

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

Slotters, 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 slotters 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.
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- 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.

Sample

Good head from Becky in tight count:

Rock till you drop

Person who can use rocking chair longest wins concert tickets

Pat McDermott may not seem like your ordinary rocker.

But the 46-year-old grandmother of four from Silver Lake, Wis., says she has what it takes to rock through the night for a chance to meet heavy metal bands Metallica and Godsmack.

With only a bottle of water by her side, McDermott and three other contestants began the first of what could be days of rocking back and forth in a wooden rocking chair in a promotion sponsored by 95 WIIL Rock (95.1 FM). The competition is being held at Rink Side Sports, on the west side of Gurnee Mills mall.

I got a call from a reader today who thought this headline was hilarious. She read poor as bad and wondered by the board would give crappy drivers a discount:

Tollway offers I-PASS discount for poor drivers

Low-income drivers now have easier access to the soon-to-be most economical way to get through Illinois' tollways – the I-PASS.

Illinois State Toll Highway Authority officials unveiled a new effort to ease the upfront price of an I-PASS transponder for drivers with fixed or low incomes.

From the rimmer:

Upgrades:: New technology may increase patronage, repeat visits

Computers must be outfitted with special wireless-network cards to pick up a Wi-Fi signal.

Libraries in Antioch and Lincolnshire are among the facilities doubling as Wi-Fi hot spots. Officials say wireless networks reduce demands on a library's traditional desktop computers and allow patrons to work more comfortably.

Board member Aaron Lawlor said the network, which often costs several thousand dollars to set up, could be a promotional tool that would attract more patrons.

Board Vice President Jack L. Martin, who leads the building committee, called the Wi-Fi proposal "a no-brainer."

"There seem to be a lot of plusses to it," he said.

The board may discuss the proposals at its next meeting, which is scheduled for April 6 at the Laschen Center, 294 Evergreen Drive, Vernon Hills.

The jump head above is fine, but it would be better to try to hit on how the changes at the library would affect patrons, rather than how it would affect the library. Here's what ran:

Upgrades:: Wi-Fi would let patrons use own laptops

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.

Sample

Authorities said all warning devices were working properly when Margaret Dahlberg unknowingly stepped into the path of an oncoming Metra train early Thursday in downtown Glen Ellyn.

The 45-year-old Glendale Heights mother of two was crossing the tracks at an ungated walkway south of the train station, 455 Crescent Ave., when she was struck just after 7 a.m. Thursday. She was pronounced dead on the scene at about 7:50 a.m. by the DuPage County coroner.

The commuter train was the Union Pacific west line, running from Geneva to Chicago. It had just stopped at College Avenue in Wheaton and was heading straight for Lombard, with no stop at Glen Ellyn. Authorities wouldn't speculate about the speed of the train at the time of the accident.

Dahlberg was on her way to catch a train to Chicago to attend a class related to her job.

One witness said Dahlberg was looking down as she crossed the tracks, unaware of the train, despite warning cries from other commuters, police said. From other accounts, however, her family believes Dahlberg watched another person dart out and make it safely across the tracks. Believing it was safe to cross, she followed.

Police, who are still interviewing nearly two dozen witnesses, have not confirmed that account.

There is no indication of foul play or any evidence her death was a suicide, authorities said.

A coroner's inquest is expected within eight to 10 weeks.

"It certainly appeared to be an accident," Norton said.

The accident closed the tracks for more than an hour and delayed trains carrying nearly 7,000 passengers, a Metra spokeswoman said.

Dahlberg's family, who was planning to leave for a Jamaica vacation after the Fourth of July, gathered Thursday at the family's Glendale Heights home.

Dahlberg, who went by Peggy, and her husband, Steve, a Glen Ellyn postal worker, have two children - Matt, 15, a Glenbard West High School student and Nathan, 13, a student at Glenside Middle School.

The family, Glendale Heights residents for 23 years, attends St. Matthew's Catholic Church in Glendale Heights.

"They were together all the time," said family friend Tom Cholewa of Lombard. "A real nice family."

Catherine Broehl was close with her daughter-in-law Peggy.

"She was a wonderful mother and wife ... she would bend over backwards to please people," Broehl said.

An employee of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for 21 years, Dahlberg was a former regional personnel officer. She had recently taken a new job as a special assistant to the division director.

"People are in a state of shock here ... so many people knew her," said program manager Gail Christoffer-Baruch. "She was a highly respected person. She was always willing to help and answer questions. She was trusted."

Funeral arrangements are being handled by Cypress Funeral Home in Glendale Heights.

Glen Ellyn's last train fatality in 1998 was ruled a suicide. In 1995, an 82-year-old woman died after she struck by a commuter train at the Main Street crossing. Gates and signals were functioning, authorities said.

Copy editors' comments:

- Perhaps just the difference between the police's account of how Margaret Dahlberg crossed the track and the account her family believes. Did she cross the track oblivious to the train, horns, and screaming onlookers, or was she making a break for it? Would we have included the somewhat unsubstantiated make-a-break-for-it account that the family chose to believe if we didn't feel sorry for their loss?

► On the train story, I would take out the suicide reference. Doesn't seem appropriate for a grieving community to have to read that.

► Why are we trying to make this story look like a suicide all the time? There are several references to the suicidal issue.

Teresa's comments

► The comments were great. I also was concerned about raising the suicide issue, but decided readers would be raising it in their heads so we should address it.

► The issue that struck me was how we identified her. She's the mother of two first and an employee of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission second. If she were a man, would we print those details in that order? Or would he be a 21-year employee of the NRC first and a father of two second?

► At the least, I doubt if we'd put the details of her career at the end of the story instead of higher up. I also found it interesting that we listed her husband's career. It's not often when we say a husband is survived by his wife that we list her job. I agree his job is important because he might come in contact with the public a lot as a postal worker, but we should make sure we're even-handed in what emphasis we place on the details of someone's life.

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 Holdway 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.

Sample

Is knowing when to capitalize so hard? Yes, it can be, because it goes well beyond what to do with the first letter of a sentence. It's largely a matter of style — publication or Associated Press preferences. Take a look at some of the things even copy editors are always looking up in the Daily Herald stylebook (in the Reference directory).

Northwest suburbs, West suburbs, South suburbs, etc. [This is purely a Daily Herald thing to place importance on the areas we cover and then remain consistent for the southern parts.]

South Side, North Side, Southwest Side, etc. Capitalize for the area in Chicago, but lower case for areas of other communities. [This is derived from an AP Stylebook ruling to capitalize compass points “when used in denoting widely known sections: *Southern California, the South Side of Chicago, the Lower East Side of New York.*” East side of, say, Elgin or Evanston doesn’t cut it.]

village board Lowercase. Preferred over board of trustees. Palatine has a village council. (See **city council**.) [Lowercased because it’s usually not the formal title.]

city council lower case unless the name of the city is in front of it (exception to AP): *Elgin City Council.*

board of trustees Lower case when referring to a specific village’s board: *Wauconda’s board of trustees approved a plan to renovate the village hall.*

city hall Lower case when referring to a specific building. (See **village hall**.)

city of Chicago Do not capitalize city, even when referring to the city as a governing body. (See AP under **city**.)

village hall Lower case when referring to a specific village’s building. Avoid treating it as a formal name in sentences, as in: *The group will meet at village hall.*

village of Libertyville not *Village*. The same applies for any other village.

Village President an official title. Capitalize when used with a name.

titles Capitalize an official’s actual title only, not the modifier before it. Some examples: *parks Commissioner Daniel Martin, union President Shirley Forpe, Police Chief Donald Harris.* Do not capitalize job descriptions, such as *village attorney, first lady, police officer, detective, board member.*

More to come. Don’t hesitate to tell me your capitalization conundrums.

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].)

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