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NEXT IN A SERIES OF EXERCISES ON **WRITING WITH STYLE**

The Power of Energy in Headlines

BY JUDY BABB

strong words draw readers into story

Can you imagine a newspaper or a magazine without headlines?

The page would be an uninspiring gray — definitely a negative for encouraging readership — but worse, the page would be without guideposts to help readers decide what piques their interest, what signals something they need to know, what helps them make decisions about the world around them. Clearly, headlines help them decide whether to read or to cruise on to some other article.

With that being understood, without a doubt, headlines should be the most important copy that appears in yearbooks, in newspapers and in magazines. However, all too often, they are relegated to the last thing a writer, copy editor or editor does before the pages are whisked electronically out the door. With that rush, publications often end up with title/headline disorders:

- *Headlines that bore:* Student Council votes on prom.
- *Headlines that lack imagination:* Wrestlers hit the mat; Swimmers make a splash.
- *Headlines that say nothing:* Classroom news, Football, Movies.
- *Headlines that shout stupidity:* Mississippi's literacy program shows improvement; Stess takes toll during exams.
- *Headlines that confuse:* Children eating garbage taken from mother; Man executed after long speech.
- *Headlines that embarrass:* One man's junk is another's opportunity; Tiger Woods plays with own balls, Nike says.

All of these are real headlines — some from student media, others from professionals.

Let's take a quick perusal of the above heads — the ones that show writers, editors and designers are not doing due diligence as they write and approve the all-important headline.

- Student Council votes on prom becomes “Student Council: Expect drama at prom.”
- Wrestlers hit the mat graduates to “Smack down: Wrestlers dominate district.”
- A label such as Classroom news is elevated to “A+ effort.”
- Misspelled words, extra words or left out words are eliminated. ▶▶

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The way to prevent those plain or stupid headlines — ones that cause us to groan or to guffaw when they appear in publications produced by others — is to avoid the last-second add-on of the headline.

Even the shortest news briefs deserve a decent head: one with a subject and a verb or an adjective and a noun — and always a parallel style. Longer, more involved stories and feature stories warrant more: a main headline and a secondary headline — the first to grab the readers' attention and the second to provide information that clarifies what the story is about.

Here's one from *The Dallas Morning News* that entices and clarifies with a strong headline and a snappy secondary headline.

Districts grapple with budget gap

State's plan of \$10 billion shortfall is 'new worst-case scenario'

Notice the strong verb and precise wording in the main headline and how the secondary headline tells the reader how important this problem is.

In addition to choosing energetic words, headline writers will find it easier to succeed if they master a few rules for clarity and success. Editors should frequently share the following strategy:

First, make sure the words fit the mood of the story. It does not work to use something light and fluffy on a story about a fatal accident or a budget shortfall. Nor does it work to use something morose on a story about a school carnival.

Second, require a primary headline and secondary headline on the most important story on a page or on a yearbook spread.

Others can have them as well, but it is a must on the main story.

Third, pre-write the headline when planning the page or spread. Advisers, edi-

tors and page designers should consult with the writer from the moment the story is assigned. Come up with words or phrases that fit the topic.

What is the best way to headline a story about a first-year principal who unknowingly rocked the boat when she did not order roses for graduation? A rose by any other name? A thorn in her side? All that blooms? Graduation does not come up roses? Reeks? Smells? Blossoms?

Perhaps the main head might read "Trouble blossoms on graduation stage." The secondary head might read "Principal faces furor from parents on choice of flowers."

Brainstorming with other people to come up with the best headlines possible is invaluable. Similarly, considering the possibilities from the start gives a head start on selecting a brilliant choice.

Readers always appreciate the effort and will be energized to read on. If superior quality appears in the first issue or on the first spread, readers simply expect great "invites" on every page. They show their thanks by reading the well-written copy and the carefully researched captions. Staffs that present creative and energetic headlines on every page and in every issue or edition mesmerize readers, who eventually regard stellar headlines as both fun and expected. Headlines lead readers to ultimate goals: reading, enjoying, thinking, trusting — and sometimes causing readers to wish they had thought of those words or phrases first. ■



From *Iowa State Daily*, Iowa State University (Ames, Iowa)

EXERCISE 1

Making Sports Headlines Pop

Rewrite the following headlines to make each a powerful version that evokes energy. After each student has written a replacement headline, work in groups of four or five to pick the best headline. Then the group should write a secondary headline to go with the primary choice. Students can do an Internet search of terms for different sports as an aid.

The first step: Each student will read a headline aloud. Other students in the group should identify the weakness in the headline. Next the group should suggest stronger, more powerful replacement words or rewriting if the headline does not follow the subject-verb-object format. The deadline goal: Submit one energized headline and sub-headline set originated by each student in the group.

HEADLINES TO ENERGIZE

1. Volleyball team wins tops in district
2. Injuries problematic on 9-3 team
3. Golfers face tough opponent at regionals
4. Team wins by 3 touchdowns
5. B-ballers swish through tough season
6. Bench plays part in state win
7. Cross-country races to finish line
8. Wrestlers hit the mats
9. Cougars continue road losses
10. Patriots crush Cats, 10-9

EXERCISE 2

Writing the Headline to Fit

Using the following information, write a news headline, a feature headline and an opinion headline. Organize students in groups of three or four and have them talk out a headline.

Prominently list the standards they should meet for this deadline:

- *News headlines* — a two-line headline.
- *Feature headlines* — a main headline and a one-line secondary headline.
- *Editorial headlines* — an opinion may show although it may simply reflect the complexity of the topic.

Four senior boys have merged their talents to create Your Perfect Date, a company that puts together a date package. At different prices, the evening will include dinner and a special event.

Dates include special events ranging from a picnic and a tour of the city in a limo to a ride in a four-seater airplane and a candlelit dinner on the tarmac.

Dates range from \$75 to \$300 a couple. Meals are prepared by the boys and include three courses.

“We were tired of the dinner-and-a-movie scene,” Steve Smith said.

WHAT TO AVOID

- Abbreviations readers will not understand
- Weak verbs such as “get” and “to be”
- Overdosing on the name of the school or mascot
- Overusing class names: freshman, sophomore, etc.
- Stating the obvious
- Splitting a phrase from one line of a headline to the next
- Hyphens in headlines
- Information in the headline that is not in the story
- Repetition of words or emphasis within headlines and subheads

EXERCISE 3

Generating Heads for a Package

Whether a yearbook spread or a newspaper double truck, expanded coverage often has an overall topic requiring a main headline and headlines for the stories included on the spread. This kind of coverage requires a lot of creativity and demands that words and ideas are not repeated.

Divide into groups of four or five and create dynamic headlines for the overall spread and for the individual stories on the spread. Compare and contrast between groups. Then have the class evaluate and choose, from all of the groups' suggestions, which headlines are the best and could be used — some with minimal revisions.

OVERALL TOPIC

A new wing being added to the building will have state-of-the-art equipment and technology for teaching languages, music, theater, journalism and broadcast. The new wing is named after donor Elmer Tate, who contributed \$5 million to the wing. The wing will be open for use by mid-October.

STORY 1

How much it cost (\$22 million), who did the research and determined the possibilities (an unheard of group: the teachers), who designed the building (architects under advise from teachers) and how teachers determined needs (site visits at other state of the art facilities and meeting with the companies creating the technology).

STORY 2

How new technology helps choir hear the tiniest errors and correct them. Facility sets them up to create CDs and DVDs and create "Glee"-like shows. A full-size auditorium stage with all the lighting and green rooms enables both theater and choir to put on shows in the 100-seat theater. All audio and lighting is state of the art. Tech theater also has a full workshop for building sets.

STORY 3

Journalism adds 20 27-inch high definition screens and MacBook Pro computers to plug into them. Twelve iPads are used as research tools as well as to submit stories from the field. There are 10 Canon T2i cameras and lenses plus 10 specialty lenses. All equipment has GPS so the adviser can know where it is at all times.

STORY 4

Language classes become microcosms of other countries. Rooms have green screens with changing backgrounds that look like the country of the language being studied. A trip to the market allows students to walk by the stalls and talk to vendors. A trip to a coffeehouse makes them feel as though they are there. In these no-English-allowed classes, students use iPads to look up words and create conversations.

STORY 5

Broadcast has three stages that they can rearrange into different sets. Green screens abound with hundreds of backgrounds. The photographers can create live screens as well. The class has 10 top-of-the-line cameras and five editing rooms. The class is capable of creating live news shows from the field.

WHAT TO USE

- Numerals rather than spelling out numbers
- A comma to replace the word "and"
- Single quotes rather than double quotes
- Vitality and imagination
- Consistency of style

"Style is the perfection of a point of view."

RICHARD EBERHART, AMERICAN POET

EXERCISE 4

Learning from the Pros

Develop consciousness of outstanding headline writing that appears in professional newspapers, magazines and online media. While practice empowers headline writers, keen observation awakens them to unlimited possibilities. Students can stimulate one another by pinpointing ways professionals energize their titles and headlines.

Prod awareness by group involvement in searching for examples. Introduce a new search each week.

SEARCH 1

Model headlines: Assign students to find examples of headlines using energetic nouns and verbs. Everyone should search for examples in print or on the Internet. Use a simple requirement: five headlines, preferably from different sources. For newspapers, they can find listings on websites such as newspapers.com, which provides readers with a plethora of headline ideas both foreign and domestic and newspaperarchive.com, which looks over the centuries.

Blog sites are also a great place to find headline ideas and often refer to newspapers and magazines. Try pushingsocial.com/17-crazy-places-to-get-jaw-dropping-headline-ideas as one of them.

Students can copy or type their choices — plus the date, publication name and their name. They can place examples on a board or in headline folders. Make the Web search competitive by using humorous awards or titles for the best example of the day or week.

SEARCH 2

World headlines: Take the search beyond the national borders. Suggest major English-speaking cities around the world. Award extra credit honors to the best examples of outstanding international headlines. Give extra credit for foreign language headlines (translations expected). Try suggesting current topics, such as government changes, political conflicts, weather surprises, sports events, entertainment events. Ask an aspiring reporter to count how many publications are represented by the end of the week. A helpful website: onlinenewspapers.com/

SEARCH 3

Headline blogs: Set up two blogs: Headlines to Inspire and Headlines to Improve. Have students post (with their names) examples from national or international publications. For the “improve” category, they can show how to “do better” with their rewrite. Again, use a simple prize or one-point extra credit — this time for three (or more) best entries.

SEARCH 4

Visual headlines: Discover how visual presentation enhances the energy of verbal choices. Headlines appear in hundreds of ways in modern publications. Begin by giving students copies of magazine and newspaper pages featuring innovative typography for headlines and titles. Schedule a day for students to work on computers to create visual designs for special heads. Halfway through the period, have students trade computers. Let them work on upgrading the examples they find. Encourage partnership as they work on fonts, type size variation, placement, leading, etc.

WHAT TO TARGET

- Eye-opening main headlines and fact-filled secondary headlines
- Omission of opinion except for editorials and columns
- Usually, omission of the articles “a,” “an” and “the”
- Present tense if the event has already happened
- Form variation in primary headlines — they do not have to have a verb
- A subject and a verb in secondary headlines

“Fashions fade, style is eternal.”

YVES SAINT LAURENT, FRENCH FASHION DESIGNER

The Power of Energy in Headlines

EXERCISE 1

Making sports headlines pop

1. *Primary:* Coming up aces; *Secondary:* Effort takes volleyball to top
2. *Primary:* Playing hurt; *Secondary:* 9-3 team still in contention despite injuries
3. *Primary:* Driving for the win; *Secondary:* Districts offer competitive challenge
4. *Primary:* Blitzed; *Secondary:* Eagles crush Martin by 21 points
5. *Primary:* Time out; *Secondary:* Tough season leaves team short of playoffs
6. *Primary:* Surprise attack; *Secondary:* 'Secret weapon' comes off bench for championship assist (*Because the problem headline does not give you any information, it's hard to have a dead-on headline.*)
7. *Primary:* Feet feat *Secondary:* Guys, girls hightail it to regionals (*No information here either.*)
8. *Primary:* Grappling for position; *Secondary:* Wrestlers face vicious competition at state level
9. *Primary:* Running on empty; *Secondary:* Cougars need refueling to win on the road (*A bit of an overstatement here.*)
10. *Primary:* Out of lives; *Secondary:* Patriots tip-toe past Cats in finals, 10-9

EXERCISE 2

Writing the headline to fit the story

News headline:

Seniors launch 'Your Perfect Date' after tiring of dinner, movie scenario

Feature headline:

PERFECTION PURSUIT

Senior boys to rev up date life

Editorial headline

Dull dates may be thing of past

EXERCISE 3

Generating headlines for a story package

Overall headline:

Form for Function

For the headlines below, notice that each begins with the kind of room or the field of study. The result is a parallel emphasis that makes it easy for readers to select the story that most interests them and then move on to stories about other facilities.

STORY 1

New wing places teachers in charge of their futures

STORY 2

Theater and choir sound 'glee'ful note about facilities

STORY 3

Technology takes journalism to the field

STORY 4

Language students charter virtual field trips

STORY 5

Broadcast goes live from colorful sets

"One man's style must not be the rule of another's."

JANE AUSTEN, BRITISH AUTHOR