

*No single element in a newspaper has the potential to win more readers (or to alienate them) than the*

# Headline

## **MANY NEWSPAPER READERS ARE LAZY.**

They don't want to read because reading is an active rather than passive endeavor, such as watching television or listening to the radio. Because folks have to work at reading, most look for any excuse to stop. And it doesn't take much of an excuse to cease reading — a poorly written head, a confusing lead, contradictory elements to layout, or apparent disorganization in a newspaper's design. Thus, the headline serves as bait, hooking the reader into reading a story.

*Bill Neville, Georgia Southern*



# OOPS

Have some fun,  
but make the  
meaning clear

Boy chasing fox  
found rabid

Relatives served  
at family dinner

Man with two  
broken legs saves  
one from drowning

Bed aflame, jumps  
from fourth floor

Two accused  
of kidnapping  
slain man

Glacier Lake still  
up in the air

# Some pointers for headlines

By TOM CLANIN, California State University, Fullerton  
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*Some of this material is from Edmund Arnold, author of the Ink on Paper series of graphic arts texts. The headline bloopers are from Mr. Arnold, Columbia Journalism Review and the adviser's collection.*

## VERBS

- Use active, not passive.
- Omit forms of “to be”

## TENSE

- Write headlines in present tense.
- Use the infinitive form of verb to convey future tense.  
(Ex: “Traffic parley to begin Monday”)
- Use past tense only when time element is critical in headline.  
(Ex: “Teacher resigned Friday”)

## PUNCTUATION

Use caution and care with punctuation. Common punctuation in headlines usually includes commas (,), colons (:), semi-colons (;), ellipses (...), and em-dashes (—). Question marks (?) are seldom used. Likewise, avoid exclamation points (!).

- Use single quotation marks.
- Use a comma to replace “and.”
- Use a comma to separate one subject and two verbs (as in “Board discusses tuition, adopts fee increase”)
- Use a comma to separate two subjects with one verb (as in “Board, administrators discuss tuition”)
- Use a semicolon to separate complete thoughts, that is thoughts both with a subject and verb (as in “Board increases tuition; administrators resign in protest”)
- Use a colon to substitute for “said” in attribution (as in “Principal: New policy introduces dress code”)
- Use a colon to replace verb in some cases (as in “New principal: a policy and procedure kinda guy”)
- Drop the “periods” in acronyms. Use “FBI,” not “F.B.I.,” or “WHS,” not “W.H.S.”

## SPLITS

- Place modifiers and words modified on the same line, including adjectives and their nouns and adverbs and their verbs.
- Place all parts of the verb on the same line, including “to” for infinitives.
- Keep prepositions and their objects on same line.

# Heads that jive

## Inmate flees in boxers, but freedom is brief

MARK MISULONAS, *Chicago Tribune*, on a story about an inmate who escaped in his underwear but was soon caught.

## Turnaround is a job for the next man of steel

New Chief Executive Officer Robert S. Miller Jr. has some tall obstacles to leap to save Bethlehem Steel

JAKE ARNOLD, *The Oregonian*

## All Cheer Fab Bold Biz

MARK J. PRICE, *Beacon Journal*: story about young entrepreneurs making it big in the laundry business

## 34 hours, \$273 in gas

That's how much time, money you spend just sitting in traffic

JAY BENNETT, *Daily Herald* (suburban Chicago): story about a report on the cost to drivers of traffic jams.

## ho took W keys at hite House?

JOHN SPETZ, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*: story about a celebrated prank pulled by outgoing members of the Clinton administration staff.

## American history is a thing of the past

ROBERTA BELL, *Daily Breeze*, (Torrance, Calif.): story about declining knowledge of U.S. history.

## Goodwill hunting

KAREN COATES, *The Repository* (Canton, Ohio): a story about people who enjoy shopping for bargains on used, donated merchandise at Goodwill Industries' thrift shops.

## Average Web page a sorry site, indeed

Online, most companies have a lot to learn, survey finds

AMY RICHARDS, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*: story about a research firm's study that found businesses' Web sites lacking in function and design.

## Bush and McCain, sittin' in a tree, D-I-S-S-I-N-G

MARY JO MURPHY, *New York Times*: story about the enmity between the two candidates.

# Writing the headline

By TOM CLANIN  
California State University, Fullerton  
and BILL NEVILLE  
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Read – and understand – the story before starting to write the headline

### A GOOD HEADLINE MUST:

- Accurately summarize the story.
- Attract the reader's attention.
- Help the reader categorize the contents of the page.
- Set the tone of the publication.
- Depict the mood of the story.

### HEADLINE WRITING TIPS:

- Say what is most important. Make certain the headline covers the story and nothing more. Avoid headlines which imply a greater scope of coverage than the story actually provides.
- Be clear, precise and accurate. The same three rules – “accuracy, accuracy, accuracy” – that apply to sound journalistic writing also apply to the writing of headlines.
- Use the story's key words.
- Watch for double meaning or confusing wording.
- Use the active voice. Be direct, avoid wordiness.
- Only use names that people will recognize.
- Avoid acronyms in all places – headlines as well as in news copy. Generally, only the most familiar acronyms – GSU, FBI, CIA, IRS and a few others – are understood by the reader.
- Use correct grammar.

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## They awt 2ban weird spellings and addresses in cyberspace

CHARLES S. MONTAGUE, *Akron Beacon Journal*

## Eat, drink, and be married

GAIL GEDAN, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*: story about the wedding of two chefs.

## Nature's better mousetrap

Meet the owl: A tough, fascinating predator

TOM KAIB, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*: story about owls

## Cockatoo caper may turn shoplifter into a jailbird

CHRIS RAIDER, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*: story about a shopper accused of trying to sneak an exotic bird out of a pet store under her coat.

## Odor in the courts; all rise and leave

KAREN SIDAWAY, *The Repository* (Canton, Ohio): story about odors that invaded a downtown office building that houses Common Pleas Court and the District Court of Appeals.

## Council acts to manage pup-ulation explosion

JIM HANCHETT, *New York Daily News*: story about move to require spaying/neutering of pets adopted from shelters or bought at pet stores.

## North Poll

In frozen Alaska, a handful of volunteers overcome long odds to become pioneers in a new kind of wilderness: online voting

CHARLEY LINDSEY and CHUCK ERVIN, *San Jose Mercury News*

## To find a dog or a cat, use your mouse

CARYN EVE MURRAY, *Newsday*: story about finding a pet on the Internet.

## Bold new jazz center will be scat's meow

MEREDITH NELSON, *New York Daily News*: story about plans for \$103 million home of Jazz at Lincoln Center

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- Shun headlines and clichés. Avoid jargon (or special interest language) in heads. This usage confuses the reader.
- Don't assume the reader has been following the story and knows the players.
- Be original; don't parrot a clever lead.
- Avoid question heads. Newspaper readers want information, not to be asked questions by editors via headlines.
- Include a subject, verb and often a direct object. Use lively, active verbs. A headline without a verb is not a headline – it is a title. Avoid constructions of the verb form “to be” in all its variations. In most cases, the verb forms of “to be” do not have to be stated to the reader to be understood.
- Know the difference between a good pun and a bad pun.
- Shun sexism and unnecessary ethnic references.
- Be selfish with the space allocated for the head. Do not pad the head with unnecessary words. Use the space for additional information.
- Look for short, clear words. Learn the “classic” headline words. “Panel” means the same as “committee” and is far shorter.
- Always use Arabic numerals.
- Make the headline say only what it is supposed to say.

# Designing the headline

## ONE LINE

A single line containing at least a subject and verb.

### Bills would give green light to intersection cameras

JOHN CORCORAN, *Daily Herald* (suburban Chicago)

## TWO LINE

Two lines containing subject and verb. Ideally, subject and verb are on same line.

### Personal scooters get room to vroom

MICHAEL TROJANOWSKI, *Detroit News*

## UNDERLINE

Main headline bolder and in a larger point size than underline. Both contain subject and verb. Both are approximately the same width.

### Teaching girls to divide and conquer

Program helps them boost math scores,  
with an eye toward entering new occupations

BILL CHRONISTER, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

## OVERLINE

Main headline bolder and in a larger point size than overline. Both contain subject and verb. Both are approximately the same width.

Across the metro area, people are flocking to libraries

### Check it out: Libraries thrive

JIM McNETT, *The Oregonian*

## HAMMER

To hit you over the head like a hammer, the biggest and boldest part may be one word or a powerful phrase. The main headline is smaller and contains a subject and verb.

### How now, Brown Cow?

Refreshing root beer float sends a surge of childhood memories

CHRIS BALL, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

## KICKER

Serving merely to add information, a kicker may be one word or a short phrase. Does not have to contain both a subject and verb. The kicker is much shorter than the main headline.

IPO delivers

### UPS shares register 36% first-day gain

JULIE PORTER, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

- Only the **first character** in the first line is capitalized.
- Elsewhere, only **proper nouns** and proper adjectives are capitalized.
- The headline begins **flush left** with the column margin.
- All **main lines** of the headline must be at least long enough to fill halfway through the last column of the story.
- Subheads are usually about **half the size** of the main headline.
- Subheads are often in a **contrasting font/style** from the main headline, but they are consistent throughout the paper.