Honors 499 – Thesis
“Improving the Daily News Forum Page”
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Thesis statement: The purpose of this thesis is to provide future editors of the Ball State Daily News with a well-researched suggestions regarding improvement of the content of the Forum Page.
When I first became editor, I thought the Forum Page was going to be easy to fill—find a cartoon, a couple of columnists, a few letters to the editor, and get on my soapbox long enough to write an editorial.

Soon, however, I discovered that this was not the case. Not only did my staff members take this page seriously, but I observed that readers did as well. I then began to be more cautious when editing the page’s content.

During the course of the year, I tried a few new approaches to finding material for the page. I began to look for letters to the editor that addressed the same subject, and when I believed I had a substantial amount, I would package them at the top of the page—with a banner headline and sometimes with an illustration—to give more impact to the subject, for example letters published February 16, 1996, or April 8, 1996. I believed that if enough readers were distraught about a single subject, it was worth running commentary big to show the impact of the topic.

I also tried to make editorials and columns worth readers’ time, and nine out of ten times, I tried to write the editorial on a news story that was published the same day. My predecessors taught me this immediacy was important so students would remember the news story to which the editorial was related. In editorials I tried to address current, local topics that I believed affected students. I wanted to attempt to address a local topic in an editorial before I looked for a national or international topic. Because I had the final say in what editorial topic was chosen and what editorials were published, I did not want to address topics on which I was uneducated or uninformed. When those topics came to
the forefront – or if there was a shortage of local topics to address – I published editorials from professional newspapers that were compiled by the Associated Press wire service a maximum of four or five times a month, for example, editorials printed April 11, 1996, and April 15, 1996.

While I had some success with editorial writing, I also had, it seemed, more failures than successes. My primary editorial topic for editorial campaigns was encouraging students to vote in both student government elections and in Muncie elections. For example, the Daily News endorsed student government voting, especially through a new process on the VAX system, in a few editorials. The end result was that student voting for that year hit an all-time record high. How much of that success was actually because of the Daily News editorials, however, would be difficult to pinpoint.

I also tried to stress to my columnists that researching subjects was vital to writing a successful column. I wanted columnists to understand that readers do not care if they are drunk all weekend or if they share any other gory details about their personal lives; readers only care about subjects to which they can relate or believe are relevant. Although I did not instill this idea in all of my columnists, I saw the ones who took this advice achieve great success.

Despite my efforts, however, my research has shown me that the Daily News Forum Page still has a long way to go if it is to become the heart and soul of this student newspaper.

According to Kenneth Rystrom's The Why, Who and How of the Editorial Page, today's opinion page editors face a greater challenge than those of the
past: Their audiences are more diverse and more educated (39). Rystrom states that many readers tend to be more sophisticated today but, at the same time, less interested in public issues (39). As an added challenge, many readers also do not read editorial pages consistently, are exposed to multiple news sources, such as newspapers, television, magazines, radio, etc., and are, overall, "a more disinterested audience" (39,40).

Rystrom's observations are why it is essential that opinion page editors know how to generate reader interest through solid editorial writing, effective letters-to-the-editor presentations, and solid columnist and editorial cartoon selections.

**Solid editorial writing**

The backbone of good editorial writing is research. In Rystrom's book, he suggests that the best editorials are those that are well-researched, do not merely restate news articles, and are not based solely on opinion (44).

Al Southwick of the Worcester (Mass.) Telegram said one half hour of additional research can make a huge difference in the impact an editorial has on the readers (46).

"'That one extra fact, that one additional insight' is what makes a difference between a routine editorial and 'something that causes readers to sit up and take notice.'" (46)

Keeping comprehensive files of possible editorial topics is one quick, easy solution to adding that extra half hour of research to the editorial-writing process (46). The files allow editorial writers to readily access information
even if they do not have the time or resources to do a more thorough search for background information.

Writing an effective editorial can be accomplished in a nine-step process, according to Rystrom:

- Select a topic – Many editorial writers select a topic after daily reading through a metro newspaper and intaking news from other sources, such as magazines and television; these sources are where the writers generate their ideas (126). Determining factors should include whether the topic is timely, if it is appropriate for public discussion, if the editorial writer can understand the topic, and if the topic can be well-researched (126).

- Determine the editorial’s purpose.

- Determine who the editorial’s readers will be.

The purpose and audience of an editorial overlap. While each editorial may have more than one specific audience, the purpose of an editorial is to reach the “general, non-expert public,” a newspaper’s primary audience (127, 128). It is this general, non-specific group of readers on whom editorials have the most effect during a long period of time (128).

- Determine a tone for the editorial – Editorial writers are primarily looking for a balance between rational arguments and emotional arguments (129).

“As for the choice between an appeal primarily to emotion or one primarily to reason, some recent research suggests that emotion and reason may not necessarily be in opposition to each other and that simultaneous appeals to both may serve to reinforce persuasion.” (129)
Sounding off, however, in a passionate, emotional manner—without any research—requires no research or skill and may lose the confidence of readers (130).

- Conduct research on the topic—Editorial writers have the choice of skipping research and writing about a subject, researching and presenting one side of an issue, or researching and presenting both sides of an issue (130). Researched editorials are preferred, and it is best to use sources other than those used in news articles (130).

- Determine a format for the editorial—Editorials can present either one side or both sides of an issue, and both formats have been proven to yield well-written editorials if well-researched and used in the right manner (131). If both sides are presented in an editorial, the writer can use either primacy, presenting the favored argument first, or recency, presenting the favored argument last (131).

- Write an introduction for the editorial—Like a news article, introductions of editorials must draw the reader’s attention and make them want to read the editorial (132). Using questions, brief statements, or statements with which most people agree are some of the best options for beginning editorials (132).

- Write the editorial’s body—Writing in this part of the editorial must present strong, clear, precise arguments because it is where writers either convince readers of their argument or lose them completely (136).

- Write a conclusion for the editorial—The purpose of the conclusion is
to convey what the editorial writer wants to accomplish (137). Writers can accomplish this by using one of six types of conclusions: urging, approving, disapproving, concluding righteously, talking consolation, or coming down softly (138-143).

William G. Ward’s book *The Student Journalist and Writing Editorials*, however, suggests a simpler editorial-writing process (63).

- First section: Get the reader’s attention.
- Second section: Persuade the reader.
- Third section: Prompt the reader to take action.

To get the reader’s attention, in what Ward labels the introduction, he says the editorial writer should strive for four goals: identifying a general topic, establishing a stance, providing a hint to the editorial’s conclusion, and trying to interest the reader (63).

“There should be just a pinch of each item,” Ward states. “By the end of the introduction, the reader should be interested in what is to come, and he should know the topic, know the stance, and have a suspicion of the conclusion. ... Introductions must be near-perfect; here the reader’s attention is gained or lost. But an introduction need not be elaborate in content, in rhetoric, nor in depth of the expressed idea. It may range from one paragraph to several. As economically as possible, the four vital elements should be presented.” (63-64)

In the second section, the body, Ward says “It is here that the hypothesis is proved, or the solution explained or a problem delineated” (70). Ward says in order for the body to be truly effective, it must include five basic elements (70).

- “Reference to authority”: This means that editorial writers must include facts and quotes from experts, books, and/or documents. This “authority” can also be reference to a historical event or reference to traditional

- "Reference to primary evidence": This evidence includes the editorial writer presenting recent events (such as news events) that affect the editorial's topic, reliable personal experiences, and any experiments, tests, or surveys the editorial writer has conducted on the topic (70).

- "Reference to critical thinking": This, Ward says, is where the editorial writer uses logic to form a hypothesis (70).

- "Reference to creative thinking": Ward says editorial writers should present fresh, new solutions to their readers for the problem the editorial is addressing (70).

- "Usage of visual supports": Ward suggests that editorial writers find graphics, illustrations or photographs to catch the readers' eyes and reinforce the editorial stance (70).

The third section, Ward says, is the conclusion, which should get the reader on his feet to take action (67). Ward says the final paragraphs should be planned before the body to ensure that the reader argues in a straight line.

Ward says the conclusion should include a summary of evidence presented in the editorial's body, the hypothesis (restated), a solution or list of solutions for the reader to consider, a writing style similar to that of the introduction, a warning or prediction to readers, a statement of sympathy, rejection, etc., depending on the mood, and a restatement of opposition or support for the editorial topic (68).

Ward emphasizes that a "conclusion must be specific" and directly aimed
at the reader (68). From this type of conclusion, "the reader knows what he can do. His feet are set in motion. He is convinced and then given direction" (68).

To motivate the reader to take action, an editorial writer should offer the reader some reward for taking action - such as a better representation of students in student government if he votes (69).

**Applying these guidelines to Daily News editorials**

If the backbone of editorial writing is indeed research, then the editorial is most assuredly the weakest part of the *Daily News* Forum Page.

It was my experience as editor - and the primary editorial writer - that editorials were often written with no research, little background knowledge, a quick read of a news story, and mere opinion and emotion. The editorial was often a last-minute thought that was written close to deadline in a twenty- to thirty-minute span.

In fact, according to Rystrom, the *Daily News* editorial writers have been writing editorials with the entirely wrong approaches. As stated above, Rystrom states that editorials that are not well-researched, restate news articles, and base arguments solely on opinion are not solid editorials (44). If that is the case, the *Daily News* has printed few well-written editorials because the taboos that Rystrom lists have been the strategies of *Daily News* editorial writing.

"The worst habit of all is to write ... and write ... and write ... and finally reach a stopping point, which automatically becomes the conclusion." (Ward 69). Most *Daily News* editorials have been written in this manner.
Based on my research, I propose that the Daily News Forum Page staff take an entirely different approach to editorial writing. First of all, even though it will require more work and effort, editorial writers must require themselves to research their topics. This strategy will require, in most cases, that editorials based on local news stories appear one or two days after the story has been published. As Southwick said, one half hour of additional research can make the difference between editorials that readers will glance at and editorials that cause readers to react passionately (Rystrom 46).

For Daily News editorial writers, one half hour of research should become a starting point. Once editorial writers have established that half hour of research, the time required can develop into forty-five minutes to an hour to whatever research is required to adequately cover a topic.

For quick-and-easy research, I propose that Daily News editorial writers use the magazines and newspapers available to them in the Resource Room of West Quad, located a floor above the Daily News office, Lexis Nexis, a database service available in the Resource Room, and/or the World Wide Web, available in the Daily News office. Additionally, I endorse Rystrom's suggestion that editorial writers keep comprehensive files of possible editorial topics, allowing writers to have an automatic head start on editorial research (46). A file cabinet would be available in the Daily News office for this purpose.

For more in-depth research, I suggest that editorial writers interview professors who are experts on the topics editorials will address, research topics in the library, read current news and opinion pieces on topics, and use
reference or fact books to add details to the editorial. All of these sources are available in Bracken Library or by planning personal interviews.

To ensure that editorials are not only well-researched but well-written, Daily News editorial writers also must devise a plan for editorial writing to prevent writing and writing until they finally stop, as Ward wrote, and believe they have written masterpiece merely because it took so long (69).

I would suggest that the editor in charge of editorial writing ask an editorial writer, after the research is complete, to submit an outline for a proposed editorial. This should include what the introduction, body, and conclusion of the editorial will contain, what audience the editorial is addressing, and what the editorial is supposed to accomplish. Once the writer and editor have agreed on these points, the editor could grant the writer permission to begin writing the editorial.

During the writing process, I suggest that the writer compose the introduction, the conclusion, and then the body, as Ward suggests, to ensure that the editorial follows a complete line of logic and does not stray from its purpose. For beginning editorial writers, I would suggest that they follow a researching, writing, and editing process similar to the one Ward presents. For more advanced editorial writers, or beginning editorial writers looking for a challenge, I suggest they follow a process similar to the one Rystrom presents.

After the writer has submitted a written editorial, the editor should have a checklist to approve the editorial. The entire outline, writing, and checklist process could be accomplished within two or three hours, forcing editorial
writers to begin their writing procedures a significant amount of time before their deadlines. I would suggest a checklist similar to the following:

**Introduction**

- Does the introduction attempt to interest the reader?
- Does the introduction state or lead up to the purpose of the editorial?
- Does the introduction clearly establish who the editorial's audience is?
- Can the reader identify the topic of the editorial?
- Does the introduction establish a tone for the editorial?

**Body**

- Does the body attempt to persuade the reader?
- Does the editorial writer present well-researched facts and expert opinions to back up the argument?
- Do the arguments presented in the body follow a clear-cut path of logic, which will lead up to a conclusion or hypothesis?
- Does the editorial writer present a solution or new outlook on the topic?

**Conclusion**

- Does the conclusion urge the reader to do something? Does it approve or disapprove something? Does it make a conclusive statement based on the facts and research presented? (In other words, does it have a point, or is it merely fancy words and phrases thrown together in the guise of a conclusion?)
- Is the conclusion specific?
- Does the conclusion, despite its topic or purpose, move the reader to take action or do something about the topic addressed?
Does the conclusion summarize the arguments and evidence presented in the body?

Does the conclusion maintain the tone established in the introduction?

Does the conclusion restate opposition or support for the topic?

This checklist procedure, while tedious at first, would be beneficial to both editorial writers and to readers, and the approval of an outline, the writing procedure, and the checklist procedure could be accomplished within two or three hours, which would require the editorial writers to start the writing procedure well in advance of their deadlines. The writers would know exactly what is expected of them, and if any of the questions on the checklist are answered with a "no" by the editor, the writers automatically know they have additional work to accomplish before the editorial can be published. For the readers, the checklist would ensure that they are getting well-researched, well-written, logically based editorials to ponder instead of emotionally charged fluff pieces.

As a school year develops and the editor becomes more comfortable with the editorial writers, I believe the outline-approving process could be discontinued. However, for all new editorial writers, I suggest that they be required to make outlines for at least six weeks so that this important step will be ingrained into their writing process. However, I suggest that the checklist be a continuous part of the editorial-writing process. It will allow editorial writers to visually see where they fall short of a well-written, well-researched editorial.

For the editorial editor, a checklist process may, at first, be difficult to
implement because staff members, in my observation, are often resistant to change. This process would inevitably kill the recently established *Daily News*' policy of editorializing on a story the same day it runs, which, I believe, would be for the better. I suggest having a stockpile of approved local editorials or Associated Press editorials in the *Daily News* office to fill the editorial space when staff members cannot meet the checklist's criteria.

After many refusals to run unfit editorials, however, I believe this checklist process could eventually, under a firm hand of discipline, become a ritual in *Daily News* editorial writing. It would produce longer, better written, well-researched editorials. Using this process also would teach editorial writers to expect no less than the best from themselves, creating a stronger editorial section and a stronger editorial page.
Breaking down the editorial

This editorial was published in the Ball State Daily News 22 April 1996. Below is a look at how the editorial fulfills the requirements of the proposed checklist:

With somber ceremonies and candlelit prayers, celebrators of Holocaust Remembrance recalled the week's overriding theme: never again.

Meanwhile, Bosnian Croats, Muslims and Serbs struggled with their uneasy peace.

Following provisions in the Dayton Peace Agreement, the factions tried to meet an April 19 deadline to relocate 800 tanks, 1,300 pieces of heavy artillery and thousands of mortars and anti-aircraft weapons.

These tools of war illustrate the extent of the Balkan conflict, a 43-month ethnic war that killed thousands and left millions homeless.

War began in 1992 when Serb militias penetrated Bosnia and Croatia. Hoping to fulfill a nationalistic dream of a greater Serbia, Serbs began a massive campaign of rape, torture and murder.

Like the Nazis of World War II Germany, the Serb mission was to eliminate a race.

Although the death toll in Serb concentration camps never reached Nazi levels, brutality sometimes equalled or exceeded German methods of torture.

"If the Germans had used the same approach, they would have needed decades to kill six million Jews," wrote Peter Maass in his 1996 book, "Love Thy Neighbor."

An Oct 22, 1992, State Department report described how Serb guards attacked a Muslim with a motorcycle.

After beating him and knocking out his teeth, they tied his testicles to the motorcycle and sped off.

How can modern-day humans become so dehumanized? What drives them to destroy each other, to have sadistic fun with their fellow human beings?

"(Such evil begins) once the door marked Torture has been opened and the first cut made in the prisoner's skin, or the first butt blow landed to the prisoner's face," Maass wrote.

"Suddenly, the torturer realizes that he, or she, has entered a new universe of sadistic pleasures. The wild beast has been set free and taken up residence in his soul."

In the aftermath of the four-year Balkan war, a war that included Nazi-esque genocide, "never again" leaves room for compromise.
Effective use of letters to the editor

“Letters help give readers a better feeling about the newspaper. Letters give readers, as citizens, one of the few chances they have to speak their mind in public. Letters also help create interest in the editorial page and increases readership.” (247)

Although newspaper editors, according to the U.S. Supreme Court case Miami Herald v. Tornillo, are not legally obligated to run letters to the editor, they are vitally important to making readers feel as if they can actively participate in their community newspaper (248). It is, however, important for editors to establish guidelines for printing letters (248).

Letters should be printed in a timely manner, and often sending them through the mail delays the timeliness (249). Because of this, many newspapers have begun to accept letters through telephone answering systems and fax machines, making their forums for public opinions more easily accessible (249).

Editors must establish policies about names and addresses of letter writers, verification, subject, length and frequency of letters, editing letters, and political letters (250). Establishing these policies and following them closely allows the editor to treat all letter writers as fairly and as equally as possible.

Some newspapers withhold specific addresses to prevent letter writers from being harassed for their statements, but seldom do newspapers withhold names unless the editors believe a writer’s life may be in danger because of the content of the letter (250). It is common policy of most newspapers, however, to print names and the name of the town or city in which the letter writer lives.
To prevent embarrassing situations, editors must realize that verifying every printed letter is crucial (251). If every name and address is not verified, some letter writer may begin letter-writing campaigns, signing each letter with a different pen name, or writers may even write letters under the veil of someone else's name.

Many editors establish guidelines for subjects that they allow letter writers to address. Some editors refuse to print letters that debate the meaning of biblical scripture, thank-you letters and letters from outside their circulation area (251). Others are hard on politicians, either limiting the frequency of their letters or asking them to buy advertising instead of writing a letter to the editor to express their campaign views (251, 254). The important principle, however, is that once a policy is established, it is followed when dealing with all letters to the editor.

Two common guidelines that editors enforce are limiting the length and the frequency of letter writers (252, 253). A common length requirement is two hundred to three hundred words, and a common frequency guideline is that letter writers may only be published once a month (252, 253). The Washington Post editorial staff tells its letter writers that they will most likely be limited to three or four published letters each year, no matter how often they submit letters (Babb 165).

After a letter has passed the guidelines for publication, the editor then is faced with another challenge: how to edit the letter (Rystrom 253). Editing letters also must have an established policy, whether it's a no-editing policy,
which is rare, or a policy that letters are heavily edited (253). Again, it is important that a policy is established so that all letter writers are treated as fairly as possible.

While policies are important to the editorial section, The Editorial Page is quick to point out that “There is no plain, precise formula for determining which letters to the editor make their way in the the Letters to the Editor column” (Babb 161).

The book, however, states that some guidelines are necessary. The Washington Post receives seventy-five to one hundred letters each day but can only print seven or eight daily in its letters-to-the-editor column (161). Key factors that The Washington Post editors look for in letters are readers with opposing viewpoints, newsworthiness, a subject that has not been addressed in news stories, and reactions to news stories that have already been printed (161-164). The opposing viewpoints, however, get first priority.

“First claim to space, The Post feels, belongs to the reader with the opposing viewpoint, especially one who feels personally wronged or misrepresented by something which has appeared on the editorial page or in a news column. The letter writer’s view may appear to the editor to be all wrong (it is likely to, if an ‘opposing viewpoint’ is being expressed), but it’s a lick to which the reader is entitled.” (161)

Well-written, concise letters are probably a letter writer’s best insurance of securing a good chance of being published but “none are commanding” requirements to be published (164). The Post states that it will never trim a letter without first consulting the letter writer (164). Adding well-written, tasteful humor can also increase a letter writer’s chances of being published in
The Post "for if the letters column doesn't entertain occasionally, it won't keep many readers" (165).

The bottom line, however, is that the letters are important to avid readers, and publishing them increases readership (167).

"A letter-to-the-editor is the reader's 13 cents worth, and for the newspaper this unsolicited manuscript is the daily best buy. The reader pays for his newspaper and he is entitled to all the delights of his purchase, that includes telling the know-it-alls that on some days they are know-nothings" (167).

Applying these guidelines to Daily News letters to the editor

My experience as editor taught me that readers take letters to the editor seriously. I have witnessed readers become irate when they discover typos or mistakes in their letters, and I have been threatened with lawsuits for refusing to run some letters.

I also have witnessed readers who make good points, those who make unintelligible points, and those who prefer to argue with columnists, reporters, editorial writers, or other letter writers.

One point my research addresses is that an effective letters policy needs to be established and carefully observed (Rystrom 248). For the most part, the Daily News has a successful and well-written policy for letters in its Forum Policy. The Forum Policy addresses confirmation of letters, length and presentation of letters, unsigned letters, and editing letters. After completing my research, however, I believe adding three statements to the letters policy would benefit the Daily News.

First of all, during my term as editor, I encountered several letter writers
who, out of their ignorance of the law, believed that the Constitution
guaranteed their letters would be printed in the Daily News. They believed that
having their letters published was part of their constitutional right to freedom of
speech. During these conversations, a few letter writers mentioned or
threatened lawsuits to intimidate me.

As a service to the public and an additional protection for the Daily News,
I believe it would be beneficial to state that “Letters to the editor are a service to
the public. The Daily News is not required by law to publish letters to the editor
but strives to serve readers’ interests by publishing as many letters as space,
timeliness, and newsworthiness permit. The editor reserves the right to
withhold letters from publication.”

Rystrom says many newspapers either forbid politicians to write letters to
the editor concerning political issues or limit the how many letters they will
publish concerning a politician’s campaign (251, 254). The Daily News Forum
Policy currently does not address this issue, and the newspaper needs to
establish some policy for these types of letters in order to remain unbiased
toward political candidates or parties.

I suggest that the Daily News add a statement to its letters policy stating
the following: “Political candidates, student and professional, and their
campaign workers will be limited to one published campaign letter per election.
Responses to attacks from other candidates will not count toward this limit, but
such response letters must be submitted to the Daily News within three
publishing days of the date the “attack letter” was printed. The Daily News will
refuse submission of any campaign letters, except in the case of response
texts that have met the three-day deadline, one week prior to an election to
ensure that all political letters can be published before election day."

Finally, for the letters policy, I would recommend that the policy include a
statement concerning publishing frequency for letters from a single letter
writer. As editor, I received a letter to the editor daily from a professor in the
Department of Psychology. He did not understand that the majority of his
letters were not published because I had other letters to print that were from a
variety of other readers. He also frequently complained about which letters I
chose to publish.

While all of this is tolerable, I believe it would be better for letter writers
to understand from the beginning that they will not be excessively published.
Although *The Washington Post* has set its frequency limit at three or four times
per year (Babb 165), I believe the *Daily News* can afford to be more generous
because it is a significantly smaller, community newspaper. Therefore, I would
recommend that the *Daily News* limit its writers to three or four published
letters per month. The editor in charge of the Forum Page would be responsible
for keeping a monthly log of letter writers.

The Forum Policy statement could be as simple as "The *Daily News*
appreciates all comments from readers; however, each letter writer will be
published only three or four times a month maximum." This statement
eliminates any confusion that frequent letter writers may have concerning the
*Daily News*’ publishing policy.
Limiting topics letter writers can address, as *The Washington Post* suggests, I do not believe is a good suggestion for a small, community newspaper the size of the *Daily News*. I believe it is in the readers’ best interests to publish even thank-you and religious letters in moderation. Limiting topics in a community as small as the *Daily News*’ 14,000 circulation, I believe, would turn off readers and make them believe that the newspaper is not legitimately concerned with feedback or opinions.

I do not, however, have any qualms with running letters that criticize the *Daily News*, even though I have been harshly criticized by some staff members for publishing them. As *The Washington Post* states, “... It’s a lick to which the reader is entitled” (161). I have discovered, however, that it is best to warn the staff member to whom the letter refers that the letter will be published within a few days. It often helps soothe the situation between editor and staff member and assists in patching any holes in the staff member’s ego.

I also suggest that *Daily News* continue its policy of carefully editing letters for grammar, spelling, clarity, Associated Press style, and facts. Any less means of editing would cause some letter writers to look exceptionally foolish in the eyes of our small campus community.

Finally, I cannot overemphasize how important it is to confirm the identity of letter writers before publishing a letter. In the fall semester of 1995, I discovered one letter writer who was writing letters under the guise of several other Muncie residents. It is frightening to think how ignorant the *Daily News* could look if this part of the letters policy is not strictly enforced.
Good columnists

“If any two columnists are not quite as different as, say, hockey goalies and football place kickers, they surely are as different as relief pitchers and centerfielders” (Post 147).

Expectations for meeting general criteria and writing well are placed on columnists despite their wide array of topics and personalities. Columnists, in general, should be “concise, pleasurable and gifted at changing the subject frequently” (Post 147).

Columnists’ jobs, according to How to Write and Sell a Column, is to look at details of issues and life events and to ponder their meanings (Raskin and Males 36). Columnists are expected to establish a slant and define it well (36).

“A columnist must be a sharpshooter, firing each word directly toward the purpose each installment serves. No digressions, verbosity, weak words, ineffectual phrases, or murky prose are welcome in this type of writing.” (36-37)

In order to become that “sharpshooter,” however, columnists must accomplish a series of steps in order to come up with a topic and write it effectively.

The first step a columnist must accomplish is finding a topic. Getting an idea for a column can come from several sources (62). One of the first places columnists can look for ideas is in their everyday experiences (62). They can also draw from life around them and what is happening in their community by listening to grocery store conversations, reading community newspapers, and
staying current on community events (62). Other people and networks are also valuable sources to columnists. Callers, readers, friends, and other people who read the paper can often offer columnists good topics (63). Established networks and contacts, such as experts on different subjects, can also provide columnists with valuable column topics (63). Columnists should also ask editors for column suggestions and search for issues to address by reading magazines, newspapers, etc., and visits to the local library (64-65).

After columnists select their topics, they must narrow them down. If topics are too broad, columnists should write a series of columns on the topic, instead of writing an excessively long column on a single topic (37).

Columnists then must decide if their purpose is to entertain, inform, motivate, etc. (37). The purpose will affect columnists’ tones, word choices, sentence lengths and overall writing developments (37).

The next steps are for columnists to determine how they will make their points and then make an outline (38). Before making an outline, columnists must decide how they will make their point – whether using an anecdote, using satire, making an argument, presenting a list of tips, or offering instructions to the readers (38). The message presented, however, must be carefully evaluated before deciding which method is used to present the point (38).

Columnists have a hefty task laid before them when they begin to write their columns: They must show the reader the point, not tell it (39). Columnists must create pictures in readers’ minds to keep them reading (39).
As *The Post* points out, columns are written pieces that add to a newspaper but are not necessary (Babb 148). Therefore, columnists must entice people to read their works.

“Columns can be delights, but they are *optional* delights. ... Reading a column is a habit, and it is not a habit people are apt to acquire unless it is pleasurable. What most readers want from a columnist is the pleasure of his company.” (148)

To keep readers’ attention, Raskin and Males suggest using Gary Provost’s *Make Every Word Count*. Provost says writers should “use concrete nouns and specific adjectives” (39). He says adjectives are needed to tell a colorful story, but they must not be overused or they become ineffective (39). Provost also encourages writers to “use strong, active verbs” to ensure that sentences are descriptive and specific (39). Provost adds that weak, passive verbs will mute a column’s message (39).

Two other suggestions Provost offers is avoiding excessive use of “to be” verbs and “eliminating adverbs whenever possible” (40). Provost says excessive use of “to be” verbs makes columns passive, and adverbs are often signs that writers have used weak verbs in their columns (40). Columnists should also use short, familiar words, too, Provost says, to speak on readers’ levels and communicate effectively (40).

Writing effective leads and endings are also vital to good column writing. As in a good news story, a good lead is necessary in a column to hook readers (40). Effective leads are especially important to new columnists, who readers do not know yet (41).
Raskin and Males offer a few devices for effective column lead writing:

- **“Make readers care”:** Using a human element in the lead will often hook readers emotionally and make them want to read further (41).

- **“Make a promise and keep it”:** This method challenges columnists to attract the reader by telling them what they can expect from the column (42).

- **“Make a strong statement”:** This device allows columnists to lead their columns with statements that are shocking, controversial, strongly opinionated, and likely to make waves with the readers (42).

- **Appealing to readers' senses:** Using this method lets columnists appeal to a readers' senses with descriptive, colorful language. It allows columnists to paint pictures using color, metaphors, or juxtaposition (43).

Columnists face a greater challenge than reporters when it comes to ending their written work. Columns must have a “definite finish” and must end gracefully, unlike news stories that are written in inverted pyramid and can be trimmed at almost any point (44).

Raskin and Males also offer devices for ending a column:

- **Anecdote:** With this device, columnists use a story that reinforces a point or provokes thought (45).

- **Summary:** To use this device, columnists restate the purpose of the column and show the relationship among all arguments, points, and facts presented (46). The authors say this device is especially useful in how-to and other service pieces where “the writer can reiterate advice to close a column” (46).
- "Recipe or list ending": This device provides readers with lists or hints that encompass the points discussed in the body of the column (47).

- Quotations: A quote from a personal interview or a famous quote or adage can often close a column by "summing up a feeling or giving readers more to ponder" (47).

- "The shocker": This ending shocks or jolts readers because the reader does not expect the column to end in this manner (48).

- Question ending: This ending method is used to provoke thought, motivate readers, or reinforce the columnists' points (48).

Columnists, however, face more challenges than writing solid leads, bodies, and endings. They must establish a rapport with readers in order to draw a reader following (57). Columnists must strive to involve their readers in the columns and address issues that concern them (57-58).

"Just as folks who see each other frequently and enjoy each other's company form an attachment, so do columnist and reader form a bond. In this kind of 'friendship,' however, the burden of establishing rapport falls to the writer." (57)

One way to establish a good rapport with readers is to visualize them when writing a column (58). Visualizing helps the columnist personalize the message, which is vital to hooking loyal fans (59). Columnists must also strive to insert their own personalities into their work, injecting bits of personal data into sections of their columns without being overbearing (59-60).

The Post claims that personalizing may be the most important part of a column.
“The beginning of wisdom about this peculiar institution, the column, is that it is a highly personal institution. People who want to read X’s column want to read it because X wrote it, not because it is about this or that topic” (Post 148).

Raskin and Males also emphasize that columnists should be careful not to sound condescending or as if they are talking down to their readers, which sets up initial barriers between the reader and the columnist that are difficult to break (60). This includes remaining nonjudgmental and stating remarks in a positive manner when possible (61).

Finally, columnists should establish authority and trust with readers and level with them by presenting accurate information in their columns (61).

“Be prepared to go the extra mile, to gather facts, and to make sure your sources are trustworthy and accurate” (61).

**Applying these guidelines to Daily News columns**

The major challenge that most Daily News columnists face is finding the right combination between information they present on their topic and their personalized message, which either reveals something about their personality or addresses the reader directly.

Through my research, I discovered that columnists, according to the experts I read, have the freedom to talk about everyday experiences, life around them, community news, and their personal lives without conducting much research. While my plea to columnists to stop telling readers every detail of their lives was justified, I believe it was somewhat misleading to them.
Columnists are allowed to share personal details that relate to their topics and let their personalities shine through their writings. What I believe most student columnists struggle with, however, is taking the focuses of their columns off themselves and their personal lives and placing them on a relevant, hard-hitting topic. Right now, student columnists are not the “sharpshooters” The Washington Post says they ought to be.

The reason, I believe, for this inadequacy is that first and foremost, student columnists have not been encouraged by any editor to write on topics, not themselves, while allowing personal details to filter through the column. They merely do not know what constitutes good column writing. Student columnists are also inexperienced at writing in general, let alone writing columns, a more complicated and challenging process.

Many student columnists have not established a good rapport with readers either. Most of them did not double check their facts to establish credibility with readers. Some talked down to the readers in their columns. And, as a result, some received threatening phone messages or mail from the public. One columnist was told in a phone message not to leave his room or face the consequences. Right now, most student columnists have not established a relationship with readers that encourages readership on a weekly basis.

To solve these problems, I have several suggestions. First of all, I recommend that the editor of these columns heavily edit a columnist’s work. If the topic is not adequately addressed, if the column has no point, or if the
column centers around the columnist's life, etc., then the editor should refuse to run the column. Syndicated columnists or Associated Press commentary are always available to publish in its place. As The Washington Post points out, columnists are "optional delights" that appear on the editorial page (148). Columnists are not requirements for an editorial page.

Second, while I believe it is important to retain students for most of the columnist positions, why not ask two or three professors, administrators, or campus experts to write a column? Implementing this approach would give the opinion page a few "expert" columnists who, if carefully chosen, rarely would have writing problems, would address campus issues, and would be positive role models for student columnists. These columnists also would be inclined to address issues that student columnists avoid, bringing a more diverse set of opinions to the page. In this case, however, editors must stress that they can refuse to run these columns for the same reasons they refuse to run student columns, although it is much more doubtful that problems would occur with these writers.

Finally, as with the editorial, I would suggest a checklist for columns that includes basic criteria for effective column writing as described by Raskin and Males. In order for this to work effectively, columnists must be required to submit their columns at least two days prior to their publishing dates so the editor in charge of the Forum Page could critique the column according to the checklist and then, if needed, return the piece to the columnist for corrections. I would suggest a checklist similar to the following:
Column checklist

- Does the column have a clearly defined goal/purpose?
- Is the column focused on a topic, not the columnist?
- Does the column establish significant points for the reader to follow?
- Does the lead grab the reader?
- Does the ending wrap up the column effectively?
- Is the language used in the column descriptive, allowing the reader to visualize?
- Does the tone or word choice of the column create any barriers between the columnist and the reader (condescending remarks, etc.)?
- Are the facts presented in the column correct?

Again, the purpose of this checklist would be to make final approval of a column before it is published. If the editor cannot answer “yes” to all of these questions, the column should be returned to the columnist for further revision and possibly further research.

While columns are not the weakest part of the opinion page, they surely must come in second place for weakness. In order to improve the content of columns, the Forum Page editor must place clearly defined objectives on columnists and instill in them that they are the faces readers associate with the Forum Page.

Effective editorial cartoons

Herb Block, an editorial cartoonist for The Washington Post, says the most important factor in an editorial cartoon is the meaning, not the art: “The
total cartoon is more important than just fun with faces and figures" (153).

But before editorial cartoonists put any ink on their pages, editors must decide their philosophies on running editorial cartoons. Two basic philosophies exist: Drawing the editorial cartoon to coincide with the paper's editorial or editorial philosophy and treating cartoons as columns are treated, meaning the work represents the views of the author, not the newspaper (Rystrom 266, 267). Once editors have decided which philosophy is best for their newspapers, the cartoonists can freely flow ink onto their pages.

According to Rystrom, a survey of cartoonists and editors showed that both believe being a critic is the first role of a cartoonist (264). Block, The Post cartoonist, says an editorial cartoon “should have some purpose beyond a chuckle” (151). Block says political cartoons should express a viewpoint, and he emphasizes that editorial cartoons are much more complex than picking a target and lashing out at them (151).

"The political cartoon is not a news story and not an oil portrait. It's essentially a means for poking fun, for puncturing pomposity and for offering criticism. ... Cartooning is an irreverent form of expression, and one particularly suited to scoffing at the high and mighty. If the prime role of a free press is to serve as critic of government, cartooning is often the cutting edge of that criticism." (151)

Block reminds us that as in any good written piece, proper preparations and research are necessary. Block said he usually started his day by reading newspapers and listening to radio reports of news and making notes of possible cartoon topics (153). He said he then drew rough sketches after he narrowed the topic down and decided what needed to be said (153). After that, Block
showed the roughs to his colleagues in the newsroom to obtain additional background information from reporters who deal with news sources daily (154).

"By showing 'roughs' to a few colleagues around the newsroom, I often find out which sketch expresses a thought most clearly," Block wrote (154).

Block also says no topic is safe from possible criticism in an editorial cartoon.

"As for subject matter, there's no sacred cows. But there's no obligation for the cartoonist to deal with a topic unless he feels there is a point that needs to be made" (160).

Perhaps no one summed up the purpose of an editorial cartoonist's job better than a New York journalist.

"When asked for ideas on how to get editorial cartoons from a good artist who didn't follow the news, A. Rosen of the Albany (N.Y.) Knickerbocker News, then president of the National Cartoonist Society, advised: 'Give up on that person; you'll never make him or her an editorial cartoonist. Instead, seek out a young person who may not draw well but who is interested in public affairs. Hire that person.'" (Rystrom 268)

**Applying these guidelines to Daily News editorial cartoons**

Editorial cartoons, the most easily noticeable section of any opinion page, have a record of hit-and-miss performance at the Daily News.

While editorial cartoonists I have worked with have no apprehensions of addressing any subject or lampooning any public figure, their editorial cartoons often have no editorial content. In fact, a portion of the Daily News editorial cartoons accomplish exactly what my research advises against: They produce
only a laugh from readers; they do not invoke any thought in readers or point any critical fingers at their subjects. The editorial cartoons I refer to are those addressing the weather (April 16, 1996), squirrels in the Quad (October 6, 1996), and most “Campus Annoyance” cartoons that readers, as well as my staff, seemed to enjoyed (September 21, 1996).

No matter how much readers might enjoy these types of cartoons, however, these subjects – which are entertaining to readers – do not belong on the opinion page. These types of cartoons belong in the entertainment section.

Daily News editorial cartoons are not a complete failure, however. Many have adequately, and even sufficiently, addressed campus, national, and world issues. I have seen editorial cartoonists draw good editorials about Student Government Association elections or figureheads (March 20, 1996), the Oklahoma City bombing (April 19, 1996), and a political conflict in North Korea (April 10, 1996). These cartoons make editorial comments on relevant news issues, are drawn in an effective manner, and provoke thought in readers. They accomplished the goals of editorial cartoons and deserved space on the opinion page.

To encourage good cartoons on a daily basis, however, the editor in charge of the Forum Page first should encourage cartoonists to gather ideas for cartoons by indulging in the information newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the World Wide Web have to offer, as The Washington Post cartoonist suggested. Daily News editorial cartoonists also should study the work of professionals such as Mike Peters, cartoonist for the Dayton Daily
News, whose syndicated cartoons are mailed to the Daily News office weekly. Cartoonists could also benefit from studying previous Daily News cartoonists, such as Bill Thornbro, by studying bound issues in the Daily News office. If a cartoonist cannot produce an adequate cartoon that provides more than a humorous touch, then the editor, for that day, should run a syndicated cartoon, to which the Daily News subscribes. This practice will instill in the cartoonists that their job descriptions are more demanding than merely providing entertainment.

Finally, in regard to editorial cartoons, I suggest that the Daily News' philosophy remain the same: Allow the cartoonists to work independently of the editorial writers and let the cartoons stand as a representation of the cartoonists' views, not the newspaper's. I believe this is the policy that best protects the newspaper from losing credibility with readers or enduring threats of lawsuits from public figures who do not understand why cartoonists ridicule them.
According to Rystrom, the role of a cartoonist is to be a critic (264). While both of these cartoons criticize the Whitewater investigation, Example A is a stronger cartoon. Explanations are listed below:

**EXAMPLE A**

This cartoon, drawn by Mike Peters, *Dayton Daily News* cartoonist, criticizes the Republican Party’s drawn-out investigation of the Whitewater scandal. This cartoon is more effective than Example B because it compares Sen. Alfonse D’Amato of New York — the ring leader of the Whitewater investigation — to the Energizer bunny, a well-known advertising icon for Energizer batteries. The cartoon makes a great impact because the Engergizer bunny, which “keeps going and going,” is long dead, while D’Amato keeps beating the Whitewater drum.

**EXAMPLE B**

This cartoon, drawn by *Ball State Daily News* cartoonist Ted Plothe, essentially makes the same point as Peters’ cartoon: The Whitewater investigation has been drawn out too long. This example, however, is less effective because it depicts a cliche phrase — That the Republicans are “beating a dead horse.” The cartoon is also less effective because instead of targeting a single figure in the investigation, such as D’Amato, the cartoon targets the entire Republican Party.
Reader input

In a random phone survey of thirty students, I found some unscientific – yet interesting – data about what students think about the Daily News Forum Page.

Out of the thirty students surveyed, nineteen said they at least glance at the Forum Page on a regular basis. Twelve reported that they read editorials on a regular basis, seventeen read letters to the editor on a regular basis, fourteen read columnists on a regular basis, and twenty-six reported reading the editorial cartoon on a regular basis. All in all, the letters to the editor and the editorial cartoon are the most popular items on the Forum Page according to this survey.

Regarding editorials, thirteen of those surveyed said they prefer written editorials, and two had no preference. The other fifteen reported that they prefer the Daily News to conduct photo editorials, where a Daily News reporter asks a number of students a preapproved question, takes their pictures, and records their responses. These pictures and responses, as a result, are published in lieu of a written editorial. Only nine of those surveyed said they were aware of any editorial campaigns or topics the Daily News had written during the past academic year.

None of the thirty students surveyed said they ever had written a letter to the editor. Sixteen, however, said that if letters could be submitted through electronic mail, they would be more inclined to participate in this section of the editorial page. The other fourteen surveyed said electronic mail submission
would have no effect on their decision to write a letter to the editor.

Only six students said they believed letters to the editor deserved more space on the Forum Page. Seventeen said they believed the letters did not deserve more space, two had no preference, three said only if there was a demand for it, and two said providing more space for letters is acceptable when a topic lends itself to running additional letters. Twelve students also said they read regular letter writers such as B.J. Paschal, professor of psychology.

Lighthearted columnists, it seems, were favored by those of the thirty students who could remember the name of a column or columnist that appealed to them. In fact, no columnists who addressed serious issues were mentioned by these thirty students. Dave Bilger, an entertainment columnist, was remembered by four students for his unusual column, sense of humor, and individuality. Jason Shotts, a satirical columnist, was named by two students who said the columnist had a unique style and could remain humorous while still making a point. These results enforce the point made by Raskin and Males stating that it is important for columnists to develop a bond with their readers.

In other questions, only three students said they were familiar with the Daily News Forum Policy, and twenty-eight students said they did not believe any type of commentary was missing on the Forum-Page. Two students who offered suggestions said columnists and other writers needed to maintain a more professional attitude and writing style, and one student suggested including columns from faculty members.
What the Daily News can learn from this survey

I think this random survey shows that students are not reading the Forum Page as frequently as Daily News staff members might hope. Although further research should be conducted, the survey suggests that editorials, which I believe are the weakest point of the page, are not interesting to students. They do not reach out and grab them. Because of the high preference for photo editorials, Daily News staff members should also consider publishing these editorials more frequently.

Another warning flag that can be hoisted from this survey is that among readers surveyed, most do not know that the Daily News has a Forum Policy, and I doubt they are alone. If students are not familiar with this policy, they probably do not understand the purpose of the Forum Page. I would suggest redesigning the Forum Policy to attract more attention to it.

Among the thirty students surveyed, columnists who took a break from serious issues and provided a laugh or two were the most popular. Although I do not endorse having more than one humor columnist per semester, the editor in charge of the Daily News Forum Page may want to conduct further research to determine what issues students would like to see columnists address.

Probably the most valuable piece of information gathered from this random survey, however, is that sixteen students said they would be more inclined to submit a letter to the editor if they could do so through electronic mail. This avenue for readers to submit letters is worth further research and a possible trial implementation.
My final recommendations

In conclusion, after writing this thesis and in retrospect to my term as editor, I firmly believe that the Daily News needs to implement stricter standards for editorials, letters to the editor, columns, and editorial cartoons. Because the Forum Page is one that is ruled by content and intensive planning, the editor in charge of this page should accept no less than submissions from editorial writers, letter writers, columnists, and cartoonists that meet these standards.

Additionally, I would like to endorse the proposal of my successor, Bill Webster, the 1996-97 academic year editor, that the editor relinquish control of the Forum Page and hire a separate Forum Page editor. I believe this will be beneficial to both the staff and the readers because it will give the responsibility of this important page to someone who can be more focused on the content and who does not have the vast array of responsibilities that the editor does.

I also propose that the Forum Page editor reduce the number of people who serve on the editorial board. Current Daily News unwritten rules suggest that every person who attends the daily 5 p.m. budget meetings should be a member of the editorial board. During my term as editor, that encompassed ten people, and speaking from experience, too many people were involved, causing a consensus to rarely, if ever, be reached.

I would encourage the Forum Page editor to limit the editorial board to about five members: the Forum Page editor, the editor, any managing editors, the news editor, and the sports editor. This group would be responsible for
approving written editorials, as well as helping write and edit them. I suggest the editorial board meet separately from the budget meetings. A group this size could be large enough to provide diversity yet small enough to make conclusive decisions about editorials.

Making a weekly plan for editorials should also be a requirement. It would be helpful to plan a budget for editorials, telling who is writing the editorial, what the topic is, and what the stance will be. That way, the Forum Page editor can plan ahead for possible art or illustrations to publish with the editorial, giving it a greater impact on the page. I would suggest that editorials be due no later than 5 p.m. the night they are supposed to be published. This ensures that the Forum Page editor will have adequate time to edit the editorials and ask for revisions.

I propose, too, that the Forum Page editor compile a list of staff members who would like to write an occasional editorial. Editorial board members would be required to be on the list. Other staff members writing editorials would be required to have at least one year of prior reporting experience. This requirement would help assure the Forum Page editor that the writer has adequate skills for writing, gathering information, organizing thoughts, and being creative, all of which are vital to good editorial writing.

Finally, for the editorial page staff, I would recommend that the Forum Page editor, besides meeting with the editorial board on a predetermined basis, have weekly staff meetings with columnists, cartoonists, and staff editorial writers to discuss their performance, critique their work, and discuss what
strategies they need to utilize in order to improve. This concept was something that I tried but failed to accomplish during my term as editor. In retrospect, however, I believe it could work if the staff members understand their work will not be published during the weeks they miss these meetings, unless prior arrangements are made.

For letters to the editor, I propose that the editorial staff research the possibility of accepting letters through electronic mail. I believe that according to my research, the more channels available for submitting letters, the better the selection from which the Forum Page editor will have to choose. If this can be accomplished, I believe it will not only increase student response to the *Daily News*, but it will make readers feel as if the newspaper is more easily accessible. In order to implement this, however, confirming the identity of writers through student identification numbers and phone calls would be vitally important.

My final suggestion is that once editorials, columns, and letters have been improved, they will continue to become longer and more well-written. While a stopping point must be established for length, the Forum Page editor may discover that editorials or columns need to run a little longer or that more letters need to be published on daily basis. All of these results would make the design of the Forum Page inoperable, causing a need for a redesign. I would suggest that designers begin researching other options for design before this element of the page becomes a problem.

In conclusion, I believe that with the help of this research and the use of
additional research by Daily News staff members, the content of the editorial page can become the heart and soul of the newspaper. Although it may take blood sweat, and tears, the goal is one that can be accomplished with hard work, dedication, and a commitment to quality.
Works Cited


