

An Editing Checklist

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It would be impossible, in a short list, to identify everything an editor needs to look for in an article. What follows is a partial list of important elements, along with some blanks so you can add things that give you the most trouble.

Facts

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Names | <input type="checkbox"/> Titles | <input type="checkbox"/> Directions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dates | <input type="checkbox"/> Identification | <input type="checkbox"/> Locations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Times | <input type="checkbox"/> Ages | <input type="checkbox"/> Numbers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> URLs | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Clarity

- Does the opening make sense?
- Does information in the body of the article back up the opening?
- Is the article focused, and does it move in a clear, logical direction?
- Does the writer explain unusual terms?
- Is the language appropriate for the audience?
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Mechanics

- | | | |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spelling | <input type="checkbox"/> Capitalization | <input type="checkbox"/> Redundancies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grammar and usage | <input type="checkbox"/> Attribution | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Punctuation | <input type="checkbox"/> Clichés | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Transitions | <input type="checkbox"/> Double-entendre | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Active voice | <input type="checkbox"/> Flabby writing | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Other Problem Areas

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Discrepancies | <input type="checkbox"/> Unsubstantiated information |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fairness | <input type="checkbox"/> Racism, sexism, ageism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Taste | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Beyond the checklist

Editing requires more than just a checklist. It requires a skeptical mind and keen thinking. The following questions and suggestions are meant to help you step beyond a checklist.

- 1. Focus on clarity.** Is the writing clear? If not, how can it be improved? Think as members of your audience think. What do you want – or need – them to know about the topic? The basics will help you here: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
- 2. Never assume.** Is the writing accurate? Are there discrepancies or holes? Do sentences or paragraphs make contradictory statements? Is information missing? If so, what needs to be added and where does the information need to come from? Is it something that you can look up?
- 3. Think logically.** Editors aren't expected to be geniuses, but they must be skeptical enough to challenge the illogical. Make sure you understand what an article is saying. Otherwise, no one else will either.
- 4. Watch for double-entendre.** Cultivate a dirty mind. Innocent words, phrases or sentences can easily take on embarrassing meanings, especially in headlines. It's up to you to spot such double-entendre before it gets into print or on the air.
- 5. Use good judgment.** As an editor, your job is to improve, not tinker. Never do something that will damage a story. Don't make changes just for the sake of change. Fix what needs to be fixed but leave intact the things that don't. Learn to trust your ear about writing, but be ready to explain your changes. If you don't know why you are changing something in a story, you shouldn't be changing it.
- 6. Check your own work.** Always reread a story after you have edited it. That way, you can erase any “footprints,” or errors, you might leave behind.
- 7. Work with reporters.** Talk through changes with reporters. Never do something that will surprise them later. If you can, send them edited copies of their stories. Editing is a team process. Be authoritative, but also be flexible. And once you've finished editing, make sure the reporter sees a fresh version of the story.