Headlines and cutlines

by Mike Orsini and Carl Wilson

GOOD HEADS

a. Summarize the content of the story.
b. Entice the reader into reading the story.
c. Anchor the story design to help visually organize the page.

BAD HEADS

a. Miss the point of the story.
b. Are so confusing, the reader doesn’t bother to read the story.
c. Disturb the design of the page.

Besides understanding the story thoroughly, headline writers must remember that the reader hasn’t read the story and perhaps never will.

Sly references to story content won’t work. If you’re stuck for a headline, always ask yourself this question: “What is the one thing that this story wants the reader to know?”

Make that one thing the headline. It’s a sure way to arrest attention, and even if someone just scans the headline and skips the story, at least you’ve communicated something to them.

Too often, headline writing is the last stage of production. While actually sizing the headlines often must come last, there’s no reason not to get ideas in advance.

Leave a space for headline suggestions on your copy lists. Encourage writers to include two or three possible heads at the top of their files or establish a rule that copy editors must come up with a headline for each story during the editing process.

These exercises teach headline writing skills to more people, and allow you to distribute the load, resulting in only minor adjustments by the time you’re too bleary-eyed to be creative.

Be creative. A paper full of dull headlines looks like a paper full of dull stories. While not every story suits irreverence, and too much of a good thing is, well, too much, headlines should have some sparkle or punch.

The temptation, unfortunately, is to write cutesy headlines. Everyone has written their share of headlines that were understood by one person: themselves. Headlines are not supposed to be inside jokes. Always be imaginative, but write “fun” headlines only when both the story and your sense of humour warrant it.

However, imaginative does not mean tasteless. Consider the headline that appeared above a story in a British tabloid. The story was about a maniac who ran into a laundromat, raped some of the customers, and took off. The headline: “Nut screws washers, and bolts.”

Sometimes being imaginative can also land you in court. A headline above a story I had written about alleged sexual discrimination at Montreal music shop Sam the Record Man read: “Sam the Sexual Harassment Man.”

That one was downright libellous. Sam’s had never been convicted of harassing its female employees, as was clearly stated in the story, but the headline-maker hung him anyway.

The lesson in this? Headline writers should read stories carefully, with their brains switched on. A fair and balanced story with a libellous headline can still land you in court. (Fortunately, we were not sued, despite several threats.)

As a headline writer, you are also expected to be a walking thesaurus. Not only do you have to find synonyms, but synonyms that will fit in the allotted space for a headline. Try exercises on yourself or with a fellow staffer. Can you come up with five synonyms for the word “inaugurate”? How about “prohibit”?

Or try “word association football” — bat words back and forth with a partner, using puns, double meanings and cognitive associations to form the chains. Go as fast as possible. (Eg., “Black,” “White,” “Hat,” “Cowboy,” “Horse,” “Throat,” “Deep,” “Sea,” “Cement Galoshes,” “Hoffa,” “Half A Loaf,” “Better Than None,” “Priest” . . . ) These games are a good warm-up to actual headline-writing.

CUTLINES

Cutlines are similar to headlines in methodology, but the stakes, like the type, are a little smaller. You’ll have to be aggressively stupid to draw attention to a bad cutline. On the other hand, you’ll have to be a bit more clever to make a cutline do its job.

Cutlines (the descriptions which hover beneath photographs and, sometimes, graphics) should be judged on either information value or wit. The ideal cutline will have both. It will:

1. Identify the image and give it a context, either by naming the people, pinpointing the locale or clarifying the situation.
2. Tell the reader something they don’t know, especially something the story doesn’t tell them.

3. Motivate the reader to read the accompanying story, if there is one.

4. Reinforce the angle and tone of the story with subtle shades of phraseology.

5. Leave a little gold nugget of wit or wisdom at the base of the reader’s hippocampus.

6. Be as short as possible to make the point but as long as necessary to fit the space.

So, for example, how about a cutline for a picture of someone sitting in a wheelchair in the snow at the foot of a staircase, to go with a story about accessibility and budget cuts?

“Spring flooding may float St. FX student Susan Ravishad into the library by exams, but the university won’t float the cash to provide her with a ramp.”

Or whatever. But “Wanna buy a ramp?” or “Physically-challenged Sue Ravishad” won’t do. They sound as cryptic as fortune cookies. Cutlines can suffer from the same faults as headlines, by being awkward, confusing, pointless or libellous.

**Warning:** cutlines attract libel even more magnetically than heads do. For instance, at a university a couple of years ago, a student councillor introduced a motion which censured the animal-rights movement as racist, because fur trapping is essential to many First Nations people's traditional economies and lifestyles.

The campus paper wrote a story featuring interviews with the councillor and a campus anti-fur activist, which was to be illustrated with headshots of the two antagonists. And the cutlines nearly read “Activist Amos: A credit to his species” and “Councillor Pete:” (who was white) “A credit to his race.”

Luckily, cooler minds prevailed. So there are limits, if you want to preserve your hide.

That said, here are a few tricks for generating better cutlines:

- If you have a great photo and a lousy story, or no time to write one, it can be effective to box the photo and cutline together, and use the cutline as a news brief.

- Get photographers to include cutlines with their prints.

- Pull a line from the story, or one that didn’t fit into the story, and put it under a picture that illustrates it or

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### Fixing common head/cutline flaws

1. Cut dense, unclear phrases or gratuitous adjectives.
2. Correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
3. Replace abstract words with specifics.
4. Replace weak or passive verbs with strong, active ones.
5. Read aloud head/cutline and lede for tone compatibility.
6. Cut clutter by narrowing focus.
7. Cut overused puns, failed jokes, clichés.
8. Make sure head/cutline and lede aren’t redundant.
9. Replace jargon and ellipses with simpler paraphrases.
10. Paraphrase abbreviations and acronyms.
11. Cut excessive possessives and prepositions.
12. Read aloud and listen for confusing double meanings.
13. Keep names, verbs or phrases on one line — don’t split them.
14. Fill extra space by adding detail, not padding.
15. Don’t use a verb as the first word in a headline, and avoid using verbs like “smashes” or “blasts” altogether.
16. Replace negative phrasings with positive ones — say someone is stalling rather than saying she "won’t decide".
17. Watch for clumsy attributions. Cut or simplify them.
18. Replace obscure names or references with description.
19. Don’t use question head/cutlines more than once in a section.
20. Be sparing with quotations in head/cutlines.
21. Ask yourself if the head/cutline is in questionable taste – exactly who would be offended? Do you or don’t you want to offend them?
22. Soften language or scrap head/cutline if potentially libellous.
23. Replace bludgeoning editorializing with subtler overtones.
24. After writing the head/cutline, scan the story again to make sure you’ve got the point.
contrasts with it. With a headshot or portrait, use a quote from the person pictured.

- Cartoon-bubble dialogue, with real or fictitious quotes, looks very silly on photos and thus work well for satire.

- Brainstorming: Put the photo at arm’s length, and start describing everything in it (and everything connected with it) out loud, until you hit upon the aspect that suits your purposes. Then start blurtling out phrases and variations on that theme, until the mix is just right. (This also works for headlines.)

- If you don’t get any ideas immediately, brainstorm in pairs or in threes. If you don’t get great ideas quickly, especially if it’s not for a prominent story or photo, dash down something factual and move along.

- Look at the picture and read your cutline aloud. Show it to someone else. Does it give you the mood or idea you want? Does it give you any mood or idea at all? Especially if you’re going to say something witty, you’d better check and make sure other people laugh. (This test is valid only before midnight. After midnight, office laughter is no longer a valid indicator of how clever you are.)

- Never say anything the reader could figure out just by looking at the picture. If you have a picture of two men fighting, and you say, “Two men fought on campus yesterday,” you insult our intelligence. What else have you got? Give names, more specific locations, the reason for the fight.

- Never identify people in photos with just a name, except under extreme space restrictions. Append their title, their organization, a quote, something they’ve done or some salient characteristic. The cutline should draw the reader into the story by making the person look like a dynamic character, rather than labelling the person for quick disposability.

- If there’s more than one person in a photo, name them from left to right. If you’re only interested in one or two people in a crowd, name their locations precisely (eg., “Crystal Fitzgerald, upper-left, and her brother Nick, centre with rifle, were mobbed by irate bird-fanciers in Audubon Park on Saturday.”)

- On the other hand, again, don’t insult your readers. If you have a photo of George Bush and Jesse Jackson facing off, or one man and one woman, it will be pretty obvious who’s who with names alone.