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Copy editor struggles with headline

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Rare is the reader who reads your magazine cover to cover. Headlines are one of the most important tools the rest of your readers use to help them decide which stories to read now, which to skip and which to perhaps come back to later. The headline needs to give a reader a quick, clear idea of the content, tone and experience of the story to help the reader make this decision.

Stimulate your creative juices

Headline writing is one of the most creative pursuits of journalism. Start the process by being bold and entertaining ideas that are wild, daring, even silly. The time for high standards is after you have made a few creative tries at a headline.

Get an early start. A headline should not be an afterthought. When you can, read the story as the reporter is writing it, so you can gain some time to think about it. Advertising agencies will write the headline before they write any copy. You can't always do that, but especially on a big story, start thinking and talking early about the headline.

Word association. John Schlander offers this advice on perhaps the most common headline-writing technique: "Think of key words and do some free association to develop angles. This is how most wordplay, good and bad, seems to develop. Good wordplay makes good use of contrast, or delightfully twists a phrase or is somehow pleasing to the ear. It's not a groaner pun, and it doesn't rely purely on alliteration. A great wordplay example from sports (and a monthly contest winner): *So close, so Favre* (when Brett Favre and the Packers stole a game from the Bucs). Think also of rhyming words, or words that sound like they look: *gritty kitty*, for example, or *beep and boom*. The reader can almost hear the headline."

Tell someone about the story. Joel Pisetzner offers this advice: "If you were to meet a friend on the street and wanted to tell him/her about the latest news you've just heard, what would you say? The two or three things you would tell your friend in your first sentence are the two or three things that should be in your headline. Is one of those details

something from deep down in the story? Define that paragraph and move it higher.” And, by all means, consult the writer about such a move if it’s a staff story.

Recognize headline writing as an art. Roger Buddenberg writes: “Heads are like poetry. Hell, they are poetry. You’re a poet: You choose words that tell and find a way to fit them into given limitations.”

Take a walk, or whatever. Sometimes it’s helpful to step away from the screen a minute or two when you’re stuck. Stretch your legs or scan the bulletin board perhaps. Pisetzner put it best: “Friends from other lives will attest to how often I, having just copyread a difficult story, will go to the men’s room (after delaying nature’s call the requisite hour or two) and will come out with a great headline idea. I can’t explain it. But I recommend that copy editors drink plenty of liquids.”

Remember the headline’s job

Be specific. The headline should tell the reader the important news if the story is newsworthy. Vague headlines, even catchy vague headlines, are not informative. Decks can help here. The main head can be catchy but a bit vague if the deck is informative.

Consider photos and graphics. The headline, photo, graphic and story are a package to the reader and should be composed as such. Look at the photo and graphic to see whether they complement or contradict the head. Make sure the photo doesn’t give an unintended funny meaning to the head. See whether the photo tells part of the story right away, freeing you to make another point with the head.

Think of the reader

Consider the reader’s perspective. Don’t tell just what the story is about from your standpoint or from the source’s. What is the reader’s stake in the story? Why should the reader care? What value does the story bring to the reader? Your headline should take an approach that connects immediately with the reader.

Be careful with, but not afraid of, puns. Again from Pisetzner: “The pun must scan both ways: as a joke and literally. My favorite spot is in photo overlines. In June 1997, over a photo of an 87-year-old woman in cap and gown at a Harvard graduation – the university’s oldest grad ever – I wrote ‘No longer a senior.’ Many kudos followed. What made this so effective, I think, was that the humor was sweet-natured as well as counter-stereotypical.”

Don’t give away a narrative ending. Narrative writing helps engage readers, and that requires magazine writers often to take a different approach from the traditional news-first approach of the inverted pyramid that newspapers overuse. Don’t spoil an intriguing narrative by telling the reader up front how it comes out.

Be possessive. Pisetzner offers this tip: “I’m not sure why, but possessives (his, their, Pope’s) tend to give headlines more zing and make them sound less like ‘headlines’ and more like conversation. I’ll choose ‘Bush breaks his leg’ over ‘President breaks leg’ every time.”

Readers change; rules have to change, too. Editors rules used to forbid, or at least discourage, question headlines (more at newspapers than magazines, but editors in any medium are prone to enforcing too rigidly rules that may have a good foundation). Don’t be the unbending editor who insists that headlines need to answer questions. Ask yourself, instead, whether the question headline is likely to intrigue the reader and invite him to read the story and find the answer. A puzzling question doesn’t work. An enticing one works well. And that no-questions rule was from a day when headlines rarely used decks. Sometimes you can engage a reader with a question in the main headline and answer it in the deck.

Challenge and refine your headline

Punch with your verbs. Consider whether you can use a stronger, fresher or more specific verb. With your limited space, you need to make every word count, and often the verb is the most important word in the headline. Give it the attention and time it deserves.

Engage with your pronouns. Much of the time, headlines need to be written in third person, telling about the people and things that the story is about. But watch for opportunities to address the reader directly using second person (advice and travel stories might be good opportunities for using “your” and “your.” First-person plural is a way to engage the reader and help the reader identify with you, writing about opportunities for “us” or about “our” shared experiences. You won’t see as many opportunities for first-person plural as for second-person, but try it now and then. More engaging pronouns aren’t always appropriate, but watch for stories where they will work well.

Make fun of your headline. Does it state the obvious? Is it full of headlines? Could it have a double meaning? Does a nearby photograph or another headline present an embarrassing juxtaposition? If you try to make fun of the headline yourself, chances are Jay Leno won’t.

Spellcheck after you write the head. Typos happen as easily in headlines as in stories, but they’re more embarrassing in large type. Don’t count on anyone catching your mistakes.

Consider the tone of the story. A light, clever head on a serious story can be silly or even offensive. Yet a light, clever story demands a light, clever head.

Read the headline aloud. This will help you spot and avoid clunky “headlines” writing and move toward more conversational heads.

Watch for traps. Read the headline one line at a time. Does the first line, read alone, take on a funny meaning that detracts from the headline and the story? Does a nearby but perhaps unrelated photo create a juxtaposition that could make the headline offensive or ridiculous?

Hold gimmicks to high standards. Effective alliteration, rhyming and puns make a memorable headline and draw readers to a story. When such techniques don't work, though, the headline becomes an embarrassment. "On a good story it's like putting an ugly paint job on beautiful wood; on a bad story it's like an admission," Buddenberg says. Be demanding of such headlines. If you're not sure whether it works, it probably doesn't. If your alliteration uses four words and only three of them actually fit the story, it doesn't work. Be especially demanding of headlines using titles or lines from movies, songs or books. Be assured that you will not be the first copy editor to pen (OK, keyboard) a head on an Iowa story asking if this is heaven or on a Virginia story using "Yes, Virginia" or on a sports salaries story demanding that someone show you the money.

Don't plagiarize the writer's phrases. If the reporter used a clever turn of phrase in the lead or the kicker or nut graf, don't scoop the writer by putting it in the headline.

Avoid echoes. Avoid echoes. Avoid echoes. Echoes are a common problem among headlines, decks, reefer heads, cutlines and leads. Read all the layers of a story together listening for the echoes. Sometimes you do need to repeat key words, but see if you can add information in the inside head if you reefered a story on page-one, rather than echoing the reefer in the head. And check to see if you're saying the same thing again and again in cutlines and leads.

Identify your weaknesses. Know where you need to improve. Focus on one weakness each day. Tonight perhaps you will try not to be so serious on the lighter stories. Tomorrow maybe you'll work on using stronger, more active verbs. The next day you'll try to be more conversational in your headlines. You can improve your headlines better by addressing one skill at a time, rather than making a general resolution to do better.

Thanks to John Schlander of the St. Petersburg Times, Roger Buddenberg of the Omaha World-Herald, Merrill Perlman of the New York Times Syndicate and Joel Pisetzner of the Newark Star-Ledger. Many of these tips are theirs. I believe I have attributed all the instances when I use their exact words, but their ideas are sprinkled throughout this handout.

Valuable copy editing resources

American Copy Editors Society: <http://www.copydesk.org/>

Heads Up! ACES collection of outstanding headlines (not current, last I checked):
<http://www.copydesk.org/headsup.htm>

Robert Niles' Web site: <http://www.robertniles.com/>

"No Train, No Gain" copy editor materials:
<http://www.notrain-nogain.com/Train/Res/CopyD/CopyD.asp>

Bill Walsh's "The Slot": <http://www.theslot.com/>

Don Fry's "Start at the Copy Desk":
http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=35366

Anne Glover's "In Search of the Perfect Copy Editor":
http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=5438

Karen Dunlap's "Mind If We Watch?":
http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=9035

International Journalists' Network's "Copy Editing":
http://www.ijnet.org/FE_Article/Trainingdocument.asp?CID=25025&UILang=1&CIdLang=1

Ron Smith's "Copy Editing for Diversity":
http://poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=52475

Christopher S. Smith's "So Many Headlines, So Few Zingers":
http://poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=80357

Institute for Midcareer Copy Editors' resource page:
<http://www.ibiblio.org/copyed/resources.html>

The Journalist's Toolbox copy editing resources page:
<http://www.journaliststoolbox.com/newswriting/copyeditors.html>

Deborah Gump's "EditTeach" page:
<http://editteach.org/>

Pam Nelson's "Triangle Grammar Guide" blog:
<http://blogs.newsobserver.com/grammar/>

John Rains's "Notes from a Writing Coach" blog:
<http://www.writingcoach.zoomshare.com/>

John McIntyre's "You Don't Say: Language and Usage" blog:
http://blogs.baltimoresun.com/about_language/

Brian Clark's copyblogger: <http://www.copyblogger.com/>