

Designing For a Difference

Handout by Ron Reason, delivered at the "Designing for a Difference" Workshop in Chicago. Updated and posted to the web September 2006

Rethinking headlines for today's reader

FIGURE OUT YOUR VOICE. Does your newspaper want to be "by the book?" Or does it want to be something more engaging? Does it want to be authoritarian, or more real? A more modern, sometimes conversational approach may help you reach at-risk audiences. If so, try to put this in writing: what do you want your attitude to be, where will it be OK to be a little bit edgier or to have some fun or engage the reader - whatever the "new" is, try to be clear on where it will be acceptable in the paper. Make sure this has the blessing of your top editor, or you may not get very far with change.

SEEK OUT AND DESTROY YOUR HEADLINE MYTHS. At The Dallas Morning News, prototypes during their last big redesign were lookin' good, but some headlines (which had appeared in the actual paper but which now stood out via the new typography) suddenly struck many as flat. In the course of discussions, it was revealed that nearly everyone on the desk had a myth, edict, misperception, or some rule from a previous boss, employer or college course, that was not exactly in synch with the improved paper the editors were trying to create. One copy editor told me, "we are limited by NEVER being able to use a question headline." I asked the executive editor about this. He replied, "I never said that and I have no idea which of my predecessors did. Question heads are OK if that's the best way to flag the story. END OF MYTH. Let's move on." We did some workshops on better headlines, and the paper created an in-house committee called the "Head Board" to examine where they were and where they wanted to be. They put their new mission in writing and headlines improved.

SOME OLD RULES ARE WORTH THROWING OUT. Just because an approach might have worked well in the early '80s, when I studied journalism and went through the Dow Jones Newspaper Fund editing boot camp, doesn't mean it's still a valid approach today. A few concepts that I have reconsidered in recent years, due to changing readership habits, and the impact of increased use of new tools such as decks (secondary headlines), include:

RULE: We must always use attribution! "Study says caffeine may be bad for you." Well, why not just say "Caffeine may be bad for you"? Is that going too much out on a limb? NO! Clarify this in the deck if the latest research is really relevant. (Better yet, write a chattier headline like "Think twice before that second cup of joe." Leave the press release voice for the body text if you must.) Over-attribution like "Research shows," "Report reveals," "Scientists say," can almost always be relegated to the deck (if you use decks, and you probably should). These words make your paper sound bureaucratic and stodgy.

RULE: We need to play it straight, we're the Newspaper of Record. Well, yes and no. The NY Times is the ultimate newspaper of record, and even they have engaging, surprising, playful, dramatic headlines, where appropriate. Yes, they're balanced with the "straight" stuff, but the provocative heads are in there, even among the news pages. (Exercise: read the Times closely for a week. Clip the most engaging heads and put them on a bulletin board. Learn from the best!)

RULE: We can't use questions (or question marks, or exclamation points) in headlines! Well, this one needs to be tossed out pronto. Some of the best heads I've seen in recent years are question heads. Many stories have a vague resolution, if any at all, but are still worth examining in the newspaper. A question head, with just the right deck or drophead, is often the way to go.

IT'S OK TO TALK TO, AND WITH, THE READER. Years ago the industry made fun of USA Today for headlines like "We're happier than we've ever been!" or "How much is your house worth?" By this point readers are used to reading and hearing such sentiments. We're now in a conversation with our readers, not talking to them from on high. Use language that sounds comfortable and neighborly where it's appropriate. Often, imperative use of YOU or US or WE can make a story seem more relevant or compelling on a personal level to the reader.

Have a tip for modern headline approaches you'd like to share? Email me at the address below!

WANT TO IMPROVE YOUR HEADLINES?

ANALYZE what's right and wrong about your current approach. Clip and discuss examples (good and bad) from competing papers or publications you admire.

CHANGE the system. Put in writing your new standards. Include real life examples of poor headlines, but rewrite them to make them more conversational or relevant.

REWARD the best efforts toward creating an engaging new voice for your paper!

Ron Reason is a *Poynter Institute* Visiting Faculty Member and Design & Editing Consultant (*Crain's Chicago Business, Advertising Age, Harvard Crimson, Dallas Morning News, Emirates Evening Post of Dubai* and many other newspapers and magazines, large and small)