Supplemental Notes: Writing Headlines

The headline of a news story gives the essence of the lead. Because the headline must fit an allotted space, headline writers have harder jobs than lead writers do.

- Headlines should emphasize, summarize, and help “sell” the content of the stories in the paper.
- Headlines should not distort a writer’s meaning or point of view. There should be no editorializing.

Writing Effective Headlines

A number of standard rules are helpful in presenting strong headlines:

- Use subject/verb combinations. Avoid labels for news headlines.

Seniors graduate    NOT    Graduation for seniors

- Make headlines as specific as possible. Emphasize the most important news element, but don’t repeat the phrasing of the lead.

- For features and profiles, make the headlines interesting. They should fit the styles of the stories and conform to the focuses and themes.

Tattoos: Art in the flesh    NOT    Students react to tattoos

- Use vigorous verbs. Use the active voice as opposed to the passive. Avoid forms of “to be.”

Provost opposes eligibility requirement    NOT    Eligibility requirement is opposed by provost

- Use appropriate tenses:
  Present tense—For events in the immediate past:
  Flood washes out rail lines

  Past Tense—For events in the more distant past:
  37 N. C. hunters died in accidents last year

- Use infinitive form of verbs for the future (to+verb):
  Krzyzewski to start Jones in ASU game
You may also use the present tense combined with the day or date for events in the future:
Mountaineers play Paladins Saturday

• Use numbers and punctuation correctly.
  1. Numbers are normally written in numerals, but numbers under 10 may be written out
  2. Use single quotation marks in headlines ‘’
  3. Use a semicolon between independent clauses
  4. Articles “a,” “an,” and “the” are eliminated; substitute commas for conjunctions

• Use attribution for statements of fact or opinion for credibility and objectivity

  Mayor: Funds in doubt  Not  Funds in doubt–mayor

  Volunteers say  Not  Work at shelter
  work at shelter  rewards volunteers
  rewarding

Studies: Women's heart care lacking

Women’s heart care lacking, study says

• Keep the infinitive phrase on the same line:

  Smith, Jones  Not  Smith, Jones to
  to visit campus  visit campus

• Keep the adverb on the same line as the word it modifies:

  Faculty well versed  Not  Faculty well
  in campus rules  versed in campus rules

• Keep the adjective on the same line as the noun it modifies:

  Administration to cut  Not  Administration to cut 80
  80 faculty positions  faculty positions

• Keep the preposition on the same line as its object:

  N.C. company announces launch  Not  N.C. company announces launch of
  of Ghost Adoption Services  Ghost
  Adoption Services