

Interview with Barbara Stoebener Johnson, Proofreader

Beverly Lindeen

Barbara Johnson started working at Allen Press, Inc., as a Proofreader in 1970. She was full time at the company for 8 years before changing from full-time to contract work, also for Allen Press, for 12 years. She became a full time Proofreader again in 1990. In total, Barbara has worked as Proofreader for Allen Press, in some capacity, for 47 years. I asked her about her long career as a Proofreader.

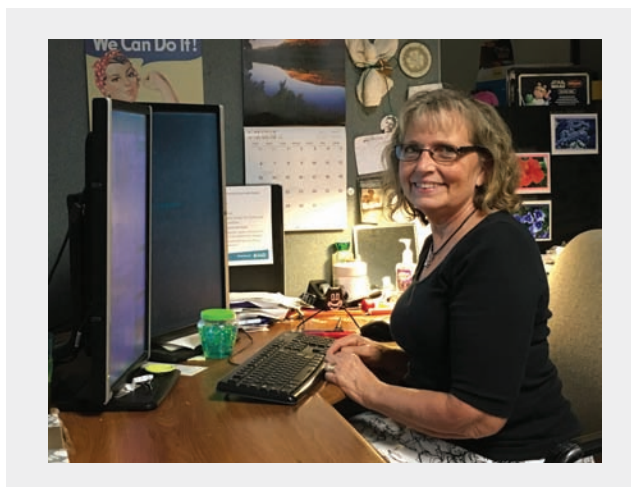
BL: How did you end up in this role?

BJ: I was editor of the school newspaper when I was a senior in high school. A couple of months after graduation, I filled out an application at Allen Press, and the owner of the company at the time took me to the Proofreading Supervisor, and I read out loud to her. The Proofreading Supervisor must have liked the way I read because several days later, I received a call back and was hired.

When I started, the type was set using hot lead, and when there was a mistake, an entire line of type needed to be deleted, inserted, and re-read. That was usually done in pairs. One person read the newly-typeset article, tapping on the desk every time there was a capital letter. The other person followed along in the manuscript, tapping each time there was italic text. Revisions were also read in pairs. Most of the proofreaders worked individually and read the article word-for-word, including punctuation, into a tape recorder and then played the tape back against the newly-typeset article, stopping to mark mistakes. Back then, proofreading was a task performed by two people seated beside each other.

BL: What's a typical day like for you?

BJ: When I get to work, my first task is to check e-mail. Afterwards, I move on to checking the passes (a job that I have already read and sent back to the Typesetting Department to have corrections made) for any jobs that I finished and sent on passes the previous day so that those jobs can be sent to the customer. I then move on to any jobs that I started the previous day and need to finish. Once I have finished any jobs that I had in process, I move on to choosing a new job from our electronic job queue. In addition to actual proofreading, I field questions from coworkers



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both within and outside the department throughout the day. I also have the opportunity to participate in department and division projects on occasion, and help training new Proofreaders.

BL: What are the top 3 things you enjoy about your job?

BJ: (1) I like the daily challenges. There is always something new to see in a job. (2) The continual learning opportunities. Even after this many years on the job, I frequently learn something new. (3) This has more to do with Allen Press than with my specific position within the company, but I really like the people I work with.

BL: What are the most challenging aspects?

BJ: Fewer than 10 years ago, Allen Press's composition process was converted from hard copy to being electronic. This change affected everything from the way Proofreaders read the jobs (now as PDFs), to how work is moved from one department to another. Where stacks of hard copy were once moved physically from one shelving unit to another, now PDFs are stored on a server, and email notifications are sent between departments. The electronic workflow in general is a challenge for me. I didn't grow up with computers, so I had to learn how to use them. For most of my career, I worked exclusively on hard copy. When the company

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decided to change to an all electronic workflow, that change came with a steep learning curve. It took everyone a long time to adapt.

BL: What has been the biggest surprise to you about your job or company?

BJ: In high school, we had a typing class that was not an easy class for me. Now, I work on computers every day. I am able to help my coworkers resolve problems they have with their computers. I have even taken apart my computer at home. I never thought when I started this job that I would be where I am now with regards to my computer knowledge.

BL: What particular skills are critical to be successful in your role?

BJ: It is important that a person have a willingness to learn, and is comfortable asking questions. It's helpful if he/she possesses the ability to forgive himself/herself. I also think possessing critical thinking skills is essential. One should be able to think through a process. And, of course, being detail-oriented is a must in this job.

BL: What are the biggest changes you've seen in the industry since you started?

BJ: The biggest change we have experienced here, as I already mentioned, is converting from a hard copy workflow to an electronic workflow. Not only did that change the tools we use to proofread, but changed the nature of proofreading itself. In the past, we received manuscripts on hard copy with no electronic files accompanying them. We retyped them into our system to prepare the manuscripts for paging,

and because every character was retyped, we read every character to ensure that the retyping did not introduce any errors. Eventually, manuscripts were submitted as Word files that were inserted into the typesetting templates. It was no longer necessary to read jobs so closely anymore because there was very little chance that errors would be introduced into the text. Now most what we do is more of a quality check than a character-for-character proofread.

BL: Do you have any predictions for the future?

BJ: I think things will continue in the direction they are currently going of being in an electronic form and online.

BL: When you were a kid, could you have imagined yourself doing this job?

BJ: I had planned in the fall of 1970 to attend The University of Kansas. It was a tumultuous time everywhere, not just in Lawrence [Kansas, where The University of Kansas is located], and I decided that instead of starting college, I would set out looking for a job. If I had attended college I would have taken classes to earn a degree in elementary education, but I ended up with a lifelong career as a Proofreader instead.

BL: If you had to give one piece of advice to someone who's interested in working as a proofreader or in the scholarly publishing industry, what would it be?

BJ: The most important things for a potential proofreader to have are a willingness to learn, and the ability to keep an open mind.