



## A Few Words on Word Play

By [Kenn Finkel](#)

If you're going to write headlines that attempt to show how hip you are, the pop culture significance has to be connected. That brings up the key to good word play in headlines: It's that subtle *second* reference.

Using a popular (or ancient) phrase isn't clever without another level of meaning. It doesn't take much wit to reach for a word or phrase that you've heard on television or in a film or at church or synagogue (or anyplace in the popular lexicon) and to attach it to a headline you're trying to write — just because that word or phrase (or a variation or oblique reference) appears in the story.

Real word play is more subtle than that — and subtlety is one of several keys to writing good headlines.

This headline and the first few paragraphs of a commentary piece ran a few years ago:

### **TV networks keep faith in movies about Jesus**

*NEW YORK — When ABC televised the classic Old Testament movie The Ten Commandments on Easter Sunday 1998, some irate viewers complained about the network airing a so-called Jewish movie on the holiest of Christian days.*

Clearly, religion is not a subject that fosters consensus.

Yet, network television — a medium that thrives only by building a consensus of the largest number of viewers possible — is set to broadcast two movies this season that take on the most sensitive of all religious topics, the life of Jesus, and a third on the life of Jesus' mother, Mary.

That's an insipid attempt to make a word play headline from a 30-year-old pop culture reference that has nothing to do with the story — and therefore no subtle second reference.

*Keep the faith, baby!* was a late-60s/early-70s line used by members of some groups (often, but not always, counter-culture groups) of the time. It was a hip version of *Keep your chin up* or *Keep a stiff upper lip* — combined with something like *Have faith and things will work out*.

Nothing in that story about networks televising films on the life of Jesus has anything to do with that. If you're going to use a pop culture cliché, recent or not-so-recent, there should be at least *some* connection to the original usage.

Now, if it turned out that Huey Newton or Eldridge Cleaver or Bobby Seale were going to appear in one of the films, you'd have that.

Every day, in newspapers throughout the United States and Canada, thousands of headline writers try a similar technique — and they almost always fail because the subtle second meaning isn't there.

This one ran above a story involving an orchestra director who was looking for people to play in the college pep band:

**University bandmaster is looking for  
*A few good musicians***

The phrase "a few good men" is part of a recruiting slogan of the U.S. Marine Corps. When the line *The Marines are looking for a few good men* was used in recruiting advertisements, it proved very effective. Later the expression "a few good men" became the title of a play by Aaron Sorkin, and, in 1992, it was the title of a film that starred Tom Cruise, Demi Moore and Jack Nicholson.

How *might* the head have worked?

Well, let's say that the orchestra director was a former Marine, who was known for bragging often of his military service exploits.

Or perhaps he had let the college know that *The Marine Hymn* and *Semper Fidelis* were going to be at the top of his play list at every football game.

Or maybe his name happened to be Cruise — or Nicholson.

Then you'd have that subtle second reference that might make for good word play. It would be the worst kind of corn, but at least the second reference would be there.

This one ran over a story involving a corporate lawyer who had been promoted:

**Movin' on up  
*Edwards on Molina & Brown's fast track,  
gets second promotion in seven months***

The line *movin' on up* is from the theme song of *The Jeffersons*, a comedy that was first televised on CBS in 1975 and ran for 10 years. The lead character was named George Jefferson, who was portrayed by Sherman Hemsley.

The headline might have worked if the lawyer's name had been Jefferson (or Hemsley) — instead of Edwards. Or it could work if Edwards had been quoted in the story as saying he almost failed the bar exam because he spent so much of his post-graduate time watching reruns of *The Jeffersons*. Then you'd have that subtle second reference.

Subtlety is missing with this next headline, which ran over a story about a U.S. court decision regarding the large suit in which Microsoft was a party. A decision had gone against Microsoft.

### **U.S. throws rock at Windows**

Where's the subtlety? It might have worked if there had *also* recently been a break-in through a smashed window at the palatial home of Bill Gates.

Some might try to make the case that, even though it was a serious subject and billions of dollars were involved, Gates is some sort of computer geek and, after all, he is so rich that he is fair game for light, silly treatment.

But there's still no subtlety. If you're going to give in to base instincts and make *every* headline some sort of pop culture reference (appropriate or not), why not add a readout?

### **A titanic lawsuit faces software giant**

(The film *Titanic* was big stuff in the theaters at the time of the suit and the headline.)

Speaking of films, three of the worst clichés in headlines came from two sports films. And all of the cliché headlines *don't* appear above sports stories. How many times have you seen variations of this?

### **Governor to Legislature: show me the money**

or

**Rob Lowe  
is a go  
if they show  
the money**

An editor at a U.S. newspaper said that he researched the paper's library and found 30 *Show me the . . .* headlines in the first two years after the film *Jerry Maguire* hit the theaters, and only two of them had anything to do with the line spoken by Cuba Gooding's character.

The other film that produced a wealth of headline clichés is *Field of Dreams*. One cliché is the title, and the other is a line from the script. There are hundreds of thousands of sports headlines with these two clichés, but there are also plenty that *don't* appear over *sports* stories.

How about these two? They're ridiculous attempts to make a play on the James Earl Jones line *If you build it, they will come*.

This one ran over a story about piano lessons:

**If you teach it, they will come**

This one ran over a story about remodeling kitchens:

### If we rebuild it, will they come and try to cook 'real meals'?

The film *title* has lent itself to some awful clichés, too. This one ran over a story about the high price of commercials for the Super Bowl and the fact that the price wasn't scaring advertisers away, that there would be a lot of commercials using a lot of new technology.

The headline?

#### Field of ads

It's obvious that the folks at that paper didn't care whether the headline made sense at all.

That's why I didn't like:

#### Field of screams

over a story about a series of Halloween pranks.

or

#### Field of drums

over a story about a farmer in the Midwest who was trying to set a record by seeing how many 55-gallon oil containers he could accumulate on his farmland.

Word play is *not* clever just because you use a word that rhymes with or sounds like another. Good word play is more than rhymes or homonyms. Fifth-grade children use those techniques in conversations — a lot. So it's not original — and it's certainly not subtle. Unfortunately, hundreds of headline writers have written Field of, and then some word that rhymes with *dreams* or begins and ends with the same letters as *dreams*.

Now, if it turned out that James Earl Jones had been dressed up in a ghost costume and was one of the Halloween pranksters — or if Kevin Costner had been driving through the Midwest, had seen the oil drums and had offered to buy the farmer's property — then you might have that subtle *second reference* that good word play requires.

Anybody can take an incident or event and find a film title to match it. Hence the multitude of

- A beautiful mind
- American beauty
- Back to the future
- Dances with wolves
- Fatal attraction
- Greek wedding
- Lord of the rings
- Moonstruck
- Phantom menace
- Sex, lies and videotape

- Sleepless in Seattle
- Titanic

*ad infinitum, ad nauseam* non-applicable references that fill television and the Internet, and, I'm sorry to say, many newspapers.