

Detroit Free Press accuracy checklists

By John X. Miller
Detroit Free Press public editor

The Free Press has focused on trying to eliminate the most troublesome and recurrent errors, such as misidentifications, misspellings and errors with numbers (phone numbers, addresses, math) by a continuing focus on accuracy and the use of accuracy checklists.

These checklists are the result of work and feedback from the Free Press staff and its accuracy and credibility committee.

We decided on what errors to target by examining the error pattern over the last couple of years, talking with and getting buy-in from staff and experimenting with the checklists. The goal of these accuracy checklists is to remind newsroom journalists, especially on deadline, to verify and re-verify certain information and to help make sure stories, photos and graphics are contextual and work together.

We designed the checklists to cover the key newsroom roles of reporter, assigning editor, copy editor, photographer, photo editor, page designer and artist. The 8 checklists are written in the active voice and are as concise as possible, and are made into a laminated 2-sided card that can be folded to sit atop a desk or computer, or to be cut apart for lists to be used separately.

As far as the Free Press' accuracy focus, accuracy and fairness are the top newsroom-wide goals. Being accurate is one of the most important responsibilities of today's journalists. It's a core value that is fundamental to all that we do. It affirms a newspaper's credibility, authority and accuracy. Readers expect journalists to get information right and when we don't get routine information correct, it has a cumulative negative affect on credibility.

Our corrections process corrects errors quickly and designates who is primarily responsible. A correction form — sent by a person responsible for sending and receiving them — goes to that person. They state how and why the error happened, what might work so it doesn't happen again, and if using the accuracy checklist could have helped avoid the error.

That form then goes to the responsible person's supervisor, then to the public editor, who keeps the forms and tracks who is responsible in a database. When evaluations are done by editors, he is consulted about who had errors over the course of a year.

Accuracy checklists

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These checklists are the result of work and feedback from the Free Press staff and its accuracy and credibility committee. The checklist idea is one of several from ASNE's Examining Our Credibility Project. In polling by the project, the No. 1 problem the public has with newspapers is it sees too many factual errors and spelling or grammar mistakes. The Free Press checklists are designed to try to eliminate these errors.

REPORTER CHECKLIST

1. Have you double-checked all names, titles and places mentioned in your story? Have you tested from the screen and CQ'd ALL phone numbers or Web addresses?

2. Are the quotes accurate and properly attributed? Have you fully captured what each person meant?

3. Is this story fair? Who or what might be missing from the story? Have they been called and given a chance to talk?

4. Have you run spell check and checked the math?

5. Have you fact-checked your information given to graphics or photography? Have you seen the completed graphic or photo?

ASSIGNING EDITOR CHECKLIST

1. Did the reporter double-check all names, titles and places mentioned in this story? Did the reporter properly CQ all phone numbers or Web addresses?

2. Are the quotes accurate and properly attributed? Have we fully captured what each person meant?

3. Is the story fair? Who or what might be missing from the story? Is the lede or nut graph sufficiently supported?

4. Are there visual elements possible? Have they been assigned? Have you seen and approved the completed work?

5. Are the background and context complete enough to tell readers why the story is relevant?

6. Did the reporter sign off on changes made in the story?

COPY EDITOR CHECKLIST

1. Is the headline accurate & balanced? Do all aspects of the story and headline seem factually accurate? Is the story fair? Who or what might be missing?

2. Is the background and context complete enough to give readers a sense of why the story is relevant?

3. Is the lead sufficiently supported? Is the story fair?

4. Have all phone numbers and Web addresses been CQ'd? Have you checked the math? Have you checked the spelling?
5. Have you checked photo captions and graphics information against the story?
6. Have you proofed the display type?

PHOTO EDITOR CAPTION CHECKLIST

1. Are you familiar with the story, reading it in ATEX when available? Do the photos chosen accurately represent the event or person?
2. Is the caption complete and error-free? Are the quotes accurate and properly attributed? Do they fully capture what the person meant?
3. Is photo cropped for maximum impact?
4. Have the photo proofs been delivered to designers in enough time to allow thoughtful design and careful copy editing of captions?

PHOTO ASSIGNING EDITOR CHECKLIST

1. Is the photo request form complete and accurate? (i.e., complete address, directions, contact phone numbers, what story is about, date needed, etc.)
2. Did the person making the photo request include any background and context to give the photographer a sense of why this photo should be taken and what point is it meant to illustrate?
3. Is the assigned photo the best way to illustrate the story? Have you discussed the assignment with a reporter or assignment editor?
4. Is the essential content of the photo unobstructed and visible?

PHOTOGRAPHER CAPTION CHECKLIST

1. Have you double-checked all names, titles and places mentioned in your caption? And have you CQ'd unusual spellings?
2. Is the caption complete and accurate? Does it include the basic information: Who, What, When, Where, and Why?
3. Are the quotes accurate and properly attributed? Have you fully captured what the person meant?
4. Is the photo cropped for maximum impact?
5. Have you filled out all appropriate fields in the SCC caption form? Have you re-read the caption carefully?
6. Is the photo file or photo folder named properly (according to the Free Press picture and folders naming convention) and saved to the appropriately?

ARTIST CHECKLIST

1. Do you have all the information you need? Does it make sense? Is the information correctly prioritized? Do you have correct source and credit line information?

2. Have you discussed with the page designer the size of the graphic and whether it's color?
3. Have you checked the information with the reporter or with an assignment editor, if the reporter is not available?
4. If it's a map, have you double-checked the location?
5. Have you sent a proof to the copy editor and reporter or his or her assignment editor?

PAGE DESIGNER CHECKLIST

1. Is the file name of the page correct? Is the date and page number correct in the folio, as well as any zone designators and fix daggers or SAP stars? Are the ad stacks drawn properly? Do jumps and break words match?
2. Have the budgets been updated? Are you missing any stories or elements (particularly graphics)?
3. Have you checked the big type—headlines, cutlines, reefers? Do they make sense to you?
4. On photos and graphics, is the crop correct? Does the image fill the frame? Are all graphics and photos proportional—no anamorphic enlargements or reductions?