

Indiana State University

Student Publications

**An assessment of selected aspects of editorial quality,
Indiana Statesman student newspaper,
Academic Year 2007-2008**

This report attempts to quantify the front-page content of the Indiana Statesman newspaper and the performance of its student staff for both fall and spring semesters of academic year 2007-2008. The metrics used in the assessment were developed by Student Publications professional staff, based on journalism industry standards. A sample rubric is included, along with an explanation of each metric. In general, our findings show that the student staff performance and newspaper content improved from fall to spring semester in several key areas, including writing of story leads, reduction in the number of factual errors, and overall front-page design. Some areas that require further improvement include extent and diversity of sourcing, writing with greater contextual background, and design innovation. The report also analyzes environmental and other factors that impacted staff performance and news content.

Prepared for Indiana State University Division of Student Affairs

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Purpose and background

We undertook this assessment in the hopes of identifying patterns in the performance of the student newspaper staff, and targeting for improvement, through training and education, areas of news coverage and presentation. To this end, the authors devised a rubric of metrics with which to measure elements of the newspaper that could be tracked objectively and quantitatively over time. Our intention is to use this data to tailor future training sessions, as well as to better target daily critiques of the newspaper that advisers disseminate to the Statesman's news editors, reporters, photographers and designers.

Method

The following is a list of the metrics devised, and a brief explanation of their meaning. A sample rubric is attached for reference.

News Leads – We considered page 1 stories only. Hard news stories that met the criteria below were counted separately from feature news stories. Hard news stories were defined as those that announced timely information in the lead, based on events or news developments; feature stories were those that focused primarily on people, entertainment, or enterprise and in-depth reporting of issues. To achieve a (1) score, each type of news lead was required to meet the following criteria:

- Hard News: Active verbs, appropriate focus on news value, explanation of context, conciseness
- Features: Active verbs, named person in the lead, relevant anecdote/storytelling, creativity, conciseness

Therefore, if a hard news lead included an active (not passive) verb, a concise reference to the story's news value, and some attempt to contextualize the story in a larger way, it was counted. An example of such a lead is:

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld, famous for his “show about nothing,” joked about everyday life, modern technology, and even Terre Haute when he performed at ISU Saturday night.

The lead includes active verbs (joked, performed), news value (at ISU Saturday night), and context (famous for his “show about nothing,” joked about everyday life...). A news lead that would *not* be counted under these criteria is:

“We are your library,” the Cunningham Memorial Library mission statement reads.

The above lead does not succeed at getting the news elements of the story into the lead paragraph, nor does it succeed in introducing a person in a creative, descriptive way, as in a feature lead. Therefore, it would not be counted in our assessment. A front page consisting of the two stories above would receive a ½ score, or one

successful lead out of two. This is the coding scheme represented in the table on page 4.

Page 1 Sourcing – To measure the quality of what we call sourcing (that is, the persons or documents cited in the story as sources of information) in the news content, we used three criteria. The first tallied the total **number of sources** per story against the industry standard of three or more. Even the most basic news stories generally require, in good journalistic practice, a minimum of three named sources. The second criterion examined what **type of source** was cited, with attention to that person’s role in the campus community (administrator, faculty or student). In general, if the story included more than one type of source, we considered it worthy of being counted. We did not count stories that relied exclusively on students or exclusively on administrators, for example. The third sourcing criterion was whether the sources cited were **credible and appropriate**. In almost every instance, students cited sources with direct knowledge of the subject over which they were being interviewed. However, if a source was asked to speculate on matters for which they had no direct knowledge or a Web site was cited that was not a credible source on the subject, we did not count that source.

Overall Accuracy – To measure accuracy, we counted the number of corrections published in each issue. We also attempted to count any factual errors we noticed that went uncorrected for at least one issue of the newspaper. This was an attempt to measure not only factual accuracy, but also expediency in correcting errors. We did not measure grammatical errors that did not rise to the level of factual errors.

Page 1 Design -- The design portion of the rubric relied on those elements of design that could be objectively quantified. There are nine (9) elements total, including:

- Dominant art/photo: The presence of a larger, more prominent image on the page.
- Secondary art/photo: The presence of additional images, including mug shots.
- White space: The intentional use of open space as a design element to draw the eye.
- Color: The use of color to organize or emphasize aspects of the page.
- Headlines: Story headlines that are proportionate to their news value, accurate, concise and creative.
- Promo: Top-of-the-page story “refers” (or references to inside content) that consist of logical design and concise writing.
- Organization: The grading of news value of stories through design. Choosing to package related stories, to highlight a feature package, to put the most newsworthy story above the fold.
- Breakouts: Additional design elements that supplement the main story, such as Web site refers, inside content refers, event information boxes, etc.
- Innovation: We measured any attempt by the design staff to try new and creative approaches to design, regardless of whether the attempt succeeded.

For the design elements listed above, the coders simply checked a line if the element was present or left it blank if it was not present. The check marks were then tallied for each issue, with nine being the highest possible score for design elements.

Results

The table below shows totals for each category we assessed, along with percentages and percentage-point change from fall to spring semester. For example, the first category of story leads shows that, among hard news leads in fall semester, 59 out of 102 hard news stories (or 58%) had leads that met the journalistic writing standard for quality. In spring semester, 58 out of 82 hard news leads (or 71%) met the quality standard, an increase of 13 percentage points semester-over-semester.

Category	Fall 2007	Spring 2008	% Change
Story Leads			
Hard News Leads	59/102 (58%)	58/82 (71%)	+13%
Feature Leads	28/42 (67%)	46/63 (73%)	+6%
Leads Total	87/144 (60%)	104/145 (72%)	+12%
Page 1 Sourcing			
Three or more sources	80/146 (55%)	92/145 (63%)	+8%
Balance of types	98/146 (67%)	88/145 (61%)	-6%
Credible/appropriate	132/146 (94%)	142/145 (98%)	+4%
Overall Accuracy			
Corrections	44 (95% of issues)	19 (44% of issues)	-51%
Uncorrected error(s)	8 (17% of issues)	1 (2% of issues)	-15%
Page 1 Design			
Dominant art/photo	37/46 (80%)	40/43 (93%)	+13%
Secondary art/photo	39/46 (84%)	41/43 (95%)	+11%
White space	12/46 (26%)	19/43 (44%)	+18%
Color	33/46 (72%)	43/43 (100%)	+18%
Headlines	35/46 (76%)	38/43 (88%)	+12%
Promo	27/46 (59%)	43/43 (100%)	+41%
Organization	35/46 (76%)	40/43 (93%)	+17%
Breakouts	18/46 (39%)	20/43 (47%)	+8%
Innovation	21/46 (46%)	19/43 (44%)	-2%
Design Total	248/414 (60%; 5.39 ave.)	303/387 (78%; 7.04 ave.)	+18%

Discussion

Leads – The moderate increase from fall semester 2007 to spring semester 2008 in the number of news leads meeting the quality standards (+12%) we defined is an

encouraging result. One reason for the increase is likely the retention of staff from fall semester into spring semester. The quality of their writing tended to improve with experience and feedback from editors. A second reason for the increase could be the critiques of each issue, which focused a great deal on news leads.

Page 1 Sourcing – While there was a slight increase from fall semester to spring semester in the percentage of stories that included three or more sources (+8%, from 55% to 63% of stories), the overall improvement is inadequate. In our view, the percentage of stories including three or more sources should have reached 100% by the end of fall semester and should have reached that level early in spring semester, given the carryover of staff from one semester to the next. Again, one reason for the limited improvement is likely an unintentional de-emphasis of this measure in critiques of each issue. However, student fatigue around break times may also have pulled the percentages down. The decrease in source type diversity is troubling. We must pay special attention to this issue in the coming school year. The near-perfect score for credible and appropriate sourcing is encouraging and should be maintained in the future.

Overall Accuracy – The total number of corrections dropped significantly – from 95% of issues to 44% of issues, a decline of 51 percentage points – from fall to spring. The number of front-page errors that went uncorrected for an issue or more also decreased dramatically. One reason for this decline is the inclusion in fall semester of the Back-to-School issue, which has an entirely different editing and reporting staff, and five section fronts, all of which were counted in our analysis. This issue accounted for five errors in fall semester. It is important to note that we do not actually consider it desirable to obtain a “perfect” score of zero in the category of corrections. Better newspapers tend to run more corrections, not fewer. The best thinkers in journalism, in fact, believe that correcting errors builds credibility. The New York Times, for instance, runs corrections prominently on page 2 of each day’s paper. Such larger and/or progressive newspapers employ ombudspersons or “public” editors whose jobs include setting the record straight. That results in more errors detected and, therefore, corrected. Not all corrections are the result of staff error. In fact, we feel strongly that we want students to feel compelled to immediately correct errors without fear of penalty. While errors that result from incompetence, dishonesty or recklessness must be addressed as a serious personnel issue by the editing staff, most errors are the result of human error (on the part of sources, as well as staff) and routine misunderstandings. The latter will always be present over the course of a semester. Our goal should be to minimize the number and severity of corrections, but we are not likely to eliminate them entirely.

Page 1 Design – The most impressive improvements were in the area of design. The largest percentage change over the academic year was in the use of promos, or teasers, at the top of each front page (+41%). The second-greatest increases (+18%, respectively) were in the use of white space and color. Next was the appropriate organization of content through packaging and story placement (+17%). Also

showing great improvement were consistent use of dominant art (+13%), secondary art (+11%), and concise and creative headlines (+12%). The overall design score increased 18 percentage points, from an average of 5.39 to an average of 7.04. A key reason for these dramatic improvements is increased training via three design sessions conducted by Merv Hendricks (one in fall, one in spring) and by Greg Bilbrey, a visiting editor from the Robinson (Ill.) Daily News.

The spring semester editor, Sara Kuhlman, also deserves a great deal of credit for embracing design as her forte. Finally, the critiques of each issue focused heavily on design issues, which may have played a role, as well.

One concern for the new academic year is training the new staff in design, as Sara almost single-handedly designed page 1 this spring. Therefore, we must prepare for newcomers to rotate into the page 1 design/layout position while maintaining design quality.

Another concern is the lack of innovation in design (-2%). While the front page consistently met the design standards set, there was a reluctance to innovate and to take design risks that make the page interesting and surprising. We must encourage such innovation.

While the percentages for use of white space and breakouts increased from fall semester to spring semester – each increasing 18 points, respectively – their percentages of use lagged by more than half behind other design factors. Even in spring semester, white space was used effectively in only 44% of page 1 designs, and breakouts in only 47% of page 1 designs.

Conclusion

We are pleased with the improvement in writing, sourcing, accuracy, and design in the Indiana Statesman over the 2007-2008 academic year. The year was marked by an increase in the overall size of the student staff, as well as retention of experienced staff members.

In general, the patterns that emerged from examining the semesters' issues show that student burnout is a factor in performance, as story quality and design quality decrease, and errors increase toward the end of each semester. What this signals to us, the advising staff, is our need to mitigate burnout through performance incentives and close contact with students during these times. Further, we need to make expectations clear, as well as provide a measure of real-time performance to motivate the news staff to achieve goals.

The retention of several young and talented staff members bodes well for the new academic year. However, we should also provide more training opportunities and greater clarity in setting performance goals.

Our intent is to conduct the same or similar quantitative analysis/assessment of Indiana Statesman editorial content for both semesters of the 2008-09 academic

year. That process will provide us comparative data vis a vis the 2007-08 data reported here. It will also allow us to immediately spot improvements and deficiencies – to applaud and reinforce the former and to intercede with feedback and training when the latter are observed. Our goal is to keep a running tally of this data and incorporate it into the routine critiques of each issue, so that the student staff may better set and reach performance goals in a timely manner.