Headline Importance

By [Joe Hight](#)
Managing Editor
The Oklahoman

Headlines are vital to any good newspaper. In a few short words, they tell what the story is about. Entice readers to read more. Set a tone for the story.

They're as tough to write as leads are on deadline, perhaps even tougher.

Even though writers usually have more words to work with than headline writers, they do share several common traits, including:

No. 1, 2 and 3: Their headlines must be accurate, fair and clear to readers.

Headline writers should double-check stories with their headlines to ensure accuracy. Avoid words that tend to give the writer's opinions. Make sure that the headline is clear in meaning. They should use active verbs and concrete words, not passive and general ones. They must avoid bureaucratic terms, useless cliches and journalese. Headline writers also must avoid "headlinese" -- words such as mull, eye and hit that Anne Glover of the St. Petersburg Times calls "headline weaklings."

They should write the headline to fit the context of the story's topic. A news head for a news story. A creative head for a feature. "If you cried reading the story, then you want a touching head. If you were laughing, write a funny head," Glover writes. "Although you want to match the tone of the story, don't steal the exact words. Write a better headline than the lead."

Write for the reader first. What will make readers want to read the story? What's important to them?

Headlines should be as tightly written as possible. Headline writers must avoid unnecessary words. Like reporters who take notes during an interview, headline writers should take notes

while reading a story to formulate a headline. In his book "Words on Words," John B. Bremner writes that headline writers "take precise words with precise meanings and fit them into precise dimensions. Their tool is a chisel, the fine semantic chisel of exact language with exact meaning and exact dimension."

Headline writers don't receive bylines as writers do. But what they do is just as important.