SECTION 2: CONTENT EDITING

Leads must be supported by the story. Each idea raised in the lead normally is explained in greater detail in the story. If the lead raises questions that the story doesn’t answer, the lead may need to be rewritten. Similarly, if much of the material in the story is not related to the lead, the editor should question whether the lead belongs in the story.

Leads must get readers into a story. Reporters and editors know that today’s readers are very selective. Few of them will read a story if its lead does not catch their attention. Although reworking leads is best done by the reporter and the assignment editor, all editors should be on the lookout for dullness.

Editors must also guard against “hyped” leads. In their search for attention-grabbing leads, sometimes reporters go too far. Few papers want to trick people into reading their stories. Overstated leads are perhaps even worse than dull leads because they can mislead and misinform readers.

Anticipate readers’ questions and make sure they’re answered. Editors are often in better positions to spot holes in stories than reporters are. That’s because reporters may know the information so well that they cannot see that their stories are missing details or background. But editors may not be as familiar with the facts. The questions they have about the story are likely to be the ones that readers would ask. Good editors make sure that those questions are answered. Sometimes that means asking the reporter to do some more checking.

Transitions are writing devices that shift the reader’s attention from one aspect of the story to another. In journalistic writing, transitions can be individual words such as also, another and however or phrases and sentences such as “Many students, however, disagree with the president’s decision.” When the story is organized in blocks, transitions play an even more important role in making stories easy to read.

Trim surgically. Copy editors do not automatically cut off the bottom of a story if it is too long. Instead, they remove wordiness and repetition. They avoid mindlessly cutting all the color from the story because they know readers are unlikely to stay with a story that is boring. And they preserve the transitions that keep the story from seeming disjointed, choppy or even unintelligible.

Assignment editors coach reporters. They give help and guidance while the reporters are gathering information and writing their stories. After the reporter has finished a draft of the story, the assignment editor and reporter discuss it.