

Coaching Reporters Tipsheet

By Doug Cospers, excerpted from "Coaching Writers," by Peter Clark and Don Fry

There are two ways to pass on your professional values and skills to your reporters: formal training and coaching. Formal training can be very effective, but it can take your reporter out of the newsroom for long periods. Editors can coach reporters in the newsroom during normal working hours, helping them learn the profession little by little each day. Coaching does take some time. The trick is to make coaching a habit, taking even a minute or two to praise your reporter's successes and point out areas where he or she could improve a story. Each editor has his or her own style of coaching. How did you learn the skills of good journalism? Did you have a mentor? How did he or she teach you?

Here are some tips to help you become a more effective coach.

- Don't just fix reporters' stories; work with them to make sure they know what changes you are making and why you are making them. Reporters don't grow just by rushing into their next assignment unless they have learned something from their last one. If you have time, involve reporters in your editing, or go over your edits when you are finished. Try to fix only on deadline.

Coaching vs. Fixing

- Coaching encourages independence. Fixing encourages dependence on the editor.
 - Coaching develops the writer, communicates values and skills. Fixing gets the story in the paper.
 - Coaching builds confidence. Fixing undercuts the writer.
 - Coaching unites writer and editor. Fixing divides them.
 - The coaching editor shares control, the fixing editor takes control.
- Reporters need to be corrected, but they also need to be praised when they do a good job on a story. When an editor they respect takes just a moment to say, "Good lead on your malaria story this week," reporters are encouraged to remember how he or she wrote that lead and to continue to work on their leads. If you can take another moment to say why you think the lead worked so well, all the better.
 - When pointing out weaknesses in reporters' stories, encourage them to solve the problem themselves. Instead of saying, "You need to talk to this or that source," ask, "Do you think that this story is balanced? What do you need to do to fix it?" We all learn better when we find solutions ourselves.
 - Coach reporters early on major stories. Before reporters begin to write, ask broad questions that encourage them to focus their stories: "What is the story about? What is the lead? Why is it important? What does the reader need to know about this? What is your best quote? Do you think anything is missing in your reporting?"
 - When criticizing reporters' stories, be specific. Say, "This quote is too long," rather than, "This is a bad quote." Reporters don't learn anything when they hear that their work is flawed but don't know why.
 - When possible, send the story back to the reporter to fix. We learn best by doing.
 - If you don't do it already, consider conducting postmortems on your paper. Postmortem means, roughly, "examine the body." When you sit with your staff for even an hour after every issue comes out and discuss how the paper could have been better, everyone learns together and are motivated to make the next issue better. But it's very important that you keep the staff focused on improving, not assigning blame for mistakes. If a staff postmortem is not possible, you can also conduct one-on-one postmortems with individual reporters and their stories.
 - Consider giving an award for the best story of the month. Post good stories on a special bulletin board.

Quick Coaching tips

- Coach briefly and often.
- Coach on breaking news as well as features.
- Try to coach reporters, not just fix stories.
- Praise good work as well as point out weaknesses.
- Let the writer speak first. Ask how he or she feels about the story.
- Ask constructive questions. Listen to the writer.
- Help the writer identify the story's most important problem.
- Let the writer suggest how to fix it.
- Coach early and at every stage of the writing process.
- Be specific with your criticisms of stories.
- Turn responsibility back to the writer.
- Conduct regular postmortems.
- Reward good work.