A Question of Internship Optimization

Question
Editorial internships are generally win–win propositions. A current or former student considering a career in science editing or publishing receives supervised work experience in an editorial office, a publishing department, or a production department for a set period. The pay sometimes is nominal or nonexistent, but the experience can be invaluable. Meanwhile, the host entity benefits from the contributions of the intern even while providing teaching and mentoring. Sometimes, an intern is hired as permanent staff after a particularly successful internship. Not always, though, do internships go well for intern and host. On the basis of your experience as an internship supervisor, an intern, or both, what is your main advice for helping to ensure that an internship succeeds?

Solutions
Develop an internship job description, and hire only interns who have the skills to do the job. We use the same process for hiring interns that we use for all potential employees. Our internship coordinator reviews the candidate’s résumé, conducts a thorough interview, introduces the candidate to the other editors, and administers our copyediting test, which is the same test we give to candidates interviewing for full-time editorial positions. The process allows the student to experience a real-life interview, and it gives us a much better idea of whether the student, who might be with us for a year, will fit with our group.

Like editor candidates, our students must do well on our copyediting test. We look for students with skills that would actually qualify them to be editorial assistants. Because our department is small, we don’t have time for remedial grammar lessons, and we have found that many applicants for internships (and full-time positions) do not have the requisite grammar and usage skills. Although our interns typically need to polish those skills, we won’t hire a student whom we need to teach how to punctuate a compound sentence.

Once hired, our interns perform all basic editorial tasks—first edits, proof-reading, literature searches, and so on. We like to spend time in helping them refine their editorial skills and teaching them about the publication process (nuances of style and formatting, ethical issues and standards, guidelines for manuscript organization, and resources).

In summary, choose interns wisely by being sure that they have a skill set that will allow them to make a genuine contribution to your organization. Unless they can really contribute, the internship won’t be successful for you or for them.

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Manager and Senior Medical Writer
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Thanks for asking me to respond. In doing so, I’ll draw mainly on my experience in supervising interns and placing students in internships. Additional ideas appear in a piece that I wrote on hosting interns.1

Require a written application, including a cover letter or an essay. Doing so lets you start to evaluate the applicant’s skills in written communication. It also eliminates candidates who lack the motivation even to do the writing required to apply.

Orient the intern. When the intern arrives, orient him or her to the setting and the expectations. For example, discuss the functions of your office, the required and optional activities of an intern, and logistics. Give the intern a tour, and make introductions.

Meet regularly with the intern. To help to ensure that the intern receives guidance and feedback often enough, establish a regular weekly or other time to meet. And be available, in person or electronically, in case questions arise between meetings.

Include work geared to the intern’s distinctive interests. Doing so can make the internship more meaningful for the intern, and it can make good use of the intern’s strengths. At Science Editor,
Interns often have written articles related to their particular interests, such as telecommuting, science broadcasting, and science editing in Africa.

**Bring the internship to closure.** Have the intern write a final report, which can consolidate the experience for the intern and give feedback to the host. Perhaps take the intern to lunch. Encourage the intern to share the experience, for example, through a presentation to fellow students. If appropriate, offer to serve as a reference for the intern.

Barbara Gastel
Professor, Texas A&M University
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**Reference**

Interns are very much like new employees. The value they gain, like the value gained from them, depends largely on the initial investment of time and attention and on faithful follow-up by the host office. Because internships are time-limited entities, expediency is key to success. The first few days can easily be wasted as the result of inadequate training and preparation. On arrival, interns should be assigned to a staff member who will be responsible for quickly bringing them up to speed on what the office does and what will be expected of them during the internship. They should be given suitable work stations, specific responsibilities, and measurable objectives. To make the most of their time in the editorial-office environment, they should be integrated into the staff, attend meetings, and follow production and other schedules.

A few days into the internship, work should be evaluated to identify weaknesses and strengths. The speed and difficulty of assignments should be adjusted to accommodate each intern’s abilities and background. Some interns are ready for serious proofreading as soon as they walk into an office. Others have terrific computer skills and can become very valuable for their abilities to format or catalog. All have the clear eyes of a newcomer and so can give fresh feedback on existing systems and processes; they also have the computer skills to thrive in today’s highly electronic editorial offices. The sheer volume and variety of editorial work in a busy office almost guarantee a productive experience, even for interns with minimal expectations. The returns for the office can be equally valuable.

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