

On course for a **spell** in Newport



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As a writer, being complimented as a pedant is a bit like, as an artist, being told that you're really good at sharpening pencils. So the offer from *Newport News'* editor Tricia Rose to attend an NCTJ course entitled 'Grammar and proof-reading skills' and then write about it, "Because, you know, you're really picky and that" probably left me with the kind of frozen grin one associates with a TOWIE cast member being asked to spell their own name.

The fact was, I was secretly delighted to get the chance to test my grammar and proof-reading skills. My habit of belligerently pointing out errors in road signs, television commercials and news bulletins has long been tolerated by loved ones. ("It's not 'amount of...' unless you'd normally weigh it. It's 'number of people!'" being a rant with which my children are now

particularly well-acquainted). So the opportunity to debate the use of dash versus comma and initial capitals in job titles struck me as fun. ...Oh God, perhaps I am good at sharpening pencils.

The National Council for the Training of Journalists – NCTJ for short – is another of those little gems that most Newportopians are completely unaware of. Housed in the former granary in Station Road, right next to the Village Hall, it is the leading accreditation body for journalism training in this country. An NCTJ qualification is a quality standard recognised around the world. The trouble is, the recent Leveson Inquiry has ensured that the words 'journalism' and 'standard' are not often associated with one another right now. Which is grossly unfair. Free speech and the right to question power are two of the most important freedoms we enjoy in the West. And it's often only good journalism, with its determination to keep its foot wedged firmly in the door of those who would otherwise prefer to deny our prying eyes, that exposes corruption and incompetence. There have been times – quite recently even – when good journalism has replaced weak parliamentary opposition in this country. Governments rarely cast light on the downtrodden and exploited; good journalists do. Good journalism is our conscience, and across the globe good journalists sometimes risk life and liberty to tell us what's really happening around us. Even at a local level, good journalism helps foster a sense of community. Local development plans, new supermarkets and road initiatives are all brought to life for us by good journalists. And for many an aspiring writer, the first and most significant step towards becoming a good journalist starts with an NCTJ qualification.

But I digress.

In addition to its role as a training body, the NCTJ runs a plethora of short courses open to anyone wanting to improve their understanding of media law, their ability to write press releases, or just needing to brush up on their editing skills. Bubbling with enthusiasm at the prospect of mixing it up with fellow i-dotters I therefore duly presented myself at the NCTJ's beautifully converted headquarters – only to be told that I was a day early.

Ah.

The next day I duly presented myself at the NCTJ's beautifully converted headquarters, this time a little more reticent about expounding on the importance of written accuracy. Having spent all of ten minutes on the journey by foot from my house to Station Road it was easy enough anyway to listen with quiet sympathy to others' tales of five o'clock starts and queues on the M25. Among them were a solicitor from Brixton, a civil servant from Westminster Council and a communications manager from Surrey. None of them seemed unhealthily picky, but then none had taken two attempts to get there on time either.

Our tutor was Steve Dyson, an award-winning journalist and regular on BBC TV and radio. After coffee and the usual introductions he wasted little time extolling the virtues of writing clearly and simply, reinforcing his message with some well-known examples of good oratory. (Among them one of my favourites, the final section of Dr Martin Luther King's 'I have a

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dream' speech which, although he certainly penned it years earlier, was largely ad-libbed when delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial). Steve then borrowed from the archives of the Plain English Campaign to bring us some choice examples of literary gobbledegook. This was followed by a quick refresher in the identification and use of nouns, verbs, descriptors and conjunctions, followed by a test.

The routine of demonstration, exploration and explanation – followed by a test – was enough to satisfy even my worst Monica Geller-esk tendencies, although it was reassuring to note that I wasn't the only one very obviously keeping score. And so we covered the differences in story structure between news, features and writing for the web, the essentials of proofreading and editing, writing headlines for print and online use, and the importance of style guides. To give him his due, Steve expertly balanced the need to maintain the necessary pace to get through the

material, with a calm flexibility that ensured that all questions were answered and no-one felt rushed.

I already had a pretty high opinion of NCTJ courses before I attended this one, but it was nice to be reminded just how useful they can be to anyone whose job involves communicating with others – and who doesn't that apply to? As someone who edits others' copy for a living, in addition to writing my own, it was also comforting to discover that I wasn't doing anything dramatically wrong.

Did I learn something new? Absolutely. That I didn't get a perfect score in every test proved that my pedantry still has some way to go. I also obtained details of some very useful reference books and online resources. Finally, I learned that when recording dates in your diary, make sure you get the day right.

More information about NCTJ long and short courses can be found at www.nctj.com. NN

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