



Headline writing can be simple

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Headline writing is a skill that most editors can hone over time.

I've been in journalism for 15 years, and have been writing headlines most of that time. The process can become second-nature for many, but each story offers the headline writer a chance to sharpen his skill in crafting a great headline. It is a skill just as much as it is an art.

Writing excellent headlines takes creativity and a good vocabulary. It takes a clear understanding of the newspaper's style rules, and the rules of good headline writing, in general.

Sometimes, writing contest winners might mean bending the rules a bit. If it's really a great headline, you might decide it warrants violating a minor point of style, or that total comprehension is not necessary. Let each case stand on its own merits.

I've found that coming up with a basic headline on a story is fairly simple and straightforward. The real creativity comes after you've got that basic headline. That basic headline is what you can tweak to turn it into a winning headline.

And in order to do this, you must allow yourself the time for tweaking. If your normal procedures do not allow ample time for the task of writing the headline, try to alter it so that there is ample time. Don't give short shrift to the headline process because, 1.) It shows in the end product, and 2.) It's not fair to the reporter or the readers.

How important is the headline? I've heard it said many times that students in journalism school

are taught that the lead is the most important element of their stories. But it's really the headline that's the most important. The headline is what guides the reader to the story; it is what the reader uses to make a "read-don't read" decision. So, if the headline is poor, chances are the reader won't spend the time on that story.

I also believe that the types of stories or the section of the newspaper in which you work has a lot to do with providing you the opportunity to craft winning headlines. I've found that in my years on the news desk, coming up with great and wonderful headlines was much more difficult for me than it has been in the past three years that I've worked on the features desk.

It seems sports headline writers have it made! They seem to always have the subject matter that will allow them to made their headlines shine. But those of you who put headlines on straight news or business copy, don't despair. The little gems come along now and then that give you the chance to shine, too.

Don Brown is a past ACES winner for headline writing.