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Getting Started

A Letter to the New Editor

by Beth Sample

So! You wandered into a Mensa meeting the other night just as the topic of discussion was the resignation of your local editor. And somebody said, “Hey, you. . . .” And you found yourself coming home that night with a strange cardboard box filled with blue pencils, pads of quadrille paper, a glue pot, a copy of the *Editor’s Handbook*, a stack of old exchange newsletters, and one wooden ruler. Congratulations! You say you have never done anything like this before in your life? You know next to nothing about producing a newsletter, and less about national Mensa? You say you are taking on this task only temporarily, until a permanent editor can be found? Well, hang in there. Most of us started out in exactly the same way. But many of us found the job so much to our liking that we have stayed at it for many years. For however long you remain editor, you are in for a large dose of frustration, a great deal of hard work, and lots of pleasure.

All right, where do you begin? You might start by looking through the “exchange” newsletters—those put out by other chapters. They are around your local group somewhere, if you don’t already have them. Find a few that are similar in format to what you have in mind and set them aside for reference. If by chance your predecessor did not participate in the exchange program*, read the part of Chapter 7 that explains it and write to Rita Levine (289 Boulevard, Mountain Lakes,

* This is now the subscription program and is administered through the national office.

NJ 07046) for the necessary forms. How to pick which newsletters you want is a problem if you have not seen any. Rita will send you a list of current editors. You can write to them for a sample copy. Most editors will be happy to comply. If it appears that another newsletter will add something to your ability to put out a better newsletter for your group, add your name to its subscription list.

Now read through the *Editor's Handbook*. It is filled with the comments of many, many editors with varying amounts of experience.

If one or more ex-editors are running around loose in your local group, collar one to help you through the first few months. You might be well advised to stick with your ex-editor's format for the time being, and imitate before you innovate. If you are starting up a newsletter where there was none before, you have a bigger problem. But take heart! See the section entitled "Help" at the end of this chapter. And don't hesitate to write to some of your 100 or so fellow editors. Most of them would be glad to help.

As editor of a local newsletter, you should know something about how Mensa operates, not only locally but also nationally and even internationally. This is covered in more detail in Chapter 10, but we will run in a bit of information here.

American Mensa maintains a small but efficient paid staff in New York to recruit members and to help local groups with problems.* Rita Levine is Local Groups Secretary. She maintains lists of editors, sends you your mailing labels, oversees the exchange program, and takes care of about a thousand other duties. As soon as she hears of your exaltation to local editor (your local secretary should notify her), she will put you on the *InterLoc* mailing list, which will keep you up on Mensa business and politics. (*InterLoc* is also described in Chapter 10.) Rita won't tell you how to put out a newsletter, but she can help with a lot of problems you may have, or at least guide you to someone who can help.

Other questions you might have about the business side of Mensa should go to Margot Seitelman (1701 W. Third St., Suite 1-R, Brooklyn, NY 11223). Margot is Executive Director of American Mensa and takes care of so many things that it is impossible to list them all. What she doesn't handle, she will refer to the proper person, or she'll send you in the right direction.

Then there are the elected and appointed national officers—the American Mensa Committee, or AMC. You may take your concerns to any of them. Certainly you should know the AMC-appointed Publications Officer.** Again, he/she will not tell you how to put out a newsletter but will attempt to help you with problems you might encounter along the way. And if a situation arises that you think should be brought to the attention of the AMC, write to the Publications Officer and ask that it be brought up at the next meeting.

We strongly recommend that you try any of the above avenues, plus writing to your Regional Vice Chairperson, or any other national officer, *before* you decide to stomp Mensa or the AMC in a scathing editorial for something that may be based on a misunderstanding. At least get the facts before you stomp.

Of each issue you publish, about 40 copies are sent to members of the AMC, national Mensa staff, and other national and international Mensa people. Their labels are provided along with your local membership labels. This helps tie Mensa together and allows those who are interested to know of your problems and of your accomplishments. Do not doubt that these copies are read; they are. This, however, does

* All content of a factual nature in this section is subject to verification. For references to the late Margot Seitelman (Executive Director), the late Rita Levine (Local Groups Secretary), and the staff in New York, substitute "the national office."

** Now Communications Officer.

not imply an attempt at censorship by AMC, which does not concern itself with setting editorial policy for local publications. The autonomy of the local editor is almost sacrosanct. It is considered wise to avoid libel, but even scatology appears now and then without too much criticism, depending more on the tastes of the local group than on the AMC.

Finally, all seriousness aside, please do not feel like you are out there all alone, unloved and unappreciated. We all share your frustrations each month, but most of us have found that the fun outweighs the headaches. Whether you put out a one-page calendar or a multi-page magazine, we hope you will enjoy it. Here are just a few more hints we would like to add, the validity of which you will soon discover:

- Keep the cat off the desk while you are pasting up.
- Avoid nose prints on the copy.
- Save many hours by typing it right the first time.
- Do NOT set your coffee, beer, wine, or bourbon down ANYWHERE NEAR your paste-up.
- Check your dictionary for all words of more than two syllables.
- Spell the name of your locsec right (they appreciate things like that).
- Remember the words of the old Greek (Turkish? Druidic? Samurai?) philosopher, "One man's schtick is another man's apathy"—this will get you through many a long night as you mumble, "Why doesn't someone else . . ."

[EDITOR'S NOTE: *The above article was originally published under the byline Beth Pos.*]

Orientation

Being Real

From the moment you first hear yourself murmuring, "Well, okay—at least for a while," you are a *real* editor. Think of yourself as one. Learn what you need to know in order to be a good one. You are in charge of a *real* publication. In the eyes of the law it would be regarded as such, if the law were ever at issue.

If you ever have doubts that you are a real editor, don't betray them. For instance, if a prospective contributor writes you a formal query and dutifully encloses an SASE, just as though you were a pro, don't treat it as the funniest thing that ever happened to you. Make a courteous, businesslike reply. In this as in so many other things, people tend to take you at your own estimation of yourself. You will encounter much advice about the danger of taking yourself and your job too seriously; heed it. But do not err on the opposite side by failing to view your role and your responsibilities with a healthy measure of respect.

Functions of the Newsletter

Your newsletter will serve both official and nonofficial functions. It has a part to play in the administration of the group's business, and it may occasionally be used to transmit information of national or international concern. Its official functions, in many cases mandated by the group's bylaws, may call for publication of such things as election materials and notices of business meetings. (See Chapter 3 for more on content.)

The newsletter is *not*, however, the official spokesman for Mensa at any level. No one speaks for Mensa. Mensa has no opinions and does not take collective stands on

issues. To the editor this means two things: on the one hand, it is important to avoid the appearance of speaking on Mensa's behalf or putting forward any view as though it were that of the organization; on the other, any member, including the editor, is entitled to voice personal opinions. An editor is at liberty to editorialize, whether or not the topic is Mensa-related. Use caution, therefore, in how you express yourself, so that your remarks cannot be misconstrued as representing organizational policy; but do not be intimidated into supposing that because you are a Mensa editor you must keep your thoughts to yourself.

Most of the copy in your newsletter will probably be included for nonofficial reasons, in the sense that it does not serve business-related purposes such as those mentioned above. This does not mean that it is any less important. Harper Fowley says: "The purpose of any Mensa publication should be to promote the organization—that is, to improve its image, to announce and promote its activities, and to encourage members to maintain their membership."

The calendar of activities, letters and articles from readers, and most of the other material seen in local group newsletters—and virtually all SIG newsletter material—contribute or should contribute to the nonadministrative purposes that are nevertheless at the heart of Mensa.

Making a Schedule

What gives your newsletter its time value is the calendar of events. Members have to receive it far enough in advance of scheduled activities to make plans to attend if they wish. Unless the newsletter meets this requirement consistently, the entire exercise becomes pointless. Norm Pos does not overstate the case when he says: "Too many editors are not aware that the FIRST responsibility is to get a calendar of local coming events to the local readership ON TIME. If this function is not fulfilled by the local newsletter, then the only applicable word is *derelict*, no matter how pretty, pretentious, bulky, or filled with astounding philosophy the newsletter is." Certain official functions, such as balloting, usually have prescribed timetables. While it may not actually be the editor's duty to do such things as initiating the election process early enough to meet the publication schedule, you would be wise to inform yourself of your obligations under the bylaws of your group.

The target at which you are aiming is *delivery date*. Do not imagine that timely arrival of newsletters in members' homes can occur without planning.

To calculate your deadline and the checkpoints you must meet along the way, you should work backwards from a fixed point. Even if your newsletter is a one-person operation and you do not need to coordinate with a calendar editor, staff assistants, or mailing crew, you must figure when you have to go to press in order to allow adequate time for delivery. Here are the elements of your schedule, listed chronologically:

1. Deadline
2. Copy preparation
3. Paste-up*
4. Printing
5. Assembly
6. Mailing

* Think of this as page make-up if you are using a computer.

To aid you in calculating backwards from the period covered by the activities calendar, and thus from the target delivery date, the six steps are discussed below in reverse time sequence. Use this as a guide for estimating your lead time from deadline to mailing. (The mechanical aspects of these tasks are explained in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.) Your own experience will soon modify your schedule according to your particular needs and circumstances.

Calendar

Typically the calendar in a monthly publication covers the month of issue (the month named on the cover). It is an excellent idea to extend the calendar into the beginning of the following month as insurance against late deliveries. What this means, though, is that activities must be planned long in advance—a feat that is not always possible. Some groups, especially the larger ones with numerous activities, set an early deadline for calendar entries to give the calendar editor time to prepare copy by the editor's closing date. Others set the calendar deadline as late into the production schedule as possible in order to minimize lead time.

6. Mailing*

Once you know when you want the newsletter to arrive in the members' homes, you need to allow time for the postal people to render their service. This will depend on your delivery method:

- first class—up to a week;
- second and third class—two to three weeks.

Second- and third-class mail are subject to different postal regulations from first class. Each station through which a bundle passes has a set period of time in which to process the bundle and move it out. Depending on the number of stops it makes en route, then, the mail can be delayed for a considerable time. You can probably get away with a ten-day allowance for delivery if you are serving a geographic area that is not too large and if you have covered the first week or so of your calendar by publication in the previous month's issue.

5. Assembly

Familiarly tagged “fold, staple, and mutilate,” this step can usually be accomplished in an evening. The variables are the size of the mailing and the number of helpers you can get together. Advance notice of the assembly and mailing date—which depends on your careful scheduling—increases your chances of securing a full crew.

4. Printing

This is not a matter of speculation. Find out what your alternatives are. A quick-copy shop may give you same-day or overnight service at a per-copy price—a reasonable option if your quantity is not large enough for good photo-offset rates—and if you are lucky you may not have to sacrifice copy quality for speed. Large quantities, sizeable issues, reproduction methods that require drying time between runs of back-to-back pages, and additional services such as collating and stapling will increase your printing time.

* Out-of-date information in this section still provides a useful basis of calculation; but verify all factual content.

3. Paste-Up*

Experience will tell you how long you need for this. The number of pages to the issue, the complexity of your layout, and your mastery of the mechanics are the determining factors. For your first issue, better allow an hour per page, add in a half hour for every heading you plan to create with press-type, another hour for every piece of copy you think you are going to type up once you see how much room you have left, and a couple of hours for contingencies; then double it. Add extra for special touches such as formatting text around inset art. An old hand can probably paste up a twelve-page issue (that's three sheets, two finished pages to a side, printed both sides) with a relatively straightforward layout in about six hours.

2. Copy Preparation**

The chief factor here is whether you plan to retype all your copy or print as much as you can the way you receive it. Bear in mind that you are pretty much committed to an all-or-nothing policy if you don't plan on retyping. You also forfeit a great deal in appearance when you have a mixture of type styles and copy widths. Many editors do feel that the extra investment of time is worth it for the sake of the quality of the finished product and the option of editing the copy.

If you make your copy decisions as material comes in and edit as you retype, actual editing time can be kept to a minimum.

1. Deadline

Add a few days' margin ahead of what you actually feel you need to allow for copy preparation. Set your deadline, announce it prominently, and stick to it.

Sample Schedule

Issue date: October

Calendar: Last week of September through first week of November

Delivery date: On or before October 1

Mailing date: September 16th (second class)

Assembly date: September 15th

Printing: September 14th and 15th (800 copies, 28 pages—7 sheets, 2 sides, folded in half, booklet-style)

Paste-up: September 12th and 13th

Copy preparation: September 5th through 12th (a few hours per evening)

Contingencies: 4 days

Deadline: September 1

This schedule cuts it close. More time for paste-up and more allowance for delivery would probably be wise. A schedule such as this, however, does work and allows the practiced editor adequate time for extras such as locating appropriate art work, writing squibs to fit, checking on the accuracy of directions to meeting locations, and working with writers over copy that poses some problems. It also affords a few evenings off between deadline and printing. A four-page issue (one sheet, two sides, folded in half), mailed first class, could probably be turned around with one week between deadline and delivery.

* New estimates for page make-up using software tools should replace the rules of thumb for the archaic processes listed here.

** Old editors, pause here and light a stick of incense to the god of word processing.

In the interest of timeliness, a conscientious editor will want to make lead time as short as possible while still allowing sufficient time for careful work.

Enforcing Deadlines

“Not allowing enough time for mailing” was Orville Brandes’s response when asked her worst mistake as a beginner. Mary Jane Stevens writes:

“You will go batty if you let people take advantage of you about deadlines. *LAMENT*, for example, has a number of regular features from columnists, plus SIG notices and about four pages of calendar items. The calendar section is put together and typed camera-ready by an assistant editor, who then sends it to the *LAMENT* editor in time for paste-up. The calendar deadline is of course earlier than the overall deadline. Every month, we get last-minute calls from people who want to change something, and some people are repeat offenders. We have adopted a policy of refusing to change *anything* after the announced deadline, and the *LAMENT* editor refuses to insert or change anything for people who missed the earlier calendar deadline. People didn’t get as mad as we expected, and a strict adherence to this policy has made it possible to get the magazine out on time despite the vagaries of second class mailing.

“Of course there are going to be times when you do consent to change something. But don’t tell anyone, and swear the late contributor to silence!”

To make a similar point, Norman Pos reminds us of how the local group newsletters began:

“Back in the dim dark ages, local newsletters were few. As a matter of course, local calendars of events were published in the national *Bulletin* (whatever its name was back then). This process seems incredible from today’s viewpoint, but it made some sort of sense back then.

“Of course, as potatoes are to peel, holes are to dig, dishes are to do, and aphids are to spray, the *Bulletin* was for coming out late. Consequently, the local groups started putting out their own local calendars of coming events. These early examples of local initiative overcame the storms of dispute in time, became established, and increased in number. Gradually, they expanded in ambition to include literary material in addition to the calendar. And through the efforts of Sander Rubin and others, the subsidy program was developed and grew.”

Norm’s advice: “Try to keep to a firm and regular publication schedule. Don’t hold back on publishing your newsletter because of tardy contributors or art-work time.”

Members are entitled to complain if their newsletters arrive consistently late for the month’s calendar of events. But even if delivery is ahead of activity dates, they may consider a newsletter “late” that appears well into the month named on the cover. Given the caprices of the postal system, you may find this to be a chronic problem. There is an easy solution: advance the cover date. You can accomplish this by producing one “combined” issue—say, January/February—and issuing it on the normal January publication date. Keep to your usual schedule, and the “March” issue will thus come out when the “February” issue would have. Presto! With but a little sleight of hand, you are “early” from then on. This stratagem also helps in securing advance program dates for the calendar. And once your newsletter has an established reputation for timeliness and regularity, you will have more leverage when it comes to enforcing your deadlines.

Basic Elements

There are three elements so fundamental to the structure of your newsletter that you should not consider them optional. The first of these is the name plate; the second is the masthead; and the third, for lack of more suitable terminology, we may call the publications statement.

Name Plate

The name plate (Fig. 2-1) normally appears on the cover of the publication. It consists of the title of the publication; the date is usually nearby, often along with the volume and issue numbers. Beth Sample says:

“It is recommended that each issue of your newsletter carry a volume number and an issue number. Simply saying ‘March 1983’ is not sufficient. Many newsletters come out a month early, and many come out a month or more late. The volume-and-issue-number system is superior for reference purposes and also aids the national Mensa staff in such matters as subsidy bookkeeping.”



Figure 2-1. Name plate

For second class mail, a consecutive issue number is required and may be shown on the cover.

The *Domestic Mail Manual* (DMM) states this requirement with respect to the name plate (Section 461):

“The name of the publication must be shown on the front or cover page in a position and in a style and size of type that makes it clearly distinguishable from the name of the publisher or other items on the front.”*

Many publications adopt a logo-style name plate that is as recognizable as the title itself. Think of the cover of any popular commercial magazine and you will probably picture its familiar name plate. Some newsletters have followed this example with attractively designed permanent name plates that enhance the identity of both the publication and the group.

Do not confuse the name plate with the masthead.

* All postal regulations are subject to verification; 1982 rules may no longer apply.

Masthead

Harper's Dictionary of Contemporary English Usage states:

The name of a newspaper as printed in large type across the top of its front page is not the paper's *masthead*, as many believe. The true *masthead*, which usually appears on the editorial page of a paper, gives basic information about the publication: its title, names of the proprietor and top officials, and whatever other data the publisher decides to include.

The top of the front page, where the name of the paper is printed, is known simply as the "name plate" or "the flag."

Your masthead (Fig. 2-2) should show, at the very least, your name and address and your title as editor. More than a few local newsletters have been guilty of lapses in this respect. It is not only silly but frustrating to read items that urge "send me" or invite "call me" without any hint of who "me" might be, while the nameless writer frets over lack of response. It is, furthermore, rather rude to send your readers what amounts to anonymous mail.



Figure 2-2. Masthead

Other appropriate content for the masthead would be the names and addresses and/or telephone numbers of the publisher or publishing group and of staff members such as assistant editor and circulation manager. The masthead may be combined with a directory of local group officers, SIG coordinators, and the like, or it may be separate, but there is no excuse for its omission.

Publications Statement

In addition to a masthead, you should present certain descriptive information about the newsletter and perhaps also about the group it serves. You may want to include any or all of the following (see Fig. 2-3):

- copyright statement (see Chapter 3 for information about copyrighting your newsletter)
- local group or SIG name

- standard Mensa description and disclaimer such as the one that appears on the back cover of every *Bulletin**
- reprint policy statement
- information for contributors
- editorial disclaimer

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Figure 2-3. Publications statement

The purpose of the statement is to supply readers and potential contributors with pertinent information about the publication. Any assumption that the information is otherwise obvious or self-explanatory is likely to be in error.

Consult Section 462 of the DMM, “Identification Statements in Copies,” for the required content of this portion of second class mailings.** (Other postal regulations are discussed in Chapter 5.)

Help

You don’t have to do it alone. All sorts of help are available, from the willing volunteer who enjoys collating to the officers of the national organization, who have a greater interest than you might suppose in the smooth workings of your group and its publication. Do not hesitate to ask for help whenever you feel the need. Here are some of the people you can call upon.

Local

Invite volunteers or solicit appointees in your local group for as many staff and crew members as you think you will need. Your local secretary may be able to help you fill some positions. Remember, too, that many people who would never come forward and volunteer will respond to a direct request—and maybe even appreciate being needed.

* Now found on page 2; but the following statement no longer appears: “Mensa itself holds no opinions, champions no causes, and is not affiliated in any way with any other organization.”

** Subject to verification.

Staff positions:

- assistant editor
- production manager
- calendar editor
- business manager
- circulation manager
- art director

Crew:

- paste-up/production
- assembly

Technical, advisory:

- local officers, especially publications officer, if any
- group member with publications expertise or experience

Regional

Your Regional Vice Chairman is an officer of AMC whose special concern is the local groups in your region. He or she may help you with information, advice, referral to other national officers, and in some cases, on a discretionary basis, newsletter support funds.* (RVCs' funds are not available to SIGs.)

National

Any of the officers of AMC will try to assist you if called upon. One of the special responsibilities of the AMC Publications Officer is to assist local group editors. National Mensa staff in Margot Seitelman's and Rita Levine's offices are also resources for the editor. Chapter 10 more fully explains the functions of officers and staff and the editor's relationship to them.

Lya Korda, Design Consultant to AMC, offers her services to editors upon request, supplying them with special art work and answering questions that pertain to graphics and design. Her address is listed under "Special Appointments" in the *Bulletin's* semiannual Directory.

In 1981, Publications Officer Susan Wantland announced the formation of an advisory panel whose services are available to editors upon request. This anonymous group of professionally qualified editorial and graphics people will prepare detailed critiques of newsletters, with suggestions for improvement, for editors who submit four copies of a single issue of their newsletter to the Publications Officer along with their request for review.

Some editors who have availed themselves of this option have shown marked improvement in their publications as a result. The continuance of this program will be a matter of choice for future Publications Officers; editors' interest will no doubt be a factor.

* May no longer be true; subject to verification.

