

Light the reader's path with good

By RALEIGH C. MANN

Readers appreciate cutlines.

Cutlines offer them useful and interesting information, yet many editors dash them off thoughtlessly as a nuisance chore.

Take cutlines seriously. Readers do. Invest your best writing. Why hold back?

Think as any reader would as you glance at a newspaper page. Your eyes pounce on every photo, headline, cutline, raised quote, graphic or special type to learn as much as possible about a subject in that quick, first glance before committing to some serious reading time.

That's what readers do. Help them.

Good cutlines help the reader understand. They inform, shed light, provide insight, identify, describe, explain, clarify, show.

Bad cutlines fail to deliver on one or more of these assignments.

Pack your cutline as full of useful, enlightening, fascinating information as you can.

A reader looks at the picture before reading the cutline. The picture raises questions. Answer the questions. Look at the picture. Never try to write a cutline on a picture that someone else has described to you.

The picture offers an opportunity to link the photo to the accompanying

Too often cutlines insult the reader's intelligence. Let's not report what the reader already knows. We can see that President Bush is shaking hands with Tom Hanks in the Oval Office. Connect what is happening in the picture to the story. Why are these two people together in that place? Why should the reader care? Tell the reader that. Use cutlines to build bridges and offer useful, interesting information.

story. Seize that opportunity. If you can bring the subject of the photo to life by using a direct quote from the story, do it.

As you write, do this:

1. Look carefully at the picture. See what the reader sees. Take note of what needs to be clarified or described more fully. Tell the reader the latter, not the former.

Check names, the wording of signs, writing on clothing, other details in the picture against information in the story or other information you have available. Pictures don't lie, but in many cases they can show that writers can make mistakes.

2. Understand the story and the picture's connection to it. What would help the reader connect the two? Connect the picture and story. Why should the reader care? Show that.

3. Answer questions. Concern yourself with accuracy, clarity, brevity but completeness, specificity and honesty. Never mislead the reader. If a picture shows a past event and is taken from the files, say so. If a picture is contrived or a gag, tell the reader.

4. Convey the mood of the picture. Use the cutline to capture the mood of the picture honestly and

