

# OK, Listen Up. This Is Simple.

## So Say We All

*Few things in our craft are certain, but these are:*

- I. There is no such thing as a miracle.
- II. Soldiers are not “peacekeepers.”
- III. We do not show stories to anyone outside the newspaper before publication.
- IV. Newspapers published in English use headlines written in English.
- V. We do not allow people to render their names as logos.
- VI. The term “black box” serves no useful purpose.
- VII. Dictionaries are the second-to-last refuge of scoundrels.

## It's All About the Copy

When I get a story to edit, I make no assumptions except one: *It is unfit for publication.*

That applies to staff stories and wire stories alike. It should not be controversial. But the attitude persists that the hard work is done when the story is moved to the copy desk.

I do not care how long or hard a writer worked on it. I do not care what conversations the assigning editor had with the reporter. I do not care about the agreements the reporter made with “sources.”

Only the copy speaks to me. When I read it for the first time, I don't want to know any more than the reader will know in the morning.

I don't much care how the writer has decided to tell the story. If I wanted to decide how stories are written, I would be an assigning editor or reporter myself. But the story had damn well better be told without distracting me much.

“Trust but verify” isn't good enough for me. I trust no number. I believe no citation. I accept no generalizations that cannot be confirmed. I am wary of quotations. If a passage seems too familiar, I want to know why.

None of this means I don't “trust” the reporter. I accept it as a given that the reporter has done his best and is pure of heart. The reporter doesn't have to convince me of anything. But the story must make me believe.

—Phillip Blanchard

## I'll Bet There Was More to It Than That

*NEWPORT NEWS -- Newport News jail officials are paying closer attention to inmates' shoes after a prisoner recently stabbed his cellmate with a crude knife fashioned from the steel shank of a boot or shoe. ...*

*Earl Coleman told jail officials that Jontae Bennafield Jr. yanked him from his bunk and began*

*jabbing him with a steel shank sharpened at one end. It took 37 stitches to close the stab wounds across Coleman's forehead, scalp and chest. ...*

*Bennafield apparently didn't like Coleman's blanket falling on his lower bunk.*

—Newport News Daily Press

## Let's Shift the Blame

I'm sick and tired of editorial getting the blame for falling circulation when it's obvious that the incompetence and indifference of circulation departments are at fault.

The most creative thing they've done in recent years is fake circulation numbers.

We do what we're supposed to do. Circulation departments do not.

More people would subscribe to the newspaper if

it were delivered when and where they want. Many more.

I get my newspaper at home and pay for it. I would have canceled long ago because of poor service were I not an employee.

I want my newspaper on the porch, not on the lawn. That seems to be too much to ask.

—P.B.



## Do Me a Favor, Carol: Don't Be a Hero

*Some of us can think of the perfect way to celebrate our 40th anniversary of toil at one place: Calling in sick.*

*But not Carol Sheehan, a Commercial Appeal copy editor whose daily dedication and refusal to call in sick shine a light on Cal Ripken Jr.'s inner slacker.*

*"I don't like to brag about it or anything," said Sheehan, 64. But she did tell us about the day she was so dizzy that after every article of clothing she put on, she had to lie back down.*

*"Then I'd get back up and put something else on," she said. Then she came to work, because that's what Carol Sheehan does.*

—Commercial Appeal (Nashville, Tenn.)

Every workplace has at least one Carol Sheehan.

If someone never stays out of work sick, it means that someone is coming to work sick at least once in a while. For a lot of reasons, including the health of co-workers and "product quality," we do not want copy editors to work when they're sick.

This is not to say that we should take sick time to, say, "celebrate our 40th anniversary of toil at one place." That's what vacation time is for.

Bless you, Carol, but please stay home the next time you get woozy.

—P.B.

# Why Go On?

In February, I marked 20 years in the professional journalism business, the past 15 as a copy editor.

I've been lucky to work for four good newspapers—from a twice-weekly family-owned paper to a top-10 metro daily. Any complaints I have are in no way specific to any of those fine publications (I'll deal with Conrad Black and David Radler privately). My frustrations are with the industry in general.

The dilemma for me: It's getting tougher each day to justify my continued role in the corporate media mill.

As someone who believes in seven-year life/career cycles, I'm again at the point where I have to decide whether to re-up, to sign another lucrative seven-year deal in journalism.

It's been nearly half my life. Exactly seven years at suburban papers, seven years at the Chicago Sun-Times and now seven freelancing and in Albuquerque.

Why go on? Why watch another generation of reporters struggle with the language? Why help downsize another newsroom? Am I really needed to pop out two editions a day five days a week?

Is the future bright? For two decades, I've been told by high-ranking editors (most of them very smart) that a turnaround in circulation is just a matter of putting one more blond celebrity's mug in a Page 1 refer box. Do I want to stick around to see who's next in line after Sharon Stone, Dick Tracy-era Madonna, Kurt Cobain, Cameron Diaz and Paris Hilton? Will there be a brave new era of brunettes? Does Amanda Bynes sell newspapers?

It's difficult not to grow weary of fixing the same mistake twice a week for 20 years. One more comma splice could make me slice my wrists.

Why go on?

The easy answer these days—maybe the only one—is that my experience is

valuable to my paper, particularly as a mentor to young copy editors and reporters. My work with college students (first in Chicago and now at the University of New Mexico) has extended, perhaps flat-out resuscitated, my career.

Most days, after my shift ends at 1:30 p.m., my day begins. I know I'm going to hit sunshine, take a nap and head to my office at UNM to work with the students at the Daily Lobo. The students are fairly egoless and eager. They make mistakes (though usually not much worse than many 20-year veterans), but they learn from their mistakes. I see improvement from September to May -- as a group and, memorably, in individuals who suddenly find it all clicking.

Am I helping, in some small way, to help create a better crop of journalists for the future? Or am I hoodwinking them into pursuing a career that has no future?



—J.A. Montalbano

# Stoopid Science

Someone out there still isn't listening: **Don't insult the readers!** Science is wondrous enough without resorting to this sort of nonsense.



- **In a scenario out of "Star Wars,"** astronomers have detected a planet outside our solar system with not one, but three suns, a finding that challenges astronomers' theories of planetary formation. (Reuters)
- **Consider it hibernation-on-demand.** Researchers plunged mice into almost a state of suspended animation and then revived them, with no apparent ill effects, in an experiment that is generating excitement because it might ultimately lead to new ways to treat critically sick people. (AP)

- A turkey-size, carnivorous dinosaur **that looked something like a diminutive but malevolent version of Big Bird from "Sesame Street"** is changing scientists' thinking about when and where some of the closest relatives to birds evolved. (Chicago Tribune)
- Scientists have nick-

named it *Godzilla*, but it really belongs in another movie, this one not yet made: "*Jaws Meets Jurassic Park*." (New York Times)

- Scientists said the animal, which they named *Kiwa hirsuta*, was so distinct from other species that they created a new family and genus for it. ... The animal is white and just shy of 6 inches long — **about the size of a salad plate.** (AP)
- NASA's Mars rover Opportunity seems to have stumbled into **something akin to a carwash** that has left its solar panels much cleaner than those of its twin rover, Spirit. (New Scientist)



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