



Writing Effective Headlines (Outline)

By [Kenn Finkel](#)

I. Approaching a headline.

A. Read the story all the way through — and complete the editing process — before beginning to write the headline (it's shocking how many editors don't follow this obvious axiom). Of course, this doesn't mean that you can't begin to note a few key words as you work on the story. But finish the editing process before beginning to craft the head.

B. Think about the story. What's the point?

1. In a news story, the point should be made early.

2. If the copy editor has trouble deciding what the point is, maybe the story needs more editing — or even rewriting.

3. A news story or backgrounder will usually have a so-called nut paragraph. The headline can often be written by using this as a starting point. If there is no nut paragraph, this might be an indication that the reporter is no more certain of the point of the story than the editor is.

4. In some cases, you should be able to distill the essence of the story into a sentence, and then edit the sentence into a headline that fits the count. Using computer terminals to write and count headlines lends itself readily to this technique. It was a lot tougher during paper, pencil and typewriter days.

5. Sometimes the cause of the action is more newsworthy than the result, and this is reflected in a well-written headline.

C. Be specific. Don't say that someone testified; say what the key testimony was.

D. Cram information. Use all the space the count allows.

E. Use short words, but don't be too cryptic.

F. Try to use active voice, but don't be wed to this guideline so that the thrust of the headline is weakened or that you waste words. The crucial words in most headlines should come near the beginning.

G. Use positive, action verbs.

H. Get a verb or key word into the top line.

I. For features, don't summarize if this spoils the impact. Tempt readers with a tidbit to whet their interest (but don't be so obscure that you drive them away).

J. The special situation might call for a gimmick. But don't overdo gimmicks; they lose their effect quickly.

K. Keep in mind that headlines should have a sound, a rhythm. They are visual, yes, but they also make sounds in the minds of the readers. Most headlines work well if they have a staccato beat and a feeling of urgency.

L. Never forget that the purpose of the headline is to make readers want to go into the story. One-upmanship and word games among a rim of editors are self-defeating when the real target is ignored. Keep this maxim in mind: Don't write headlines for your peers; write them for your readers.

II. Headline techniques to avoid.

A. Lifting a phrase verbatim from the lead of the story and making it the headline.

B. Splits. Particularly when a modifier is at the end of one line and its noun or pronoun is at the beginning of the next. Or when a preposition is at the end of one line and its object is at the beginning of the next. Or when the to of an infinitive is at the end of one line and its completing verb is at the beginning of the next. The guideline tends to be more rigid for two-line heads and for lines 1 and 2 of three-line heads than it does for lines 2 and 3 of three-line heads. One explanation: if readers have read two lines of a three-line head, they are committed — and therefore less likely to be bothered by a split.

C. Repetition of thoughts or words. Watch this regarding the main headline and the kicker (or between decks).

D. Belaboring the obvious. (Example: Grand jury indicts Jones. Who else but grand juries

indict? Pushing too hard to use the active voice caused the problem.) Another aspect of belaboring the obvious involves headlines with no news value. Read your headline with reverse meaning. If the reverse meaning is more interesting, then your headline belabors the obvious. (Example, you write a headline that says: Minister professes belief in God. The reverse meaning, that is, the minister says he doesn't believe in God, is more interesting. Therefore, your headline belabors the obvious.)

E. Headlines: Confab, tilt, probe, hit, ink, etc.

F. Trying so hard to express a thought in short words that you say the opposite.

G. Headlines with a verb but no subject. (Example: Kill 3 in shootout)

H. Headlines without a verb, or, at least, an implied verb. (Sometimes you can get away with this technique over feature stories or backgrounders if you're trying for an effect. But be careful of overworking a gimmick.)

I. Forms of the verbs to be and to have. Often these weaken headlines. Earthquake rocks Southern California is a strong head. Southern California has earthquake is weak. Smith arrested is stronger than Smith is arrested. (But be careful. Sometimes dropping the is or the are can give a headline a cryptic, side-of-the-mouth flavor.)

J. Too many adjectives or adverbs. Active, specific verbs provide the best description. You don't have room for many adjectives or adverbs in well-written headlines.

K. Headlines that have an un- or a not construction. Usually the concept of your headline should be expressed with a positive twist. Directors silent on takeover bid is a better way to say Directors won't comment on move. Jones drops out of race is a better way to say Jones won't be in race.

L. Headlines with a may or might construction. If the best headline you can find for a story is that someone might do something, then perhaps the story lacks focus.

M. Unrestrained hyperbole. (Example: Councilman explodes)

N. Clichés or overused trendy phrases. (Example: Students make money the old-fashioned way — they earn it)

O. Puns and other plays on words. (Example: Rubber industry bounces back) Under certain circumstances, these can work, but, if they are used regularly, they give your paper a sophomoric tone. The rare use of this technique should be one in which the multiple meaning fits at every level and the words are so compelling that no other headline will do the job. Once in a while, this condition is true. Usually it is not.

P. Padding.

Q. Alphabet soup.

R. Nicknames.

S. Pronoun heads, especially over news stories. (Example: She predicts 30-hour week will soon be the norm)

III. **Headline hints.**

A. Be careful of question-mark headlines. If you ask too many questions, maybe you don't have the answers.

B. Take a skeptical look at the headline after you write it. Does it convey your meaning? Is there double entendre lurking that will give readers an unintended lascivious chuckle when they see it? Look again when the headline is on a page proof or in an early edition. A headline doesn't always look the same on paper as it does on a computer screen. If you have another edition or a replate, change it. Improve it.

C. Watch sequence of tenses. Headlines in present tense describe action in the story, something that happened yesterday (or even today if you have p.m. editions). Past-tense references in headlines describe action that took place before the action in the story. But sometimes present tense must be used to describe future events. Read your headlines carefully to be certain that the tense sequence makes the situation clear to the reader. Remember: The reader doesn't know as much about the story as you do.

D. Before you begin to write the headline, jot down four or five key words or concepts (some of these might be implied, rather than expressed in the story). Rate the words by importance, and then try to construct the headline around these words or concepts, with the most important ones used first.

E. Imagine describing the story to a friend. Can you summarize it in seven or eight words that would make the friend take interest or want to know more about it? An extension of that technique would be to apply the barroom test of the late J. Montgomery Curtis of the American Press Institute. Monty always suggested that you write the headline, then imagine swinging open a barroom door and shouting it. If a lot of heads turn, you probably have a good headline.

F. The single-thought concept is a good one. Headlines with subordinate clauses — expressed or implied — indicate a lack of focus. If your headline has a so that he or as she concept, it is

probably wandering.

G. Unless the location — the where — is the news in the story, don't use it in the headline. Location references are usually dull and waste space — unless that location is what makes the story news in the first place. Obviously the guidelines would be different if you are writing headlines for a regional page — on which you would probably have news from several localities.

H. Don't be too quick to drop articles. Usually we leave out a or an or the when we write heads, but sometimes the articles are necessary — either for clarity or to establish the rhythm necessary to a good headline.

I. Be sure — if you use a person's name — that the name evokes instant recognition. If readers have to think about which Smith you mean, they'll move to another story.

J. Occasionally, label headlines do work. If you have all the key words and cover the news, a strong headline without a verb might be the best one for that story. Just don't use this technique too often.

K. Never say never. Nothing is absolute except that common sense is the ultimate guideline. The best headline rule is the one that says a rule should be broken if circumstances dictate.

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