

YOUNG JOURNALISTS: HOW DO YOU DO?

Evaluation and Guidance for Interns and New Reporters

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "James J. Atwell", written over a horizontal line. The signature is cursive and stylized.

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Introduction

They write every day but too often they do not know what is wrong--or right--with that writing.

New journalists, particularly, want to know if their work measures up, if it is acceptable, if it is good or if they are doing something wrong.

"We'd all like to know how we're doing every now and then," said Frazier Smith, a summer, 1981, intern for the Cincinnati Enquirer.

He said he wanted criticism of his work on a regular basis. Most of the young journalists in Indiana that I surveyed wanted more criticism of their work; it was the major suggestion made throughout the three-page survey.

An intern for the Chicago Tribune said, "I believe most reporters value criticism." Many new reporters are asking for more evaluation of their work. And journalism educators who run internship programs agree that feedback will assist the learning process.

This thesis will try to show that for an intern or new reporter to learn on the job and improve his or her writing and reporting skills, regular and specific evaluations and

criticism of work is needed. A survey of young journalists in Indiana and Indiana newspaper editors shows the prevailing attitudes in this area; a search of some of the available and pertinent literature shows what educators and professionals are thinking and doing.

In addition, this thesis will suggest ways to better evaluate and critique new reporters' work. The suggestions will, I hope, aid both editors, who want a quality newspaper, and young journalists, who want to improve their writing skills.

Internships will be the focus for much of this paper for several reasons. First, much has been written about journalism internships and very little on training new reporters. Next, most of the survey responses came from interns or former interns. Finally, learning is stressed much more in an internship than in a first reporting job; a full-time journalist may have to put less emphasis on improving his* writing.

Evaluations in general--and in Indiana

An internship, by definition of the Association for Education in Journalism's Internship Committee, is "that planned activity in which a student undergoes an on-the-job learning experience in a professional medium, under proper supervision for which academic credit may be granted." (underlining theirs.) (7:2)

Perhaps the key words in this definition are "a learning activity" and "under proper supervision." An internship is simply a supervised learning experience--at the work site.

* "His" will be used throughout this paper. It is intended to designate persons of both sexes but it is shorter than "his or her."

The newspaper editor has his own reasons for hiring interns or part-time student reporters. Whether it is to fill in for vacationing reporters, expand news coverage during a busy period or to look at the crop of prospective employees, employers also need to be aware that a supervised learning experience is the very important focus of the internship. (7:2)

However, the Associated Press Managing Editors Red Book of 1976 says

The sink-or-swim approach (to internships) probably is the one most generally used by American newspapers, big and small. It puts the young student into the 'real world' of journalism where he or she must live up to responsibilities. (2:204)

This sink-or-swim system assigns a young reporter or intern to a beat, an area to cover, and leaves him to cope on his own.

Several Indiana journalists found this method to be true--and perhaps a little trying.

"I generally would come up with my own ideas and write stories without editorial assistance," said Daniel Thomas, a new reporter for the Austin Crothersville News, answering survey question three on guidance on individual stories.

A new sports editor for an 11,000-circulation Indiana daily said, "I am pretty much on my own." Another intern said, "Few suggestions ever were made by anyone on how to approach a story."

Survey Question three asked, "What kinds of guidance do you receive on individual stories?" Almost all those who responded said the editor comes to them with suggestions, but almost as many also relied on other reporters for information and feedback. Three persons said they receive little or no help with specific stories.

A Women in Communications, Inc. report stated, "Employers should provide interns with daily direction and feedback." (9:8) The comment was made after analyzing 350 questionnaires on college internships. The study continued, "The employer--preferably the senior supervisor--should meet regularly with the intern to answer questions, regarding past assignments, discuss problems, evaluate performance and offer suggestions for improvement." (9:8)

Employers in the WICI survey said they need more specific guidelines and better guidance on internships from universities.

John DeMott, professor of journalism at Memphis State University, has prepared a guidebook on internship programs for media executives. Two of the four key factors in a good internship program, he said, are "educational environment in the newsroom and commitment to teaching by news staffers supervising interns.

"Does your staff understand their responsibility to teach the interns?" he asks. "The person on your staff who is in charge of the program will be, in effect, an off-campus professor." (4:6)

In my survey of Indiana newspaper editors, 82 percent of the editors said reporters come to them daily or weekly for assistance or guidance. (Question seven) Areas in which they ask for guidance, editors said, include style, handling of stories, legal problems and general information.

However, the answer given most often on a similar question for reporters was that they make occasional requests for assistance, with 36 percent giving that answer. Twenty-eight percent said they request help weekly and 25 percent ask for help daily in matters

of journalism. (Question nine) The interns and reporters surveyed said their response for help was favorable; editors were receptive and helpful. (Question ten)

All the editors surveyed said they use oral suggestions as a method of critique. More than half also said they critique by written comments, conferences and at staff meetings.

However, one editor said he uses "no fixed system" and another said none of the critiquing methods are used frequently enough. A few have systematic reviews relating to salary increases but for many editors surveyed, the evaluations are done "as needed."

Editors' guidebooks on internships suggest a more formal program, including standard and regular critiques. "The formal feedback is a crucial part of any successful internship. Critique a week's worth of stories at a time," said DeMott in his manual prepared for the American Newspaper Publishers Association. (4:10)

The internship should include an orientation, trial period and introduction to the methods used by the newspaper. An intern should work closely with a good beat reporter and rotate to different departments within the newspaper, to learn the different jobs, DeMott said. (4:10)

The Women in Communications, Inc. survey suggests a "learning agreement" to spell out the internship's objectives, proposed learning activities and methods of feedback and evaluation. (9:2) The student's responsibilities and the university's role in supervision also are included in the agreement. Sixty of the 73 universities WICI surveyed require these contracts, which educators compare to a "course outline."

The WICI study also suggests the faculty adviser take a more active part during the internship and visit the work site at least three times during the internship. (9:7) A final joint evaluation with professor and editor would determine a final grade and help choose follow-up courses for interns to sharpen skills found lacking.

A Roundtable report from 55 journalism departments or schools shows internships are monitored by faculty visits to the work site, telephone calls and periodic student reports, or some combination of these. Although the frequency of communication varies from weekly meetings to once-a-quarter visits, the report says, "The vast majority (of schools) seems to be quite conscientious about monitoring." (3:2)

The AEJ internship guidelines also provide for regular contact between intern, editor and faculty adviser. Clear understanding of the university's expectations and how the newspaper can fulfill them should be established prior to the internship, according to AEJ guidelines. Interns also should be aware of their responsibilities.

Yet, only half the interns and new reporters surveyed received any information on their beat when they began to work. Only 32 percent said they had a training period. (Question one) Almost all said they had a tour of the facilities and instructions on video display terminal use.

Karen Day, who interned at the LaPorte Herald-Argus, said, "It was a lot of on-the-job training--go out and do it yourself. I was scared to death a lot, but there's nothing like learning from experience."

Smith received a thorough introduction to the Cincinnati Enquirer. He had the newspaper's stylebook, information on the city and other data several months before his internship began. Six orientation meetings throughout the summer showed interns the paper's departments. "I was given good treatment," he said.

Although 84 percent of the reporters surveyed said they received oral suggestions on their work, 68 percent also said they needed additional guidance or criticism. Story ideas, word usage, developing sources and endings were areas in which they said they wanted additional help.

One intern said he had to get "immediate feedback or none." Others realized the time limitations of busy editors and took that into consideration when asking for additional critiques.

Thirty-six percent of the reporters said they received suggestions or criticism weekly and 36 percent said only occasionally. (Question seven) Another 25 percent said they were critiqued daily.

Some intern programs

Each newspaper has its own methods of training interns and new reporters. The newspaper's size, number of editorial staff members and its dedication to quality writing may, in part, determine how the intern's learning experience is handled.

This section will highlight some of the methods used by newspapers, including those educators judge as better methods.

The Charleston, S.C., Evening Post spends three weeks training its new reporters and interns. Lectures on style, policy, copy preparation and general topics, handouts, required readings and outside materials are part of their program. The trainees write short stories that are monitored carefully and they work closely with the best photographers and reporters. At the end of the initial period, a test is given to see what progress is made. (4:11-12)

"It is through this constant analysis during this critical period (the first months) that the trainee begins to become familiar with the style and policies of the Evening Post and develops his own skills," said Thomas Neilson, managing editor. (4:12)

The Christian Science Monitor also has a highly-structured intern program that it has developed with Principia College in Elsau, Ill.

"Students must design and write a contract for the 10-week internship to assure the school it will be a genuine learning experience," said the director of the Monitor's writer's training. "The student sets specific goals of things to learn about the newspaper's operations." (1:56) Interns spend five weeks as copy clerks and five weeks in an ongoing writers' training program.

Other newspapers' intern programs are less structured. "Their duties are not restricted, except by their own abilities to perform," said Harry Hill, assistant managing editor for the Milwaukee Journal. "We consider it a learning experience for them." (6:1-2)

"We feel we contribute as much to their learning experience, if not more, than they do to us," he said.

However, the Journal limits the number of interns to eight, because of its desire to give adequate supervision and instruction. (6:3)

The Louisville Times believes supervision is the most important part of a successful intern program. A reporter or desk person is in charge of interns and has no other duties for the first half of the internship. This intern director coordinates all intern activities and goes over each assignment in detail with them. He edits their copy with them. (4:12)

The editor of the Oak Ridger, Oak Ridge, Tenn., said most of their interns learn by osmosis. "We make no apologies for being a busy newsroom, with virtually always more to do than we can do as promptly as we'd like to do it," said Editor Richard Smyser. (8:2)

The interns find themselves with an overabundance of assignments. "We believe that the best way for the students to learn is simply by doing and they do a lot," he said. (8:5)

"We try hard to critique their work on a day-to-day basis. At least four or five times during their ten-week stay, we sit down for a formal sort of evaluation session--us of them, them of us."

Many newspapers ask for two-way evaluations so interns critique the newspaper as well as being critiqued by its staff. Newspapers that use this system generally say it is beneficial and they learn from interns' comments.

For interns at newspapers with little formal guidance or no planned intern program, DeMott suggests universities conduct a "post internship seminar." In it, students use their experiences to discuss special problems in mass media. (5:8-9)

He conducted such a seminar at Northern Illinois University, one night a week for three hours. Each student was expected to tell about his experiences and have detailed background on the media in which he worked. Discussions include ethical questions, style, changes in the field and problems interns have seen or faced. (5:10)

Suggestions and Conclusions

Both reporters and editors were asked for suggestions to improve evaluation and feedback methods. Their answers and materials from some of the literature provide many ideas for better communication between editor and reporter--and hence better writing.

Reporters' single most widely suggested response was more criticism of their work.

Mike Botkin of the Crawfordsville Journal-Review, asked for "more personal contact with the editor while editing a story because the criticism and response would be immediate and would stick in the reporter's mind longer." Several young reporters suggest additional personal attention, editors taking more time to work with their reporters and edit the stories with the reporter present.

Tell the reporter how to correct his errors; don't do it for him, said a former intern for the Evansville Sunday Courier and Press.

A daily critique of the newspaper by the editor is also suggested by several journalists in the survey. They also want to be able to work with the news editor or other editors, talk to them and understand their jobs.

Sherry Pethers, reporter for the Anderson Herald, suggests smaller department staff meetings would allow for more constructive criticism and individual attention.

"Communication! Within the newsroom it seems to be a lost art," she said.

Some editors said they are trying to allot more time for critiques. Stan Felder, managing editor of the Hammond Times, said the Times is considering writing and editing classes, in addition to conferences, written and oral suggestions currently used.

At the Lafayette Journal and Courier, a monthly meeting for teaching, talking and idea exchanges between editors and writers is planned. The Fort Wayne News-Sentinel is implementing an evaluation program, in which, among other things, the reporter will evaluate himself.

Editors of smaller newspapers generally feel their current methods of evaluation are adequate. The small size and closeness of the staff allows discussion of work without standardized evaluation methods.

I believe the Women in Communications, Inc. "learning agreement" that spells out what is to be learned and how it will be accomplished is an important step in making internships meaningful to the individual journalist.

If standard procedures for regular, consistent evaluation are made, it will be easier to follow through and evaluate a young reporter's writing and progress. The university and the reporter must take the initiative on this system for internships because it most directly benefits them.

Each newspaper can also develop its own methods of evaluation. The procedures should be built into a timetable and the paper's system. The methods can fit the paper's size and needs of employees and editors but nonetheless should be fixed and used regularly. One survey respondent suggests a weekly review of the intern or new reporter's work, scheduled on a slow news day. If it is scheduled, it will probably take place; if it is a system used "as needed," it can more easily be set aside.

New reporters and interns must speak out for what they want and need. If they think they need more criticism, they must ask for it.

The newspaper must feel its responsibility in assisting in the training of new journalists. A responsible staff member should be assigned to guide the interns. The guidance will pay off--both to the intern and to the paper.

"I thought I was treated great. They gave me a phone, typewriter, a desk and plenty of freedom," said one former intern in a survey. Yet all the young journalists asked for a little guidance, a regular evaluation.

"We'd all like to know how we're doing every now and then."

Appendix I
About the survey

Surveys were sent to 20 percent of Indiana's 73 daily newspapers, randomly selected from the 1980 Editor and Publisher Yearbook. They also went to about 10 percent of Indiana's weekly newspapers, selected randomly.

Whenever possible, they were sent directly to the editor or managing editor. Each package included a reporter's survey for the paper's newest reporter, a letter explaining the survey and a stamped, addressed envelope.

Names of college students who had served newspaper internships were provided by journalism schools or departments at Ball State, Indiana and Purdue Universities and the University of Evansville. Indiana State University sent no names. Inquiries were sent directly to the student-intern and included an explanatory letter, survey and stamped, addressed envelope.

The surveys were mailed in September and early October, 1981.

<u>Group</u>	<u>Surveys sent</u>	<u>Surveys returned</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Newspaper editors	31	11	35.5
Daily editors	16	10	62.5
Weekly editors	15	1	6.7
Reporters/interns	59	25	42.4
Interns		16	
Reporters		9	
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TOTAL	90	36	40.0

Average newspaper circulation

Reporter survey	119,200
Editor survey	26,264

Average weekly pay

Reporter	\$194.89	Range: \$140-185-230
Intern	\$171.33	Range: \$133-150-315

CONFIDENTIAL

Responses on the reporter/intern survey came from:

Newspaper

- Columbus Republic
- Fort Wayne News-Sentinel
- Crawfordsville Journal-Review
- LaPorte Herald-Argus
- Peoria Journal-Star
- Elkhart Truth
- Shelbyville News
- Boston Globe
- Richmond Palladium-Ttem
- Fort Wayne News-Sentinel
- Kokomo Tribune
- Evansville Sunday Courier-Press
- Indiana Daily Student -x
- Anderson Herald
- Lafayette Journal-Courier
- Purdue Exponent -x
- Purdue Exponent -x
- Seymour Tribune
- South Bend Tribune
- Cincinnati Enquirer
- Austin-Crothersville News
- Fort Wayne News-Sentinel
- Chicago Tribune
- Evansville Sunday Courier-Press
- ~~Purdue Exponent~~ -

-x Although these persons listed a university newspaper, they also worked as interns at a professional newspaper and used their experience from both to fill out the survey.

CONFIDENTIAL

Responses on the editor survey came from:

<u>Title</u>	<u>Newspaper</u>
managing editor	New Albany Tribune
managing editor	Hammond Times
editor	Crawfordsville Journal-Review
city editor	Anderson Herald
managing editor	Seymour Daily Tribune
editor	Shelbyville News
editor	Columbus Republic
editor	Madison Courier
managing editor	Lafayette Journal & Courier
Accent editor	Fort Wayne News-Sentinel
news editor	North Manchester News-Journal

Reporter survey
Reporter feedback, guidance and evaluation

25 responses for 42.7 percent

1. What sort of introduction were you given to the newspaper and your job?

23	tour/introductions	92%
20	VDT instructions	80%
13	information on beat	52%
11	handbook	44%
8	training period	32%

2. What writing and style aids are readily available for your use?

25	dictionary, thesaurus	100%
21	wire service style book	84%
19	clip file	76%
18	well-stocked library	72%
15	journalists' magazines	60%
11	newspaper's style book	44%
3	other: city/county directory, city maps, grammar book	

3. What kinds of guidance do you receive on individual stories?

23	editor comes to you with suggestions	92%
20	other reporters give information, feedback	80%
8	written comments	32%
7	orders to rewrite story	28%
3	other: very little specific comments, daily critique of paper	12%
2	none	8%

4. In what areas do you think you need additional guidance?

17	criticism of work	68%
11	story ideas	44%
10	word usage	40%
9	developing sources	36%
6	endings	24%
5	story flow	20%
4	writing style to fit paper	16%
4	leads	16%
4	others: VDT instruction, recommended story length, photography, develop techniques	16%

Reporter survey/2

5. What critiquing/criticism systems are used for your stories?

21	oral suggestions	84%	
9	written comments	36%	
8	at staff meetings	32%	
6	regular meetings with editor	24%	
2	none	8%	
1	other: bi-weekly meeting with journalism professor hired for interns.		

6. Where were the most criticisms of your work made?

7	general style	28%
4	your style	16%
4	spelling, punctuation	16%
4	length	16%
3	handling facts	12%
2	the lead	8%
2	other: headline writing, clarity	
1	speed	4%
0	news judgment	

7. How frequently did you receive suggestions, critiques or criticism?

9	weekly	36%
9	occasionally	36%
5	daily	20%
1	never	4%
0	monthly	
0	seldom	

8. What suggestions do you have for better guidance and criticism of your and all new reporters' work?

See comments in body of paper.

9. How frequently did you ask for assistance with your writing or in another area related to your career?

9	occasionally	36%
7	weekly	28%
5	daily	20%
2	seldom	8%
2	never	8%
0	monthly	

10. What was the general response to your requests for assistance?

All 25 said favorable, helpful, always receptive.

Reporter survey/3

11. Who or what was most helpful in your transition into your new position? Why?

Answers varied but the immediate supervisor or editor was named most often. Others mentioned included the other reporters, the staff in general, copy desk chief, adviser, publisher or a specific editor.

12. What changes would you suggest in methods of introduction, criticism or assistance with new reporters' or interns' work?

See body of paper for answers.

13. How often does your newspaper have staff meetings?

13	weekly	52%
5	seldom	20%
3	monthly	12%
3	never	12%
1	occasionally	4%

14. What is discussed at those meetings? How helpful do you find them?

Problems, plans and suggestions were mentioned most often. Many also looked at the previous week's paper and critiqued it informally. Story ideas, style, upcoming events, questions were other answers. One intern said he didn't attend them and a few said they were boring or trivial.

15. What other means of communication are used between staff members and from editors?

17	word of mouth	68%
16	memos	64%
15	notices passed	60%
2	other: notes, internal newsletter	

16. How long did it take you to acquire a working knowledge of your paper?

9	a week	36%
5	two weeks	20%
4	a month	16%
2	six weeks or more	8%
1	two months	4%
1	two days "I took a crash course."	

Reporter survey/4

For permanent reporters (not interns)
8 responses

A. What method of evaluating job performance for possible raises or promotions is used?

3 3 day by day evaluation
3 other: evaluation by editor, section editor or self; none
2 interview with supervisor, editor
2 written critiques

B. How often are these evaluations done?

3 yearly
1 every three months
1 every six months
1 seldom or never

C. What sort of community feedback do you personally get about your stories?

There was no consistent answer here. Some got good comments; others got bad and a few got a combination.

D. What feedback does the paper get?

Letters to the editor, especially on controversial subjects, was listed most frequently. Telephone calls also played a large part. One reporter wrote, "If no one complains, we feel the job is getting done."

E. How satisfied are you with the assistance and guidance you receive? What changes would you suggest?

Most said they were satisfied but a couple reporters asked for more constructive criticism.

Comments:

Mike Botkin: "Young journalists, like myself, are idealists and want to expand coverage of local (sports) teams and try new creative tactics. These ideas are often killed before they happen with the attitude that 'we have always done things this way and we will never change.'
"Have I been trained to deal with the nagging public? The answer is no."

Shirley Reno: "Often, there just isn't time to have a lot of formal meetings for critiquing one's work. It's best to ask questions of the editor as these questions arise. Or, it's better to have the editor to tell you what's wrong when it happens."

Comments (continued):

Mary O'Doherty: "Love this business! Love the camaraderie that a newspaper staff has and the feedback and thought about story ideas and the role of newspapers in general that that camaraderie provides."

Paul Heaton: "I gained much news-gathering experience (interview techniques, etc.) from my internship."

Editor survey
Reporter feedback

11 responses for 35.5 percent

1. How often do you have staff meetings?

6	weekly	55%
2	occasionally	18%
1	monthly	9%
1	twice daily	9%
1	twice weekly	9%

2. What is discussed at these meetings?

Story planning, scheduling and coverage, feature ideas and problems were common answers. Policy, complaints and ideas-- "everything," one editor said--also are featured.

3. What other methods do you use to keep your staff informed?

9	memos	82%
9	word of mouth	82%
8	notices passed	73%

Others: meetings, bulletin boards, private discussions, yell.

4. What methods of critique and criticism do you use for reporters?

11	oral suggestions	100%
7	conferences	64%
6	written comments	55%
6	at staff meetings	55%

5. How frequently is this critiquing system used?

8	daily or weekly	73%
2	occasionally	18%
1	as needed	9%

6. What other methods would you like to try or are you considering trying to aid in greater reporter-editor communication?

Spending more time with reporter, reporters evaluating themselves, writing and editing classes, monthly meeting for teaching and talking were suggestions. Some felt they were fine as they were and planned no changes.

7. How often do reporters come to you for assistnace and guidance?

5	daily	45%
4	weekly	36%
1	monthly	9%
1	frequently	9%

Editor survey/2

8. In which areas do reporters ask for guidance?

Style and handling of stories were the most common reply. Other answers included story focus, art, feature ideas, spelling and grammar, leads, sources, editing, libel and legal problems and personal and professional problems.

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