



Teasers: the other front-page headlines

By [Neil Holdway](#)

Writing the front-page teasers often is viewed as a tedious daily chore, but the task of showing just a little bit here, a little bit there is an art like so many others at a newspaper – and such an important one.

Teasers are the front-page headlines for stories that don't make it on the front page. They help direct readers to things they care about inside your newspaper, and they can compel passersby to buy your paper off the newsstand. They therefore increase circulation and advertising revenue, which can bring resources to your copy desk. And they play a large part in developing your newspaper's character.

Here's a guide to the art of the teaser.

Big teaser decisions

First, do you want them? Many editors and designers don't like teasers. Some think they take up too much front-page space. Some think they're not useful. If they're poorly done, they won't be. So if you decide you want them, then you should commit to them. Teasers should get the same care front-page headlines do, but with a marketing flair. Yes, you're trying to sell your newspaper. Don't worry; you can still maintain your journalistic integrity.

Long or short? Do you want short, larger-type, headline-style teasers, or longer, brief-style teasers? USA Today employs full briefs down the side that provide a quick way to read the news as well as tease to full stories. The Wall Street Journal's "What's News" section does the same thing. More papers, however, feature headline-style teasers on top and smaller teasers down the side. If you want to help readers quickly navigate the paper, shorter is always better.

What should you tease to? "Newspapers are so incapable of identifying the most interesting story," said Bill Ostendorf, a former managing editor/visuals at The Providence Journal and now a newspaper design and management consultant. Editors

get in a rut, he says, and think they must always tease to hard news or the lead stories of inside sections. "The most interesting story is on page 5 of every section. What we put on the cover is what everyone already knows is in the paper."

So the teasers shouldn't promote only the stories you and the editors think are the best; they should market the stories that matter to the readers. Features as ordinary as the advice column, the gossip column, an op-ed piece, the personal finance section and the auto section are as important as the international news, sports and movie reviews.

Who writes them? At my paper the local, metro and section editors wrote the teasers for the stories they edited, and if they didn't, the copy desk begrudgingly did. When we redesigned, we decided to devote only a few copy editors to writing the teasers, a single copy editor each day. The teasers now get their proper attention and continuity.

Basic points

Use art: Art gets attention, so teasers with it are always better than teasers without it.

Keep them error-free: Teasers are front-page elements, so they'll be seen. Errors – of fact, grammar, page number, any kind – hurt your paper's credibility.

Again, keep it short: It bears repeating: Teasers are more useful to readers if you're not making them read a whole lot of type before they actually read the story.

Speak right to the readers: You're trying to make your newspaper useful to them. So not "The cost of postage stamps will increase next week" but "How much more you'll have to pay for stamps starting Monday." Yes, use "you"; it's OK. Ostendorf also suggests key words that a study he was part of found to be attention-getters, like "guide," "top 10," "best bets," and "your best (letters, pictures, vacation destinations, etc.)."

Be different: Especially if you're in a competitive environment, you want to show potential readers why they should pick up your paper and not the other one. Don't say merely "Cubs win in extra innings." Show what your sports writers are really saying: "For once Sammy plays for the team and saves the Cubs."

Read the whole story! No, reading the lead is not enough to compose a story's teaser, and above all, don't use the very words the reader will see again in the lead. You can get yourself a teaser that way, but it won't be one that's very useful to the reader. Once you see all the details and the overall voice of the story, you can write a truly

compelling teaser.

For that matter, look at the story's layout How much space is it taking up? What other elements does it include? Seeing the whole package will help you devote the appropriate amount of space to the teaser, as well as the proper voice.

And don't steal the story's headline: Duplicating the head wastes the reader's time, when you can be so much more useful and entertaining.

Finer points

How much do you – ahem – reveal? Giving away the whole story wouldn't give readers a reason to go inside, would it? But maybe giving them a scintillating little piece will make them crave more. At the same time, being too much of a, um, tease can be irritating. In the postage stamp example above, for instance, I didn't give the amount of the increase. Would you?

What's the latest angle? In addition to differentiating yourself from the competition, you also want to give your readers something more than what they've already heard on the TV or radio. If your football team's head coach was fired, it would be all over the sports talk shows. So "Bears fire Wannstedt" at the top of your paper is old news. What more does your paper have on the story? Could it be something like, "Out of time: Bears lose patience with Wannstedt." Or if you really have the inside scoop, go simply with "Why the Bears finally dumped Wannstedt."

When you tease a columnist, use his or her voice: Quote them. Paraphrase them. And save the attribution for the middle or the end: "Why are the White Sox acting as if the Minnesota Twins don't exist? Barry Rozner wants to know why the team's management appears to be uninterested in making an acquisition or two."

Don't do the bait-and-switch: Don't you hate when the TV news promotes a piece all night, over and over, and it turns out to be only 30 seconds long? Or bad magazine covers with flashy teasers and lots of exclamation points promoting things that turn out to be briefs? Or cover teasers that improperly use a celebrity, like "Make people look at you like you're Madonna!" A teaser should accurately reflect its subject.

Even tease a couple of days ahead of time: If you've got a big story coming up, start touting it early, giving away very little. Then on the day of publication, rewrite the teaser and give away just a little more.

Tease with photos, too: When using art with your teaser, avoid using the same art

accompanying the story, or in the case of multi-photo packages, avoid using the lead art. If you have no choice but to use the same art, crop it; crop on the person being profiled rather than include the background, or crop on a single tree in the nature shot.

Be the voice of your newspaper: Your newspaper has an image, a character it's trying to present to your readers. It's in your design, in your writing style, in your content, in everything, so it should be in the teasers, too. You're the newspaper's host, presenting to the readers what you have and why they should like you. Seize the opportunity.

Neil Holdway is metro news editor for the Daily Herald in suburban Chicago.

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