

Advice on Headlines

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This is an amalgam of wisdom and advice on headline writing that I have accumulated over the years. Much of it is my own, but some comes from former editing professors at KU, some from John Bremner's books *Words on Words* and *HTK*, and some from editors around the country who have given workshops at conventions of the American Copy Editors Society.

“Headline writers digest a digest. They take precise words with precise meanings and fit them into precise dimensions. Their tool is a chisel, the fine semantic chisel of exact language with exact meaning and exact dimension.”

“If you had to reduce all the rules and recommendations of news headline writing to two, they would be: the head must fit and it must tell the story. A head that doesn't fit won't appear in print. A head that doesn't tell the story shouldn't appear in print.”

— John Bremner, *Words on Words*

Getting started



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Headlines are by far the most-read text in any publication or on any website. That alone means they deserve special care.

The importance of headlines goes beyond that, though. Headlines set the tone for articles and even entire publications. They help organize pages, guide readers visually and distinguish between the serious and the light-hearted. They summarize, but they also “sell” stories.

They do all this in just a few words.

Headline writing is an important responsibility, but don't let that create anxiety or stifle your creativity. Like anything else, headline writing takes practice. It also takes reflection. Always look at your work after publication. Do your headlines work? Do they seem different in print or on the Web than they did on your computer screen? If you see problems, what could you have done better? Is there a lesson there that will help you next time?

Similarly, how do your headlines compare with those of your co-workers? With headlines in other publications? That type of reflection is crucial if you are to improve.

Telling And Selling

Good headlines have an immediacy and a verbal appeal that make you want to read on. They summarize information and “sell” the story they go with. Good headline writing, though, is really just good writing -- with fewer words. That’s what makes it challenging, and that’s what makes it fun.

Bremner said that if you boiled all of headline writing down to two rules, it would be these:

1. A headline must tell the story.
2. It must fit.

Technology hasn’t changed those rules. You sometimes have more leeway on the Web, but not always. In a world of microscreens and cellphone apps, space is as precious as ever.

To get started, phone home

So how do you start? Obviously, you must **read the story first**. Get a sense of what it’s about. If you try to write a headline too soon, you run the risk of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the story. You also don’t want to just steal the nice verb the reporter used in the lede or play spoiler to a narrative the reporter has crafted in a feature story.

Once you get a sense of the story, think about how you’d tell the story to a friend or to your parents. You call or text and say, **“Mom, can you believe that ...**

That will help you get to the essence of the story. It’s a good trick not just for writing a headline but for writing a lede.

Clarity counts

Most of the time, that will give you too many words, but now you have something to work with. That’s crucial to all types of writing. It’s much easier to edit and rewrite than it is to look at a blank screen. I’d suggest saving your original and any variations on your headlines. You might be able to use parts of them for a deck or a summary. And you can often mix and match words from your attempted headlines and create a stronger final version as a result.

Now that you have a start, work toward logical sentence structure, active voice (noun-verb), strong verbs and good phrasing. For instance:

Students embrace Kansas’ early-college experiment

Budget cuts jeopardize mental health services



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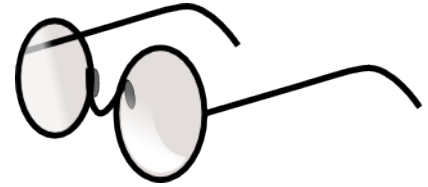
Still stumped? Maybe it's the story

Problems with a headline often signal problems in a story.

If you pull information for the headline from low in the story, that's often a sign that the reporter has missed the real news. If your headline lacks focus, look at the story again.

Maybe it isn't focused either.

If you run into those problems, go back to the reporter and explain. Talking about the headline can be a good way to help both of you get to the heart of the story. In that sense, headline writing can help make you a better story editor.



Kenneth Thilakarathna
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Make Every word count

That's good advice in any type of writing, but especially in headline writing. A wasted word or an imprecise word can easily make for a bland, meaningless headline. Consider this example:

Knife incident occurs at Jet Lag

Incident and *occurs* tell us virtually nothing. Notice how a stronger verb and more precise language enhance the meaning and make the headline more interesting:

Knife fight injures 3 at Jet Lag

Speak English

That means avoid headlines, those words that no one uses in everyday conversation but that journalists just can't seem to get rid of:

nabs, raps, rips, eyes, ups ...

For instance, this headline sounds as if we've captured an alien.

Jayhawks nab Md. recruit, eye juco star

Remember your audience

A headline for the *Kansan* will usually be different from one for the *Lawrence Journal-World*, the *New York Times*, *Wired News* or any other publication because the audience is different. (The exception might be an AP story.) In the *Kansan's* case, the audience is primarily students, but also faculty and staff members. So when you write headlines for the *Kansan*, always consider how the story affects students. Here's a hypothetical example:

New York Times: **Kansas' Budget Cuts Are Among Largest in U.S.**

Lawrence Journal-World: **\$10M in state budget cuts hit Lawrence hard**

Kansan: **University to close 4 academic departments**

Headline style

Headlines do indeed have their own style. For the most part, this style helps achieve three things: It creates a sense of immediacy, reduces the space needed to convey thoughts, and makes those thoughts as easy to understand as possible.

Verb tenses

Use **present tense verbs** for events in the immediate past, **future tense** for coming events.

Immediate past: **Jayhawks defeat Tigers**

Future: **Regents to review University budget**

Punctuation

Use **semicolons where you would usually use periods** (most of the time), and use **single quotes** where you would use double quotes in copy. For instance:

•
;

**Student Senate meets with Hemenway;
long-term tuition policy nears approval**

Troupe puts a twist on ‘Oliver’

‘
XXXX’

Strive to keep all punctuation except hyphens at the ends of lines. Don’t use a hyphen at the beginning or the end of a line. The “Student Senate” example above shows the proper approach with semicolons and hyphens. Avoid this type of hyphenation, though:

**Senate seeks long-
term tuition policy**

- Use attribution when needed, but avoid attribution gimmicks such as the colon or the dash. You can see the pitfall of that in this headline about Hurricane Katrina:

U.S. dealing with one of worst natural disasters: Bush

‘Down’ style

Write heads in “down style”: all lowercase except for the first word in the head and the deck. But capitalize proper nouns.

Down style, as in the Kansan:

Hashinger Hall damaged by burst pipe

Up style, as in the New York Times:

House Expands Children’s Health Care

Headline style

(Cont.)

Eliminate most articles, adverbs and adjectives in headlines for hard-news stories.

Officer smells smoke, arrests homeowner in arson

In feature headlines, consider keeping them if they help the headlines sound more conversational.

It's a record: 249 miles without an extension cord

Notice how the stripped-down language gives the first headline a sense of immediacy. In the second one, the words *a* and *an* add fluidity and indicate a more lighthearted story.

Names

Don't use proper names in heads unless the name is well enough known to be recognized immediately.

Yes:

Gray-Little meets Obama during trip to Washington

No:

Spiegler to replace Arnold on University subcommittee

Abbreviations And Acronyms

The same is true for abbreviations and acronyms. Don't overdo abbreviations and acronyms; your headlines can end up looking like alphabet soup. Here's an example of a headline you'd want to avoid:

SPCYR says Fla. bridge needs completion ASAP

Beware

Part 1

Exaggeration, generalization

Avoid editorializing, exaggeration and generalization.

Extremist group to protest on campus

Sex offenders flocking to Wyoming

In cases like these, we are far better off sticking to the facts, which carry much more authority than labels:

Phelps to protest University policy on gay rights

Wyoming eases rules on sex offenders

Use the same logic when you end up with a headline so general that it could apply to nearly any story:

Precautions are needed



Beware

Part 2

Double-entendre,
puns and
the brilliance
syndrome

Watch for ambiguity and double-entendre, particularly when a noun in your headline could be a verb and vice versa. Cultivate a suspicious mind – and a dirty mind – so you can catch headlines like these before publication:

LSU officially grabs Stanford's Johnson

Lesbians like straight men, researchers find

Bush to attend summit on drugs

Avoid the temptation to write cute heads or to use faddish or commercial slogans. If you do, your headlines will sound like instant clichés. Especially avoid puns on names. Most are so obvious that they look juvenile, and they only show a lack a creativity.

At some point, you will write a headline *so brilliant* that you just *know* that no one else has ever thought of such word play before. Before you let it fly, take a deep breath and maybe go buy a pack of gum. Then have the person next to you take a look at your Einstein moment and give you a reality check.

Maybe you have indeed crafted a headline that will make your fellow students swoon when they see it in print and on the Web. Perhaps you have stitched together a pun so clever that comedians will use it in case studies and generations of headline writers will put you on the same pedestal as, as ... some other great unknown headline writer.

More likely, you've created a clinker along the lines of these, which never should have been published:

Downs and out

The 'Wright' choice

Finally, Self respect 'Bolloed' over by cotton

Cookies to raise dough for VFW

Puns work occasionally, and if you try one, don't draw attention to it with quotation marks. That's the equivalent of jumping up and down and screaming, "Look how cute I am!"

By all means, have fun with headlines when the occasion calls for it. Remember, though, that the tone of a headline should match the tone of the story.



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Beware

Part 3 Splits

Splits occur when parts of verb, adjectival or prepositional phrases are separated between lines in headlines. For example, these two headlines have bad splits. The meaning suggested by the first line is totally different from the intended meaning of the complete headline.

**College may ban sex
offenders from dorms**

**Man surrenders in bus
stop abduction of teen**

Easy fixes for splits

Often, you can avoid splits by making a few adjustments:

Splits:
**City plans to
buy new
buses by
August**

Better:
**City plans
to buy
new buses
by August**

Sometimes, especially in one-column headlines, you are forced to choose between a split phrase and clarity. **Always choose clarity.**

For example, here's an example of an awkward split headline. Beside it is an alternative. It includes a split prepositional phrase, but the phrasing is much more fluid.

Original:
**Failed hit
case lands
in court**

Better:
**Trial set
in case of
failed hit**



Do I have to fill all the space?

The short answer is no. But neither do you want to leave gaping, distracting areas of white space next to your headlines. (Unintentionally that is. Sometimes you *want* white space, but that's a different discussion.) A good rule of thumb is to try to fill each line of a headline to within two counts.

Similarly, you don't want to leave one line of a multi-line headline drastically longer or shorter than the others. For instance, the phrasing in this headline is fine, but the difference in line lengths makes it distracting.

New York Philharmonic to give concert on campus in February

Notice how keeping the lines approximately the same length, as in the next example, makes the headline much more visually pleasing.

New York Philharmonic to perform at Lied Center

Don't obsess about exact counts, though. You are better off with an accurate, fluid headline that is a couple of counts short than one that fits perfectly but sounds stilted and padded.

Count

Each of these lines is 10 letters wide:

MMMMMMMMMM
WWWWWWWWWW
AAAAAAAAAA
SSSSSSSSSS
PPPPPPPPPP
llllllllll
ffffffffff
iiiiiiiiii
,,,,,,,,,,

All letters are not the same size. Some take up more room (m and w are the widest), while some take up much less (f, i, l, t and j are the narrowest). In most cases, you can see on the computer screen how well a headline fits, but knowledge of character length can make headline writing much easier. Below is the old system for counting headlines, which gives a good sense of gauging character length.

A count of 1: most lowercase letters (except f, i, l, t, j, m, w)
capital I
all numerals except 1
question marks
spaces between words

A count of 1½: most capital letters (except M, W and I)
lowercase m and w
\$, %, & and the dash

A count of 2: capital M and W

A count of ½: commas, periods and other punctuation
the numeral 1
lowercase letters f, i, l, t and j (flit-j)

Web heads

The same guidelines that apply for headlines in print apply to those online. A good headline tends to work in any medium.

The biggest difference is context. You know exactly where and how a print headline will appear. Pictures or graphics add context and often help focus headlines. Size and placement on a page indicate importance.

You can't count on any of that on the Web. Most of the time, you have the headline and only the headline. It may show up as a link on another site, on an RSS feed, or, perhaps most important, on a Google search. **Because the headline must do its work alone, the headline writer must be as precise as possible.**

Consider this New York Times headline, which showed up on a Google list of technology articles:

After the Months of Marketing Comes the Day of Reckoning

In print, that was a fine headline. It appeared above a picture of four futuristic soldiers from a video game. They were carrying large weapons and walking through the rubble of a ravaged city. The article beneath the headline had a label identifying the package as a column on new video games.

On the Web, that headline was a failure. And yet it offers a lesson in how Web headlines and print headlines are different. That doesn't mean that you should stifle your creativity when working on the Web. Rather, you need to keep in mind the different places the headline might show up, and make sure that it will work on its own in each of those places.

Details can lure a reader to click. For instance, "Burglar gets stuck in grocery store vent" is far more informative and interesting than "Store broken into."

Inform first, then entice.

If you try wordplay or other techniques in a Web headline, make sure the deck tells exactly what the story is about. (For the most part, that applies in print, too.)

Labels can draw in readers if they deliver what they promise. Again, be specific.

Consider how readers might misspell words, and include those words in the embedded HTML coding of a Web story.



Keywords

That last guideline is a reminder of the importance of keywords on the Web. You want your headlines and stories to show up on Google and other search engines. To do that, you have to think about what terms people will use in their online searches. Ideally, you want those terms in your headlines. If you can't do that, you want to make sure they are embedded in the coding.

Google offers some advice on using keywords. You will find it here:

<http://support.google.com/adwords/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=160320&from=64886&rd=1>