

# Daily Newszine Baby Steps

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## The Great Type-Size Debate

The name and description of the discussion group at Smofcon 12 was:

11:00am Discussion: Newsletters What do you include: Balancing fun with information. How do you get people to read the damn things, anyway?!

David Langford said it best, in his article "You Do It With Mirrors" (*Mimosa* #14). "And no matter how boring the lists of programme changes, I wanted the whole [newsletter] larded with funny bits to ensure it got read from end to end."

I don't think I really got a chance to make this point at Smofcon, so I'm bringing it up now. I can't stress it enough! After Loscon 20 [1993], I was congratulated for putting out a daily newsletter (*the Plush Pile*) that appeared every day (and on time). I grilled the well-wishers, looking for some kind of negative criticism, and got exactly one comment from one fan: "It was dull."

She was right! And I saw the same thing when I looked at other conventions' newszines, and re-examined my own *Plush Pile*. Since then, I've been trying to make my publications more interesting, and less dull.

I feel this is the forgotten side of the Great Type-Size Debate. The Great Type-Size Debate may be summarized as follows:

"You have to print it large, or people won't read it!" vs.

"If the newsletter is interesting enough and printed in a small-but-legible size, people will read it cover-to-cover!"

Many conventions have a limited budget for the newsletter (it is, after all, expendable) and this usually translates into a limited number of issue-pages. If the amount of issue-pages you can produce is a given, then you have to decide what to put on those pages and how to fill them.

You may decide to go with 12 point text, as in *Orycon* 16's *Oryconian* newsletter this year.

Or you might pick a good legible typeface to use at 8 point, and pack in some amusing "filler material" to bring them in. (My favorite example from my own work to-date is the *Pteranodon Ptimes*, at *Westercon* 47. Send me an address label and a dollar for a complete set.)

There is the "third side" to the Great Type-Size Debate, which is the "Print More Pages" point of view, cutting the Gordian Knot. This only works if your budget doesn't limit the pages. The modern-day super Gestetners were mentioned at Smofcon; see the *Boskone* flyers for a real-life example of the

output from these duplicators that work like a photocopier. (Put your original down on the glass, push a button, copies come out the side.) NESFA's machine reportedly cost \$5,000 and apparently has already paid for itself.

## Basic Newszine Concepts

**Program Changes always go first.** They are of paramount importance, and are the justification for the newszine's existence in the first place. Best way to highlight them: put them in a box on the front page (and try not to have anything, or hardly anything else boxed on the front). My opinion: don't shade the box, it makes the contents look less important and readers are more likely to skim over them. Don't have them continued from the front to the back — fit them all on the front, in a box that takes up half the page if you have to.

**Party Lists should be set aside in a box.** Neither Program Changes nor Party Lists should be printed smaller than the regular text; make them them larger if possible, or the same size if necessary.

**Party Lists are an important part of the value of an evening newsletter.** Put them on one side of the page (don't have them continue to the other side, don't let them start at the bottom of one column and finish up at the top of the next) and please, put them on the front of the page. (You may occasionally have to deal with Party Lists and Program Changes fighting for dominance on your front page; just remember that they're the two most important items, and everything else can probably be moved to the back.)

Party Lists should have the top floors listed first. This encourages party-hoppers to work downstairs from the top; they're more likely to use the stairs to go downstairs, thus easing the burden on the elevators; and Con Ops will appreciate it too. You also want them separated by tower. You should be able to go from one listed party to the next listed party, without having to jump all around the page.

**Credit your staff.** Your credits etc., or "colophon", is important, but not all-important. Put it on the back side of the page. You can shade it, to make it less conspicuous. Give your staff credit. It's easy and cheap, and makes them feel great. You especially want to name your staff if you've made reference to "all uncredited articles are by staff!" This also goes along with putting bylines on all items where possible.

Remember that there are probably less than a handful of people who care about what high-tech equipment you used, no matter how interesting your setup appears to you. (On the other hand, if you're using equipment loaned by a corporation for free or dirt-cheap, be sure to mention them so

they're happy. See the Gestetner/Eastercon relationship.)

**Small print needs to be legible.** Besides "The Great Type-Size Debate" (mentioned earlier), the suggestion was made to go to a sans-serif font if you're printing small print, because at the smaller sizes the serifs run together. (From a technical standpoint, you want to look for a generous x-height in whatever you use — 8 pt. Times Roman is a lot more legible than 8 pt. University Roman, for example.)

Personal note: beware of "Condensed" typefaces; "Condensed" and the smaller point sizes don't mix well together. (For proof of this, see my use of the sans-serif Abadi Condensed in *Conozoic/Westercon* 47's *Pteranodon Ptimes*.)

**Choose your paper colors wisely.** (1) Never use the same color for two consecutive issues. (I'll let you use two colors — white for all the odd-numbers and buff for the even-numbers, but that's my limit...) (2) Never use the same color for two consecutive pieces of paper that aren't stapled together. This even includes "pg 1-2" and "pg 3-4" of the same issue, if they haven't been stapled! It doesn't matter if they're marked differently, or are in the same slot or different slots on the newszine board; if they're the same color, lots of the fans will only grab the first one that comes away when the tug on it.

(3) Use light colors. You don't need to use the "astrobright" colors to get your newsletter noticed — there should be enough other things going for it, and you're not fighting against all of the freebie flyers. (Or you shouldn't be, see my newszine board proposal.) Both "astrobright" and regular "pastel" papers can still get you into trouble, however. Suggestion: get a sample of each paper you're considering, write the name of the paper's color on each one, and make (white) photocopies of each. If it doesn't photocopy to clear white — if it's grey or worse — don't use it. The hassle is not worth the variety (see my "two colors" in point #1 above). The *Con Francisco Norton Reader* was held up as a bad example; some of the red and blue issues are nearly opaque.

**Print their bylines.** Encourage your contributors to print their name on their news. Having a signature of "(scrawl) Member #042" doesn't help you, despite the existence of a memberships-by-number database at the con somewhere...

**Inter-departmental distribution.** Have someone deliver copies to all of the departments. One suggestion: have the Chair do it! It's a good way to make sure that the Chair gets to all the departments; circulating around the con is probably what the Chair's doing most of the time, anyway. (And if the con is too spread-out, the Chair will have to deal with it twice a day. That'll teach 'em...)

## More Basic Newszine Concepts

Relations with the hotel. Remember that hotel personnel will be reading the newszine. It's a good idea, both from the fans' point of view and the hotel's, to run items highlighting the hours the coffee shop is open, any brunch or buffet specials they might offer, and so forth. (In addition to the all-important pool/jacuzzi hours.)

Issue numbers at the top. Have the issue number and date in large digits at the top of the page (see *Oryconian*). Date should have both day of week, and date of month. This is independent of running a large issue-number as a "watermark" image. (In fact, you have to be careful with the watermark interacting with your text; you don't want the text to be hard to read.)

Publish your deadlines. Put the deadline-for-next-issue on the front of the page, preferably set aside in some way so people notice it. (see *Oryconian*)

Meet your budget. Prepare a budget ahead of time, that includes things like a spare toner cartridge (if your laser printer fails, you're in big trouble) and enough issues to print. At Loscon 21, we had 1,173 members and we had a need for a 600-issue print run; 50% of the membership seems to be a good estimate for your print run. If you run out, it means that some of the membership didn't get a copy. Make sure you've got a contingency budget that covers possible extra issue-pages.

If you're getting it photocopied: Get costs from local office-supply/service stores (Staples, Office Depot, for example). Keep in mind, however, that these might not be open at critical times during your holiday weekend, like before-programming-opens on Sunday morning. Get costs from your local all-night photocopy shop (Kinko's, for example) and see if you can work out a good deal by combining stores, or possibly bringing all your business to one shop in exchange for a better rate.

If you've got your own copier: Make sure it can handle the high volume, high speed you'll need. Remember you'll want to print both sides. If you've got a two-sheet issue to staple, you're better off printing all of one, then all of another, and stapling them by hand, because the automatic collator-stapler unit might be low-volume and low-speed.

(But consider, in that case, of making the 2nd sheet sufficiently independent to be printed on a different color paper and presented as an "extra" issue. Or run it all on 11x17 paper and fold it in half.)

If you've got two super-Gestetner (or equivalent) high-speed duplicators: You lucky dog. Backup equipment is a good idea, so that you can (1) do both sides (or both sheets/issues) at once, and (2) if one breaks down you're still in business. And the Gestetners are supposed to be low page cost machines.

Getting back to the budget, you've got to set a realistic budget, and stick to it. And be prepared to improvise if your budget gets slashed. I had bake sales, sold homemade fudge, peddled advertisements, and managed to put out a respectable news-

zine within a budget that was curtailed at the last minute. (I received a printing budget of \$70 from the convention for printing during the convention, plus another \$80 to purchase a spare toner cartridge.)

Masquerade. If there's a Masquerade, try to arrange with the Masquerade Dept. to get copies of the entry forms, so you can prepare a running order. (If you have it all typed up in time, you can even print a large copy of the running order to post in the photographers' room at the Masquerade. They'll love you for it.)

Hall Costume Awards and other mid-convention prizes awarded. Try to coordinate with whoever's responsible for issuing the prizes, so that the newsletter can promote them. (Recent example: if Loscon 21 had hall costume awards, we never heard about them. This fosters the appearance that Loscon 21 didn't care about hall costumes, in my opinion.)

Pre-written articles. I lifted certain articles from Conadian's *Voyager* and Baycon 1994's *Baycon Bugle* on some basic subjects such as hygiene, tipping, and so forth. It's a good idea to have these already written and in place, so you don't have to try to come up with 100 words on the subject to fill a hole in your page.

## Basic Desktop Publishing Style

Beware of the three most-common pitfalls of Desktop Publishing.

(1) Using too many fonts. Just because you have twelve different typefaces, it doesn't mean you have to use every one in every issue. You're better off picking one typeface for all of your headlines, and one typeface (or typeface family — i.e. regular, bold, italic) for the text in your articles.

(2) Misuse of all-capitals in decorative fonts. Zapf Chancery is not meant to be used in all-caps. The implication, by the way, is that some fonts are not suitable for writing things like "Redondo Beach CA 90278." (Use "Calif.", if you find yourself in this situation.)

(3) One-man Tunnelvision. Finally, DTP means that it's possible for a project to go through the hands of just one person, from start to finish. For example, a dyslexic typist can prepare the program schedule for an entire major national convention, and send it to the printers, without once running it through a spell-checker program (let alone one with the participants' names in it) or letting anyone else have a look at it. This is a recipe for disaster.

In other words, have someone else proofread it before you go straight to press.

Other minor nitpicks (mistakes I haven't seen in print lately, but the newcomer should be wary): Don't use double-spaces after sentences if you're not using a typewriter. Don't use underlining; it's the typewriter's way of using italics, and you should be able to do *real italics* on your DTP rig. I also recommend avoiding ALL CAPS; use bold for emphasis.

## Advanced Newszine Style

Art really improves the look of the newszine. (I touched on this briefly in *Baby Steps #1*.) Assuming you have room around the Party Lists and Program Changes, try to have some kind of art on every issue. If you can get art from the art show artists, or some (probably older) art from the Artist Guest of Honor, so much the better. For example, the most interesting-looking issue of the *Orycon 16 Oryconian* is the one with the giant frog in a clerical collar.

Separate articles. One way to add visual interest to the page, and to help differentiate between successive articles on a page, is to put some kind of symbol or dingbat as a separator between articles. At Loscon 21 in the *Future History Revisionist*, I used a ringed planet. At Conozoic/Westercon 47, in the *Pteranodon Ptimes* I used dinosaurs — a different one each time.

Nameplates. (That portion at the top of the newsletter, with the name of the newsletter, often misidentified as the "masthead".) Have an artist draw up something special for your newsletter at your particular convention. Worldcon-sized cons: have several artists give you a bunch of different ones to rotate through?

Explore fold-over formats. Especially if you're running into extra pages; it's not a bad idea to have them available as a contingency plan, for that matter. One format suggested (but not tried) was a "legal" (8.5"x14") format, folded over (8.5"high x 7" wide). I've seen this used as a zine format before, but not as a daily newszine; it's probably worth trying.

On the other hand: the point was made that you might want to have at least enough margin on one side to allow the newsletter to be three-hole-punched and put in a notebook. In which case, your regular "letter" format (8.5"w x 11"h — not sideways, 8.5"h x 11"w), or the double-sized fold-over ledger paper (17"w x 11"h, folded in half to 8.5"w x 11"h) would be preferred.



## Extra Credit Ideas

Registration figures. If you can get Registration to give you figures for memberships-so-far, in time for every single deadline, you can run a box at the top of the page with "memberships as of 2 pm Friday" and so forth. If that's not available, see if you can get membership totals from them at the close of each day, for the morning editions.

Morning issues at breakfast. It's pleasant to have something to read over breakfast, so consider having one of the newszine boards placed near the hotel restaurant. You may have a higher degree of non-members reading the newszine; you might not be able to set it up in the first place because it's not part of the function areas; but it's probably worth a try. (The *Oryconian* reportedly had a distribution point at the coffee shop; I haven't tried it yet myself.)

