

CHICAGO TRIBUNE ERROR POLICY

The Chicago Tribune adopted an error policy Feb. 19, 1996. We require that a correction form be filled out with every published correction or clarification. Copies of the correction form are in the Reference basket in our CCI computer system as well as numerous public baskets assigned by departments. Corrections and clarifications appear on Page 2.

The form is part of our system for monitoring errors. We use it to help us identify patterns of mistakes, which can be useful in a number of ways, from how we use our resources to how we do our jobs.

The Public Editor is the coordinating editor responsible for assuring that corrections are published and tracked. Each supervising editor is responsible for making sure that the electronic form is filled out.

These forms need to be specific, including the names of individuals. Our experience has been that the process of following up on mistakes has been invaluable, in determining if we can learn from mistakes and prevent them from recurring. We know, too, that errors typically have many fingerprints, and our attention to accuracy has led to many important, if difficult, conversations among staff members in different departments.

How it works

An error appears in the paper. Ideally, a staff member notices it first. In practice, someone associated with the story topic or a careful reader calls it to our attention.

The section editor has conversations with people who handled the story or item. The person (or persons) responsible for the error explains in the electronic form how this happened. The supervising editor then sends it to the Claries basket.

Some tips

We hope you don't need these, but here are some suggestions for how to do a correction.

- Determine, as quickly as possible, if in fact there is a mistake. Avoid the defensive trap of minimizing something as too insignificant to warrant a correction. Someone's name or job is not insignificant, even if not the focus of a story. We should fix it. If something is wrong, we need to know about it, and we want to make a correction promptly. It's all right if it takes a day or two to wrap up the information for the error form.
- However, if there is doubt or debate about a fact, please get the Public Editor's office involved to sort out the matter.
- Try not to restate the error when writing the correction. Exceptions can be made for clarity, though.
- We avoid assessing blame and pointing fingers in corrections. Readers aren't interested in our internal angst.
- Generally, identify the page and section where an error appeared, although that may not be appropriate in some cases involving zoned editions. Ask your editor. It's unnecessary to say an error appeared in the Chicago Tribune.

- July 2003

ERRORS, PAST AND PRESENT

At the Chicago Tribune, we monitor clarifications and errors. In 1991, the public editor's office began a system of analyzing clarifications. An error survey, done by a company called Professional Proofreading Services, was added in 1992. Each of these reviews is done quarterly. In 1996, an error policy was adopted.

Published errors lead to clarifications printed on Page 2. If we agree that there are levels of concern about errors/accuracy, these are more serious. Some are identified by readers or sources, some by staffers. An error form helps us focus on problem areas and trends that produce significant mistakes.

We use a spreadsheet software program to summarize where errors ran and what types of errors are involved. For example, we often have a high percentage, perhaps 40 to 45 percent, of fact errors. Another big category: errors that involve large display type or material, such as headlines, photo captions or graphics.

A companion study is the error survey. Professional Proofreading is a niche business started by Barbara Henry, former proofreader supervisor for the Miami Herald. Knight Ridder, with its emphasis on quality, asked her to develop a system for all its newspapers.

Newspapers send her papers from designated sample periods. She reads each and applies her formula, errors per page, as a standard. She does our paper, Fort Lauderdale, the Wall Street Journal, the Baltimore Sun. And, some Knight Ridder papers.

Ms. Henry cannot give us exact data about other papers. She guesses, however, that the lowest rate by any other paper is about 2.4 errors per page. Our best score so far was 1.65 errors per page in the third survey prepared for 2003. Further, we consistently show that half to two-third of our errors are preventable, involving misspellings and typos, extra or missing words, and extra or missing spaces.

- Chicago Tribune
September 2003

CLARIFICATION/ERROR EXPLANATION

Please include electronic copy of the error, with section, page and date noted.

FOR PUBLICATION

Text of proposed correction for Page 2:

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Describe error and show a corrected version.

How did error occur? Please be specific and include names.

How did the error come to our attention?

Did deadlines affect this error?

How could this error have been avoided?

Comments:

Name of staff member filing this form:

TYPES OF PROCESS ERRORS

News gathering	Editing	Display	Syndicate, outside service	Simple error (brainlock)	Unavoidable
Visual/text	Source/desk				

News gathering process. Incomplete or inaccurate information. It can apply to photo captions as well as stories. Example: single-source reporting job, when it turns out that a second, logical source should have been contacted. Or, we make assumptions and fail to double check, such as names spelled in clips or basic facts. “Visual” is for newsgathering errors related to caption or graphic information. “Text” is for reporting stories.

Editing. When we edit in errors. Often, it is a lack of communication between editors and writers. We have two sub-categories: source, or content, editing; and copy editing. Did the error happen at the assigning editor level? Or did the copy desk edit in an error (and fail, for example, to contact the source editor or reporter for clarification).

Display. When things fall through the cracks on headlines, photos, graphics or general presentation. ACTUAL PRODUCTION was the consensus. This is often a work flow issue. It can be a fast trim, either by a typesetter or on the production floor. It can be a caption problem in which photos were switched, and the person writing the caption information does not see the actual picture being used. Or, it can be related to a mistake that occurs because we may be switching data or info from one computer system (CCI) to another (the Mac, for the graphics department). Headlines go in this category. The execution of captions, but not the fact-gathering, can be display errors.

Syndicate, outside suppliers. This could be a problem with a crossword puzzle. It could be information about a distant news event that we would have no way of checking. However, if there were information that we should be checking and just miss, that might qualify instead as an editing error. Example: If AP happened to say in a story on deadline that Peoria was east of Champaign, we could be expected to correct that. For categorizing how we heard about errors, syndicated material is considered ext/source. BUT, there are some exceptions we will count as internal: Clarence Page, for example.

Simple error (brainlock). Sometimes we just goof. We have a typo or we misread a press release. Staff consensus was to be strict on this, because in a way, almost all the errors we make are brainlock.

Unavoidable errors. We have very few. These are likely to be when information changes or the source was wrong. Or when we do what we should be doing, such as checking phone numbers, and an error still sneaks through.

How do we learn about errors? We are tallying whether we learn about errors from readers or sources, which we define broadly as including parties immediately affected.

Footnotes... From time to time, we will keep track separately of possible trouble areas that we need to monitor. For starters, here are some examples:

- Freelancers. This work can be a trouble spot for us. We notice it sometimes when there are new sections or more news assignments on deadlines are made.
- Phone numbers.
- Deadlines. Just how often do deadlines really cause errors?
- Big words or type. Mistakes in the display elements, including headlines, captions and graphics, are particularly annoying to readers, who tell us that informally in complaints and more formally in focus groups.

- Chicago Tribune 2002

EXAMPLES OF ERRORS

GETTING IT RIGHT

- * People sometimes fail to confirm information, including names and basic facts, and rely on clips. The error gets perpetuated. We did a 20-inch story on a woman whose name we misspelled, because the reporter didn't ask the woman how to spell her name. The previous four stories in which the woman was mentioned all had the incorrect spelling; no one else asked, either.
- * Several times, we attributed quotes inaccurately. In most cases, the explanation was that the reporter confused the notes. But we also have attributed statements in pull-out quotes to a person different from the one quoted in the story.
- * Person A, active in, say, the garden club, sends in a press release on garden club stationery about a community event for a calendar item. We assumed that the event was to raise funds for the garden club. It was not.
- * A convent was listed as a source for obit information. Whoever answered the phone referred to the person as "Sister" such and such. Therefore, we assumed that the deceased person was a nun. She was not, but we didn't ask. Her son was not amused.
- * In a story about a teenager who drowned, a reporter received two spellings of the name. The reporter made a choice, but did not double check. We were wrong.
- * We covered a speech but misidentified the civic club that sponsored the event, because it was held at a site other than the sponsor's address.

SOURCES, ASSUMPTIONS

- * We reported that a Chicago City Council measure was written by the corporation counsel's office. In fact, that office wrote a resolution that took the opposite position of the actual council measure. The wrong information was from aldermanic sources. We didn't check with the corporation counsel.
- * We misidentified a popular country singer at a concert. The photographer was told by the club manager that the headliner would be out right away. When a man stepped to the center microphone, the photographer thought it was the headliner. It wasn't.

EDITING

- * In a story about a theater complex, we described the village president as president of the development company seeking to build the project. He was not. An editor inserted the company name before "president." Then, we took out "village." That is how "village president" became "company president."

* In a suburban listing, we gave a phone number with an area code of 312. That should have been a red flag. The event was in Oak Park, where the area code is 708. Only part of downtown Chicago uses 312.

IS IT REAL, OR IS IT...

* A copy editor failed to read the caption information on a Xerox copy that came from a photo editor. Our caption referred to a building as a model of a planned theater complex. In fact, the building pictured was the actual theater.

SAY WHAT? ERRORS CAN HAVE MANY FINGERPRINTS

* A story written on Monday for the Tuesday paper said that a court matter “continued Tuesday.” On deadline, the sentence was changed, to “continued Monday.” We should have said that the court matter was to continue Tuesday. The error was introduced in editing, but that would have been unnecessary if the original description had been correct.

* We described a former alderman as a state senator. That person is a state representative. Another reporter had sent a message, and the writer did not double check. Nor did the desk catch this.

* A reporter misunderstood estimates about how many cars a residential housing development would bring to the community. We said the number of cars may be twice the number of residents. In fact, traffic officials say that the number of cars is expected to be double the number of residences.

* We spelled a name Streans, not Stearns, as it should have been. The reporter didn’t check; the copy editor didn’t question the odd spelling.

* A graphics coordinator did a timeline on the athletic career of DePaul’s Ray Meyer that correctly showed him as a guard at Notre Dame. The artist added a cutline that identified him as a forward. The sports copy desk didn’t catch this.

* A sports graphic was to illustrate the miserable performance by (former) Bears starting quarterback Rick Mirer compared to that of New England’s Drew Bledsoe, one of the league’s hottest passers. We transposed the colors in the key for the color version. Perhaps wishful thinking?

UNAVOIDABLE ERRORS

* We reported that an elephant and tiger farm lost \$250,000 in a contract cancellation. The reporter challenged the owner, questioning that figure. The owner insisted that it was right. It was only \$25,000.

* Wedding information was incorrect. The couple kept changing plans.

* We met a Friday section deadline, but a program time was changed.

* The suburban high school's football roster was wrong. (This goes for theater cast notes, recording liners and pro sports, too.)

* A hotel gave us brunch prices, and we double checked. They were wrong anyway.

COMMENTS (AND SOMETIMES ACTS OF CONTRITION)

* How did the error occur? I screwed up. Working in a buro, away from my files, I wrote the name from my faulty memory.

* I do not mean to make excuses and am not trying to be funny, but insomnia caused me to get a mere 4 hours sleep the night before and my left eye felt like a hot needle sticking in it. I was really fading when I wrote this story.

* How could this error have been avoided? Have programmable robots do this work instead of human beings.

- Chicago Tribune