

START HERE



20 things YOU SHOULD

STOP DOING IMMEDIATELY
to Make Your Magazine Better

By Sean Plattner and Wendy McMillan

A magazine must serve its readers. It's not about you, and it's not about your boss. Strive to keep your team — and your supervisor — focused on readers first and foremost. The best ammunition you can have to defend this mindset is feedback that shows what your readers like and dislike in your publication. We conduct a survey every three years, posing similar questions to track how results evolve. Keep your surveys short and be sure to include some open-ended questions. The responses will help you provide readers with more of what they want.



Stop
thinking that
your boss is your
audience

Mistakes — we've made a few. Surely you have, too. But it's the mistakes we all make routinely and as a matter of practice that can take a toll on our magazines, making them less engaging and less effective over time.

At *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, we've drawn the line. We say that anyone involved in the design, editing, and publishing of magazines should stop doing the following 20 things — right now. Just stop.

Your magazine will be better for it.

Stop
worrying
about
stealing

When you look at other magazines, steal some ideas! Don't feel guilty, and be flattered if another publication steals from you. There's no harm in imitation. Neither of us has ever worked on a daily paper, travel magazine, or fashion publication, but we've stolen design treatments, story ideas, and even seemingly unimportant, small graphic elements from all of them. The key is to take the idea and make it your own. Adapt it to fit your tone, design style, and audience. Make it work for you. By doing so, you've effectively *re-appropriated* the idea — not just *stolen* it. There, feel better?

Stop
reading only
magazines in
your competitive
set

Look at all kinds of magazines, in print and online. There's so much creativity and inspiration to learn from, as well as bad practices to key into and avoid. Read all types of publications — the well-established (check out the app available at texture.com), titles you've never heard of (try coverjunkie.com), and award-winners (start with the National Magazine Awards sponsored by the American Society of Magazine Editors, and check out the Folio: awards as well) — or just hang out at the newsstand for a few hours. And don't just read. Deconstruct. Analyze. Critique.



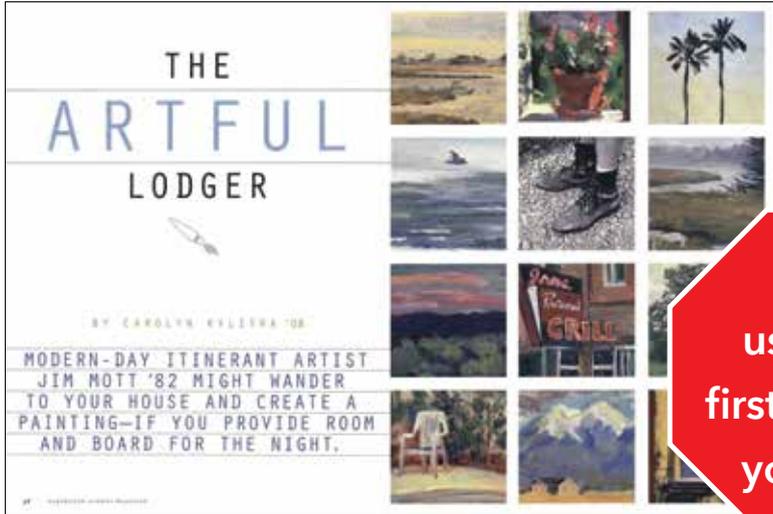
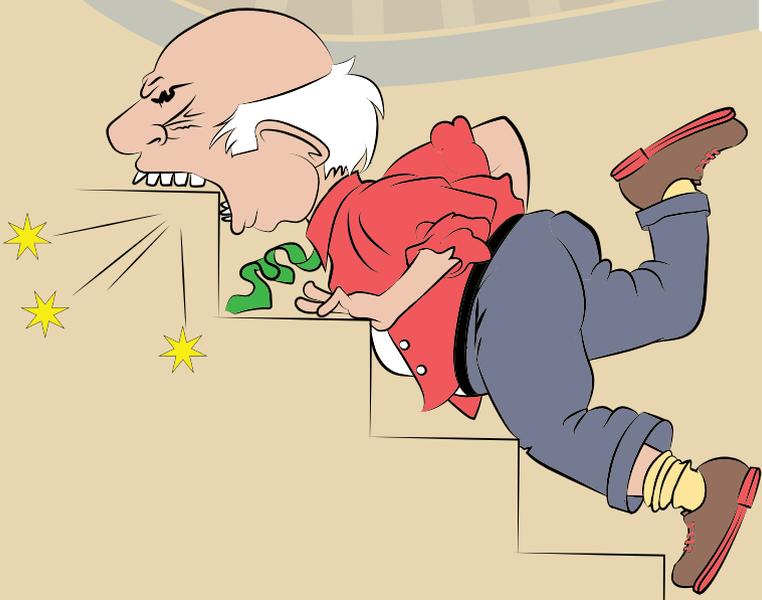
For the most part, keep your layouts clean of busy typography. For departments, we use two font families only — one serif, one sans serif. Find a couple of fonts that work well together, and use a variety of weights within these families for flexibility. In our features, we break out of this mold and use a variety of fonts. Try to find and use ones that match the story tone and design concept. This overall approach keeps the majority of your magazine feeling unified and easy on the eyes.

Stop
using too
MANY
fonts

Stop
planning
one issue at
a time

Sit down and plan out a whole year's worth of stories — or at least

three or four issues. It's far better to have even a skimpy plan that can be changed as necessary than to scramble with no plan at all. Devote the extra time you'll gain to getting ahead of your deadlines, or you'll never get off the hamster wheel. Stockpile some evergreen stories that can run anytime. Assign stories farther in advance.



Have you ever heard the expression, "There's no such thing as writing, only rewriting?" It's solid advice for any story editor, and it applies to display copy as well. Don't settle on the first headline you come up with. Pump your creative juices by thinking of clever puns and catchy phrasing. Titles of other works — movies,

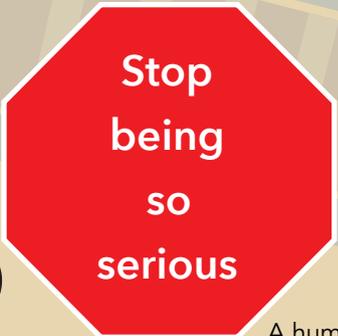
Stop
using the
first headline
you write

books, songs — might spur ideas. Dust off that thesaurus and rhyming dictionary. Compete with others in your office. Headline writing should not be a dull exercise in labeling a story. It should be a lively effort to come up with a few words that grab attention and communicate something of value to readers.



**Stop
playing
inside
baseball**

Many of us produce magazines for small, homogenous audiences, and our publications strive for a certain intimacy with that audience. That's great. But make sure you don't ignore those readers who won't dig into the box scores and minutiae. Watch your use of acronyms, insider lingo, and other unclear references so as to not turn off anyone who might happen across your magazine.



**Stop
being
so
serious**

A humorous or exaggerated illustration can make a serious story more accessible and reader friendly. It's bound to draw more interest and engagement than just another photo of a microbe or an image of an oil pipeline. Find illustrators who have proven themselves capable of bringing a light, clever touch to a variety of topics.



**Stop
with all the
brainstorming
meetings**

Too many of us spend too much time at meetings trying to come up with creative ideas. But you cannot force inspiration. When do your best ideas come to you — while commuting, in the shower, taking a stroll in the yard? Studies show that eureka moments happen when you least expect them. When an idea starts to gel, have an informal discussion with your creative partners and go from there. You'll be off and running without having to sit at a table, stare at other faces, and eat donuts.

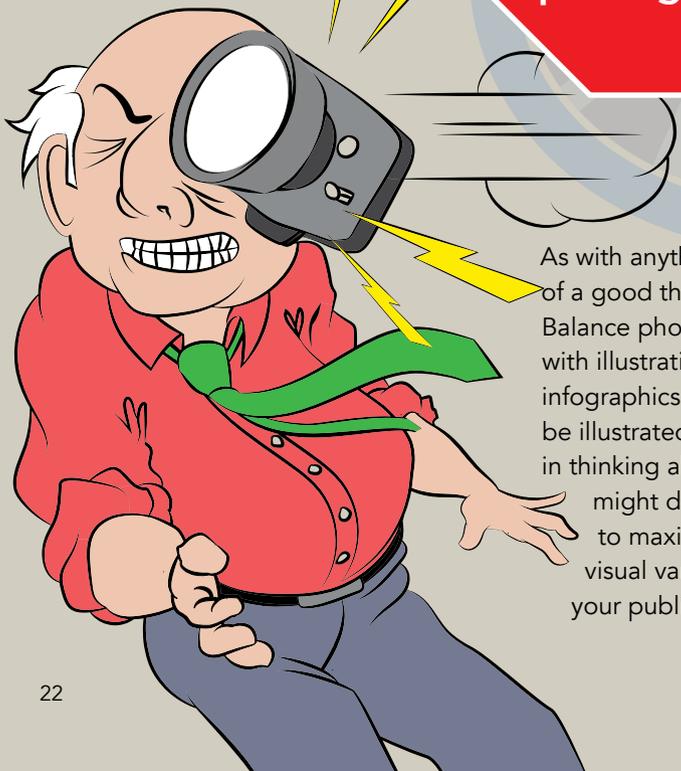


Stop
being
conventional
with covers

Stop
overusing
exclamation
marks

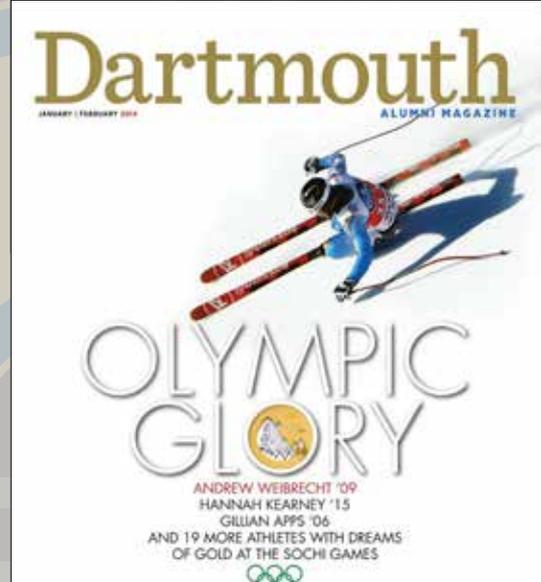
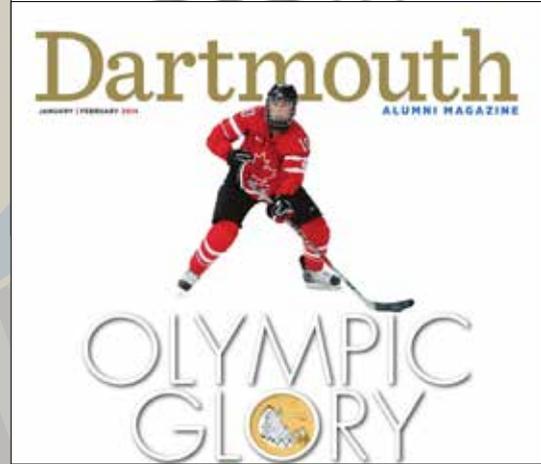
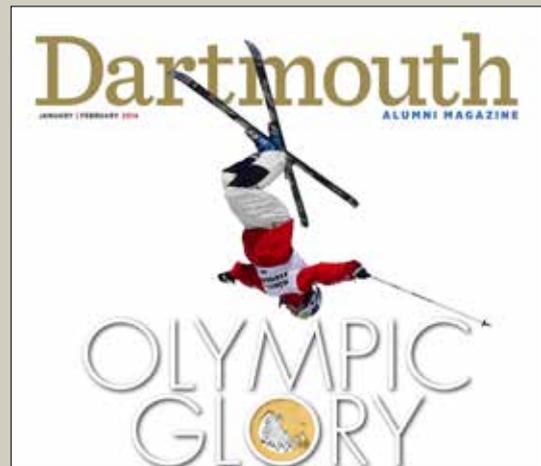
This punctuation mark is overused — plain and simple. It's a phony way to conjure up excitement to make a sentence, headline, or some dialogue more exciting than it really is. Here's a good test: Whenever you use an exclamation mark, replace it with a period and have another look. You're not likely to miss it! The writer Elmore Leonard once said you are allowed no more than two or three exclamation marks per 100,000 words. We think that's good advice.

Stop
running
nonstop
photography



As with anything, too much of a good thing can get old. Balance photo-heavy visuals with illustration as well as infographics. Any story can be illustrated. Be creative in thinking about how you might deploy illustrators to maximize the visual variety in your publication.

Instead of just one cover, surprise readers with two, three, or four — all for one issue. For an issue about the Winter Olympics, we printed three covers featuring three different athletes. This surprised readers and set us apart since it's not often done by small magazines. We distributed the issue randomly among subscribers, but you can easily send different cover versions to different segments of your audience, making them more targeted and personal. The best part? This project was easy on the budget.



Stop breathing down the backs of contributors

Make your life easier. Don't micromanage your writers and artists. Find good people, give them solid direction, and let them do their thing. That first part — finding good people — is the key. Do your research by looking at other magazines and googling the story topic to see what's been done and who might be appropriate. When you make an assignment, be flexible and open to contributors' input. You never know how their ideas might improve upon your own. And most importantly, develop honest working relationships. This includes delivering bad news directly and efficiently when a contributor deviates from your vision.



Stop insisting there's only one template for a magazine

Unusual pacing and architecture is something you might consider if you're looking to break out of standard magazine mode. It can be tricky, but some publications succeed doing things that are just completely different. Running covers that don't relate to their contents.

Putting small news departments in the back of the book rather than the front. Going with small or oversized — or even square — trim sizes. **STAND OUT FROM THE CROWD.**



www.onmakeupmagazine.com

For those of you who write them, don't be offended. But we feel most editor's letters are a waste of time and space, and they're often redundant with the table of contents. Sometimes they exist only to create an ad adjacency. As Tina Brown writes of the editor's note in her new book "The Vanity Fair Diaries": "I hate it. It's impossible to get the right voice when you have to speak for a publication. Whatever you do it turns into eight hundred chirpy words reeking of clichés about a 'telling narrative' or an 'insightful profile.' I have made various attempts to reinvent the form, which have defeated me."

Stop running a letter from the editor





Stop thinking you can't afford great art

Yes, custom photography and illustration can get expensive, but you can actually find good art on the cheap. Check out the stock houses (Getty Images, Redux Pictures, The iSpot, Pixabay) for already existing art that's available for purchase (and, in some cases, for free). Stock art is far more economical than an original commission. You can also work directly with a photographer or illustrator to pick up second rights on artwork that has run previously in another publication.

Stop thinking that graphic stories can't be serious

We love the trend toward telling stories visually. Graphic stories add an element of surprise to a story mix. They can also be effective when magazines use this approach for serious stories, as when *National Geographic* recently ran a graphic story about the search for relics in war-torn Iraq, and when *World Wildlife Federation* magazine published a graphic story about tracking tigers in Siberia. These stories broke up the visual pacing of the issues and likely surprised readers.

THE UNBELIEVABLE TRUTH

DECADES AGO, THANKS TO A CLEVER ALUM AND A POPULAR SHOWMAN, A BIZARRE COLLECTION OF ODDITIES ARRIVED AT THE COLLEGE MUSEUM. THE ONLY THING STRANGER THAN THE RELICS IS THE CURIOUS TALE OF HOW THEY GOT HERE, THE ENSUING CONTROVERSY AND WHY THEY RARELY SEE THE LIGHT OF DAY.

1939 ROBERT RIPLEY LAUNCHES HIS "BELIEVE IT OR NOT!" CARTOON IN THE NEW YORK DAILY GLOBE. BY THE 1930S THE SYNDICATED CHRONICLE OF WEIRDNESS WAS READ DAILY BY 80 MILLION PEOPLE.

1949 AFTER HOSTING THE 13TH EPISODE OF HIS "BELIEVE IT OR NOT!" TV SHOW, RIPLEY DIES OF A HEART ATTACK. (INTERESTING TIDBIT: STORER HOSTS THE REMAINDER OF THE SERIES THAT SEASON.)

IN A SURPRISE DEMANDS THE... BE RETURNED, CL... A LOAN, NOT A DON...

1950 INTERESTING RIPLEY PRODUCER DOUG STORER '31 HAS A BRAINSTORM TO BOOST HIS BOSS'S REPUTATION AS A SCHOLARLY COLLECTOR: DONATE SOME ODDITIES TO DARTMOUTH.

LATER THAT YEAR RIPLEY VISITS AND PICKS UP AN HONORARY DEGREE.

TO CURRY FAVOR, COLLEGE TREASURER JOHN MECK '33 SENDS TWO APPLICATION FORMS TO RIPLEY'S BROTHER, DOUG, FOR HIS TWO SONS (ONE AN INFANT, THE OTHER A TODDLER).

AFFADAVITS CONVINCING THE RIPLEY ESTATE TO WITHDRAW ITS CLAIMS IN JANUARY. FOX BILLS THE COLLEGE \$290.

THE COLLEGE GOES TO COURT TO DEFEND ITS OWNERSHIP OF THE MATERIAL. NEW YORK CITY ATTORNEY PAUL H. FOX '32 REPRESENTS HIS ALMA MATER. STORER SIDES WITH DARTMOUTH AND INSISTS THE GOODS WERE A DONATION.

1950

RIPLEY'S DONATION OF MORE THAN 100 ODDITIES GOES ON DISPLAY IN THE ROBERT RIPLEY ROOM IN WILSON HALL.

INDIGNANT CURATOR W. WEDGWOOD BOWEN WRITES TO STORER, CLAIMING THEY COULD DRAW A "LARGE CROWD OF MILL-HANDS" BY PRESENTING MORE OF THE ARTIFACTS, BUT HE DID NOT WISH TO LOWER "THE BATHING HIGH STANDARD WHICH I HAVE MADE IT MY POLICY TO MAINTAIN FOR THE MUSEUM."

1961

THE RIPLEY COLLECTION GOES DARK WHEN IT IS PUT INTO STORAGE TO MAKE ROOM FOR ITEMS MORE DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES OF THE COLLEGE. PRESIDENT MUSEUM CURATOR ELMER HARR '38 WRITES TO VICE PRESIDENT ORTON HICKS '21: "I BELIEVE WE SHOULD NOT BE TOO HASTY ABOUT GETTING RID OF IT... ONE DAY IT MIGHT TAKE ON A NEW VALUE FOR TEACHING PURPOSES."

1961

WHILE RIPLEY'S ARTIFACTS REMAIN IN STORAGE, INDEED SOME FACULTY PULL ITEMS TO VIEW AND DISCUSS. ART HISTORY PROFESSOR ALLEN HOCKLEY, FOR INSTANCE, SHOWS CLASSES RIPLEY'S JAPANESE NORIMAN, WHICH HE BELIEVES MAY HAVE BELONGED TO A RULING FAMILY IN THE 1800S.

AND SO GOES THE INCREDIBLE TVY ODYSSEY OF RIPLEY'S ODDITIES. BELIEVE IT OR NOT!

RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN BY KAREN DORIO '90, LEE MICHAELIDES AND SEAN PLOTTNER. ILLUSTRATION BY JAN FEINDT.

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Stop using too much color

Use color as an accent, background, or visual cue in moderation. When every headline is a different color, it's hard on the eyes. The same goes for overusing screened colors to delineate sidebars and secondary stories, particularly in conjunction with colored type. Rather than falling back on color to create visual hierarchy, use type sizes, type weights, and white space, too.

Stop with the unreadable display copy

Beautifully rendered typographic design treatments are useless if readers can't read them. Make sure everything you produce is legible to fresh eyes (conduct an informal poll to be sure), or you risk turning off readers and possibly losing them for good.



Stop being so humble

Enter award programs. We've already mentioned a few, but there are many more: The Society of Publication Designers, PRINT magazine, and *Communication Arts* magazine all sponsor design competitions, for example. Entering will force you to think more clearly about your goals and how well you've executed against them. Learn from the winners. And if you win, brag and boast. You are worthy.

Editor **Sean Plottner** and Art Director **Wendy McMillan** have worked together at Dartmouth Alumni Magazine for 18 years. Connect at tinyurl.com/linkedin-plottner.

