

Nancy Gupton

Online Copy Editor for *National Geographic Magazine*

Q: What do you do for the magazine?

I've worked there for 10 years. National Geographic magazine has many different divisions. The magazine is one and then my division is digital media. Included in that is the magazines and the specific Web site ngm.com. We also have a broader NationalGeographic.com that includes our television channels, the kid's site, our mission site. It's not just the site. We have different teams that oversee different areas.

Q: How did you come to work for *National Geographic*?

A: It's kind of a cheesy story. I had always wanted to work here. Like a lot of people, I grew up with the magazine. The sorts of content that the magazine deals with were always something I was interested in. I was working at CNN in Atlanta as the first over-night employee for CNN.com. There was a time when the Web site was just manned during the day. I decided to just pick up and move to Washington, D.C. I managed to find a contact that knew someone here and I started freelancing copy editing for them. Then I got a full-time job!

Q: What drew you to digital journalism?

A: I fell into it with the CNN job. Before that I had been in print. I worked for newspapers and at a magazine for a short period in Atlanta. I sort of fell into the CNN thing and took to it. I like the immediacy of the Web. You don't have to work days or months to see your work produced. It's just a more dynamic environment. It suits news.

Q: How has the internet revolutionized traditional copy editing?

A: I don't think it has. I think copy editing is a very basic skill. It makes things sound and read correctly. I don't think it's that much different on the Web. Some sites have looser standards but we don't. I personally don't think there should be. Grammar is grammar. Writing for the Web is different so I guess you could say copy editing for the Web is a little different because you're bending to that style a little more.

Q: Are there any downsides?

A: No. The simple fact that you can change things quickly counteracts any problems. You can't do that with print. Once it's published, it's out there.

Q: What is the hardest part of your job?

A: The hardest part is that we have more work than we can handle. When working on the Web, things happen so quickly, which means a lot of content all of the time. We're not necessarily staffed on the copy editing side to handle it so keeping up with the flow is hard.

Q: What are your copy editing pet peeves?

A: Yes. I have many pet peeves. I think all editors do. I honestly have so many. The thing I see missed most are misplaced modifiers and conjunctive clauses in the wrong places. Oh, and “between you and I” – that’s my biggest pet peeve. And “where we’re at.”

Q: Were you a grammar geek growing up?

A: I wasn’t necessarily a grammar geek but I was always drawn toward words. Language was always important to me. I was a huge reader growing up. I started my own little neighborhood newspaper when I was six or seven. It was called *The Monster Monthly* but it came out weekly. It was about monster sightings around my town and I made them all up. It wasn’t clear to me that I was making it up but it had to be interesting. My ethics were questionable but the stories were good. I photocopied them at my dad’s work and sold them for a quarter at my brother’s Little League games.

Q: What’s been the most memorable moment of your career so far?

A: When I was at CNN and the Columbine shootings happened. That was pretty intense because we had live feeds coming in to the newsroom. We were seeing bad stuff as it happened. We were, on average, getting our updates every 3 minutes. It was an extremely fast-paced, crazy time. No body knew what was going on. It was one of the first tragedies like that that was so well-covered. It was unprecedented and we were flying by the seat of our pants.

Q: How do you think that experience shaped your reaction to further national situations, such as 9/11?

A: I don’t work in news anymore. The Web site I work on doesn’t really address those kinds of things. We might change our programming for the day in reaction to these situations. For example, the Haiti earthquake. If that happened on a day when we had a story up about something trivial in Haiti in that region, we would have taken that down. That’s the kind of way we react to those situations. In situations like that, you hone your editing skills of turning stuff around quickly and learning how to work in that environment where you have only minutes rather than hours.

Q: Do you prefer a fast-paced news environment or a leisurely magazine environment?

A: I like them both equally. I work better under shorter, quicker deadlines. But I enjoy the content that I’m working on now more than I do news content. I’ve paid my dues in news and I am enjoying my work now. I think I would prefer it if I had an hour to do something. Sometimes I have a month to do something and I don’t know if I like that schedule better.

Q: Have you ever prevented a major mistake from being printed that would have cost a reporter their job or ruined the publication’s reputation?

A: I can’t remember any one major incident. But that’s your job so you do that potentially several times a day.

Q: What makes an outstanding copy editor?

A: An extreme attention to detail. You have to have an eye for it. If you're not naturally drawn to that, you're not going to be a good copy editor. I think you need to read a lot. You need to be able to spot things. You can't hone your skills if you don't read publications that are well-edited.

Q: What are the best-edited publications out there?

A: In print, *The New Yorker*. Having worked here at *National Geographic*, I've seen first-hand the kind of work that goes into the magazine. They've got some of the best editors in the world working for them. They've got a dedicated staff of fact-checkers that process every little thing that goes into the magazine. Online, I like Salon.com. That's a good question, though. I don't really pay much attention to the editing of online Web sites.

Q: What are your favorite field-related books?

A: In terms of reference books, the one I use the most is *The New York Public Library Desk Reference*. My favorite reference book is *Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia*.

Q: Why is clean, grammatically-sound text a keystone to a publication?

A: Because if you as a reader can't trust the publications, or if you find errors, you're going to turn away. You shouldn't be able to notice grammar. If you notice it, that's bad. It's a problem.

Q: What advice would you give to a young adult aspiring to work in major publications, such as *National Geographic*?

A: Definitely work experience. Interning at a place that's similar and really getting your hands dirty: Being familiar with that particular publication and their style. Being a well-read person will take you far. Read newspapers, magazines, books, Web sites... I don't think you can be a good editor without being immersed in it at all times. To be a good editor at any kind of news publication, you have to have a good grasp on current events and pop culture. The way to get that is to read.