

# Headline Rules



<http://jteacher.com>

## Readers expect headlines to be direct and enlightening.

The lead of a news story summarizes the story, and the headline should summarize the lead, and it must do so in a limited amount of space. The headline should be reader-friendly, so there are some basic rules to guide the headline writer in this task.

- Headlines should emphasize, summarize and help sell the stories' contents.
- There should be no opinion stated in a headline, with the exception of headlines for editorials and columns.
- Readers generally scan headlines very quickly to see if there is anything that they want to read about, so the most newsworthy information must be featured.
- The headline should not give information that is not given in the story.
- The headline should inform the reader through a simple declarative sentence: subject, verb, direct object.
- The best headlines are in active voice and use action verbs rather than "being verbs"
- To reflect past action, the headline should be written in present tense.
- To show future or possible action, the headline should be written with the infinitive form of the verb: to + verb
- Headline writers should use "can" or "may" rather than "will" unless they are absolutely sure their predictions are accurate.
- Headlines should let the reader know who is doing what, along with other necessary Ws and H. The "when" is generally not necessary.
- Abbreviations should be avoided in headlines. Initials should be used only when the readers are familiar with what they stand for.
- The vast majority of the student body knows what school they attend, so it is not necessary to tell them repeatedly in headlines. Don't use the name of the school or its initials in headlines.
- Avoid the use of "a", "an", and "the". Eliminating these words makes room for more interesting subjects, verbs and objects.
- Headline structure should be varied. Use multi-line headlines as well as one-line headlines on news stories. For special stories and feature stories, use specialty or feature headlines.
- When writing multi-line headlines:
  - a. Keep verb phrases on the same line.
  - b. Keep adjectives and the words they modify on the same line.
  - c. Keep adverbs and the words they modify on the same line.
  - d. Keep prepositional phrases on the same line.
  - e. Keep words that go together, such as a first and last name, on the same line.
  - f. A line of a headline cannot end with a hyphen.
- Keep capitalization to a minimum. Most newspapers use down-style, that is, capitalizing only the first word in the headline and proper nouns and adjectives. All-cap headlines are difficult to read and should only be used in small doses for emphasis.
- Punctuation in headlines should be minimal:
  - a. Use single quotation marks rather than double.
  - b. Use a comma in place of the word "and"
  - c. Colons can be used to replace the word "said".

*Example:*

**Coach: Best season ever**

- d. Use semicolon to separate two complete thoughts.

*Example:*

**Bears victorious;  
coach resigns**