

Writing Headlines Guide

(Source: Creative Editing, Dorothy A. Bowles and Diane L. Borden)

“Patience, diligence, painstaking attention to detail – these are the requirements.”
– Mark Twain

Modern headlines are designed to

- Summarize the story
- Capture readers’ attention
- Maintain the mood of the story
- Help set the overall tone of the publication
- Indicate the relative importance of the story
- Add to the attractiveness of the page

Good headlines have these characteristics:

- Accuracy in fact, tone, scope and focus
- Emphasis on the main theme of the story
- Clear, succinct, grammatical, easy to read and to understand
- Vitality through strong, active verbs
- Balanced and fair
- Tasteful
- Fresh and immediate
- Legally sound (avoid libel)

Headlines are written in skeletonized language. They use **present tense** to describe past action, and each headline must fit its allotted space. Each letter, punctuation mark and space in a headline is a unit or a portion of a unit.

Copy editors write a headline after editing the story, a process that generally requires three readings of the story. While reading and editing the story, the copy editor makes mental notes about headline ideas. For readers, the process is reversed. They read the headline first. A perfectly crafted headline that lacks meaning until after the story is read is unacceptable. To write a headline that communicates clearly and accurately, the copy editor must first understand the story thoroughly.

- Avoid clichés.
- Provide a subject for every headline.
- Use strong action verbs, preferably in the top line of a multiple-line headline. Avoid *dead heads*, which merely label stories.
- This rule applies to news headlines but not necessarily to feature or news-feature headlines, which often use magazine-style titles.
- Do not use forms of the verb *to be* when a strong verb will fit the meaning and the space. They detract from the vigor of a headline.

Lawmakers’ pet projects hitch ride on NASA budget

When used, *to be* verbs – *is* and *are* – are often implied rather than stated.