



Headline Checklist

[American Press Institute](#)

After you have written a headline, stop and ask yourself:

1. Does it tell the news clearly? If it's a news story, does the headline contain the latest developments? If it's a feature story, does it convey the basic sense of the story?
2. Is it accurate and informative? Is it compelling in approach, news angle and impact?
3. Does it contain concrete nouns and active-voice, present-tense verbs?
4. Does the tone fit the story, so that when there is emotion or a human element, irony or humor it is reflected in the head?
5. Does it avoid the obstacles to clarity: jargon, cliches, slang, headlines, forced phrases, abbreviations, acronyms, obscure names and puns? Serious news stories should not contain any puns.
6. Does it have words or meanings that are as precise as possible?
7. Does it make each word count by being direct and dense with information?
8. Does it play fair by trying to reflect both sides of a story if an opposing view exists, or at least avoid overemphasizing one point of view?
9. Does it avoid danger of libel, take caution with sensitive material and include attribution when necessary?
10. Does it include the "where" when important? Does it signal any local involvement in the news when it may not be clear otherwise?
11. Does it avoid names that may not be well known?
12. Does it avoid elements of bad taste, double meanings, exaggeration and sensationalism?

HEADLINE COACHING SHEET//TECHNIQUES

Strategies for excelling at headline-writing in news sections:

- o At first, disregard the "count" and write the head the way you would like it to appear. Then start making as few adjustments as possible to fit the headline into the available count. Drop the most expendable words or switch to better-fitting words, while staying close to your original intent. A thesaurus may help.
- o Identify the key angle and key words. Follow the checklists that help achieve consistency and quality. Recognize that headlines tell the story best when they are clear, specific, precise and dense with information.

HEADLINES CHECKLIST II

Many things can weaken a headline. Things to avoid:

- o Inappropriate language or a tone that doesn't fit the story.
- o Exaggerating conflict, danger, criticism, etc.
- o Editorialization or words that suggest an opinion of the head-writer.
- o A "negative" head using the word "not."
- o Conclusions the story doesn't back up.
- o Inappropriate assumptions or interpretations.
- o Piled-up adjectives or other modifiers that detract from clarity.
- o A "label head," unless omitting the verb helps the head or the count is so short that a "book title" head is the only way out.
- o Assumptions that the reader has been following the story daily.
- o Obscure names that readers won't instantly recognize.
- o Undue familiarity, often by using a person's first name.
- o Pronouns alone and unidentified, such as in: His business is your pleasure, or: It's all in the wrist, she says.
- o Abbreviations or acronyms that are not instantly recognizable.
- o Jargon, which clouds the meaning for readers.
- o Cliches, which are neither creative nor compelling.
- o Meanings the reader won't "get" until the story is read.
- o Echoing the lede or stealing the punchline.
- o A hard-news head based on facts far down in the story.
- o Puns in heads on serious news stories.
- o Putting first-day heads on second-day stories.
- o Using "question" or "colon" heads routinely.