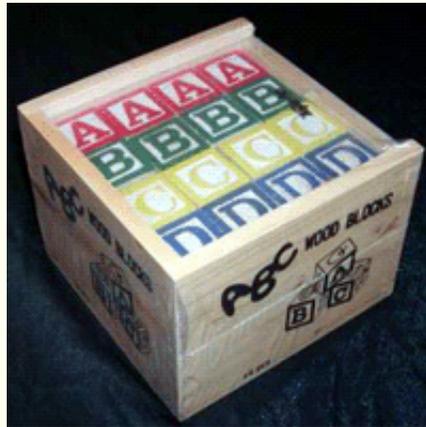
Copy editing is a thankless job -- when everything goes right, nobody notices. But it's vital to successfully accomplishing your mission. Remember, your products are a direct reflection of your command. If your newspaper looks sloppy or contains numerous errors, what kind of credibility do you have? You may be a great PAO in terms of media and community relations skills, but if your newspaper consistently fails, those other functions may falter as a result.

To help you keep that trust and credibility, there are three primary things you need to be concerned about when it comes to copy editing:

Accuracy

Brevity

Clarity



Accuracy

Accuracy is needed for spelling, facts, figures, style, grammar, and policy. If the information you're putting out is incorrect in any way, what's the point? People have got to be able to trust you to get the news **right**. If you can't, you can forget credibility.

Once upon a time, the Flyer at Langley Air Force Base, Va., ran a large headline on the front page about Lt. Gen. Croker -- only it was spelled "Crocker." That morning, at 7 a.m., the general's chief of staff was on the phone personally with the lieutenant in charge of the paper, asking why and wondering if the lieutenant needed to have Croker's bio faxed over so the staff would know how to spell his name next time.

Then there was the time a PA office announced in its own paper that it had earned "Best **Pubic** Affairs in Command" ...

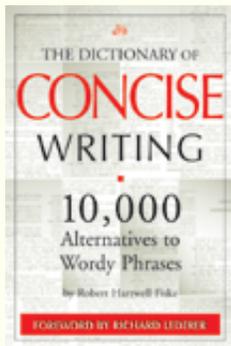
'nuff said?



Brevity

Brevity is all about keeping it short. Be concise. Eliminate wordiness and redundancy.

We usually have more stories for our papers than we have space. With the attention span of readers, tight writing not only saves space but saves readers time. Why use phrases like "in order to," "he said that," "in other words"? Brevity is half of the KISS formula: **Keep it short and simple.**



Clarity

Will your writing say to the reader what it says to you? All readers have to go by is what you *write*; they have no idea what you *mean*.

Clarity is answering questions or telling readers why you can't answer those questions. It's writing for an 8th-grade reading level. It's putting numbers/statistics in context. It's staying away from slang, technical terms or acronyms/abbreviations readers may not understand. Sometimes, it's very easy to forget that not everyone reading your publication is actually IN the military; write with the knowledge that John Q. Public is also a big part of your audience, even for your internal publication.

Don't sacrifice clarity for brevity. Think like this: "Being clear means never having your readers say 'Huh?'"



Three-step copy editing

How do you employ the ABCs of journalism? Many people say you've got to read a story at least three times to effectively weed out problems. Even then, nobody's perfect, but here are the three steps that will bring you as close as you can get to perfection:

- **First reading: tone of the story**
 - Is it publishable? Is it appropriate for your newspaper? Does it violate security, accuracy, policy and/or propriety? Obviously as story edited for the New York Post should read and "feel" different from a story edited for your military newspaper. That's what we mean by "tone."

- **Second reading: errors corrected**
 - Does it conform to the AP stylebook? Are names spelled correctly? Are punctuation and grammar correct? Are facts/figures accurate?

- **Third reading: polish the story**
 - It's a fine line between the way you would write something and the way one of your staff journalists wrote it. Writing for an editor -- something almost everyone has to do -- means you are writing to the style, tastes, sensibilities, knowledge and experience of the editor. So editing is somewhat subjective. Editors assess the writer's ability to adhere to attention to detail. Good writers listen to and learn from their editors. (*While you are attending PAOQC, your instructor is your editor. If he or she tells you to do something a certain way, you will be expected to do it that way, regardless of what another section of the class might be told by their instructor. This is no different from having different college professors; the key is that the end result -- learning the subject -- is the same.*)

Polishing and improving writing

Polishing and improving writing has several facets:

- Look for omitted or overlooked facts. Don't leave the reader with questions in her mind.
- Make sure the writer (even if it's you) isn't getting on a soap box. A writer's bias has no place in journalism. Get rid of "I" and "we" in news writing.
- Potentially boring stories should not be allowed to live up to their potential. The writer must find an interesting angle or provide interesting details. It's a writer's job to make whatever is written interesting, accurate, clear and concise.
- Poor organization is often the problem with a poor story. Many times the lead is buried -- the most important stuff comes at the end or doesn't make it into the story at all.
- Watch out for libelous statements. *(If you're not clear on what constitutes libel, your AP stylebook contains a section devoted to it.)*

Sources for copy editors

Another task for effective copy editors is to have a solid bank of sources/references.

- **AP stylebook:** This is the industry standard for news writers, so it makes sense for us to use what civilian reporters use. It provides guidelines that result in news copy consistency and basic standards for every writing project. This adds credibility to your work. **Always check the stylebook first**, even for some spellings (such as adviser/advisor), brand names used as regular words (Kleenex), and differences in how words are used (adopt/approve/enact/pass). The stylebook also contains sections on punctuation, business terms, photo captions and sports, among others.
- **Dictionary:** If a spelling is not in the stylebook, use the first spelling referenced in the dictionary.
- **Directories:** Telephone, city, command, unit rosters, etc. One caution: many directories are outdated a day after they're published because people move, change jobs and titles, etc. A directory is only as good as your follow-up check on the information you glean from it.
- **Morgues:** These are great for background research and to see how you did it before. More and more morgues, or "clip files," are electronic. They'll help you double-check a so-called error, and they are useful for giving leads on sources for stories. Every PA office needs a well-organized morgue.
- **Reference books:** Encyclopedias, almanacs, periodicals, atlases, etc.
- **Reporters:** Double-check their notes and/or question them if something sounds screwy.
- **Home Town News Release forms:** These are an excellent resource because the forms insist on the source of the information to verify the info and sign the release forms -- instant insurance!

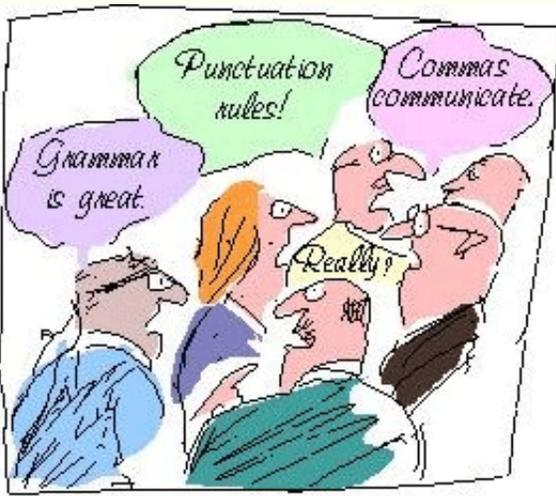
The bottom line

Make sure as a PAO that you're correcting errors, not just inserting your personal style of writing.

Constructive feedback is the only way writers will ever improve, whether their egos will allow them to admit it or not. What seems to sound good or make good sense to the writer only does so because he or she is the one who wrote it! Writers need an outsider's view -- an editor -- to give them a different perspective on their writing.

Always remember, however: if it ain't broke, don't fix it!

Common issues and problems



Instructors normally see a lot of grammatical errors in written products submitted by new writers. Poor grammar typically will manifest itself in readability and clarity problems. Grammar is the system of language. Everything in a sentence is related.

But grammar errors aren't the only problem that turns up in the work of new writers. Let's take a look at some of the things that can go wrong if you're not careful.

Fifty-cent words

One of the most common problems DINFOS instructors see is students trying to IMpress instead of EXpress -- mainly with vocabulary.

Why use fifty-cent words when a nickel's worth will do? The use of inflated vocabulary loses readers -- they either get tired of referring to the dictionary to get your meaning, or they just start skipping your stories altogether.

Try the exercise below for fun. The first link is the exercise itself; see how many of the common phrases -- represented in the exercise by inflated vocabulary -- you can interpret without using a dictionary. When you've gotten as many as you think you can, check the key for the answers.

[Exercise](#)

[Exercise key](#)

The point of the exercise? **Don't do this to your readers!**

Who and whom

"**Who**" is properly used when it is the **subject** of a sentence:

- The woman **who** rented the room left the window open.
- **Who** is there?
- **Who** is renting the room?

"**Whom**" is properly used when it is the **object** of a verb or a preposition:

- The woman to **whom** the room was rented left the window open.
- **Whom** do you wish to see?
- For **whom** was the room left open?

The AP stylebook contains a who/whom entry; refer to it for more guidance.

That and which

"**That**" is used for **essential** phrases/clauses -- information that is grammatically (not journalistically) essential to the meaning of the sentence:

- For camp, the children needed clothes **that** were washable.

If you remove "that were washable," the meaning of the sentence changes significantly. Therefore, it is an essential/restrictive phrase. Note that essential phrases/clauses are not set off by commas.

"**Which**" is used for **nonessential** phrases/clauses -- information that is not grammatically essential to the meaning of the sentence:

- For camp, the children needed sturdy shoes, **which** were expensive.

If you remove "which were expensive," some meaning is lost, but the defining characteristics remain the same. Therefore, it is a nonessential phrase/clause. Note that nonessential phrases/clauses are set off by commas.

The AP stylebook contains entries for that/which and essential/nonessential phrases/clauses; refer to it for more guidance.

Appositives

An **appositive** is a noun or noun phrase that renames a nearby noun. Appositives are used a lot in journalism because attribution and identification are so important. How do you know when an appositive is restrictive or nonrestrictive? Does the second phrase simply rename, or must it be included for the reader's complete understanding of the sentence? It makes a difference in how you punctuate it:

- John Grisham's best-selling novel "**The Runaway Jury**" is available at the library.

If you remove "The Runaway Jury" from the sentence, much meaning is lost; it could be any one of Grisham's many best-sellers. Therefore, the name of the novel is restrictive; it must be included, and it is not set off by commas.

- John Grisham's first novel, "**The Firm**," is available at the library.

If you remove "The Firm," you aren't giving readers the actual name of the novel, but Grisham had only one first novel. Therefore, the name of the novel is nonrestrictive; it does not have to be included, so it is set off by commas.

Subject-verb-object sentence structure

One of the most basic rules in the English language is to use simple sentence construction -- **subject-verb-object**, or "who did what" -- whenever possible.

Using a preposition or clause to start a sentence is seldom good, though writers do this for variety's sake. In news writing, it is sometimes necessary to "back into" a sentence for news value or for a variety of purposes in a feature story. The importance of the lead emphasis will be discussed in the News 1 unit of instruction, but in general, just about every other sentence should be written in subject-verb-object form:

- The budget officer (subject) typed (verb) the appropriations committee's meeting notes (object).

Sentence fragments and run-ons

To be considered grammatically correct, a sentence must contain at least a subject and a verb. A **sentence fragment** is missing one or the other:

- The body of Air Force Capt. Mark H. Monty.

To fix this sentence, information needs to be added: *The body of Air Force Capt. Mark H. Monty was recovered Tuesday.*

A **run-on** is two or more sentences written as one, with only a comma to separate them or no punctuation to separate them:

- Polls are showing that democrats prefer Ted Kennedy for the party's nomination for president, however, the Massachusetts senator shows no inclination to enter the race in 1980.

To fix this sentence, a period should be placed after "president" and a new sentence should begin with "however."

Modifiers

A **modifier** is a word, phrase or clause that limits the meaning of another word or phrase; adjectives and adverbs are modifiers. When misplaced, modifiers become confusing for readers:

- The girl watched the seagull in the striped bikini.

Who was *really* wearing the bikini?

- Dangling from the tweezers, the teacher held out the frog's legs for inspection.

Was the *teacher* dangling from the tweezers, or were the frog's legs?

Compound modifiers

Grammarians often call **compound modifiers** "coordinated adjectives." Whatever you call them, compound modifiers are two or more words that express a single concept. "

- Mary has some **newspaper-wrapped** fish.
- Walter is not a **well-known** candidate.

When a compound modifier precedes a noun, hyphens are used to link all the words in the compound except the adverb *very* and all adverbs that end in *ly*:

- a **first-quarter** touchdown
- a **know-it-all** attitude
- a **very good** time
- an **easily remembered** rule

The key to figuring out whether two or more modifiers are being used to express a single concept (and should therefore be hyphenated) is to ask yourself, "*Does each adjective make sense without the other?*" For instance, in the first example on this page, "some newspaper fish" makes no sense, so "newspaper-wrapped" is expressing a single concept and must be hyphenated.

The punctuation section of the AP stylebook contains an entry for hyphens that includes compound modifier information; refer to it for more guidance.

Homonyms

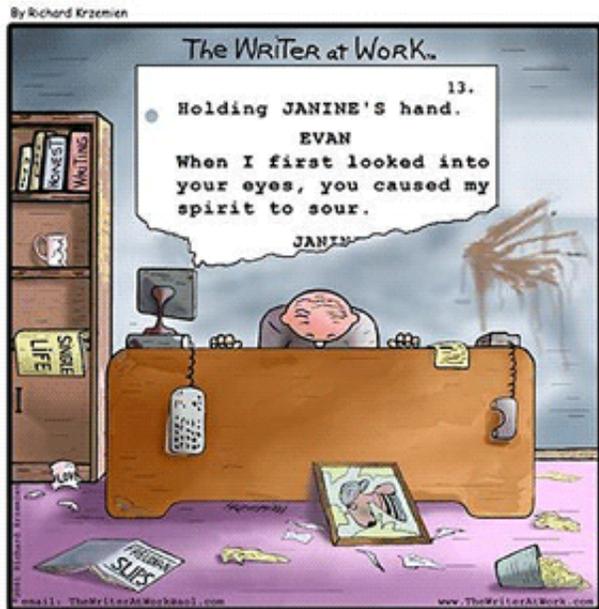
Homonyms are words that sound alike but are different in meaning, depending on how they are used/spelled. This is not by any means an all-inclusive list, but these are commonly confused homonyms instructors see:

- their, there, they're
- its, it's
- accept, except
- principal, principle
- affect, effect
- your, you're, yore
- capitol, capital
- to, too, two
- then, than
- fourth, forth
- insure, ensure

The AP stylebook can help you with the proper use of many of these homonyms. Check to see if there's an applicable entry when you're in doubt.

Beware spelling and grammar checkers!

Because of things like homonyms, be very wary of relying exclusively on the spelling and grammar checkers that come packaged with some of the more popular word-processing software. For instance, a spell-checker knows if a word is *spelled* correctly, but not if it's *used* correctly. You are the last line of defense: always copy edit using your brain as the primary tool.



Subconscious mistakes spell checkers never catch, but significant others always do.

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Regarding Computer Spell Checkers

Eye halve a spelling chequer
It came with my pea sea
It plainly marques four my revue
Miss steaks eye kin knot sea.

Eye strike a key and type a word
And weight four it two say
Weather eye am wrong oar write
It shows me strait a weigh.

As soon as a mist ache is maid
It nose bee fore two long
And eye can put the error rite
Its rare lea ever wrong.

Eye have run this poem threw it
I am shore your pleased two no
Its letter perfect awl the weigh
My chequer tolled me sew.

Unit Summary

The bottom line, after all we've covered in this unit of instruction, is that your credibility is on the line every single time you put out a product. You are supposed to be the experts. Just because you're an officer in the public affairs shop, you're not excused from being part of the team. In fact, in many instances, you're the last line of defense before that product is put before the public. And if that's not enough, try to remember that the boss is probably not going to see Sgt. Snuffy if there's a mistake in the paper or on the Web site. The commander will be asking **you** what went wrong.

