



Writing & Editing Tips

Strong reporting can fall flat if the writing doesn't hold up. The job is shaping that information into something readers will trust, understand, and want to keep reading. Editing, meanwhile, is where stories sharpen from "drafts" into journalism. This guide breaks down the essentials: how to craft a compelling lead, how to recognize different story structures, what grammar and clarity rules matter most, and how to edit like a professional newsroom.

Writing a Strong Lead

A lead is the doorway into your story. If the first sentence doesn't orient the reader and signal why the story matters, they may not read the rest.

For news stories, the lead should:

- Answer the core "what happened?" in one clean sentence.
- Include the most newsworthy fact — not just the first fact you learned.
- Avoid buildup or throat-clearing. Readers don't need to be eased in; they need clarity.

Weak: "On Tuesday evening, the Student Government Association held a meeting in Founders Hall."

Strong: "Haverford's Student Government voted Tuesday to raise the activities fee by 15 percent, the first increase in a decade."

For feature stories, the lead should:

- Invite the reader into a scene, voice, or moment.
- Use detail, character, or atmosphere — but still point toward the larger story.

Example: “The cafeteria line stretched past the salad bar as students waited for the first taste of the new dining contract.”

For opinion pieces, the lead should:

- Present the argument directly.
- Avoid hedging or apologizing; opinion writing is strongest when it’s confident and declarative.

Example: “Raising tuition while cutting financial aid is not just shortsighted — it betrays the college’s commitment to accessibility.”

Structuring Different Types of Stories

News (Inverted Pyramid)

- Lead with the most essential fact.
- Following paragraph: key details (numbers, names, dates).
- Then: context, background, quotes, supporting material.
- Finally: the less essential details.

Why: If an editor cuts from the bottom, the core story still survives.

Features (Narrative Arc)

- Start with a scene, anecdote, or character.
- Broaden to show why this matters to the campus/community.
- Layer in voices, data, and context.
- Circle back to the opening thread at the end for closure.

Why: Features are about depth and connection.

Opinion (Thesis + Proof)

- Clear thesis in the first or second paragraph.
- Three to four points of evidence or reasoning.
- Address at least one counterpoint.
- End with a firm conclusion that leaves the reader convinced or challenged.

Why: Opinion writing is persuasion, not ranting.

Grammar and Clarity Rules That Matter

Journalism is about clarity, not showing off vocabulary. A few rules go a long way:

- **Short sentences win.** Break up long thoughts into digestible pieces.
- **Active voice > passive voice.** “The committee approved the budget” is stronger than “The budget was approved by the committee.”
- **Avoid filler words.** Phrases like “it should be noted,” “in order to,” or “due to the fact that” add nothing.
- **Numbers matter.** Always write exact figures when possible, not “a lot” or “some.”

- **Titles and names.** Identify people clearly: “Dean of Students Maria Lopez” on first reference, “Lopez” afterward.
- **Bias in word choice.** “Claimed” implies doubt; “said” is neutral. “Admitted” implies guilt; use only if that’s accurate.

The Editing Flow

Step 1: Self-Edit

- Read aloud — clunky sentences reveal themselves when spoken.
- Highlight jargon and replace it with plain English.
- Trim: if a word or sentence doesn’t add meaning, cut it.

Step 2: Peer Edit

- Ask a fellow staffer to read only for clarity: do they understand the story without extra explanation?
- Then ask them to read for fairness: are all sides represented accurately?

Step 3: Final Copy Edit

- Check names, titles, and dates. Errors here undermine the whole piece.
- Scan for grammar and punctuation slips.
- Ensure quotes are transcribed word-for-word.
- Confirm the story follows the publication’s style guide (AP, in most student papers).

Editing Checklist (One-Page Reference)

Before publication, make sure every box is checked:

- Lead is clear, specific, and newsworthy.
- Structure matches story type (news/feature/opinion).
- Names, titles, and dates verified.
- Quotes are accurate and attributed.
- Numbers and statistics sourced.
- No jargon or filler language.
- Every sentence is clear on the first read.
- Story is balanced and fair — no hidden bias.
- Headline matches story content.
- Final read-aloud passes smoothly.

End of Document.

