



**(U) Write Right: Breaking an Old Reporter's Heart**

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*(U) This month's Write Right column has a special guest columnist,*  
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(U) As the SIGINT Reporting (RPTG) Curriculum Manager and the Lead Instructor for RPTG 3222 (SIGINT Analysis, and Report Writing), I get to know many of NSA's young reporters. In talking with them, I have learned something that is breaking my heart. Many of them are telling me that they hope they never have to do another reporting tour. They say they *hate* reporting.

(U) If it were only one or two folks, I could just attribute it to whininess or oversensitivity. Unfortunately, it is more than just a few. When I ask them why, almost to a person I get this answer: their editor.

(U) The last thing I want to do is attack editors (especially since they probably write well and will make time to attack me back!). I understand the stresses that go with the job: long hours, many reports to be written and not enough reporters to write them. But addressing this issue should benefit both editors and writers, and thus the mission.

(U) **Editors who inspire complaints fall into two groups.** The first is the one who provides **no feedback at all.** The reporter has no idea what they did right or wrong. The editor corrects any errors, even doing some rewriting, and sends it on its way. I don't know if such editors don't know how to talk to and mentor reporters or if the operational "need for speed" means the reporter gets forgotten in the process.

(U) Whatever the reason, this is not helping young reporters, who, I have learned, crave feedback. They do not get offended when you correct them as long as you do it in a constructive manner. They want human interaction; tell them something. My first reporting trainer would hand back my reports with nothing written on them and say, "I know you can do better." This was very frustrating, because I didn't know where the improvement was needed. Did I get anything right? What specifically did I do wrong? How was I to know?

(U) The other type of problem editor is the one who just hands back a report bleeding red ink and **never offers any encouragement.** This editor may talk about what was wrong, but once again, the reporter has no idea what they did right. In class I like to provide what is called "optimistic feedback." Does that mean I only blow sunshine at students? Nope. I am more than happy to point out what they do wrong, but I also put their errors into context and tell them what they are doing right. We must provide some encouragement if we want them to be the future and replace us someday.



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(U) Solving the problem requires us to look at what qualifies someone to be an editor. Is being a good reporter enough? If getting a well-written and accurate report out in a timely manner is the only goal, it may or may not. If we expect them to be mentors, and to raise the standards of their workcenter's reports, it most definitely isn't. As one good editor says, "the goal should be to help them to write reports that don't need editing." How much training do we give folks specifically in editing, which includes how to provide feedback? Thankfully, the Reporting Board is working on a **much-needed senior reporter's class** which will focus heavily on editing.

(U) This is only half the solution, however; the other half is **buy-in from management**, from top to bottom. Such experts, whether you call them editors or senior reporters, will be ineffective despite their job title and qualifications if supervisors and managers do not recognize their expertise, authority and contributions to the mission.

(U) How many reporters earned their positions as editors, dedicated themselves to the position, and then were told during their promotion feedback, "sorry, you are *just* a reporter"? Some editors even tell us that the feedback they get consists of "you need to write more reports, not *just* edit." This mind-set trivializes what they do and certainly doesn't inspire anyone to want or keep the position. Not rewarding the star editors ultimately affects the training and feedback our young reporters receive. Worse, the [bean-counting mentality](#) represents a detriment to the mission in more ways than one. Something to think about.

(U) Editors should groom the reporters of the future, not send them running from the field. In the words of Benjamin Disraeli, "*The greatest good you can do for another is not just to show your riches, but to reveal to him his own.*" Do this, and maybe we can develop a generation of folks who love reporting.

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(U//FOUO) Do you agree with the author's views? Do you have a solution to propose? Please post your comments on the [SID today blog](#).

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