

Traineeship Guidelines

Selling Your Work · By Simon Townsend · 6 min read

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Fairfax editorial traineeships

John Fairfax Ltd offers graduate editorial traineeships to energetic, dedicated people seeking a career in newspapers.

Most positions are in journalism, with some in photography and graphic design. The number of traineeships varies from year to year. In 2005, the company offered 30 positions.

The traineeships take the form of a 12-month, performance-based contract, commencing in February. Selection is highly competitive. Most successful applicants hold at least an undergraduate degree, in any discipline, but applicants with relevant work and life experience (especially clippings of work published) may also be considered. Trainees are assessed constantly during the year. Most are offered permanent, full-time positions at the expiry of their contracts.

Traineeships are usually offered at The Age in Melbourne, The Sydney Morning Herald and The Sun-Herald in Sydney, The Australian Financial Review in Sydney, and BRW magazine in Melbourne and Sydney. Some may also be offered at The Illawarra Mercury in Wollongong, The Newcastle Herald in Newcastle and Fairfax Community Newspapers.

The recruitment process: Traineeships will be advertised in late July or early August in the Saturday editions of The Age, The Sydney Morning Herald and The Australian Financial Review. The selection for The Age is conducted from Melbourne, and applicants must check theage.com.au web site for details of that paper's recruitment process. Selection for all other mastheads is conducted from Sydney. Applicants are invited to nominate the publication for which they would most like to work, but the company reserves the right to recommend them to the editors of other publications.

Applications must include the following items:

- A completed application form. The form will be posted on this web site when the positions are advertised.
- A full resume, including work history and extra-curricular activities.
- A portfolio containing copies of a limited number of articles, photographs or design works.
- A 500-word autobiographical piece (journalism traineeship applicants only).

All applicants are expected to demonstrate keen intelligence, energy, determination, superior verbal and visual or writing skills, and a genuine commitment to a career in the media. The ability to touch-type is seen as an indication of such commitment.

A certain number of applicants for journalism traineeships are invited to sit a three to three-and-a-half hour examination testing their writing skills and their knowledge of national and international current affairs, business, arts and sport.

Short-listed applicants in all three fields are invited to attend a series of interviews with a panel of editors from the newspaper that is considering hiring them. Additional assessment tasks may be assigned in the course of the selection process.

The training: Trainees spend February in an intensive induction course that provides orientation to Fairfax, the various mastheads for which they will be working and the newspaper industry as a whole. They undertake simulated reporting and production exercises and are given expert feedback on their work.

This training continues at regular intervals throughout the year. Journalism trainees receive tuition in teeline shorthand and are required to reach a speed of 120 words a minute by the end of the 12 months.

In March, the trainees move into the newsroom of their designated masthead. For the rest of the year, they rotate through various areas of the newspaper, such as general news, features, arts, sport and business.

At the end of each rotation, the trainee is assessed by the editor of that section and given formal feedback on their performance, identifying areas of strength and weakness, and formulating plans for improvement.

At the end of the year, trainees who have met the performance requirements are offered full-time, permanent positions at the paper where they have trained. Those who are not offered a permanent position are given a one-month extension of their contract, during which they receive assistance with finding a position elsewhere.

For all updates http://www.about.theage.com.au/view_page.asp?intsectionid=0 and further information traineeships@theage.com.au

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So what does it take to scoop a newspaper job with News Ltd?

It's a sobering statistic that has pricked holes in many a would-be reporter's fantasy.

Most journalism graduates -- most -- will never work in their chosen field. Unlike teachers, nurses and accountants, journalists cannot pick their job or the city they work in and are lucky if they get any newspaper experience after university, let alone a full-time job on a city newspaper.

They must be prepared to move interstate or to regional or country centres or even work as an editorial assistant before they get their break.

By the time a journalist has reached a metropolitan newspaper they have often spent a number of years on a local newspaper and have probably sent off hundreds of applications to no avail.

News Ltd, publisher of The Australian, The Daily Telegraph and The Sunday Telegraph, receives thousands of applications each year and, as a result, rarely needs to advertise for reporters.

The company does not have a yearly journalist cadetship program and simply hires new journalists through university internships or from its own junior editorial assistants when the need arises.

Most of these people, a News Ltd spokeswoman stressed, had work published elsewhere.

"That's the No. 1 advice we give journalists: try to get something, anything, published -- even if it's just the local paper -- before you knock on our door," she said.

"The competition is so high that we have people coming to us who are exceptionally well educated, have had work published, have life experience and an excellent attitude. It's hard to beat someone like that."

Furthermore, as journalism becomes less of a trade and more of a profession, editors are less likely to take a chance on someone with little qualification but plenty of chutzpah.

So the best way -- and increasingly the only way -- to get a start on a metropolitan newspaper is through a trainee or cadetship program.

Fairfax recruits trainees nationally each year for its metropolitan mastheads: The Sun-Herald, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Age, The Australian Financial Review and Business Review Weekly (BRW) magazine.

The scheme was extended last year to include the Illawarra Mercury and The Newcastle Herald.

While it is not essential for Fairfax trainee applicants to have a degree, it is rare these days for them not to.

But while a degree now is virtually mandatory, you don't need to study journalism. Indeed, you may be better served by studying law or commerce. A Fairfax survey of trainee qualifications from 1999 to 2003 revealed that only 31 per cent of the trainees had a degree in journalism, while 54 per cent had an arts degree or arts/law degree and 15 per cent had another degree.

Another 14 per cent had postgraduate qualifications in journalism, taking the total percentage of trainees with a degree in journalism to 45 per cent.

This year (for traineeships starting in February) there were nearly 550 applications for the NSW general papers, more than 500 for The Age, 170 for BRW and more than 200 for The Australian Financial Review.

While the number of traineeships fluctuates each year according to budgets and staffing, generally Fairfax takes on 20 trainees who range in age from 20 to 35, with the average age being 25.

The trainees are put through a rigorous selection process which includes a quiz (which tests grammar, writing skills, general knowledge and current affairs), an analysis of their published work, several rounds of interviews and referee checks.

The one-year scheme includes shorthand and journalism training and while there is no guarantee of employment once the year is up, so far most trainees have been taken on or offered other work within the group.

Fairfax Community Newspapers in NSW and Victoria run their own cadetship programs.

Dr Willa McDonald did her cadetship with The Sydney Morning Herald in 1983 and is a lecturer in media (writing) at Sydney's Macquarie University.

She has watched the competition for journalism cadetships swell over the years and attributes it to the sheer number of BA (journalism) graduates.

"You have to really be sure that you want to be a journalist before you go down the path because it may be a while before you get work," she said.

"And journalism isn't what it seems. While it is interesting work, a lot of it can also be tedious drudgery. I always tell my students that most people coming out with media degrees will end up working on corporate newsletters. So my advice always is to try to get things published, become a freelance writer, and then you become a name people recognise."

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