

How To Write a Headline

The primary tool to grab and hold the reader

Some of the most important words a journalist writes are a headline.

Headlines contain essential words that convey the subject of a story and what the story is about.



Please note those are two different things. The subject is general and the *what's it about* is specific.

What is a headline?

- A headline is an abstract sentence
- Usually it is only five to ten words
- It is a complete thought
- It has a subject and a verb, and often an object

The goal is to grab the reader

- Ask yourself this question as you compose a headline:

If people see my five to ten words, will they know what the article is about?

- It's not hard to find examples of headlines that answer that question in the negative. Sure, they may have a couple of words that point to a subject, but they don't answer *what's it about?*

Most important rule

- The words in a headline must represent accurately what is in the story. Accuracy counts above all else.

What to do?

- Understand the story completely before writing its headline.
- Base the headline on the story's main idea, which should be in the lead or introduction.
- Don't use in the headline facts that are not in the story.
- Don't repeat the exact wording of the story in the headline.
- If a story qualifies a statement, the headline should also.
- Avoid ambiguity, insinuations and double meanings.

Word choices

- Be specific, accurate, clear and concise.
- Don't repeat key words in the same headline.
- Avoid unclear or little known names, phrases and abbreviations.
- Don't use pronouns alone and unidentified.
- Alliteration should be intentional and not change the general tone of the story.
- Avoid *headline speak* such as *hit, flay, rap, hike, nix, nab, slate*. Be more precise.

Verbs

- No headline may start with a verb.
- Headlines are complete sentences or imply complete sentences.
- A linking verb can be implied rather than spelled out.
- If a story is about past or present events, write present tense verbs.
- If a story is about future events, use the infinitive verb (to leave, to work).
- *To be* verbs, such as *is, are, was* and *were* should be

omitted.

Punctuation

- Use punctuation sparingly.
- Don't eat up space with the conjunction *and*. Instead, use a comma.

*Principal and parents meet on school rules
for next year*

Principal, parents agree on new school rules

Grammar

- Don't use the articles *a*, *an* and *the*. They waste space unnecessarily.

*A new fire engine helps make the houses
safer*

New fire engine helps make houses safer

Web headlines

- As with any news story, a strong headline is vital for a web story.
- Headlines often are found in lists of links, where they are a reader's first introduction to a story. If they do not sell a reader on the story immediately, the reader is unlikely to click the link to navigate to the story.
- SEO is search engine optimization. Search engines favor coherent headlines. Your headlines can be essential to search engine optimization, which draws traffic to your website.

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910.521.6616 [e-mail](#) [home page](#)

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