

exploring career options

Editor

Eleanor Barkhorn
Features Editor, Vox.com

Eleanor Barkhorn was a junior in high school when she read *Into the Wild* by John Krakauer—a book that showed her, she says, that “nonfiction could be just as compelling as fiction.” Now, as features editor at Vox.com, Barkhorn is in the business of writing, editing, and publishing compelling nonfiction. In her year as features editor, she has worked on articles on a diverse array of topics: yoga, politics, suicide, education, homelessness. She describes her beat as “anything that Vox covers”—a huge territory that is perfect for someone with unbounded curiosity.



JOE POSNER

What was your first job out of college?

I was a high school English teacher for two years in Greenville, Mississippi, with Teach For America. While I was doing that, I was also doing freelance work for the local newspaper in Greenville, the *Delta Democrat-Times*. Once my commitment to Teach For America was over, I took a job as a reporter at the *Delta*

Democrat-Times. That was my first full-time job in journalism.

How did you start working at *The Atlantic*?

After about six months of working at the newspaper full-time, I was ready to get back to the East Coast, where I grew up and went to college. I applied for an internship at *The Atlantic* and was accepted. That turned into a job, and I was there for about five years.

What did you work entail there?

When I started at *The Atlantic*, I was working in a section of the company that was tasked with developing online products that would help give *The Atlantic* a robust web presence. One of the first big projects was launching a section of the website that was devoted to food. We were getting people who worked in the food industry—farmers and cheese makers, wine makers and restaurant

Interview by Melissa Hartman

owners—to write about their fields. I got to edit and work with amazing people who do cool things for a living. It was really exciting.

Can you talk a little bit more about what your role was as an editor?

In a lot of ways, it was very similar to my role now, which is basically taking charge of an article from start to finish. I would email our contributors to ask if they had any ideas for articles they would like to write. If they had an idea we could use, I'd ask them to write the article.

When they sent a draft, I made sure the structure was good, that the argument made sense, and that everything was factually accurate. After a round or two of those sorts of edits, I would move to the sentence level, making sure everything was grammatically correct and stated as clearly as possible.

Then I would move the article into what's called a content management system, in which I would do the whole layout: insert a photo, pick pull quotes, write a headline, make it look nice, and then press “publish.”

Now that you're at Vox, what does a typical day look like for you?

Usually, while I'm still at home, I check my email. I check Twitter to see if any big news has broken overnight. I check Vox.com to see what's been published since I last looked, and I check our internal chat system for any messages.

Then I'll publish the pieces I've worked on. I like to do this first thing in the morning, which I've found is

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optimal in terms of getting readers, getting attention, and making an impact.

When I get to the office, the whole daily juggling act begins. On any given day I'm emailing writers and asking them to write articles for me. I'm receiving pitches from writers and deciding whether or not to accept them. I'm having meetings with in-house writers at Vox about the stories they're working on. I'm editing drafts that have come in. I am thinking of headlines, photo choices, ways to lay out stories. And I'm also thinking ahead. I think weeks or months ahead. It's January now, but I'm thinking about articles for summer.

What is most challenging about your job?

Prioritizing is the most challenging thing—figuring out at any given moment in the day what I should be working on. Should I be working on the piece for tomorrow so I can get that ready? Should I be working on the piece that's for two weeks from now because I know it's not in as strong shape as it could be? Should I be reaching out to new writers who haven't started writing for us yet? There are so many different ways to use my time. I have a very detailed to-do list, breaking down each task that I need to get done into small pieces, but even with that system, there's not always an obvious answer to the question of what I should do first.

What do you like most about your job?

I get to learn new things all the time. Even if my schedule is similar day to day, what I'm learning is different. I'm always working on something new, learning something new, meeting new people who I get to work with. There's a constant learning process, so I never get bored.

What skills do you think somebody needs to be successful in your career?

Even online—with the hectic pace and new pieces coming out all the time—people still want to read good writing. So it's important for writers

to also be voracious readers. You need to read novels, read magazines, read websites and all sorts of media.

You also need attention to detail. You need an ingrained knowledge of grammar. You need an interest in current events and to be aware of the world around you. And if you don't know something, you need to know where to look. It's important to have a strong sense of what sources of information are reliable and unreliable. That discernment is particularly important for online sources.

Besides the trend toward digital and mobile content, are there other trends in journalism that might affect people entering this field 10 years from now?

Being fast is even more important now than it was in the days of newspapers and magazines, when deadlines were more spread apart. But so much *hasn't* changed. So much of what's important is old-school stuff: being dependable, being accurate; figuring out when you make a mistake, correcting it, being honest about it. Being curious. In 10 years, I think those things will still be really important.

Is there anything else you'd like to say to the aspiring journalists in our audience?

I would offer a word of reassurance: you can build a career writing and editing. That was probably my biggest question growing up. I wondered if my love for reading and writing would always be a hobby or if I would actually be able to do it for a living. I would say now that yes, this is a career option, and you can start looking into it from a young age.

You can reach out to a writer at your local newspaper or news website and ask them how they broke into this business, what's interesting to them about it. When you get to high school and college, you can do internships to get a taste for it. It's very possible to do this, and it's never too early to start. ■

What editors do

Whether they work on books, newspapers, magazines, or websites, editors decide what to publish and then work with writers to prepare their work for publication. They ensure that writing is clear, appropriate for the audience, and grammatically and factually correct; approve content before publication; and oversee the production of their publications.

Where they work

Editors work for book publishers, university presses, trade and professional publications, textbook publishers, magazines, and newspapers. They also work on publications and websites for commercial, governmental, and nonprofit organizations.

Education required

Although no specific degree is required, most editors have bachelor's degrees in communications, English, journalism, or related fields. Depending on the type of publication they work on, they may also need specialized knowledge (e.g., a science background may be necessary to edit content for a science magazine).

Salary range

In May 2012, the median wage for editors was \$53,880, with the top 10 percent earning more than \$104,600 (source: Bureau of Labor Statistics).

For more information

American Copy Editors Society
www.copydesk.org

American Society of Magazine Editors
www.magazine.org/asme

Editor & Publisher
www.editorandpublisher.com