

I. Where readers start

Importance: The importance of headlines cannot be understated. For many editors, can seem like added burdens; the stories are what really count. Headlines are far too often written last.

Reader: The reader unfolds the newspaper and sees what first? The photos, the headlines. These are the first reader entry points. Busy people (which includes all of your readers) scan the newspaper, surveying photos, headlines and cutlines to decide if they want to commit more time to reading the stories that interest them. The photos, cutlines and headlines are thus important decision-making points. In fact, they may be more important than any paragraph in a normal story. Probably more news consumers see the headlines and cutlines on Page One than read the first graph of even the lead story.. **Good photography and good cutlines:** are vital ¾ but this lesson focuses on the page editor's role in providing information the reader needs to decide whether to read on: writing good headlines. Consider this: what is the correlation of the readers' needs for headlines -- and the importance placed on them by editors in terms of attitude and time allotted toward the task. Editors should dedicate plenty of time to this important task.

Accurate: in fact, in implication, in spelling, in grammar. When readers see errors, they assume a similar rate of error will continue. They must decide whether it is worth their time to read a story that may start with a 20 percent error rate in the headline (e.g., one error in five words).

II. Four imperatives for writing headlines

- ☐ Attract attention (using interesting, active words).
- ☐ Connect to ordinary readers (easily understood).
- ☐ Correct, in fact and implication.
- ☐ Set or match tone of the article.

Headline warning: Never allow cute, creative headlines to blind you to the need for accuracy. Be alert to headlines that have unintended meanings.

Current trend: in headline writing. Use hammer headlines: 1-3 words without a verb, often using a double-meaning or subtlety. The subhead then explains the news accurately

Headline



III. Headline writing process: news, features

- ☐ Be quick, but don't hurry. Don't allow the goal of "pushing pages" before deadline to short-circuit the need to write accurate, clear, tasteful headlines. Remember: readers start here.
- ☐ Understand the news peg or feature angle.
- ☐ Use the Key Word system: select key words from story (but don't parrot lead). Select words that reflect the central theme of the article.
- ☐ For news heads: play it straight, summarize the news.
- ☐ For feature heads: be creative. Tease, flirt, hint - but don't give away lead.
- ☐ In feature heads, use freshened cliches, creative puns, twists of ad slogans, well-known sayings.
- ☐ Highlight intrigue, contrast or conflict within central theme, using key words.
- ☐ Avoid lazy headline writing. Don't settle for your first try, then change type size to make it fit.
- ☐ Don't fall in love with your own cute, creative puns. The challenge: rewrite and make it better.
- ☐ Seek the input of others: How can the headline be misread? Does it work?
- ☐ Listen to the lone ranger: honor the courage of one brave soul who objects. One person who doesn't "get it" now represents thousands who won't get it later.
- ☐ When it comes down to Cute vs. Truth, make sure you choose the right one.

IV. The TACT Test

Taste - Attractiveness - Clarity - Truth

- ☐ Is it in good taste? Anything offensive in any way? Can anything be taken a wrong way?
- ☐ Does it attract the reader's attention? How can it be improved without sacrificing accuracy?
- ☐ Does it communicate clearly, quickly? Any confusion? Any odd words, double meanings?
- ☐ Is it accurate, true? Proper words used? Is the thrust of subject-verb true?

IV. The TACT Test (cont)

- ☐ A single "NO" above is a veto. One "No" vote represents thousands of readers. Start over: rethink the headline from the beginning.

IV The One-Last-Look Step

Each version of each headline must pass the TACT Test -- one last time. Don't forget this step. Don't rush through or bypass the TACT Test. The last or latest version must be examined as if it were the first version.

Errors in headlines do not often occur because the writer doesn't care. Many have occurred on headlines that got plenty of attention, but the One-Last-Look Step was skipped. It may have been a difficult head to write -- and all agree the last one solves a key problem. This may be the time when no one stops to reexamine it one last time for a newly created problem (e.g., a typo/misspelled word, a double meaning, a word that can be misunderstood by the ordinary reader). Always pause a minute to conduct the One-Last-Look Step..

The problem: The writer of the headline too quickly became infatuated with the rhyme and didn't double-check to make sure it was accurate. The writer forgot the One-Last-Look Step. The word flairs is the wrong word; the correct word: flares. Fortunately, this was caught and corrected by another editor whose-examined the headline carefully with a healthy, skeptical approach ¾ before it was published.

VI. Choosing Headline Verbs.

- ☐ Use active, short, action verbs.
- ☐ Remember to have fun; think of interesting ways to attract the reader.
- ☐ Balance the fun/attractive elements of the headline with accuracy.
- ☐ Avoid words that could be read as either a noun or a verb.
- ☐ Examine connotations, context, unintended meanings.
- ☐ Work hard to find the precise verb that summarizes the action.
- ☐ A note about synonyms. Are there any? There may be some ¾ but most words carry distinct connotations. Get the right word.

Heads without verbs

- ☐ Use creative, attractive hammers of one to three words.

VI. Choosing Headline Verbs. (cont)

- ☐ Then add drop heads in smaller type that clearly explains heart of story.
- ☐ Make the right choice: clear labels vs. vague labels (clear is better).
- ☐ Use humor and double meanings effectively.
- ☐ Beware the pitfalls of over-simplification.

Avoiding headlines

Shun headline jargon whenever possible:

- ☐ Stenholm eyes new legislation.
- ☐ Syrian head visits Senate.
- ☐ Mexican left wins more seats.
- ☐ Arson suspect held in Smithson case.
- ☐ Another gubernatorial candidate enters fray.
- ☐ FBI probe expected in hijacking case.

VII. Some Do's & Don'ts

- ☐ Make the headline easy to read. The key purpose is to communicate.
- ☐ Make the head complete in itself (especially true for news heads).
- ☐ Avoid slang unless relevant to feature story and headline.
- ☐ Abbreviate sparingly .
- ☐ Each line should be a unit by itself.
- ☐ Don't mislead reader.
- ☐ Don't split nouns, modifiers, verbs & prepositional phrases over two lines.
- ☐ Don't exaggerate; maintain neutrality.
- ☐ Don't use common or unrecognized names in heads.
- ☐ Don't use said, when you mean said to be ("County said considering tax increase").
- ☐ Don't use feel, believes or thinks.
- ☐ Don't pad heads with unnecessary words.
- ☐ Remember the rules of grammar and use them.
- ☐ Don't begin with a verb ("Saves daughter from fire").
- ☐ Don't use present tense to indicate future unless necessary; add time element for clarity.
- ☐ Use present tense to indicate past ("Bush wins presidency").
- ☐ Verify accuracy -- avoid any word carrying a double meaning.