

Headline Rules for Citizen Journalists

Use that *present tense*. Headlines should convey a sense of immediacy, particularly when reporting events of the previous day or recent past. For example, when the U.S. president offered the Russian president a \$1 billion aid package, the headline didn't say:

President offered aid Russia \$1 billion in aid

It read:

President offers Russia \$1 billion in aid

Be accurate. The headline should be accurate, concise and to the point. On a hard news story, if you have to choose between a bright, witty head and one that tells the story more accurately, choose accuracy.

Punctuate properly. (See *punctuating headlines for details*).

Try to use the subject-verb-object sentence structure. Use the active voice, where the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb. The active voice is more direct and less wordy.

Poor: **Wage bill vetoed by president**

Better: **President vetoes wage bill**

Watch grammar and syntax. Headlines normally have a subject and a verb and must be grammatically correct. Don't use the wrong word to make the headline fit. Nouns are nouns and adjectives are adjectives; they are not interchangeable. All of these examples were written by newsroom copy editors who made a headline fit at the expense of good grammar and clarity:

Congress to study workplace smoke

Libya expels Europe envoys

Nationalist candidate to take president oath

The right words are smoking, European and presidential.

Using the wrong word can create confusion:

Serb vote rallies lure 200,000

What is the verb here: vote, rallies or lure? Using "Serb" and "vote" as adjectives for "rallies" turns the headline into a random collection of words. One solution for this hed:

200,000 Serbs at election rallies

This hed technically breaks the rule requiring verbs, but the hed is acceptable because the reader understands that the omitted verb *attend* has been replaced with the preposition *at*.

Replace some words with their common symbols: Use the percent sign (%) in headlines. You also can use Arabic numerals for one-digit numbers:

Unemployment up 2% in August

3 die in apartment fire

Some abbreviations are allowed; "Mo." for "Missouri" is fine. So are "KC," "NY" and "LA" for "Kansas City," "New York" or "Los Angeles."

Headline writing pitfalls

Bad breaks are forbidden under most circumstances. Exception: They're tolerated in small one-column heds and in two-column heds with large point sizes, generally those 48 points and up.

Headlines and slang: A copy editor with more vocabulary than common sense once wrote a headline proclaiming:

Yeggs raising hob in county

After consulting the dictionary, the news editor changed the hed to:

Burglaries increase in county

Acronyms: Avoid all but the most common acronyms and initials, such as SWAT team, FBI, CIA and PTA. Contrary to the old Missourian stylebook, I don't ever want to see P&Z as a substitute for Planning and Zoning Commission in a headline. Nor should CATSO appear when writing about the organization overseeing transportation plans in the Columbia area.

Names: The only names that should appear in headlines are those of people the readers will recognize immediately. Bush, Ashcroft, Cheney, Powell, Hindman and McCaskill are all examples of national and local leaders that fit this category. When in doubt, ask the news editor, TA or a fellow copy editor for guidance.

Loaded words: Reporters say the public criticizes them more often for a story's headline than its content. You should be particularly careful not to accuse or convict someone of an act unless the story clearly does so. Examine this headline:

Teen arrested for shooting friend

Without offering attribution, this headline states that someone has committed an assault. An unbiased hed would read:

Teen held in fatal shooting of friend

These headlines all show bias:

Woman elected Acme Soup chairman

Black seeks council seat

Mexican immigrant arrested for suspected drunken driving

Sometimes legitimate reasons exist for identifying someone by his or her race, sex or ethnic background — such as an article about the first black seeking public office in a predominantly white district. But would you write a headline saying:

Irish-American arrested for drunken driving

Also, make sure the attribution remains neutral. The use of "claims" in the headline

President claims he will lower taxes

implies to the reader that the headline writer doesn't believe that the president plans to lower taxes. Using *says* tells the reader what the president says he intends to do. Any doubts about the president's veracity can be explained in the deck:

President says he will lower taxes

*Senate leaders doubt Bush's
proposal will win approval*

Attribution: Accusatory headlines must have attribution. This head states an opinion:

Police use of wiretaps is illegal

Who says wiretaps are illegal? At this point, only the headline writer says so. Headline writers can attribute in several ways:

Court says police wiretaps illegal

High court rules wiretaps illegal

Court: Wiretaps are illegal

“*So what?*” headlines: Heds that say nothing are usually the work of a sloppy or overworked copy editor:

City Council meets tonight

That’s what they do. Tell people what they’re going to consider:

Council to consider park plan tonight

Double meanings: Make sure the headline says what it is supposed to say — and nothing else.

Sometimes choosing the wrong words results in a confusing headline:

Israeli officer found slain by kidnappers

Libya to give up bombing suspects

Did kidnappers kill an Israeli officer, or did the kidnappers find his body? Has Libya stopped bombing people in custody, or is it surrendering suspected bombers? Sometimes the wrong choice of words can be embarrassing:

Jesse Jackson could have

altered race, analysts say

BRAZEN SQUIRRELS TURN ON

CAMPERS IN MOUNTAIN PARK

Plan to tax health benefits dead, sources say

Witty writing: A deft turn of the phrase is great, but pick your spots. This headline offended devout Catholics in Santa Fe when it appeared above a story about a pair of shootings on the Plaza:

Holy week hullabaloo

And this one that appeared on a food page drew further religious fury:

What a friend we have in cheeses

Punctuating headlines

The comma replaces “and.” Why? Because “and” wastes space.

The semicolon divides colons that have different subjects. Where a comma plus “and” would be used in body text (two independent clauses), the semicolon is used exclusively in headlines.

Example:

South Africa bomb kills 9;
voters growing anxious

The period is not used, except in some abbreviations. The most common use of the period is in “U.S.” and “U.N.”

The colon is used sparingly. It typically introduces a list, a direct quotation or a topic.

Some hair-raising news:

‘I’m rid of the cancer’

Sometimes the colon is a substitute for “say” or “says,” but this use is frowned upon by some editors and banned at some publications.

Experts: Rate increase

is around the corner

The dash is seldom used.

The hyphen is used to clarify the relationship of words. It is never used to break a word from line to line or to end a line.

Cops looking for sex assault suspect

A hyphen between “sex” and “assault” would keep the police from looking like rapists.

Hyphenation across lines of type is not allowed.

Single quotation marks, not double quote marks, are used.

The best headlines are usually those that require no punctuation.

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI Extension

David L. Burton

Civic communication specialist and interim county program director

Editor of Southwest Region News Service

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI EXTENSION

833 Boonville, Springfield, Mo. 65802

Tel: (417) 862-9284

Website: <http://extension.missouri.edu/greene>