

The ONE MAIN THING: Your headline

Headlines are the second thing your readers will look at in your newsletter. (Graphics are the first.) Headlines are your main chance at getting folks to read the important information or feature material in the body of the article. So they must grab the reader's interest, attention, curiosity—and do it in no more than 3 to 8 words! When you finish an article – or get one from a contributor – read it over with a special eye to writing the headline. What is especially important or exciting about the article? What is the ONE THING that this article is mainly about?

Headline basics

Short — just a few words—3 to 8—say the experts. The headline should probably not be a complete sentence. “Comments from Executive VP Burrus on why he believes workers deserve higher wages and cost of living adjustments” is too long, too boring, and makes the reader feel she has the message just by reading the headline! “Burrus: Employer wage proposal insulting.” Then your lead sentence can identify VP Burrus for those who don't know him.

Punchy —hard-hitting and direct. Don't meander around the topic. Get it out and done with.

The KISS approach—keep it simply simple! Short words, simple construction—a phrase, a quick question. No convoluted thoughts and meanings.

Target the “one thing” — make sure the central, most important message in the article comes across loud and clear. “The election process” doesn't tell you much or get you at all excited about reading the article. “Our election process needs help: Yours!” involves the reader, suggests that it is our union election process we are talking about, and conveys the urgency of the writer's perceived argument for changing the system. **Avoid cute headlines which provoke the reader's interest, but do not indicate what the story is about.**

Sub-headings okay. Sometimes you can grab attention in the headline and then explain the “one thing” in a subhead. The headline grabs you; the subhead explains. The headline is bigger and bolder; the subhead smaller. Not: “Management approach to automation: Slash and Burn” But “Slash and Burn: Management's approach to automation”

Use the present tense —even if what you're talking about has already happened. “Union wins big” rather than “The union had a big victory”.

Be active—talk about events in action, not as static finished products. “Contractor's Association creates violence study group” not “Commission to study workplace violence.”

Be big and bold—set the headlines in as big a font as you have room for.

Use lower case, first word only capitalized— Not “CONTRACTOR'S ASSOCIATION CREATES VIOLENCE STUDY GROUP” or “Contractor's Association Creates Violence Study Group” but “Contractor's Association creates violence study group”.
