

Writing Cutlines

More people read captions than any other text in the newspaper. Of all news content, only headlines have higher readership than cutlines. It follows that standards of accuracy, clarity, completeness and good writing are, if anything, higher for captions than for body type. Like headlines, cutlines must be crisp. Like news stories, they must be readable and informative.

Simply stated, cutlines should explain the picture so that the reader is left with no reasonable questions. The cutline should not restate what the picture makes obvious. Rather, it should supply information the picture cannot. For example, a picture can show a football player leaping to catch a pass, but it cannot show that the result was the winning touchdown. The cutline should say so.

Most photographs are at least somewhat ambiguous. When writing a cutline, study the picture carefully to make sure that all ambiguities are explained. For example, are two men in a picture hugging or wrestling? Also make sure that the detail a hurried reader might miss is mentioned. For example, are the batter's eyes closed even as the baseball approaches?

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LENGTH

Cutlines should be as concise as possible, but they should not sound like telegrams; they should contain articles and conjunctions, just as stories do. News picture cutlines should be straightforward and strong. Trite writing should be avoided. Do not point out the obvious by using such phrases as looks on, is shown, poses or pictured above.

EDITORIALIZING

Editorializing is as dangerous in cutlines as it is in news stories. The cutline writer should never make assumptions about what someone in a picture is thinking or feeling. The writer should try to explain, though, if an emotion is ambiguous. Is the person in the picture laughing heartily or screaming in anguish? It's sometimes difficult to tell, and in such cases, the cutline should explain the emotion to the reader.

The cutline writer should also avoid characterizing a scene as beautiful, dramatic, grisly or in any other way. However, the cutline should explain how the picture was taken if the photographer used an unusual lens or took the picture from an unusual angle. For example, was a wide-angle lens used, or time-lapse photography? Was an overhead view taken from an airplane or from the top of a building? Similarly, special effects, such as the use of an inset picture or a picture sequence, should be explained.

ACCURACY

Cutline writers should make sure that the caption accurately reflects the picture. They should count the number of identifiable people in the photo and check the number and sex of people identified in the caption to make certain that they match. Special precautions should be taken to make sure that the cutline does not identify someone who has been cropped out of the photo.

Similarly, cutline writers should check the spelling of names in the story against names a photographer has provided, to spot any discrepancies. They should also be sure that names in the cutline are the same as names in the story. It should not be John Smith in the cutline and John P. Smith in the story.

The same standards that apply to editing copy apply to editing cutlines. Facts, spelling, punctuation, grammar and the like must be checked.

WILD ART

With cutlines for stand-alone pictures (photographs that don't have stories to accompany them), cutlines provide sort of a miniature story for the reader, summing up not only the action in the photograph but the events surrounding that action, too.

For instance, a photo shows a distraught-looking man holding a screaming child on his lap as a woman in a long white coat gives the girl an injection. The information provided with the picture says that a doctor at a free clinic in Peru is giving the man's daughter an inoculation against cholera. The cutline should tell the names of the people in the photo, and where and when the photo was taken.

It should also give additional information; it should tell a story. Why is this scenario different from any other clinic where a child might get an inoculation? For this photo, the reasons are that a cholera outbreak in Peru has reached epidemic proportions and that the country has set up free clinics so that as many people as possible can be inoculated.

You will often have three or four sentences for a stand-alone cutline (sometimes called wild art). For pictures that accompany stories, however, length of cutline differs depending on the picture. For instance, you might have room for only the essential information: *A Peruvian child receives a cholera inoculation at a free clinic.*

The thinking there is that the story provides the essential information and that the cutline shouldn't be repetitious. The New York Times follows this philosophy.

EXTENDED CUTLINES

Always write at least two sentences. The first sentence should be written in the present tense and the active voice and should describe the action in the picture. Avoid developing a formula for writing wild art cutlines. Writing to formula, such as always starting the cutline with the name of a person pictured, leads to a pre-packaged sameness. (A ban on starting cutlines with names is just as silly because it can lead to extremely awkward phrasing.)

Never put the time element in the first sentence; you have described the action of the picture in the present tense, and the time element is always past tense. In the second sentence, add information necessary to the reader's understanding of the situation. Write the second sentence in the past tense and include the time element.

More than two sentences certainly are permissible, indeed perhaps necessary to tell the story properly. Here's an example of a stand-alone cutline from the Philadelphia Inquirer. The photo showed a throng of people carrying a banner along a city street. The banner read: "Oust the U.S.-Aquino Regime!" The cutline read: *In a rally bringing together leftists and rightists, more than 20,000 protesters in Manila demand the resignation of Philippine President Corazon C. Aquino. March organizers read a manifesto yesterday saying that they "do not wish this heartless government to remain in power." Protesters also carried banners demanding that the government close the six U.S. military bases in the country.*

KICKERS

A kicker is a headline that is positioned either above a photo or directly above a cutline in a piece of wild art. It serves many of the same functions as a headline for a story, mainly to attract readers' attention and to give them a brief dose of information about what is in the photo and cutline. However, kickers are usually only two or three words and often break the rules of headlines in that they don't have to have a verb or a noun. In that sense, they are the same as feature heads or label heads, relying on their clever wording to attract readers.

For example, during the Persian Gulf war, Newsday ran a picture of a group of U.S. Marines, their fists doubled and their arms raised, riding into Kuwait. The kicker read: **Wave of Marines**

Another photo from the same edition of Newsday showed two Marines holding their rifles ready as they ran across the sand into Kuwait. The kicker read: **On the move**

Like headlines, kickers must have the proper tone. In feature photos, the tone may be lighthearted, and the cutline writer has a chance to be creative. Avoid triteness or cuteness, though. Similarly, don't write something flip for a kicker that accompanies a hard-news photo such as a fatal accident or fire. In such cases, a straight-news headline style usually works best: "Fatal accident" or "Three die in house fire."

PACKAGE ART

Newspapers that subscribe to the facts-only style of cutline writing usually run only a single-line cutline for a photo that accompanies a story. Such cutlines are often called “singletons.” Identification of people and situations is the important thing here. Be careful not to waste space by repeating information that is not important or that is in display type.

A time element usually is not necessary in a singleton, and if the caption describes any action in the picture, the cutline writer should try to use the present tense. Because of space restrictions, however, a singleton cutline may be written in the past tense.

Writing a singleton cutline is every bit as difficult as writing a good headline, and the cutline writer must fit precise wording into a tight count.

When accompanying a hard news story, a singleton often tells only the facts necessary to explain the photograph. That often means identifying the people involved and what they are doing. For instance, when nine people died in a fire at a Colorado nursing home, the Philadelphia Inquirer ran a story and a photo. The headline for the story said: **Nine residents killed by fire at Colo. Springs retirement home**

The photo above the headline showed a woman in her 40s hugging an elderly woman in a wheelchair. The singleton cutline for the three-column photo read: *Bea Richards, 77, is comforted after the fire by Susan Brown, administrator of the Crystal Springs Estate home.*

The cutline left out information. For instance, Bea Richards is assumed to be a resident of the nursing home that burned, but the caption doesn't say for sure. Also, it refers only to “the fire.” The cutline does not identify two other women in the photo, nor does it say where the photo was taken. Because of space restrictions, a cutline writer is often forced to choose what information to include. The best advice is to use common sense. Provide as much information as you can in the amount of space allotted.

When accompanying a feature story, a singleton has a different function: to pique interest and entice the reader into the story. Those things are best accomplished by words that raise an issue or make a point not made in the head, yet beg for further elaboration. Here's an example from the Inquirer. The headline reads:

Looking through the Doors

The group was volatile, moody and darkly dramatic.

It's in the spotlight yet again — this time in Oliver Stone's Film.

But does its music say anything to today's listeners?

The photo that accompanies the story shows Jim Morrison standing in profile at a microphone, a deeply serious look on his face. The cutline reads: *Jim Morrison's pose was clear: He was the drunken, misunderstood poet.*