

Judge Comments - JEA Nebraska 2018

Advertising: Winning entries were professional and pleasing to look at. Reproduction quality makes a difference. Be sure you make it clear WHAT is being advertised. Font choice and photo selection make a difference, as well as graphics and color choices. Since all of these were aimed at student audience, that should be clear focus.

Column Writing: Columns come in assorted flavors (political, entertainment, advice, sports, observational, humor, and so many more), but the best columns share a few things. First, the best columns depend upon a unique, insightful point of view from the author, and rarely make use of the same tone as on AP essay. Second, skillful use of language is fun in and of itself, but also persuasive (and all columns ultimately are persuasive, even if the argument is simply to make you laugh). Third, the best columns tend to move from specific observations ("Oprah said x at the Golden Globes") and move to more general arguments, designed to appeal to readers ("America is starved for powerful, hopeful voices, voices which can summon us all to work for a better future"). In other words, writing a column is not for the faint of heart.

A significant percentage of entries were basically news-feature stories written in first person. They were often great topics, but would have been better if presented as in-depth packages. Another chunk of entries spent so much time on history or news background that few readers would stick around for the paragraphs where the writer opened up about an emotional issue. Don't get me wrong: a strong column needs a "news peg" of some sort, and the top five entries all had one. They also had some passion, assumed some risk, took some provocative stances. One included personal experience (as a young woman) with a Boy Scout summer camp, while arguing that worrying about gender and scouting may be missing the point. Another was a visceral reaction to the Las Vegas shooting and didn't give a damn about logical nuance. Another included personal anecdotes of the writer, having spent a night with some homeless people. A top entry brought the suffering of Puerto Rico to Nebraska, through the eyes of a Puerto Rican girl living in the heartland. And the fifth top winner took readers to detention hall, and made a number of points regarding the ineffectiveness of this punishment.

There are some who advise students to stick to the "news." There are some who are uncomfortable with seeing raw emotion and vulnerability on the pages of our school publications. But I celebrate the students who take a chance, share a bit of themselves, and push the envelope (just a little, anyway).

Editorial Cartooning: Entries with an original idea stood out. There were several topics that were covered by multiple schools. Top entries combined a clever, original idea with creative artistic skills. This category was very competitive this year. I was very impressed with the students ideas and abilities.

Editorial Writing: Superiors/excellents:

—unique topics —thorough research —balanced perspective (acknowledges both sides of issue)

No Awards:

—overdone topic; lots of editorials that focused on similar topics and they all sounded the same
—overtly biased opinions with little-to-no acknowledgment of other side's stance
—lackluster in one way or another: style, word choice, perspective

Entertainment Review Writing: Superiors used specific and qualified descriptions; they were not afraid of negative comments but justified their view with concrete examples; the best reviews met the needs of their audience - they convinced me whether or not to spend my money or my time. I noticed the stronger writers showed a depth of knowledge about their subject. For example, they were able to cite other movies, novels, music, etc. in order to draw comparisons to what they were reviewing. I liked that. They included lots of specific details, including some direct quotations from the work or artist. These reviews also showed a strong and unique voice. They all sounded like they were written by different, distinct people with different, distinct opinions. The topics, in addition, were very relevant to a high school audience.

Newspaper Feature Writing:

SUPERIOR: Superior feature stories stood out in that writers tackled relevant topics, and in clear and creative narrative fed target audiences something interesting that students didn't know or should know about their school or classmates. They're the kind of stories that, if read in 10 or 20 years, would take students back on a vivid voyage to what it was like to be a high school kid in 2017-2018. For example:

- One (Elkhorn) story featured a pair of budding filmmaker students whose work was a sign of the times and popular culture. The duo's ups and downs made for a colorful yarn about classmates trying to break into a modern day competitive career field.
- A (Papillion-La Vista High) story described the oddity and attraction to a new Dungeons and Dragons student club (and its "make-believe creatures" and "rattling dice").
- A (Papillion-La Vista High) piece quoted multiple experts and students in the effort to link technology use and and mental health.

Superiors all quoted (and built stories upon) more than one source. Writers exercised good use and placement of direct quotes that offered a flavor for someone's unique personality. For example:

- This quote tipped off the spirited relationship between a (Millard North) football star and a special needs student: "Oh man! Look at those guns. You're showing off today buddy." The same story wrapped up nicely with a quote from the special needs student: "I'm going to miss you. You're just a great friend. We do a lot of sports together. You make me feel excited and happy."
- A (Millard West) story about a videographer student with Spina Bifida had multiple quotes - from the teen, his mom and a few different football players - that helped tell the story from different perspectives.

Superior leads quickly grabbed this judge's interest, and forecast what a reader was about to learn. For example:

- An (Elkhorn South) story about a transfer student from Puerto Rico led with: "For the first time in her life, a 15 year old girl will buy a winter jacket."
- A descriptive start to a (Lincoln SE) student profile put the reader in the middle of a noisy pep rally, which was upstaged by an even more boisterous student. Rich detail later shared in the story (including the very young age of the student's parents when he was born) helped the reader understand and relate to the subject.
- A (Marian) lead about security guards pulled in the reader with a colorful image of men cruising parking lots in little green Priuses. The writer later relayed great detail about a guard's "spooky" Oct. 31 fog sighting.

Superior feature writers found and spotlighted people who put an extraordinary spin on what otherwise might be a run-of-the-mill story. For example:

- A (Papillion-La Vista High) story about careers featured two students who want to be morticians (enough to raise one's curiosity).
- A (Millard North) story featured a foreign exchange student on the pom pom squad, which led to an unusual peek into two worlds and how they intersect.

EXCELLENT: Excellent feature stories were well written, rich with detail, and many shined light on important topics or trends affecting high school students. Some pieces were compelling enough to be superior, had they been constructed in a way that better showcased impact on a student/person -- or had they quoted more than a single source. A few thoughts:

- This judge appreciated a (Millard South) story that interviewed someone from the "older black generation." Writing about racism, inclusivity and social injustice can be tough, and I applaud writers who explore such issues that should be discussed more by our youth.
- Stories featuring students from other countries and places were excellent in that they exposed classmates to other cultures and ideas. A (Elkhorn South) story, for example, profiled a transfer student whose poetry reflects his changing moods, but the writer also weaved in nice detail contrasting Omaha with the poet's more "liberal" former home.
- This judge is impressed with writers exploring student health trends, such as the (Papillion La Vista South) piece linking technology and mental health, and the (Omaha Central) look at caffeine addiction among students.
- Some stories stand out as simply interesting slice of student life, like a (Mount Michael) piece about seniors "cooking up heat" for fellow students; a (Fremont) fire-baton twirler; a (Fremont) profile of a student, her Great Dane mobility service dog and their shared quest for her independence.

HONORABLE MENTION: Entries rated honorable mention tell compelling stories about student life, school programs and issues facing teen-agers. A few tackled topics as serious as any facing young people, and writing also was stand out, but they could have used more expert sources.

This Journalist wholeheartedly encourages young writers to tackle sensitive issues. Feature stories are stronger when reporters include evidence of fact-checking or comments from experts in a respective field – these voices can add context, depth to stories.

InfoGraphic Design: Sophisticated font/color and spatial choices made by the top entries. Don't forget that infographics ideally include a headline, data and sources of information. Those that didn't win awards were sometimes hard to follow (as in a flow chart) or difficult to determine purpose. They also may have had spelling errors.

Newswriting: Best stories told me things the mainstream press didn't. They localized news stories for the high school readers. Some potentially good stories were weakened with spelling mistakes and the lack of local connection or quotes. Good variety of story content among the winners. Some stories would have been stronger if categorized as features because they lacked the timeliness factor or as commentary because they included opinion of the reporter.

Newspaper Sports Feature Writing: Sports features that earned Superior were creative or had a unique angle; they felt "fresh." Award winners sought out interesting quotes to enhance their features. Errors were minimal in articles selected for awards. Advice moving forward - push beyond the everyday and write features that show a part of the sport that fans can't easily see from the sidelines or bleachers. Dig deeper. See the other side!

Newspaper Sports News Writing: One thing I liked was a lot of kids' effort, as far as talking to multiple people, asking some of the right questions, checking on some things like NSAA rules, etc. Like I always tell classes, I've never made a story worse by calling and talking to another person(s). Sometimes you can spend too much time looking at how you write it, but never in the gathering of detail or information.>> Some of the stories that stood out included kids not afraid to include a little color in their writing (without going overboard).>> A few did a nice job with stories other than the standard gamer, preview, season recap or feature: How a coach helps her players with recruiting, a school's effort to combat/address injuries, a historical look at a school's basketball program, a school working with Nike, etc. >> One problem kids often run into is saying something in 15 words that could be done in 10. Or use 10 words for something that could be said in a quick six. Good thing to have them focus on is trying to tighten their writing. You think it hurts to take things out — or sit and watch as a good editor does it for you — until you go back, they're gone and you think, "Oh, hey, that's better."

Newspaper Layout: Dominant headlines help to define sections of the page and clarify information. Spacing is important. Use white space to your advantage and try not to stuff too much information onto one page. Graphics should be easy to read and understand. A busy background can make text hard to read. When using a dark background, use much lighter text and potentially increase the size of the type. Consistency is key. Use different fonts or graphics only when it is necessary to help illuminate a topic or define hierarchy on the page.

Headline Writing & Design: We are living in "interesting times" in terms of headlines, with SEO-style headlines from social media and websites constructed in very different ways from print headlines. SEO is less about being clever and "fun," and more about clarity and immediate payoff. I appreciate the playfulness that print headlines still can offer, and many of our winners demonstrated that sense of fun and a tendency to stretch language a bit. Print headlines are often more effective when they combine something attention-getting with a secondary deck or subhead that provides more information. Many of our readers are "grazing" through the paper, and a headline that makes them smile or nod, while also supplying some basic news is still a treasure (and our readers are more likely to spend some more time on the stories once we have grabbed their attention). Design complements the writing, of course, and most of our top entries offered some sort of contrast. All-Cap Bold main heads were combined with Roman weighted decks. A large, bold top line might include color, while smaller sized decks provided "news at a glance." It tends to be harder to write "short" than to write long, since each word carries so much more significance, so congratulations to the top headline writers for their skill with language and their insights into appealing to readers.

News/Feature Photography: Some entries consisted of one strong image and second one that didn't have the same impact. Some entries consisted of two similar images that failed to show versatility. A few entries had underexposed images caused by backlighting. This is easily avoided by increasing exposure compensation or by spot metering on the subjects (usually faces).

Sports/Action Photography: Many images could be improved with some cropping out of extraneous detail to place more emphasis on subject. Some images with backgrounds of bleachers and fences could be improved with some straightening of the image. Some images are slightly blurry due to slow shutter speeds. I opened them in Photoshop and used file info to check. Some photographers just needed to increase their ISO. Newer cameras handle the noise that comes with higher ISOs pretty well.

The best images had excellent storytelling impact. It was encouraging to see that some photographers had fast lenses with at least a 2.8 aperture. One even had an 85mm 1.8 for basketball. It is so hard to have success in dark gyms and at night football games with a slow, kit lens. Fast lenses have the added advantage of being able to blur distracting backgrounds.

Photo/Artistic Illustration: Such a variety of entries. Difficult to judge them as one category, that is why there are a lot of superiors. Winners simply showed a professionalism in use of artistic ability, illustrative technique or photo manipulation software. It was difficult to know how some of the entries were to be used journalistically. Strong use of color and or tone was important in the final analysis.

Yearbook Feature Writing: - The superior stories had strong leads and a solid quote related to the angle early in the piece. -They told compelling stories from unique perspectives that covered universal themes about life as a student. -The pieces were chock full of quotes that weren't just stock answers and really helped paint a picture. For stories that received no awards here are things to improve on: -Don't editorialize or cheerlead. -Watch long leads....and don't lead with when. -Make sure you have a quote early in the piece, that you have lots of quotes, and that those quotes aren't general. -Watch your tenses...journalistic style should be simple past tense for the most part...some stronger stories were weakened by using tenses like 'would be'. -Some stories were more newsy...to help these stories make sure to use more storytelling devices in the lead.

Yearbook Sports Writing: For the most part, Superior and Excellent winners had these qualities: well written with few, if any, grammar mistakes
organized -- strong transitions and good flow
topics were more than just how the season went and had reader appeal/were original

Yearbook Theme Copy Writing: Since this is theme copy judging, there is no need to provide the full layout. The key is that the copy should be readable! A few seemed negative in focus. Understand that this copy can set the tone for the entire book, for the entire year in retrospect. The best entries were full of specific detail. Readers need to see that this text could only be written for YOUR school THIS year! Also, pay attention to stylistic standards. If you don't use AP style (but it is still recommended that you do), at least be consistent with your ID and naming conventions. If a reader could read your copy and NOT know that it was YOUR school, your theme copy doesn't do enough. Every student should be able to see themselves and their year captured in some small way.

Yearbook Layout: *Top entries solidly followed principles of layout and design.

*Overprinted copy can be effective, but it loses its effectiveness if it's hard to read. Additionally, use white on black sparingly. *Make careful font choices, thinking about readability and restraint. Ideally, don't use more than three fonts per spread. *Make sure that places for all types of copy - body copy, captions, headlines - are evident on the spread.

Yearbook Theme Development: Please pay attention to the rules. No more than 10 spreads should have been submitted for consideration. On the flipside, be sure that you include enough division copy to explain how the theme works with the book. If you use filler text, it is hard to see thematic presence. Some well-designed spreads, but great design doesn't necessary = great theme development.

Newspaper Indepth Coverage: • The top entries offered a wide variety of copy and visuals.

- The best entries used a main story to anchor the coverage and included several sidebars.
- The best entries were visually appealing.
- Many of the entries failing to be awarded presented no hierarchy of content. For example, too many had multiple stories of similar content and/or background and were of similar length with similar headlines. Something needed to stand out above the rest.
- Designers should use a main headline or graphic to pull everything together, including pages and content items.

Literary Magazine: shared with the two entrants. If you want to see the comments, contact Marsha Kalkowski.

Broadcast News Story: Feedback went directly to those who submitted entries (6 pages worth!). Contact Marsha Kalkowski if interested in learning from that feedback.

Broadcast Sports Story: Use natural sounds for all of your b-roll/cutaways. It adds texture to the story.

Ideally, interview the subjects in their "element". Maybe before or after a game/practice.

Use attribution in your voiceovers. Don't assume your audience knows who you're interviewing and relying on a lower third graphic, while helpful, isn't enough.

Make sure reporter/producer shoots relevant b-roll for their story and make sure that your b-roll is a variety of close ups, wide shots, extreme close ups, etc. It makes the video more interesting to the viewer.

Broadcast Feature Story: OVERALL COMMENTS:

-Localize national issues with a focus on people at your school. Avoid repeating national news or having stories sound like a research paper.

- The best videos used the Lead - Quote - Transition - Quote - Transition - Quote formula

- Don't tell the audience what to think or do in the narration or how good or bad something was at the event.

- If videos feel long or boring add quicker cuts or edits to speed it up.

-Use B Roll and make sure B Roll matches or goes along with the story

- Use a variety of shots - WIDE - MEDIUM - TIGHT

- Use natural sound

- Watch out for abrupt cuts

- Try using logos for intros and branding of videos

- To improve try using backdrops as backgrounds or a natural environment instead of a hallway

- Avoid quick pans - use tripods to improve

- Don't be afraid of stories with a conflict or a story with a person or group trying to get something.

Take viewers on a journey rather than just being informative

-Embed Videos on website if possible

- On a video intro make sure to narrate over the b roll with important facts or context without your opinion

- On long interviews cut to b roll

- Use lower thirds to give names of interviews and keep them up for a bit of time.

Broadcast Public Service Announcement: With a PSA, you don't have a lot of time to let your message develop. You need to have it make an impact immediately.

Make sure your message is clear. What is the "so what?" factor? Meaning, what do you want your

audience to get out of the video?

Framing of your shots is key. Make sure that things don't get cut off and that the elements in your frame are relevant.

Broadcast Program: STRENGTHS OVERALL - Strong b-roll! In general, good audio! Intros are good! Good lower-third chyrons!

HOW TO IMPROVE - Make sure sources are in a "third" (either right or left), Clearly identify which pieces are opinion/review and which are news--nearly every school had at least one segment with biased commentary from either reporter or anchor. Work on transitions between sources--don't just introduce sources. Consider writing some copy for the reporters to read over the b-roll--think "if I was writing this story instead, what would that story include?" And then make that part of the broadcast.