Superlatives, a tradition older than the yearbook itself, are widely anticipated at many schools.

At other schools, yearbook advisers and editors shy away from superlatives out of fear of upsetting their school community by picking favorites. Still others worry that including superlatives will negatively impact an award from a press association contest or critique.

Just as the professional journalists publish “Best” editions of magazines and newspapers profiling the best people, entertainment, food, parks and sports teams in their communities, yearbook superlatives can be done in a responsible and creative way.

By featuring as many students as possible and involving the entire school in the voting process, superlatives engage readers and create a sense of anticipation—both important components to maintaining a healthy yearbook program.

Sarah Nichols, adviser to the award-winning Details yearbook at Whitney High School in Rocklin, CA, shares insights on how to responsibly and creatively present yearbook superlatives.

Nichols’ ideas are reproduced with permission from her cover story on superlatives for the Spring 2010 issue of Blend magazine published by Ball State University. Visit www.blendmagazine.org for additional information on superlatives and other journalism-related topics.
Why should a yearbook staff consider superlatives?

Superlatives are fun, entertaining and interesting to readers. With readership declining in every form of printed media for our targeted age group, is upping the entertainment value such a bad idea? There’s a business to yearbook—and selling books is essential to keep the program operating in the black. The key, of course, is to build upon that entertainment value and connect to the book’s role as a history book.

Aren’t superlatives just a popularity contest?

To create superlatives that go beyond superficial categories, strive to find balance among all areas artistic, academic, athletic, comedic and otherwise. Let students create their own category suggestions. Avoid anything physical, inappropriate or potentially hurtful. Make sure the range of categories represents the range of students at your school. Are you finding ways to recognize additional students or simply glorifying the same ones already over-covered throughout the book?
Are there any suggestions for success with superlatives?

- Consider the yearbook’s purpose (history, reference, memory) as you would for all other content/coverage decisions.
- Consider letting students write their own (positive, fun, reader-generated) to get more students involved in the coverage. Make sure you have a verification process to ensure that what gets turned in is actually from the person it says.
- Stay away from popularity coverage.
- Don’t let superlatives dominate the book by taking up too much space. One spread is often enough space. Keep the presentation simple and out of the spotlight.
- If the yearbook is truly dating the year, use contemporary categories (Most Addicted to Farmville on Facebook, Most Likely to Audition for “American Idol”) and link to popular culture.
- Stay away from physical categories—high school is cruel enough.
- Try not to overlap with other parts of the book. If you do an Academic Top 10 or other similar awards lists, how will superlatives differ?

BOLD AND COLORFUL | Cut-out background (COB) photos and a bold black background create a powerful display for superlatives. To add color, words run across the background listing the superlative categories. | San Marcos High School [CA]

INSIDE THE BOX | Thinking inside the box resulted in “outside of the box” creativity. Colorful blocks define the space behind the cut-out background (COB) photos. Some of the COB photos break out of their boxes adding dimension. In all, 30 students are featured on the spread. | Fayetteville-Manlius High School [NY]
How do you design a dynamic presentation for superlatives?

Design your spread to match the style used for the rest of the yearbook. The colors, typefaces and photo treatments should look like other pages to create a unified effect.

Some staffs present superlatives as content modules on senior spreads to supplement the portraits.

Consider repeating a special photo treatment or graphic element. Action shots are fantastic photo choices. Action shots are fantastic photo choices. Action shots are fantastic photo choices. If you can capture students in the setting or activity for which they are nominated. If that’s not possible, or if you want something a little more formal, just plan ahead and strive for professional and consistent photographs. It may seem funny to provide props and costumes or suggest silly poses, but these might undermine your professionalism.

There’s nothing wrong with using posed photos for superlatives. Professional publications use posed photos all the time. Just make sure you have an appropriate pose, good lighting and correct camera settings. Crop, adjust and color-correct carefully as you would with photos anywhere in the book.

Superlatives

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