ZENGER

Headline writing for smart journalists

1. Headlines are not titles. They are attention-grabbers. The one and only purpose of a headline is to persuade a reader to engage. That takes an emotional response, not a summary. Don't just restate the lede or a central quote.

2. The best headlines use targeted words to radiate emotion, drawing readers in with the promise of engaging or entertaining new information—or a surprise.

3. The smartest way to engage readers with a headline is to focus on two things: characters and conflicts. Most news stories are about two or more opposing forces. Briefly spell out who they are and what they're fighting about.

4. Your headline should accurately represent your article. It should engage and draw in readers, but not at the expense of the truth. Beware of loaded words, particularly verbs that make headlines seem biased. The difference between "Trump destroys critics" and "Trump blasts critics" is important.

5. Think like a search engine: What words or names should someone search online to find this story? Put those words in the headline. When you name a person, use both first and last names.

> *Bad:* FBI arrests former governor Blagojevich in scandal
> *Good:* FBI arrests former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich in bribery scandal

6. Don't use clickbait tricks like "The answer will surprise you…" but do take advantage of the reader's curiosity. If you give away the whole story, there's no incentive to click and read it.

7. Don't phrase a headline in the form of a question. We're telling the reader something, not asking.

> *Bad:* Will Warren drop out of the 2020 race?
> *Good:* Elizabeth Warren considers quitting White House race as Democrats urge her to drop out

8. An adverb is a waste of space in a headline. Use adjectives only sparingly. Nouns and verbs are usually all you need, and they help you avoid using your opinion as a crutch. (Your headline shouldn't tell us anything about you.)

9. Say something and be specific. Don't shy away from using numbers. If the weather is cold, tell us how cold. If a plane crashes, tell us where and how many people were on board. If one company buys another, tell us what it cost.

> *Bad:* Startup tech company makes bid for stake in GM
> *Good:* Upstart electric carmaker Tesla bids $1B for GM stake

10. Use 'single quotes' instead of "double quotes." But don't write headlines that start with a quotation and a colon. In fact, don't use punctuation unless it's absolutely necessary.

11. Never use the passive voice, which typically involves writing the word "by." Be assertive and use active, muscular words.

> *Bad:* LeBron James taken into custody by police
> *Good:* Squad of six Virginia state troopers arrest LeBron James after Ferrari joyride

12. Don't use SAT words, which alienate people who didn't ace the SAT (i.e., nearly everyone). Remember George Orwell's advice: Don't use a Latin root word when you can choose an Anglo-Saxon root word instead. These tend to be the words you learned before the 6th grade.

> *Bad:* Colossal conflagration claims lives of 15 taproom patrons following malevolent fracas
> *Good:* Kitchen fire kills 15 after barroom brawl

13. Headlines are capitalized like sentences without periods; in general, cap the very first word and proper nouns only.

> *Bad:* White House Threatens To Stop UN Payments If Uganda Remains on Human Rights Panel
> *Good:* White House threatens to stop UN payments if Uganda remains on human rights panel

14. Don't use abbreviations in headlines. Only use acronyms that have become everyday substitute words. The following are acceptable: CIA, FBI, IRS, IQ, NASA, SCUBA.

15. If your headline is longer than 100 characters, it's probably too long. Read it out loud to a friend or colleague for comprehension before you file. Ⓩ