
4.4: *Headline Writing*

Objective(s):

The learner will:

- Recognize the various types of headlines and their uses
- Write appropriate headlines for stories

Vocabulary:

deck, hammer, tripod, wicket, main, secondary

No matter how much effort you put into a news story, feature story or editorial, if you can't get the attention of readers, you have wasted that time. Headlines serve several purposes: they attract the reader's attention, they may summarize the article, they may intrigue the reader, and they serve as a very important design element. The main headline, the dominant picture on the page or spread and the lead of the story should all work together to focus the reader's attention on the article. It's all a part of packaging, and the headline serves a crucial role in this.

Functions of a headline:

- The headline should reflect the content of the story and set the tone for the readers.
- Through its graphic design, the headline adds visual interest to the entire package.

Headline design:

- Remember the basic reading pattern of left to right and top to bottom.
- The most important story, and therefore, the headline to that story, should appear to the top and left of a page or spread if more than one headline appears at the top of the page.
- Headlines should be in larger type toward the top of the page, and then graduated down the page to reflect the importance of the story. More important stories will appear toward the top and their headlines should reflect their importance.
- Headlines should not have to compete for the reader's attention. Choose typography that is harmonious with other elements on the page.

Typographical design:

- Your publication should have a headline style sheet which specifies what typefaces are to be used for straight news stories and what enhancements may be used for feature packaging.

4.4: *Headline Writing*

- There should be no more than three typefaces used on a page or spread: one serif type, one sans serif type and one novelty or script font. Variations of these typefaces, such as italicizing and bold facing, may be used.
- Headline design should be a unifying factor in the publication.
- Visual interest can be achieved through the use of contrasting types: serif with sans serif, roman with italic, bold with light, large with small type.

Headline styles:

- ***Single line:***

Hastings Ninth Grade Center to open Monday

- ***Double line:***

**Students cope with decision
not to issue lockers this term**

- ***Hammer***

Rise and shine

Early morning D-Hall a real eye-opener

- ***Underline (Main headline with a secondary headline)***

It's always something

Students find innovative excuses for tardies, absences

4.4: *Headline Writing*

- *Overline*

Hurricane's winds and rain devastate community

A mid-summer nightmare

- *Wicket*

It did not last long
and it melted as soon as it touched ground,
but Tuesday's brief winter storm had students singing
'Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow'

- *Tripod*

It's a wrap:

Clubs raise funds By decorating gifts

Readers expect headlines to be direct and enlightening.

The lead of a news story summarizes the story, and the headline should summarize the lead, and it must do so in a limited amount of space. The headline should be reader-friendly, so there are some basic rules to guide the headline writer in this task. The main headline, photograph and lead of the story can all work together to seal an idea for the reader and together they are a powerful invitation for the reader to enter the story.

4.4: Headline Writing

Example:



In the example, the headline, picture and the caption all work together with a single theme to attract the readers' attention.

Figure 7.1: Layout courtesy Texas Association of Journalism Educators

The rules:

- Headlines should emphasize, summarize and help sell the stories' contents.
- There should be no opinion stated in a headline, with the exception of headlines for editorials and columns.
- Readers generally scan headlines very quickly to see if there is anything that they want to read about, so the most newsworthy information must be featured. The headline will be read by more people than the story will.
- The headline is the number 1 entry point into the story
- The headline should not give information that is not given in the story.
- The headline should inform the reader through a simple declarative sentence: subject, verb, direct object.
- The best headlines are in active voice and use action verbs rather than "being verbs"
- To reflect past action, the headline should be written in present tense.
- To show future or possible action, the headline should be written with the infinitive form of the verb: to + verb
- Headline writers should use "can" or "may" rather than "will" unless they are absolutely sure their predictions are accurate.
- Headlines should let the reader know who is doing what, along with other necessary Ws and H. The "when" is generally not necessary.
- Abbreviations should be avoided in headlines. Initials should be used only when the readers are familiar with what they stand for.

4.4: *Headline Writing*

- The vast majority of the student body knows what school they attend, so it is not necessary to tell them repeatedly in headlines. Don't use the name of the school or its initials in headlines
- Avoid the use of "a", "an", and "the". Eliminating these words makes room for more interesting subjects, verbs and objects.
- Headline structure should be varied. Use multi-line headlines as well as one-line headlines on news stories. For special stories and feature stories, use specialty or feature headlines.
- When writing multi-line headlines:
 - a. Keep verb phrases on the same line.
 - b. Keep adjectives and the words they modify on the same line.
 - c. Keep adverbs and the words they modify on the same line.
 - d. Keep prepositional phrases on the same line.
 - e. Keep words that go together, such as a first and last name, on the same line.
 - f. A line of a headline cannot end with a hyphen.
- Keep capitalization to a minimum. Most newspapers use down-style, that is, capitalizing only the first word in the headline and proper nouns and adjectives. All-cap headlines are difficult to read and should only be used in small doses for emphasis.
- Punctuation in headlines should be minimal:
 - a. Use single quotation marks rather than double.
 - b. Use a comma in place of the word "and"
 - c. Colons can be used to replace the word "said".

Example:

Coach: 'Best season ever'

- d. Use semicolon to separate two complete thoughts.

Example:

**Bears victorious;
coach resigns**

4.4: *Headline Writing*

Top 10 List of 'Dos' in Headline Writing

1. **Do** read the article, especially the opening paragraphs, to understand the purpose and main idea.
2. **Do** give the most general, overall focus/summary of the story.
3. **Do** remember that the headline may be the reason the reader decides to read the story (Entry point.)
4. **Do** limit the number of words -- 6 to 10, generally
5. **Do** use strong, active verbs. (To be verbs are generally understood, but not written out.)
6. **Do** use present tense verbs to show past action. Use the infinitive (to plus the verb) to show future action.
7. **Do** express a complete thought. Headlines usually read like simple sentence, without words like "a", "an" and "the".
8. **Do** use a secondary headline -- or subhead-- to convey an additional idea of a story.
9. **Do** substitute a comma for the word "and."
10. **Do**, for downstyle headlines, capitalize only the first word and proper nouns and adjectives. For upstyle headlines, capitalize the first letter of each word. Avoid all cap headlines as they are hard to read.

4.4: *Headline Writing*

Top 10 List of 'Don't Dos' in Headline Writing

1. **Don't** editorialize in the headline.
2. **Don't** use acronyms/abbreviations that readers won't recognize.
3. **Don't** put information in a headline that isn't in the story.
4. **Don't**--in most cases with hard news stories--write the headline from any part of the story other than the summary lead.
5. **Don't** copy the wording in the lead for the headline.
6. **Don't** overuse puns. If you groan, it's no good; if you laugh, it is good.
7. **Don't** use headlines with double-entendre meanings. It takes a dirty mind to edit a clean newspaper.
8. **Don't** split: adjectives / nouns; nouns; verbs / adverbs; prepositions / nouns etc.
9. **Don't** turn in three or four versions of a headline, unless the editor specifically requests it.
10. **Don't** be afraid to ask for help.

--adapted from workshop handouts

Tips on headline writing:

1. Each separate part (deck) of a headline is a separate thought. For example, put one piece of information in the main headline. Put a different piece of information in the secondary headline.
2. When writing multiple line headlines, write the whole thought out as one line, then divide it at logical points to go on separate lines. If you try writing separate lines to fit together, your headline very likely will make no sense whatsoever.
3. Don't overwork the word *students*. Certainly your newspaper is about students. Your readers are aware of that. You don't have to remind them in every headline.