

Some Guidelines for Headlines

- **Four functions of a headline:**

1. It gets the reader's attention.
2. It summarizes or tells about the article.
3. It helps organize the news on the page.
4. It indicates the relative importance of a story.

- **A good headline** should be accurate, clear, grammatically correct, strong, active, fresh and immediate. It should catch the reader's attention.

- **The two most basic rules for headlines:**

1. They must be accurate.
2. They must fit the available space.

- **For headlines to be accurate**, the headline writer must understand the article thoroughly before writing the headline; the copy editor who doesn't have a good view of what the article says isn't likely to write a headline that communicates clearly and accurately.

- **Accuracy tips:**

1. Spell check AFTER writing the display type.
2. In particular, double-check any proper names or any numbers.

- **The headline should sell the article to the reader.** Tell readers why they should be interested. Every news story headline should have an active VERB; headlines on feature stories can be more creative. But aim for complete thoughts. Tell the story, but avoid the "clears hurdle" or "man dies" phenomena. Get the most important element first, the least important head element last.

- **ATTRIBUTE** heads that convey opinion. If the lead needs attribution, chances are the headline will, too. Most times, attribution will go at the end of the headline.

- **Headlines should be accurate in TONE:** don't put a light headline on a serious story. Be careful not to put a first-day head on a second-day story. Match the tone of the story. Be original and creative, but not trite and cliché. If you do employ word play on an idiom or common phrase, be sure the meter is exactly the same. The headline will ring falsely otherwise. If you use a pun, be honest with yourself. Will it make the reader smile, or groan?

- **Don't repeat the lead in a headline.** Write a better headline than the lead. And don't give away the punch line of a feature story that has a surprise ending. Be aware of any unintended double meanings: Real-life examples of some headlines that were published: Old man winter sticks icy finger into Virginia.; Teens indicted for drowning in lake; FBI ordered to assist Atlanta in child slayings.

- **Avoid BAD BREAKS** at the end of lines, such as dangling prepositions or conjunctions.

- **Avoid HEADLINESE:** Words such as mull, eye, rap, hit, slam, vie, assail, seen and bid are headline weaklings. Alter your approach to get away from them. Look for a fresh approach.

- **Don't go for the obvious.** On fire-related stories, for example, stay away from verbs such as spark and snuff; on storm stories, stay away from verbs such as spawn, dump, blow, churn. In articles, hurricanes always seem to churn, and tornadoes are always spawned. And nothing should be taxing around April 15.

More tips on headline writing. Don P. Brown, copy editor for The Oklahoman's Features Department, and Doug Simpson, chief headline writer on the sports copy desk at The Oklahoman, offered some guidelines for headlines at "The New AGE of Copy Editing" workshop Sept. 13-15, 2002, in St. Louis, Mo.

More tips from the workshop:

- We can all write better headlines every day
- Tips anyone -- even you -- can use
- The language and style: Improving yours
- Some elements of poetry

Helpful links:

- "Focus Areas" on Mid-America Press Institute's Web site:
<http://www.mpinews.org>
- "Resource Material" on American Copy Editors Society's Web site:
<http://www.copydesk.org/>

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In page layout

- The layout editor should make the headlines work with the graphics and the art on the page. Most reader surveys show that newspaper readers look first at photos on a page, then headlines.
- The page designer should leave AMPLE ROOM so writers can create good headlines. Also, the layout editor should vary the SIZE and SHAPE of headlines to accurately grade the news elements for the reader.
- Some basic TYPES of headlines: banner (streamer), hammer, kicker or eyebrow (above the main headline), sidesaddle, deck (usually half the point size of the main headline), drop, read-in, read-out, jump heads.

Some Headline Technicalities

- Don't get into the habit of relying on SQUEEZING or STRETCHING the headline type to fit the space. To trained eyes, it can look sloppy, especially when the "doctored" headline appears near other headlines.
- In general, commas are used to replace 'and'; semicolons are used to split multisentence headlines. Many desks do not allow colons to indicate attribution, except in rare cases, so it might be best to avoid that usage altogether.
- Some "headlines" words to avoid: slate, solon, nix, eyes, acronyms (unless they are well-known, such as CIA, FBI), names of people who are not well-known. Don't convict someone in a headline (unless the story is about a conviction) -- use "in" instead of "for."
- Avoid repeating bugs or page titles in headlines. For example, in a regular column that runs with the bug "Insider Trading," avoid using the word "Insiders" in the headline.
- Avoid using the same word in several headlines that appear on the same page. This can easily bore the reader.

Doug Simpson's Tips

- Best headline writers are spontaneous and creative; the best headlines instantly come to you.
- Headline writers have to be the best writers at the newspaper.
- Many times, the best headlines you come up with cannot be printed!
- Continuity leads to better headlines; one must write them day after day to get good at it.
- Read others' headlines to get ideas, but doing so isn't necessarily going to make you a better headline writer.
- The most-effective headlines are those that give an old cliché a new twist; readers are familiar with the cliché, but something different about it will reel them in.
- The more conversational the headline, the more the readers will like it.
- Don't be so quick to abandon using articles such as "a," "and" and "the"; sometimes these words are needed for clarity. Also, headline styles change over time.
- Four-part test for each headline:
 1. Is it accurate?
 2. Is it clear?
 3. Is it proper in tone?
 4. Does it have a twist?

Don P. Brown is a copy editor for The Oklahoman's Features Department. He was the winner in the Large Newspapers Division of the inaugural American Copy Editors Society Headline Contest in 2000.)
Doug Simpson has been the chief headline writer on the sports copy desk at The Oklahoman for 15 years. He writes an average of 25 headlines every night and says he's always learning.

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