

SHOULD I BECOME A REPORTER OR A COPY EDITOR?



Question: For two years after earning a BA in history, I worked as a [newspaper sportswriter](#). Then I accepted a [job as a paralegal](#) with the intention of enrolling in law school. I've since decided against becoming an attorney, and I'd like to return to journalism, but not covering sports (the hours are too irregular). My dilemma is whether I should earn an MA in journalism to learn to cover the news as a [reporter](#), or try to break in as a [copy editor](#), since demand for that specialty seems to be high. I'm considering taking a copy-editing job while earning an MA part-time at a local university.

—*Dave, San Francisco*

Dave: There are two schools of thought about graduate school and journalism. One is that writing, reporting and editing can't be taught in college, and instead must be learned in the real world. Thus, landing any journalism job, including copy editing, is all the training you'll need to develop a successful career. The other school is that the media business has become so complex that an extra year or so spent studying both the basics (writing, editing) and new developments (HTML, media law, etc.) is time and money well spent. I think the answer depends on your goals. A master's degree earned part-time at a school not known for its journalism program will generate lots of local contacts you'll maintain for years, but that's about all. It likely won't help boost your earnings, and it may not do much for your writing that working as a copy editor won't achieve (unless you get some terrific instructors). On the other hand, attending one of the top J-school programs in the country, such as at Columbia, Missouri or Northwestern (from which I'm a grad), will give you exposure to the national media, allow you to train with noted journalists and provide the opportunity to do coursework on Capitol Hill, Wall Street and other usually off-limits locations for aspiring scribes. But like any graduate-school program, you have to calculate both the cost of attending and the lost earnings from not working for a year or longer while studying.