



Headlines Are Easy, Aren't They?

By [Wayne Countryman](#)

Headline writing is easy. Edit story, check whether cutline is needed, make sure coding is correct, convey information concisely and accurately, send to slot.

Oh, you want good headlines? That's difficult.

It gets easier with experience, except when repetition makes it more difficult.

"C'mon, this ain't brain surgery. It's not rocket science," barks your newsroom's enforcer of deadlines. True: Brain surgeons and rocket scientists don't have to put clever, enticing labels on their work while struggling with daily/nightly deadlines.

10 basic rules I've been taught for writing headlines:

1. Always use active tense.
2. It is not necessary to use active tense.
3. Use clever punctuation.
4. Don't get clever with punctuation.
5. Read your work aloud. Bounce ideas off your co-workers.
6. Shut up, we're trying to work here.
7. Use the most vivid image in the story.
8. Write it from the lede. And don't steal the reporter's thunder.
9. Use the hed to draw the reader into the story.
10. Write the hed so that the reader doesn't need to read the story.

Hmmmmm, it's a wonder that I ever write a decent hed.

Let's try again. Most of us began as reporters; what did we learn then?

1. Keep it tight (as if headline writers have a choice).
2. Get it right (that includes facts and spelling). Spellcheck, if you work on a computer with that function. Keep a dictionary and other reference books nearby.
3. Know your publication's style. Follow it, unless you have a reason that you can put into words that a harried slot editor might heed.
4. Write for the reader (not your ex-professors, contest judges, competitors or co-workers).
5. Eschew obfuscation. For example, "buy," a short word, often is the best. "Infrastructure," popular with bureaucrats, means little without elaboration. With the elaboration, "infrastructure" might not be needed.
6. If you're not sure what a word or term means, ask someone who does or look it up. Or use something else.
7. You have no idea what approach to take: Do you understand your subject? Is the problem with your source material? Fix.

8. Rewrite, so that others need not reread.
9. Read the work of others, especially those who do good work. This includes non-news publications, and even fiction. (Don't imitate James Joyce or Harlequin romances often, though.) But don't plagiarize.
10. Listen to suggestions and criticism. Apply or reject as appropriate.
11. Don't lock yourself into a gimmick, such as keeping a list to 10.

Other ways in which I cope with my weaknesses:

1. If a great headline idea hits me, I write it at the top before I forget it, even if I haven't finished reading the story. If the idea no longer seems great after the story is edited, I look for another idea.
2. Trying to force too much information into a tight headline does no one a favor.
3. Banging your head on your desk merely delays the inevitable -- writing the headline.
4. Running a headline past the reporter or assigning editor can help, but don't lead them to expect it. (I do this about once a year.)
5. Negotiate with the layout editor. A drop head, please? Smaller point size, perhaps?
6. Deep breaths and chocolate.

Go get em!

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