

## Basic headline rules

- **Summarize what's new** about the story. Don't just label the general subject matter. You have to keep up with the news to know what was reported previously.
- **Use present-tense verbs** even if the event happened in the past. ("Man bites dog," not "Man bit dog.")
- **Avoid time elements** except when referring to future events. "Meyer dies at dawn" means the instructor will die tomorrow morning, not that he did die at sunrise today.
- **Avoid question headlines** or tentative headlines. A headline should answer questions, not ask them, and shouldn't hide behind lots of "may"s.
- **Capitalize normally**, as you would in a typical sentence, not as you might in some misbegotten title for a term paper.
- **Eliminate unnecessary words**, including articles and most forms of the verb "to be."
- **Avoid unfamiliar acronyms or names**. If it is shows up in a headline, it has to be so widely known that absolutely no one would fail to get it right if asked to identify the person or the abbreviation .
- **Avoid "headlinese"** words such as "hike," "rip," "blast," "pols," "mull," "eye" and "ponder." We're not hacks, even though some of you may work on or read hack newspapers.
- **Don't "split" phrases** from one line to the next. This includes separating adjectives from nouns, prepositions from objects, and auxiliary verbs from main verbs. Imagine reading your head aloud with a long pause at the end of each line. If it sounds wrong, chances are it's split. For example:  
*Increase in bus  
fares likely to  
add to joblessness*  
A better headline, without the splits, might be:  
*Rising bus fares  
likely to increase  
unemployment rate*
- **If you can turn a phrase** prosaically, do so, but make sure the headline "reads right" the first way, with any subtleties coming out secondarily.
- **Avoid puns** unless they are really funny and the subject matter is, as well.

■ **Think dirty** and re-read your headline. If there's a way to misread it with dirty intentions, it probably needs to be rewritten.

■ **Award-winning headlines** from this year's competition sponsored by the American Copy Editor Society:

*Queasy Street*

*Market opens with 330-point drop, rebound*

*New districts have GOP written all over them*

*Ergonomics, economics  
often go hand in hand*

*Surgeon general: Sex is not a 4-letter word*

*Teaching girls to divide and conquer*

*An old trick  
can dog you*

(column about a magician's botched attempt to break free from thumb cuffs)

*So ends  
the winter  
of their  
discontent*

*Library fans await reopening after renovations*

*Privacy is  
becoming  
everyone's  
business*

*Online firms new and old are offering  
consultation services, hoping to benefit  
from growing anxiety about data collection*

*Some are losing  
it, bit by bit*

*Owners of digital devices are relying less  
on memory and more on megabytes  
to recall phone numbers and birthdays  
once burned on their brains*

*Question on payday:  
Paper or plastic?*

*Employers can "deposit" wages onto prepaid  
Visa cards that workers can use at ATMs, stores*

*Going in style*

*Restrooms in some public places are worth  
a trip even if you don't need to go*

*There's a movement afoot*

*Irish dance entices more to shake a leg*

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# Tips on better headlines

## ■ Word association

Think of key words and do free association to develop angles. Put them together as if assembling a kidnap note. Scramble, rescrumble, mix and match. Add to the list whatever catch phrases, movie titles, etc., you can imagine. Good wordplay makes good use of contrast, delightfully twists a phrase or is somehow pleasing to the ear. It's not a groaner pun, and it doesn't rely purely on alliteration. The best plays on words take a fresh look at a well-worn phrase. Examples: **So close, so Favre** (when Brett Favre and the Packers stole a game) or **No longer a senior** (over a photo of an 87-year-old in cap and gown: Harvard University's oldest graduate.)

## ■ Mental picture

What picture comes to mind as you read the story? Use that in your headline. Prime examples: **Wearing jackets of ice, crops weather freeze; Bashful moon to blush as Earth passes by and From intensive care to death chamber.**

## ■ Perfect verb

Strong, well-chosen, anthropomorphic verbs can really make a headline. Examples: **Summer muscles its way into spring** and **Deputies inch toward unionization**. Or, over a story on drought emergency regulations: **State seizes the spigot.**

## ■ Personification

For a wrenching piece about how immigration law forced a tearful goodbye of a man and his wife and daughter at an airport: **Heartache boards the plane.**

## ■ Perspective

Come at the head from a different viewpoint. Instead of writing the head from the government's perspective (**Officials consider later high school starting times**), write it from the affected person's perspective (**High schoolers: Don't reset alarm yet**).

## ■ Emotion

Go for the emotion in the story. Is there anger? Love? Frustration? Desperation? Appreciation? Respect? Elation? Shame? Embarrassment? Readers respond to emotion. Hit 'em in the gut or the heart. Examples: **Thief wanted gift; she let him have it** and **When dialing # \* turns into @!\$&!**

## ■ Quote

Is there a great quote that sums up the story? Don't overuse this technique, but it can be effective: **"He never had a chance."**

## ■ Foreshadowing

Give readers a compelling detail that foreshadows the action and makes them wonder but doesn't frustrate them with vagueness. For example, instead of banging people over the head tabloid-style with Dr. J admitting that Wimbledon sensation Alexandra Stevenson is his love child, a headline writer took a better route: **In the hot glare of fame, secret is revealed.**

## ■ Punctuation

Set up the punch line of a headline (**These surgeons have nerves of steel. They're robots.**) Or, for a story on a new tollbooth: **Sayreville becomes synonymous with change — 35 cents, to be exact.** The danger comes in over-punctuating

## ■ Specifics

Sometimes, just making a headline more specific really helps. Instead of **Slain woman mourned at service**, try **1,500 attend funeral for slain woman**. How many people have that great a number of mourners show up for their funeral?

## ■ Possessives

Possessives (his, their, Pope's) tend to give headlines more zing and make them sound less like "headlines" and more like conversation. Choose **Clinton breaks his leg over President breaks leg** every time.

## ■ Taste your cooking

After you've written the headline, pull away and pretend you're picking up a newspaper from the newsstand and seeing the story for the first time. Does the headline capture the essence of what the writer intended?

The gist of a headline should be readily apparent to every reader upon first glance. When some colleague says, "I don't get it," or "What's that mean?" don't even bother trying to explain. Just shrug your shoulders and start anew.

Examine any photograph that runs with it. The head and photo should play off each other.

Avoid punning with a person's name, never require quote marks to help the reader get the joke, and make sure any pun must scan both ways: as a joke and literally.