

Beyond headlines

Integrating all display elements of a story

Lisa McLendon, The Wichita Eagle / ACES 2006

Headlines do the heavy lifting, but other display elements — overlines, deck/subheads, cutlines, boxes, pullquotes, etc. — can tell more of the story. These elements can flesh out a general or vague headline, get a great quote into a more visible spot, and get more details into big type. They give readers more to go on before they start reading the story, or increase the chances of readers starting a story. And remember that the usual rules of headline writing apply to all display type: Be accurate, be clear, don't make readers work to understand, and don't force cuteness or cleverness.

Be different

The first and foremost rule of display type is: **Don't repeat!**

If you have a deck, don't repeat the main headline. If you have a cutline, don't repeat the deck headline.

There's plenty of information in the story, so use as much as you can to draw readers in.

Anticipate questions

Think about what information is left out of the big type and put it into the smaller display type. Does a name need a title/job description with it? Is a time element needed? How about more details or a dollar figure?

By the numbers

How much money? How many car accidents? How many people volunteered? How close was the vote?

Specific amounts give display type more effect. In a main headline, a number can show the size or scale of the news. Numbers as a secondary element can help explain an issue or punch up a vague or short main headline.

Details, details

This is specifics without the numbers: Who is this person? What are the main points? Where exactly is this area? What's the time frame? What's coming next? Who is affected by this decision/project/disaster?

You can do this with a fact or two in big type, or summaries/more facts broken out of the story in smaller type.

Punch line

An overline can be a good way to start a sentence, leaving the "punch line" for the big type. This works only if you have a sentence where the last part works well on its own, and if there's not a picture separating the lead-in from the punch line (there's no guarantee that readers will read the overline first and make that leap).

Quote, unquote

Quotes can give more insight, more detail, more emotion and sometimes a witty or incisive take on a story. Often, a key phrase is all you need. Sometimes a slightly longer quote can illuminate a story or add an extra dimension to the presentation. Quotes are especially useful for adding information to cutlines. Be careful, though, with one-word quotes, as they can appear sarcastic.

Art elements

-- Use the headline to play off the art. Don't take up precious headline space saying something that's obvious from a piece of art. Instead, work with the art to bring up another angle of a story.

-- Avoid "cutlines for the blind." Readers can see what's going on in the picture and don't need to be told that anyone is "shaking hands," or worse, "gesturing." Use the cutline space for something interesting.

-- If a graphic or info box has a headline of its own, there's no need to repeat it elsewhere.

Design tips

-- Overlines: If you don't already have an overline style, see if you can get one. Consult a designer if you can, or look at other newspapers for ideas of how to do this (newseum.org is a great resource). Work within your headline font family, but set the overline off somehow: make it bold, condensed, or all-caps. If you're using a longish quote as an overline, the pullquote style should do fine, but you may need to increase the point size a little.

-- Summaries: Small paragraphs above or below the story don't even need art (though it usually helps), but make sure they are not in body type (but cutline font should do). These can be main points of a story, time elements, the "players" in a story, or answers to questions that immediately come to mind, to name a few. More concise, shorter summaries that will run larger (18-24 points or so) can take a display font.

-- Quote rails: These usually look better vertically, but can work either way. Quote rails are a good way to pull out the main points of a speech or highlight various viewpoints on an issue. Mugs can jazz up a quote rail if other art is weak or if the rail is on a jump page.

