

## Elm Tips: Headlines

How do you think up good headlines? Do you use certain techniques? John Schlander, a news editor at the St. Petersburg Times, came up with this list of methods he uses when he gets stuck. As he noted, “These help me get beyond groaner puns.” We tried to add as many Elm headline examples as possible to go along with the following types of headlines:

**WORD ASSOCIATION:** May be the most common method. 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.

Ex: So close, so Favre (when Brett Favre and the Packers stole a game from the Bucs); *Chestertown Retail Freshens Up* (a fall 2011 article about Fresh and Greens); *WC Shaken, then Stirred* (another fall 2011 article, this one about the summer earthquake). 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.

**MENTAL PICTURE:** What picture comes to mind as you read the story? Use that in your headline.

Ex: Uprooting fallen history and Square peg, round world; Wearing jackets of ice, crops weather freeze; Flecks of Hitchcock, swirled in a snow globe; Bashful moon to blush as earth passes by; and From intensive care to death chamber.

**PERFECT VERB:** A fresh verb can really make a headline.

Ex: Summer muscles its way into spring; Deputies inch toward unionization. This also creates a strong mental picture. Strong, well-chosen verbs often do that.

**PERSPECTIVE:** Come at the head from a different viewpoint. For example, instead of writing the head from the government's perspective (Officials consider later high school starting times), write it from the affected person's perspective (High schoolers, don't reset alarm yet). This is also good advice for reporters writing government stories.

Ex: Good news for class of 2011: Job market on rebounds for grads (Winter 2010 Elm article)

**EMOTION:** Go for the emotion in the story. Is there anger? Love? Frustration? Desperation? Appreciation? Respect? Elation? Shame? Embarrassment? Readers respond to emotion. Hit 'em in the gut or the heart.

Ex: In the hot glare of fame, secret is revealed (Classy but still emotional head on story about Dr. J acknowledging Wimbledon sensation Alexandra Stevenson is his daughter.) ; Thief wanted gifts, she left him have it (can you feel the revenge?); Leaving as she stayed: quietly (strength in the face of adversity); Brage's little house of hope; Heal ever, forget never (on a post-Columbine story); and When dialing # \* turns into @\$&!

**QUOTE :** Is there a great quote that sums up the story? Don't overuse this technique, but it can be effective.

Ex: "He never had a chance." "*The Brief and Wondrous Visit*" of Junot Diaz (Fall 2010 Elm article about a visiting author)

**FORESHADOWING:** Give readers a compelling detail that foreshadows the action and makes them wonder, but doesn't frustrate them with vagueness. The "hot glare of fame" head fits in this category, too. Instead of banging people over the head tabloid-style with Dr. J admits tennis star is his love child, we took another, better route.

**SPECIFICS:** Sometimes, just making a headline more specific really helps. If you have a rather vague head, sub in specifics. This method works on many everyday heads.

Ex: Instead of Slain woman mourned at service, try 1,500 attend funeral for slain woman. How many people have that great a number of mourners show up for their funeral?

Below are some more tips from [Joel Pisetzner](#), wrote the following guideline for editors at the *Newark Star-Ledger*:

All right, you already know how to write headlines. I know that. I read them every day. But a couple of you have been kind and inquisitive enough to ask how I write a headline. So here it is, starting with four paragraphs of basics, and then thoughts in no particular order. Perhaps most of it is already obvious to you. Hey, that's great. You can use the back of this copy for organizing the next Pizza 2000 run.

### **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED**

To me, writing a head is, first and foremost, constructing a jigsaw puzzle. You don't even have to look at the story to know how many long and short words will fit the specs. So I try not to go into the text without a rough idea of the head room I've got, and let a section of my brain play with it while I'm reading.

I free-associate the key words of the story; they become the jigsaw's pieces. One or two may fit, the rest get thrown out. For feature stories, I add to that list whatever catch phrases, old movie titles, etc., I can imagine. On a story that jumps, I highly recommend writing the jump head first. I find that it funnels and distills one's thinking. I often come up with my main head while writing the jump.

I put words together like assembling a kidnap note. Scramble, rescrumble, mix and match. Frequently I'll come up with the bottom line of my headline first, and tailor the rest to flow into it.

If too many events in the story make the direction of the story (and therefore the head) vague, I pick one or two facts to concentrate on and ignore the rest.

So much for the basics.

### **THE GOLDEN RULE**

After you've written the headline, pull away and pretend you're picking up a newspaper from the newsstand and seeing the story for the first time. Does the headline capture the essence of what the writer intended? And, even if it does, can a touch-up make it more concise?

### **BE POSSESSIVE**

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 "Clinton breaks his leg" over "President breaks leg" every time.

### **THE PUN**

I love puns, as do most misguided copy editors. Sensing when to use them and not to is another matter.

I figure I can get away with a pun on a story of no pressing concern if I've newly invented the pun and it is a play on something fresh in the public's consciousness. Just as a matter of course, my mind plays with the titles of shows and songs when they first come out. The harder part is remembering the ones I can use in the future. Most are useless; they're either unconnected to reality (For underappreciated firefighters: "Looking for love in all the wrong blazes") or utterly tasteless (For the news

that millionaire Nelson Gross is found dead: "Woe Nellie").

When I do pun, it is almost never on the person's name (leave that to the Sports folks, although for a feature on Connie Chung's husband, "There's Something About Maury" would be okay) and it is never the sort of pun that requires quote marks to help the reader get the joke. Also, 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.

The best puns and plays on words are ones that take a fresh look at a well-worn phrase. (Above the picture of a man pushing a cart loaded with food for 400 down the street to a soup kitchen: "400 meals on a roll." )

When it comes to scatological jokes, I've yet to find a way to dilute one enough to suit the taste of the slot person and the general public. ("Vanna White: Queen of vowel movements.") But I'm working on it.

## **PERSONIFICATION**

Used once (maybe twice) a week, this device will take you far in your career.

I myself was inspired as a child by the movie title "Death Takes a Holiday." Now I resort to this device like a carefully timed dose of prune juice. It keeps me unconstipated, especially on difficult stories with room for only 3-5 words in the head. For a wrenching piece about how the immigration law forced a tearful goodbye of a man and his wife and daughter at Newark Airport, I relied on the overline for the obligatory "immigration law" concept and, for the main head, "Heartache boards the plane." Ahh... I'm regular for another week.

## **PUNCTUATION**

I use punctuation to set up the punch line of a headline ("These surgeons have nerves of steel. They're robots." Or, for a story on a new toll booth: "Sayreville becomes synonymous with change - 35 cents, to be exact"). The danger comes in over-punctuating, especially with commas, but that's why other editors were invented. Go ahead. Live dangerously.

## **THE FIRST PROTOCOL**

When some colleague says of your headline: "I don't get it" or "What's that mean?" don't even bother trying to explain. Just shrug your shoulders and start anew. The gist of a headline should be readily apparent to every reader upon first glance, even if one or two of the words in it (for instance, the dreaded "berm") aren't.

The challenge: a 36-point, two-column-wide, two-deck headline (20 units per deck) about a pay raise for congressmen and senators.

The U.S. Senate passes, by about a 60-40 margin, a spending bill that, while raising salaries for judges and others, also contains a pay raise for senators and congressmen. The House had approved the bill the previous day. Clinton indicates he won't veto it.

This seems to be a cut-and-dried assignment. "Congress approves/ pay raise for itself" will never get a copy editor fired. But it'll appear in 50 newspapers tomorrow. Can't I do

better?

Deep in the story, it is pointed out that the spending bill comes up annually; usually Congress strikes out the provision for its own pay raise. This detail catches my imagination; I can envision congressmen wincing every year as they strike out the phrase. What a temptation that must be!

My headline: "Senate, like the House, / finds pay raise irresistible."

### **WAITING FOR THE MUSE**

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.

### **LEARNING TO SETTLE**

Sad to admit, I write my share of not-so-hot headlines. That's life.

What's more important to my bosses is that I strive for a fresh headline every time I write one. This includes writing heads for briefs.

Equally important is to realize, after not too long a time, that the great head just isn't there for me. For someone else, maybe, but not for me. So I grind out something and move on.

The challenge: A four-column headline for an interview with a jailed drunk driver.

This is one of those test cases that has no definitive solution I know of. I'd be happy to hear conclusions other than the one I reached for the Sunday, Sept. 26, 1997, front page. Maybe there's a great head here and I missed it.

Two years ago a man plowed into a car, killing the woman in it but not her three children. Now in jail, he has just learned that, on that very section of road, another driver (not drunk) has struck and killed the kids' father, who was out jogging. In an interview with us, the inmate says he cried; he feels guilty and responsible for helping turn those kids into orphans. Before hearing this news, he wanted to die, he says; now he wants to live to help in the crusade against drunk driving.

A tough headline regardless of its count. So many facts to digest....What ideas absolutely must be in the headline? At first glance there are four: The idea of driving. The idea of death. The idea of alcohol. The idea of punishment.

Note: NOT the idea of tragedy or irony. It is a common temptation to use "tragedy" in a headline, dumping it into the reader's lap like a fish ready for the trash. It is far more effective to lay out the facts and let readers enjoy reaching the conclusion, "What a tragedy," for themselves.

I'm not dismissing phrases such as "leads to tragedy" out of hand, just saying they should be emergency fallback positions. As for constructions such as "leads to ironic tragedy" (or "to tragic irony"), shoot it at the knees and disavow any knowledge of the action.

So, what do I have? "Inmate feels guilty for death of victim's spouse" feels good when I type it out, but then I obey the Golden Rule (pull away and read it as if I were a buyer of the paper and had just opened to that page) and now I see the headline has three problems: It's difficult to follow when you read it quickly, it's ambiguous (is the "victim"

necessarily the inmate's?) and it could be about a knifing or a shooting as easily as about a car accident. Also, it's too long, but, like most of my peers, I worry about precise length later.

"Driver who killed wife now grieves for husband, too."

Whoops. Until the eighth word, it sounds as if it was his own wife. I don't want the reader to have to read it twice.

"Driver who killed woman now grieves for her husband."

Well.... It's not clear the husband's dead. Plus, I've yet to insert the alcohol angle. (And when I do add alcohol, I'll have to be careful not to imply that the second accident was alcohol-related.)

The upshot is, I cannot fit every one of the four key ideas in the space I have. In desperation, with time growing precious, I wind up writing: "Drunk driver has new cause for regret."

It is no prize-winner - it's far too vague. But, in the time allotted to write it, I decided I can live with its three virtues:

1. It's dead accurate. Even if the inmate is lying when he says he regrets the husband's death, he has cause to regret it.

2. The phrase "drunk driver" indicates he already has been found drunk and convicted of same, so three of my four key ideas - alcohol, driving, jail - are taken care of.

3. It pulls readers in. What's the cause for regret? Plunk down your \$1.25 to find out, my friends.

I cite this example because, to me, a serviceable head on a difficult story is as satisfying as a great head on an easy story.

## **THE MASTER'S VOICE**

Each newspaper has its own voice - a blend of tone, vocabulary and syntax - and I think that voice is most strongly projected in its headlines and its editorial page.

Wherever you work, you should be gathering a feeling for your paper's particular voice (some papers are shrill, some breathless, some icy) and adjust your own work to it.

A headline appearing in The Star-Ledger should reflect, I think, the paper's sense of being an authority and its confidence, even ease, in that role. Consequently, my best headlines are a tiny bit detached and reflective. (For a story on High Point Monument: "Height of irony: Repairs ruined the landmark.")

## **THE ART OF UNDERSTATEMENT**

Whether the type is 84 point or 14, you control the "volume" - the bluntness - of your declarative statement by the degree of its straightforwardness. Some stories give you no leeway whatsoever, but many others leave you with a wide latitude. Upon your choice rests what readers perceive as the newspaper's underlying intelligence. (There is no one single correct choice, mind you. It's a matter of taste, yours and your supervisors'.)

For a recent story with a five-column headline, the headline waiting to be written was: "FBI raids Englewood Cliffs office of campaign donor."

However, I didn't want to pump up the volume for a story that, after two paragraphs covering the basics, used four paragraphs to describe the scene of the donor (one David Chang) standing outside the office, declaring his innocence, while his lawyer called the

raid a publicity stunt. Plus, instead of a photo of FBI agents, we were running a photo of Chang, smiling outside his office.

So I went with:

"U.S. probe of campaign donations comes to Chang's door."

(Such casual name-dropping of someone not widely known should be used advisedly. In this case, those who don't know the name of Chang can figure out what he does through the context of the headline.)

### **EYE ON ART**

As the Chang story illustrates, no headline should be written before the copy editor has examined the photograph that runs with it. The reader will view both of them before getting to the story, so they must not contradict each other unless it's absolutely unavoidable (in which case, someone high up ought to be warned).

We made the Columbia Journalism Review - and not in a flattering way - with one headline that said an athlete was keeping his chin up. Next to it was a photo of the athlete with his head bowed.

One other thing about photos: Just as my main headline often springs out of the jump head I write, it sometimes comes to me while I'm writing the outline. When inspiration strikes, write the headline idea immediately. When inspiration doesn't strike, write the headline last. (And then rewrite the outline if you find you've duplicated its language or ideas.)

### **THE BIG ONE**

I like writing reflective and wry heads, but I find these characteristics work against me when I'm trying to fashion the lead headline on Page One. Sadly, a newspaper's most important headline is often its least fanciful. It needn't be shrill or breathless, but it must get itself across in the space of half a stride: the one the pedestrian takes while glancing at the newsstand or vending machine.

When I can accomplish this and stretch myself at the same time, I'm a happy camper indeed. For the banner headline on the declaration of a drought emergency in New Jersey, I wrote: "State seizes the spigot."

### **RIM SHOT, PLEASE**

I sometimes joke that, as part of my job as a copy editor, I remove imprecise or pat expressions from a reporter's copy, then put them in the headline.

Reporters find this observation absolutely nonhilarious.

### **THE GRACEFUL EXIT**

I wrote an overline I loved, for a photo in which barrels of toxic chemicals dislodged into the Raritan River by Hurricane Floyd are rounded up by the EPA:

"Drums along the Raritan."

It almost made the newspaper. But after some conferencing, the powers that be (while professing their admiration of it) decided the tone of the headline could prove inappropriate in the face of potential calamity.

And so it died.

When told this, my response was to clutch my stomach and double over. But I didn't whine out loud to my superiors (as I recall). Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.

For the overline on the photo of Red China's 50th anniversary parade, I came up with what I knew immediately was a loser. But I was kind of fond of it: "Still communist after all these years"

I approached the slot man in advance and said, "You'd never approve this, would you?" No, he agreed, and that was that. But at least I'd given it a shot (every once in a while I'm pleasantly surprised), while I also made it easy for the slot man to turn it down.

Most people don't enjoy saying no, and I hate to aggravate the people I work for. From time to time I will press for a headline I think is just right, but let's face it: The good headline speaks for itself. ("Good night, sweaty prince: Gorilla Monsoon dies." )

### **OLDIES BUT GOODIES**

When I was your age, you young whippersnappers, I wrote some of my favorite headlines. As the blood thins, I like to recall some, now and again, to warm my extremities.

For story on Jordan cracking down on women's rights: "It's Amman's world."

For the hunt for an escaped iguana: "Off to seize the lizard."

For a student in a cultural-exchange program, a rare headline based on an anagram: "She took her viola to France and ... Voilà!"

(I still dream of writing a palindrome headline. I came close during the 2000 Stanley Cup playoffs. The only thing wrong with "Now Devils lived, won" was that it made no sense. Too bad.)

### **THE WELLSPRING**

I'll conclude with an elemental truth about headlines. It's useful for dissolving brain freeze in both the rookie and the veteran headline writer. 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.