

Do-It-Yourself
Training ideas from the
Daily Herald
of Chicago's Northwest and West suburbs

Training doesn't have to be costly, time-consuming or painful. All you really need is commitment from yourself and the initiative. Here are some simple ideas on how to train your staff on a regular basis:

- From the Slot
- You Make The Call
- Focus of the Month
- Catch of the Month
- Brown-bag discussions
- Peer review
- Fun fact of the day
- Staff bulletin board

From the Slot

How it works

Slotlers, usually the news editor of the day, copy before and after versions of headlines (or sometimes stories) into an e-mail and then explain why changes were made. We don't discuss everything slotlers change; we pull out a couple of examples that perhaps fall in line with improvements we're focusing on at a given time (such as use of question headlines, poetry in headlines, accuracy) or that otherwise warrant discussion. No names are used except to point out good work.

Why we do it

"From the Slot" is a way to give feedback instantly, explain why we change headlines and show copy editors what we're looking for, especially on Page 1.

Time commitment

The news editor or another senior editor can prepare this e-mail easily in a half-hour or less, and it need not be done every night. We try to send out two or three per week.

Obstacles

- It's yet another e-mail in the Inbox. But if you keep it brief enough, it gets looked at because copy editors like the feedback, especially if praise is included.
- Some may not like being criticized in public, especially if they liked their headline. But we don't use names when criticizing, and we explain why we made the change. As with any critiquing, egos must be set aside.

A sample is attached.

You Make The Call

How it works

If the news editor, or another senior editor, runs into a story that requires major editing, rewriting or holding, the news editor takes the original copy, e-mails it to the copy editors and asks if they were the final slot on the story, what call would they make. Hold it? Run it? Rewrite it? Why? The next night, she sends out the story again and includes the copy editors' comments, as well as "the call" that was finally made.

Why we do it

The goal is to teach copy editors critical editing skills and to encourage them to speak up when a story needs help. It also provides an opportunity to show how reporters and editors can work together – with a productive outcome. Copy editors often enjoy giving their feedback on stories that often are left to senior editors, and sometimes they find problems that weren't discovered in the first place.

Time commitment

The news editor can compile copy editors' comments and put together the explanation usually in less than a half-hour. I usually do it about once a week.

Obstacles

- This assumes your paper's top editors would support you working with content editors to improve stories or hold them.
- Sometimes copy editors feel You Make The Call is a test and they'll be penalized if they don't make the call. While we are impressed with the copy editors who get it, we also realize this is not an easy exercise, and the point is to teach and interact.

A sample is attached.

Focus of the Month

How it works

My metro news editor chooses a topic for the month, often with help from other desk managers or others in the newsroom. Then he writes an e-mail on the topic usually once a week. It goes to the whole newsroom. Topics can be simple – homonyms – or complex – using numbers – but they often address problems in writing we on the desk feel are pervasive at a given time.

Why we do it

It's a simple educational tool for copy editors and everyone in the newsroom that also is aimed at improving the copy that comes to the desk. The staff seems to enjoy reading simple grammar tips. And sometimes you can have fun with a topic, such as putting it in quiz form with answers sent the next day. It also provides copy editors with a chance to flag repeated errors in copy without sounding too nit-picky.

Time commitment

Neil spends about four hours a month researching and writing; it depends on the topic. "Homonym trouble" was easy; "Using numbers" was more difficult. But you can spend only minutes a month pulling items from your own stylebook.

Obstacles

- It's easy to write too long and lose people. So, get someone to edit your work.
- Also, format your e-mail to make it easier to read, if possible. Indent blocks of text taken from another source, for example.
- It *is* another e-mail in the Inbox, but your Focus of the Month will get read if more often than not it is kept light and quick.

Samples are attached.

Catch of the Month

How it works*

A catch is a hole in a story or an inaccuracy, though it can be a grammar or style error. The news editor compiles the good catches that others nominate or that she hears about. The compilation is sent out by e-mail at the end of the month for a vote among copy editors. The winner is presented with a 14-inch softball autographed by the paper's top editors and copy desk managers.

Why we do it

The chief point is recognition. It also shows the copy editors what kinds of catches are being made and helps them learn to watch out for them.

Time commitment

I spend about 15 minutes each month compiling nominees and announcing the winner. Desk managers also spend bits of time here and there keeping their eyes out for catches being made and putting them in an e-mail to pass on.

Obstacles

- Some copy editors don't like to nominate themselves, so managers must keep their eye out.
- Catch of the Month is harder to maintain, so periodically copy desk managers must make a special effort to renew interest in the award.
- You must buy the baseballs or softballs! (They're not *that* expensive.)

*The Herald upgraded "catch of the month" to be included in the overall monthly excellence awards. The current system has catches submitted to the leader of the excellence committee. The winner is selected by that panel.

Brown-bag discussion

How it works

Once a month a copy desk manager or senior editor schedules a discussion during dinner break. It's optional to the copy editors; we provide dessert. It's an open forum, with topics ranging from a grammar review to layout critiques. Sometimes guests are invited, such as a bureau chief, the managing editor or even an advertising manager.

Why we do it

It's an informal way to discuss our work, share ideas and help each other improve. The required preparation to foster discussion is simple, such as gathering layouts or compiling sentences with grammar errors. Having a content editor or someone from elsewhere in the company helps develop good relations between copy desk and city desk or even editorial and advertising. And the session doesn't steal from shift time.

Time commitment

An hour for your staff; a little more for those planning the meeting.

Obstacles

- It seems like another meeting. But copy editors usually are agreeable and have a good discussion. Plus they get dessert.
- If the night is busy we can feel pressure to hold the discussion for later, and then later, and then later. But the trick is to simply insist upon having it, just as we insist that our copy editors take a break.
- You gotta buy the dessert!

Peer review

How it works

A senior copy editor sends out a story for everyone to look over. Copy editors gather for a quick meeting after deadline to discuss issues in the story.

Why we do it

It's an informal way for copy editors to discuss stories and issues without managers hanging over them. Each copy editor brings a unique perspective to the story. One always catches grammar, another catches style mistakes while someone else sees libel. It also helps develop mutual respect among co-workers and lets some start to stand out as experts in certain areas.

Time commitment

However long copy editors chose to discuss a story.

Obstacles

- Since it's staff directed, it's tough to keep your management fingers off. It's also somewhat sporadic, falling victim to busy work schedules or morale issues.

Fun fact

How it works

The assistant news editor e-mails out a fun fact of the day. Topics vary from season style issues to odd facts. The metro news editor reads the fun fact out loud at night staff's daily meeting.

Why we do it

To convey simple information in a direct fashion or pique interest in a particular topic.

Time commitment

Time depends on how complicated the fact is. Could be from a few minutes to a half hour researching on the Internet.

Samples:

When did "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" debut?

Its first nationwide broadcast, on PBS, was on February 19, 1968. (This is an important distinction from when his show first went on the air, which was in 1966 but only on WQED in Pittsburgh.)

The national median home price in January was \$160,400, up 6.7 percent from the same month a year ago. (This compares to \$xxx,xxx in [your region].)

The ability to form a plural of a name, or the plural of any word, seems to be a dying skill. Here are some rules about names:

-- most last names ending in **es** or **z** add **es**: so the plural of Jones is **Joneses** (not the Jones' -- as we often see), the plural of Gonzalez is **Gonzalezes**.

-- most last names ending in **y** add **s**, even if preceded by a consonant: so the plural of Duffy is **Duffys** (not the Duffy's)

-- for others, just add **s**: the **Howards** (not the Howard's).

fun fact of the day:

* **Pool** and **billiards** are not the same thing. Billiards is a game played with three hard balls on a rectangular table covered with cloth and having raised, cushioned edges. Pool is a type of billiards game played with balls numbered one to 15 and a cue ball, on a table with six pockets.

fun fact of the day:

* An unmarried woman who is the main bridesmaid in a wedding is a **maid of honor**. A married woman who serves in the same role is a **matron of honor**.

fun fact of the day:

* **NEW STYLE ALERT**: Copy editor Virginia Willey had to double-check some information the other day, and discovered the **Kenneth Young Centers** has finally dropped the "s" from its name and is now the **Kenneth Youth Center**.

Staff bulletin board

How it works

Each copy editor is assigned a two-week period in which they are responsible for developing an idea and the materials for a bulletin board in the copy desk area.

Why we do it

To get the staff more involved in their own development and to generate new ideas to focus on.

Time commitment

Time depends on how complicated the bulletin board is. So far, all employees have worked on theirs off deadline.

Obstacles

- Since it's staff directed, it's tough to keep your management fingers off. Quality may vary greatly depending on skill and commitment of individual employees