

The Voice of Experience

Some of the wisdom gained from experience at the editorial helm does not fit neatly into a single category such as philosophy or technique. This chapter assembles a variety of editors' comments that contain valuable suggestions and advice of a general nature.

What that means is that this is the catch-all chapter.

The sections headed "Hurdles," "Shortcomings," and "Improvements" are compiled from responses to a questionnaire published in *InterLoc*.

Hurdles

What is, for you personally, the hardest part of your job as editor? How do you deal with it?

I used to have a problem with putting off doing paste-up, but I've found that publishing a date for the Fold, Staple, & Label party gives me an obligation to finish on schedule. I work best under deadlines, so I made one for myself.

—Donna Porter

The hardest part of my job as SIG editor is completing the final stages of work: folding, collating, affixing labels, stamping, and stapling. I dread doing it. I finally decided that the SIG could spring for the few extra dollars to have the printer fold the pages, but collating is too expensive. If we ever get any extra funds, I'd like to save my tongue by investing in a PostaFix.

Also difficult is the editing. A lot of members write pages of material and are not offended by my having to cut parts of it; but it is often hard to judge which sentences or paragraphs can be cut without changing the essence of a submission.

—Vicky Gehrt

Cutting down articles I know are important to writer to fit space. I try to apologize and let writer know how important I feel his contribution is. If requested by others, I publish full text.

—Glen Lambert

Getting a really atrocious bit of writing and telling the writer, gently, that it is unsuitable. If I reject, I do it immediately rather than let it moulder in the file. That is my system, but I think the mouldering would be easier on the editor. Actually, I always hope to get better material from the writer in question.

—Cynthia Fisher

Patiently and politely reminding contributors to get their copy in. When I begin wondering why, when I am volunteering my time, should I have to chase people to do their jobs, then I have to remember they are volunteers too and don't have to produce copy for me.

—Donald R. Jacques

Getting more creative (rather than just informative) material. I solicit in the newsletter, at events, through others. There seems to be a lot more good material submitted in other groups than in GLAAM.

—Bob Abrahams

Maintaining editorial impartiality, despite strong personal opinions, without becoming innocuous. Balance is the key, and I work at it all the time. I wonder if it ever gets any easier.

Aside from that, the toughest job for me is cutting. I actually find it easier to shorten my own mss. than to edit someone else's for length.

—Meredy Amyx

Not having enough time to do the best damned job possible within the monetary resources available to us. We have never been satisfied with an issue by the time it went into the mail. It could always have been better, equally in content and appearance.

—Robert "Hagar" Hartman

Shortcomings

Editors were asked, "**What bothers you most about the things you see in other newsletters?**" The purpose of the question was not to encourage self-righteous finger-pointing but to reveal some of the common weaknesses that tend to escape mention even by conscientiously self-critical editors. This list is derived from their responses to eliminate duplication and to phrase them in brief, general terms.

Editors have their own priorities and often have to sacrifice one value for another they rate more highly: an editor who uses the expedient of word-processing with a dot-matrix printer, for example, may prefer to devote the time he saves to a more careful editing job. This is not, therefore, a list of faults to be avoided at all costs, though some (such as copyright violations) are inexcusable. But the pet aversions of your peers may offer some points for your consideration.

Sloppiness: dirty or illegible copy, crooked paste-up, strikeovers.
An appearance of total lack of caring.

Over-long articles.
Insufficient editing of poorly written copy.
Misspelling of names.
Overuse of emphatic devices.
Misuse of language and punctuation.
Profanity.
Rampant typos and ignorant spelling.
Articles that end in “continued on page x.”
Crude comedic sentences running up the margins.

Reductions below 75%.
Illegible type faces; too many different type faces.
Dot-matrix printing from computers.
Crowded copy; too little white space.
Amateurish hand-lettering.
Apparent lack of concern for the most basic “rules” of layout.

Egomaniacal authors.
Budgetary extravagance for editor’s personal glory.
Excess of material written by the editor, especially in large groups.
SIG newsletters that are purely self-serving for the editor.
Editorial smart-assery.

Local group warfare.
Uninformed accusations against national officers.
Snide digs at other local groups.
Diatribes against the membership for inactivity, apathy, or failure to contribute to the newsletter.
Sexism, racism, and personal attacks on members (who help pay for the publication that’s attacking them).

Misappropriation of copyrighted material.
Failure to credit the original sources of reprinted material, including art work—even small pieces.

Staples alongside rather than through the spine.
Newsletters stapled closed.
Excessive space given to advertising.
SIG newsletters that fail to deliver promised issues.
Irrelevant cover art.
Apparent lack of concern for the USPS rules.

An editor who asked to remain unidentified writes, “Too many local newsletters waste their valuable space by printing, e.g., routine memos from national officers *in facsimile*, when the important materials could be condensed, attractively and effectively, into a paragraph or two.”

Vicky Gehrt wishes that writers reporting on Mensa events “would permanently lose the phrase, ‘a good time was had by all.’” Nancy Reller is put off by “clip art and borders laid on with a trowel.” For Henry Roll, the cardinal offense is “Dullness. Dullness, dullness, dullness, dullness.” Glen Lambert says that he is “most bothered by tremendous potential with such piddling results.”

Andy Di Cyan, past editor of distinguished local and national Mensa publications, admits that he is unhappiest of all when he sees in other newsletters “things I wish I had printed myself.”

Improvements

If you had the time/assistance/skill, what improvements would you most like to make in your own newsletter?

I would love to be able to retype all the material so it is all in the same type face. The time just isn't there to do it.

—Katherine DeWitt, Jr.

If I had the time, I would like to have the newsletter monthly instead of bimonthly. With a national SIG, it is very difficult to delegate responsibilities; the effort to do so would take more time than if the editor did the job himself. Since the production of the newsletter is almost a one-man job, I don't have the time to go monthly despite the fact that SIG members would prefer it.

—Vicky Gehrt

Skill—digesting and writing gist of published articles. Find better ways of nurturing dialogue between newsletter and subscribers.

—Glen Lambert

Improved layout, to make it more appealing to the eye.

—Donald R. Jacques

Use of photographs.

—Nancy Reller

I'd like someone to proofread before paste-up. I'd also like that person to be convenient and not hold me up in the limited time I have to work on the newsletter. I don't really think I'll find someone that convenient, so I do the best I can—but it's hard to catch your own mistakes.

I'd like for my local group to send in more cover art; they're doing pretty well on inside copy.

—Donna Porter

It would really be neat to have the whole thing typeset. Other than that, it would be nice to be a cartoonist (or have one available at 3:00 A.M.), but with the resources I already have, I cannot complain.

—Phillip H. Snaith

I'd like it to be a book of humor and wisdom that would cure the world.

—Henry Roll

Perspectives

Do not make your job as editor too big a deal. Remember that some groups have difficulty even getting someone to volunteer for the post. An editor must *like* the work and not expect too much adulation from the membership. A new editor should start small and slowly, building in size and content by degrees. A giant smash first issue could lead to future disappointment for readers and embarrassment for the editor, perhaps ending in a quick resignation to save face. Editors should *ask* for help and not wait around for volunteers.

If a local subscription is levied, the readers have a right to expect reasonable content for their money. Controversy should be welcome, but not to the point of alienation. Learn the basic principles of good journalism, and stick with them. AND, use LOTS of names.

—Gordon K. Andersen

The best news releases and articles are those in national publications, not local. The national publications get us more members, carry greater weight, and do not embarrass local Ms. It is a sad but true fact that it can severely damage relations with fellow workers, bosses, and friends for one's membership in Mensa to be publicized. We do not fall into the best-beloved category. We are suspected of being on an ego trip and of being a threat.

I am disgusted and repelled by the Palace Wars and battles at upper levels. I am distressed that the malcontents find themselves in print so easily. The balanced mind allows the privilege of diverse opinions and therefore is not so hot on the pistol with opinion-pushing. As things are, a very distorted picture of Mensa gets presented both nationally and locally in the Mensa Press.

I am not currently exchanging newsletters with anyone, but I do get some every month. They tend to be overly wordy, not easy to read, have confusing formats, and are usually too loaded with complaints about noncooperation, apathy, etc. (a great way to develop more of the same). I frankly can't see this sort of material as a constructive way to spend my group's money.

InterLoc could and probably should serve as a filter and relay, replacing the entire exchange program. It could eliminate the trash and the local tidbits. Perhaps regional chairmen could edit the newsletters in their districts and forward only the meat to *InterLoc*. There, it could be further refined. Then locsecs and editors would be receiving useful material and not be cluttered with the present exchange system, which loads their mailboxes with junk that costs a lot of dough to produce and circulate.

—(unidentified)

Which is better: an editor who knows nil about Mensa but has a master's in journalism or an editor who knows Mensa but has no journalistic talent?

The local Mensa newsletter is the single most powerful unifying force a group can have. The newsletter is the one thing all members have in common. Every M sees it, whether he is active or not. Whether they realize it or not, through a form of osmosis, all derive certain attitudes, impressions, feelings, and conclusions from it. This is the reason the personality of the editor is so important. We all know a newsletter is the creature of the editor. To a lesser extent the morale of the group is the creature of the newsletter.

A positive-thinking editor who does not dwell on the shortcomings of the group (e.g., all the rotten underachievers who won't contribute, how useless Mensa is because it has no purpose, and why the hell didn't more Ms attend such-and-such an event, plus palace wars, bickering, and how the whole group is going straight to hell on roller skates, and you know the rest, luv) is a fantastic asset—and if he can even write—Gawd, what a jewel! How can one take pride in belonging to a group that is constantly being cut to pieces in its very own newsletter?

A lot of editors seem to be constantly fussing about not getting contributions. And justly so. But it does seem to me that this is negative nagging. If no one wants to contribute, obviously not contributing is the IN thing to do. So why advertise the fact? Why not contrive to make contributing a statusy thing? Pat contributors on the back, personally request a member to write a short article on his hobby or pet hate,

and have guest editorials. For those who don't write but might like to draw or sketch, the same comments apply. Get them to do cover art, line drawings, cartoons.

Grabbing new members while they are still eager and impressionable and giving them something to do is an idea. Then when they've done it, tell 'em they done good. But you must be telling the truth or it won't work.

—Joanie Kollar

Humility is a wonderful thing in an editor. Everyone knows how smart you are, no need to keep rubbing it in. If you let your readers think that they are a little smarter than you are, they will love you.

Everyone knows that you are the editor and do all the work, but let it appear to be a group effort. Say "we" instead of "I." Don't use your name any more than necessary. You can sign your comments and editorials "Editor," or simply "Ed."

Don't be afraid to edit. A lot of your contributors have great ideas but don't know how to present them. Touch up their stuff and make them look good.

Don't be afraid to use the wastebasket for any contributions of doubtful interest to your readers. This will include 99% of the poems sent to you. Accentuate the positive. Nothing is gained by bemoaning the lack of activity or lack of interest in your group.

Print a financial report at least quarterly—monthly is even better. If you are low on funds this may inspire some contributions. Also, you never know when some nut will accuse you of dipping into the till.

Remember that your publication is probably the only record of your group's activity and the only information that the AMC receives about you.

Be sure always to list your officers, your proctor, and your SIG chairmen, especially those of national interest like SIGHT, Mensa Friends, Gifted Kids, Call-an-M, etc. Believe me, the AMC people really read the local group publications.

Mensa is a national organization. Print a little national news, like other group activities, gatherings, AMC activity.

Make your publication personal. Use a lot of names. Have a news column. Print biographical data. Print rosters. Welcome new members. Give awards. Do anything to get some names into print.

A good publication, more than anything else, can make a group successful. To send only the calendar page to nonsupporters is a great disservice.

—Harper Fowley

I have frequently heard and read within Mensa that we newsleitors are simply amateurs, volunteers to boot, and shouldn't really be concerned with doing a bang-up job, we never know when we'll be appointed to another Mensa job, and then another amateur will take over. I think that's a deplorable attitude. ANYTHING put out by Mensa, where the public is able to see and evaluate it, should be the very best that we individually are capable of producing. The products of Mensa, however small and insignificant, should, in every manner, shape and form, reflect the uniqueness of the organization to which we voluntarily belong.

I would hope that some measure of that attitude, one that strives for excellence befitting our intelligence, could be communicated to readers of the *Editor's Handbook*. If absorbed, it could go a long way towards eliminating some of the really bad, bad publications floating around through the public mails.

—Robert "Hagar" Hartman

An editorship is not a democracy.

—Meredy Amyx