Copy editors hold the key

A skillfully written headline can open the door into a story

By HANK GLAMANN
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Last Sunday morning, my newspaper landed on my driveway with a distinct and rather satisfying ker-thunk. "This is a substantial publication," I thought. "I wonder how many words are in it."

I measured inches and counted columns. I included only editorial matter, ignoring the advertising. My efforts yielded an estimated news hole of 180,000 words.

About the same size as the New Testament.

All of it.

How long would it take you to read the New Testament? And do you spend that long with your Sunday paper each week?

Readers simply don't give us that kind of time, much as we might wish they would. On a typical day, it is estimated, a typical reader gives us between 15 and 25 minutes. A bit longer on Sunday, perhaps, but nowhere near enough for Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, etc., etc., etc.

So, confronted with a publication of biblical proportions, how do busy readers decide which chapters of it are worthy of their time?

The principal answer is the mighty headline.

All readers are skimmers to some extent. They leaf through the paper waiting for something to stop them, to pull them in. It's the headline that does it more often than anything else.

The big type is what readers see first. It demands to be read. If it does its job well, the door to the story opens and the reader steps inside. If not, he or she moves on to the next story, the next page, the next section, the next thing on today's to-do list.

Here are just a few thoughts on how can we make our headlines do their job better.

**Be sure that the key words are in the head. Using them is like waving a flag for the reader: "Here's a subject you care about. Don't miss it." And, all other things being equal, put those power words as early in the head as possible.

**Watch out for bad breaks from line to line, often between adjectives and the nouns they modify. This is the single greatest structural defect of contemporary new headlines. Readers see heads as a sequence of vertical tiles, so it matters how the words are split. Try to make each line a single thought, or a single discreet compartment within a larger thought.

**Before you write your head, ask yourself why you're putting the story into the paper. What does it mean? What makes it interesting? Why should the reader care? This thought process will help you to find the heart of the matter, which is what should be in the headline.

**Never type a proper name into a headline (or any other display type) freehand. Use copy-and-paste, and you'll always get it right (assuming that it's right in the story).

**Run the spell-checker after you've written your heads. It's hard to catch your own errors, and the computer can find spelling mistakes in heads just as it does in any other type.

**Never say never. The moment you ban a particular style of headline (label heads or puns, for example), a situation will arise promptly in which that's precisely what you should use. Employ alternative approaches judiciously, but don't be doctrinaire.

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