

Journalism/Creative Writing Extended Project Non-Fiction Track

Step Eight: Headlines

This page will give you some helpful tips for headline writing. After you review them all, try out a couple of headline ideas that could work for your story. Write them in your journal or on your laptop. You can always change or revise the headline later.

The Story at a Glance

Effective headlines draw the reader into the story. What else do they do? To be effective, a headline must:

- Retell the story accurately or be a truthful and ethical representation of at least part of the story.
- Reflect the tone of the story—serious for news stories and perhaps lighter for feature stories.
- Follow generally accepted rules for headline writing.

Today, writers have virtually abandoned all-caps headlines, with some exceptions like tabloids. Readership studies have found that all-caps heads are hard for the reader to understand quickly. First, designers favored upstyle headlines, and more recently downstyle. In upstyle headlines, all words may be capitalized, leaving prepositions and other less important words in lower case. In downstyle headlines, only the first word and proper nouns are capitalized.

- This Type Illustrates Upstyle Headlines
- This type illustrates downstyle headlines

Point Sizes

The headline is typically **at least** twice the size of the font of the story. For example, if your story is in 12 point, your headline needs to be in *at least* 24 point, but may be bigger if you wish.

Writing Headlines

Traditional news headlines follow time-honored rules, while more contemporary feature headlines often break some of the rules. Two rules, however, should never be broken:

1. **Be honest.** Headlines must be written ethically. You should never think of a clever headline just to trick readers into reading your story. If readers fall for such a trick once, they aren't likely to again. Worse yet, they may suspect your entire body of work of having no credibility.
2. **Read the story.** Before you can possibly write a headline to attract the reader, you need to know the whole concept of the story.

Top 10 Rules for Writing Headlines

1. Use subject-verb-object or phrase order with active voice verbs. Avoid “to be” verbs and label headlines that simply name something.
2. Be sure to write a headline specific to one story, not a general headline that could apply to several stories.
3. Use present tense for past and present events, use future tense for future events.
4. In the interest of saving space, omit “a”, “an”, “the”; use a comma in place of “and”; use single quotation marks when this punctuation is needed; do not place a period at the end of a headline.
5. Keep associated thoughts together in multi-line headlines. Do not split verb phrases, prepositional phrases, adjectives and their nouns, hyphenated words, or proper nouns between lines.
6. Use only widely known abbreviations (without the periods)
7. Avoid repeating the same word or another form of the word, also try to avoid repeating words in different headlines on the same page or spread.
8. Attribute opinion; avoid including the writer’s opinion, except in opinion pieces (for example, editorials or reviews) when opinion should be included in the headline.
9. For a hard-news story, use facts from the lead; for many feature stories, use facts from anywhere in the story.