The short and the short of it

Unless it's a special package, with photos, graphics, infoboxes and sidebars, the most difficult item to design is a long story. Actually, it can't be designed so much as just shoehorned into a page.

Overly long stories are not only difficult to design; they're also a turn-off to readers, who feel they just don't have the time to spend on a long article. When confronted with a sea of gray text, readers often will bypass the story.

So…it's critical for us to search for ways to keep our stories short.

Here are some suggestions:

DIRECTION: Talk over the story with your reporter before she goes out to cover it. Cover the basics like the lead, getting names, getting quotes, what her phone calls tell her is going to happen at the meeting, etc. And during that quick chat (it need take no more than two or three minutes), help her to decide a target length for the report. When she returns from the meeting or event she's been covering, confirm with her that she can still write to the agreed-upon length. If she now thinks that's not possible, find out why. It could be that the story has taken some new twists and turns and it needs to be longer…or…shorter.

EDITING: If your reporter has to write longer than the length you agreed on earlier, that doesn't mean you have to allow the final piece to grow beyond a reasonable length. I don't know of any experienced editor who can't trim a story to the bone—and sometimes to the marrow. But cutting a story after it has been written should be your last resort. It takes more time to edit a long story and you're also tossing out the time it took the writer to create the parts you've excised.

Which of these would you prefer to read?

SEGMENT: If a piece must be longer—let's say it's an investigative article or a centerpiece you've been working on for a month or so—then talk with your writer about ways to break it apart. Rather than one long piece on five mayoral candidates, for example, write five separate interviews, each with a photo and an infobox. A map could show readers where the five candidates reside. Another infobox could outline the duties of the mayor. Another sidebar (with chart) could give an election timeline.

INFOBOXES: An easy way to shorten a story is to pull information that's not critical (yet interesting) from the story and place it in an infobox. Example: an infobox on a fire story could include the square footage of the building that burned; time of the 911 call reporting the fire; response time of the firefighters and number of firefighters involved; how long it took for the fire to be brought under control; a list of other recent fires in the area, if any. Infoboxes not only serve to deliver information quickly; they also are a "hook" to get readers into the story.

LENGTH LIMITS: This can be a less-than-desirable method of controlling story length but it can work well if your writers are aware that no story is to run more than, say, 500 words. The length limit need not be applied in all cases but your writers will eventually become comfortable with the idea that they need to let you know if they are exceeding the limit—or running way short.

As the editor of your newspaper, you're a busy person. Having a handle on the length of your major stories helps you plan your day—and your design.

'101 HENNINGER HELPFUL HINTS' is filled with so many good ideas. You'll find yourself asking: "Why didn't I think of that?"'

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