Making an impact — accurately

Apply the following rules when writing headlines. The best way to write a good headline is to keep it simple and direct. Be clever only when being clever is called for. Puns are good, but only on “punny” stories. (For examples of the good, the bad and the ugly, go to Good headlines and Problem headlines after you read these tips on “Writing Effective Headlines.”)

Use the active voice: Effective headlines usually involve logical sentence structure, active voice and strong present-tense verbs. They do not include “headlinese.” As with any good writing, good headlines are driven by good verbs.

A “capital” idea: The first word in the head should be capitalized as should all proper nouns. Most headline words appear in lower-case letters. Do not capitalize every word. (Some publications do capitalize the first letter of every word; the Kansan and most other publications do not.) In most cases, do capitalize the first word after a colon. (In some cases, when only one word follows the colon, the word would not be capitalized. Use your best judgment.)

Number, please: Numbers often go against AP style in headlines. For example, you may start a sentence with a number and, even though that number is below 10, you do not have to spell it out. (Note: For best results, please view in the full-width of your computer screen.)

Example:

3 die in crash

However, whenever possible, follow AP and Kansan style rules.

To the left: Write all headlines flush left unless told otherwise.

It’s xx-rated? Fill each line of the head within two units of the letter “x” in lower case. (We’ll talk about this in class). Do not have one line of a multi-line head too short. Exceptions can be made on some headlines with narrow specifications (such as one-column heds). Note: The two-“x” rule for this class and the Kansan; it is not a rule that is universally followed. Some publications allow greater leeway; most do not, some requiring you to come even closer. Nevertheless, the two-“x” rule is a good one to follow.)

Example:
Lincoln, Douglas to debate at new KU Dole Center (not acceptable — almost 3 x's short)

Lincoln, Douglas to debate at KU's new Dole Center (OK — fewer than two x’s short)

Lincoln-Douglas debate today (acceptable in narrow, multi-line headlines)
at Dole Center

Present tense, please: Use present tense for immediate past information, past tense for past perfect, and future tense for coming events.

Punctuation normal — mostly: Headline punctuation is normal with two significant exceptions: Use periods for abbreviations only, and use single quotes where you would use double quotes in a story.

Example (single quotes):

Lincoln: ‘The war has begun’

Moreover, note the use of the colon (substituting for the word “said”). The colon can be used, sparingly, for introducing both a direct quote and a paraphrase. (See “He said, she said” below.)

Example (paraphrase):

Lincoln: War inevitable; victory essential

The semicolon (above) is used normally: separating two thoughts of equal weight.

Example:

Lincoln says war inevitable; Davis agrees

‘And’ more punctuation: The comma, in addition to its normal use, can take on the work of the word “and.” On rare occasions, the comma also can indicate the word “but” (but, if used that way, be very, very careful, ensuring that the reader has a clear understanding that’s what the comma means. The semi-colon is better for the “but.” Even better is to use the word “but.”)

Examples:
Lincoln offers compromise, Davis declines *(awkward)*

Lincoln offers compromise; Davis declines *(better)*

Lincoln offers an ‘out,’ but Davis declines *(best)*

**Even more on punctuation:** In multi-line headlines, strive to keep most punctuation, except hyphens and dashes, at the end of lines. Don't use a hyphen at the end of a line. With few exceptions, any semi-colon should only be used at the end of a line in a multi-line headline.

Example #1 (good):

Clinton says there was no affair, urges witness ‘to tell the truth’

Example #2 (not acceptable):

Clinton says no affair, that witness should ‘tell the truth’ *(not acceptable; awkward break)*

Example #3 (not acceptable):

Clinton: I'm not two-timing the First Lady *(not acceptable; awkward break)*

Example #4 (not acceptable):

Clinton says no affair; Starr maintains he's got evidence *(not acceptable; awkward break)*

Example #5 (not acceptable):

Clinton: No affair; Starr: Evidence says it happened *(not acceptable; see explanation below)*

Example #6 (horrible):
Clinton: No affair; Starr: His probe proves it happened more than once (horrible; see explanation below)

The breaks in the “bad” examples above make it hard for the reader. Make “natural” breaks — breaks where a slight pause by the reader is OK and natural (as in the first example). In Example #4, the use of the semicolon before “Starr” is too close to the end of the line. In Example #5, there’s a bad break, but there’s also just too much punctuation going on. (The same for Example #6). Keep it simple. Use as little punctuation as possible in headlines.

(An important note on word use: Be careful, very careful, about the words you use. The word “probe” in Example #6 obviously is not an appropriate choice given the nature of the story being covered. (See “double meanings” below.) You might think that’s rather obvious, but you’ll be surprised how many times things like that appear in print — and in this class!)

"And" more on the comma: While a comma can be used in the place of the word “and,” you should be careful and avoid the practice when possible — and especially in the nominative portion of the headline. Don’t overuse.

Example (bad):

Clinton, Gore, Dole, Kemp to meet, debate

Avoid split ends to avoid “hairy” heads (pun intended) for readers: Work for good phrasing. Avoid splitting verb pieces between lines and ending lines with prepositions.

Examples (bad):

Bush, Kerry to oppose tax plan

Kerry knocks tax plan because capital gains loophole ‘too big’

To be or not to be “is” the question: In many headlines, as with the example immediately above (…loophole [is] ‘too big’), the verb “to be” is not necessary. It can be used, but in most cases should be avoided. It’s a convention of headline writing to omit uses of the verb “to be.” But, as always, be careful and think of the reader. If an “is” or “was” or “to be” is absolutely necessary for clarity, use it.
Who (and what) is whom (or what)? Make it clear: Don't use proper names in headlines unless the name is well-known enough to be recognized immediately. The same is true for abbreviations.

Example (bad):

Jones to fill vacancy on city council

Example (good):

Lincoln-Douglas debate today on K.C. radio

Abbreviations: Many abbreviations (as with “K.C.” in the above headline) that are not acceptable in stories are acceptable in headlines. But be careful. If you have any doubts, ask. Everyone would know that “K.C.” is Kansas City, Mo., or the Kansas City metro area in the above example. If it were Kansas City, Kan., you’d have to rewrite the headline and avoid the abbreviation.

Avoid all acronyms or abbreviations that are not immediately recognizable by the reader. For example, “NFL” would be OK; “LCC” for Lawrence City Commission would not be. When in doubt, spell it out.

Subject and verb, please: Don't write headlines in which nouns and verbs (other than “is” or “was”) are assumed. And don’t start a headline with a verb. (See Problem Headlines section.)

Don’t be cute, unless cute is called for: Don't yield to the temptation to write cute headlines or to use faddish or commercial slogans unless doing so fits especially well with the content and tone of the story.

Don’t “Micks nix pix!” Huh? (Mickey Rourke and Mick Jagger turn down roles in same movie): Avoid headlineese, which simply is the use of words that you normally don’t use in writing and conversation in similar contexts. Try to stay as “normal” as possible. (See Good headlines and Problem headlines.)

“Polly want a cracker?” Don't just parrot the lead of the story, and try to avoid stealing the reporter's thunder on a feature story. A good headline captures the essence of the story without pillaging — and, therefore, dulling — the writer's punch.
More things to avoid: Do not editorialize, exaggerate, generalize or use long words. Keep it simple and direct.

He said, she said: Use attribution when needed (but avoid attribution gimmicks, such as the colon or dash, whenever possible).

No “a” or “and” or “the”? Avoid the use of the articles a, an and the unless they are needed for clarity. (Otherwise, their use generally is considered padding.)

Watch out for ambiguity and the double entendre: Be especially careful to read for hidden meanings (as in the “Starr: His probe proves...” headline above) and when a noun could be a verb and vice versa. (See Problem headlines.)

Example (of double entendre):

The following is a famous headline. Not only does it have a double entendre, but the bad break at the end of the first line contributes to the problem. Street sales for the newspaper were extraordinary that day; the edition sold out in a remarkably short time. Read the head and you’ll see why:

Textron Inc. Makes Offer To Screw Co. Stockholders

Need I say more?

Finally, the “doo-dah” rule: Headlines, like poetry and songs, should have a rhythm about them. An old trick to see if a headline “sings” is to apply what's called the “doo-dah” rule. After each line of the headline, simply say “doo-dah” to see if it “sings” (sounds good to the ear). Example:

City's singers in good tune

“doo-dah”

“doo-dah”

It's that easy — try it!