

“The language of truth is unadorned and always simple.”

— Marcellinus Ammianus

“Brevity is the soul of wit.”

— Shakespeare

Tweets, titles and headlines

Keep it short and sweet

Newspapers and magazines have had headlines since the days of Ben Franklin, and the ability to write clever, accurate headlines has long been admired in newsrooms.

In today’s world, where social media sites are a primary path to news and social interaction, knowing how to write short, punchy titles and headlines is more important than ever.

Studies show that online and print readers scan headlines and titles for what interests them. But headlines are too important to leave until the last minute. In the Poynter Institute study *Eyes on the News*, subjects were asked to read a newspaper prototype while their eye movements were recorded. The study found that 85 percent of headlines were “processed” by the readers. “Processed” meant that the subject’s eyes stopped on that headline. By contrast, only 25 percent of the story leads were processed, and many fewer were read in depth.

Bloggers know the value of writing good entry titles as a way to index information for their readers — and to attract search engine queries. Facebook and Twitter act as news digests for a substantial portion of the U.S. public, according to the Pew Center for Research. Public relations firms are turning to Twitter to get their messages out

Many new organizations, advertising agencies and public relations firms have responded by putting more effort into writing short. Today, writers and editors must be skilled in creating headlines, titles and tweets that are clever, direct and informative. Gone are the days of “teasing” the reader. For most readers, the title or tweet *is* the story.

Know your limits

Writing short today means writing to fit a space. A WordPress title should sit comfortably on the page with no bad “splits.” Newspapers and magazine have always placed a premium on brevity; headlines and magazine titles are always written to fit a given space on the page.

Twitter presents its own special challenge. The maximum of 140 characters is short enough as it is, but those in the advertising and public relations business recommend writing much shorter to allow space for a link and for a retweet. Shea Bennett of adweek.com keeps his tweets to about 100 characters, leaving 20 for a shortened URL and 20 for a retweet.

The majority of newspapers and magazines today rely on pagination, a system where entire pages are laid out on the computer and sent to an image setter as a complete, or composite, page. In these systems, the editor might be asked to write a headline or title with broad specifications so that final adjustments can be made by the makeup editor on the electronic page. In one system, editors write headline combinations in “templates” that can be applied and adjusted to fit on the electronic page.

Splits

Skillful writers know that headline, titles, advertising copy, signs, billboards and the like have to be well-written but also must sit nicely on the page. This means paying attention to “splits” when the writing extends over two or more lines. A skillful writer will keep a strong subject and strong verb together on one line.

Other splits to avoid include preposition-object, adjective-noun and verb-helping verb. Look at these two headlines:

Car rams food line; 1 killed ❌

1 killed as car rams food line

Which is better? The first has a top line that sounds a bit silly until you pick up on the second line, but overall, it flows better than the second one. We like the second one better just because it prevents a reader with an odd sense of humor from laughing at a serious story.

Splits are a mistake when they cause the reader to do a double-take, when they might confuse the reader, or when they might be unappealing visually. Here's an example:

Clinton replaces Gore aide in staff shake-up ❌

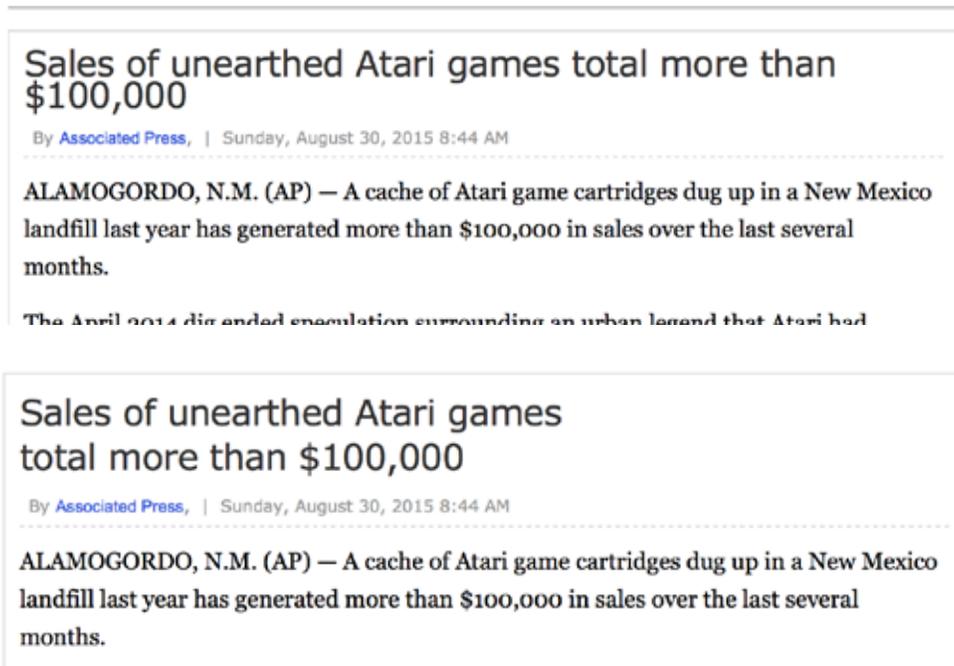
Gore aide replaced as Clinton shuffles staff

The first headline suffers from a *modifier split*, the type that is most easily misunderstood. Avoid these, and avoid splitting names in general.



Another kind of split is the prepositional split, between the preposition and its object. See the problem with the ad on the left? The preposition *with* is split from its object *copy*. The one on the right is much better, even though readers might not be able to say why.

Here is an example of a WordPress title with a bad split (top), and the corrected version:





A third type of split is the verb split. The type in the Tango ad fits in a neat shape, so that might be a design consideration, but the helping verb *have* (part of the contraction *you've*) is split from the main verb *been*. This is not as serious as other types of splits, but it's often avoidable.

The fourth and final type of split is an infinitive split, between *to* and the *verb*. The FedEx ad splits the infinitive *to be*.

By the way, these are not real ads, although the products are real enough. They were put together for demonstration purposes only.

How to write short

This section outlines step-by-step approaches on how to write various types of short messages: headlines, titles, ad slogans and tweets. These approaches are adapted from a process developed by Buck Ryan of the University of Kentucky, an expert on creative writing strategies and a former editor at the Chicago Tribune.

What follows is not only how-to but also hands-on, so before you read further, reach for a pencil. We'll start with headlines, then use the same tactics to write tweets.

The skeleton approach

The skeleton approach works best for the straight information we see in headlines and titles, and tweets from news organizations and public relations people. Let's start with a headline. What head would you write for a story that begins with this paragraph? You have just four words to do the job. Take a moment to think it through and jot down your answer.

The city's school board president was re-elected Monday in a close race that focused more on a textbook controversy than on the usual funding issues.

The first step to writing a headline is to check the lead of the story, usually the first paragraph. If it is wrong, chances are the headline will be wrong. If its phrasing is weak, the headline probably will be weak. You must sweat every word of the lead to make sure it's the best summary for the story.

We often err in short messages by reaching for ideas that don't relate to the main facts, in this case, the facts in the lead. Remember that the lead might be the first sentence or the first several paragraphs of a story. Anytime you write a headline that doesn't relate in some way to the lead, either the headline is bad or the lead is bad. For our example, let's assume that this lead is fine.

The second step is to look for the lead's skeleton. You identify the simplest form of the subject, verb and object in the main clause and keep them in the same order as they are in the lead. You just aren't picking out key words; you're trying to write a scaled-down sentence that makes sense. By doing this, you are using the lead's structure to write the first draft. This first draft may be something you write out or just think through.

The full skeleton for this lead would be something like:

School board president re-elected in close race focusing on textbooks.

Note that in headline writing, we can leave out articles (*a*, *an* and *the*) and some verbs (in this example *is*). With a tight space, like the one you face here, only the skeleton's subject and verb may fit. In this case, your headline could read:

School board president re-elected

The last step is to ask whether your headline is really the best one for the story. A better idea may occur to you. Take this example. Can you do better than *School board president re-elected*? Probably not.

Repeat after me

Compare the challenge of writing the school board headline with this one. You have two lines, and each line can hold only three or four short words. Remember to use the skeleton approach. Here's the lead, which you can assume is correct:

When it comes to securing a mortgage these days, home buyers are facing a double whammy: Interest rates are high and lenders are scarce.

Applying the skeleton approach, you would focus on the main clause. The subject and verb would form the top line of the headline: *Home buyers facing*. The object would form the second line: *a double whammy*.

"Double whammy" is the type of wording that a reader would notice, so we want to avoid repeating it in the headline. With the school board headline, the words were more routine, so repetition was less noticeable.

So what would be a good headline for this story? If the top line reads *Home buyers facing* or *Home buyers face*, that's fine. The second line could just tell the story. Notice how this straightforward headline resulted from the skeleton approach but with a slight twist (left):

Home buyers face high rates, few lenders

Home buyers face 1-2 punch on loans

Or you may be the type who is concerned about reflecting the tone of the lead, which has a lighter touch than *high rates, few lenders* suggests. You might write the headline on the right.

Both headlines have their merits, and both arose from using a combination of the skeleton approach and another method, the condense and patch approach.

Condense and patch approach

To illustrate this approach, let's work through another example. What headline would you write for a story with the following lead? You have just five short words to do the job. As always, we'll start with the skeleton approach and see how far it can take us. Think it through and jot down your idea above the lead.

Three area residents were killed Monday when their car hit a telephone pole, skidded 50 feet and flipped over, police said.

First let's assume that in fact three people were killed and that the lead is fine. Now we look for the skeleton, which would go something like this: *Three killed when car hits pole, skids and flips over*. The first five words of the skeleton will not work for us as a headline, so we turn to the condense and patch approach.

Weigh each idea to see if it absolutely must be in the headline. This is not always as easy as it seems. It requires good news judgment, and all good headline writers have that. Remember, every idea in a lead is good, or it wouldn't be in the lead. You have to decide what ideas must be represented and which would be nice to represent if you have room.

At the same time you're weighing each word's value, you should be looking for ways to shorten ideas without losing meaning. Let's take the ideas one at a time.

Three killed is a must; it can become *3 killed* or *3 die* if you have to condense the idea. *Car* is a must, and you can't get any shorter than that. *Hits pole* and *flips over* are stronger than *skids*; most car wrecks involve skidding.

Now comes the moment of truth. You could liken this part to playing the parlor game “Lifeboat” in which you have to decide who in the boat deserves to live and who should be cast overboard for the betterment of the group. *Hits pole* seems more worthy than *flips over* because a car flipping over in a wreck is more common than a car hitting a pole.

Because of our five-word limit, we must deviate from the lead’s structure, and condense and patch the headline together with a semicolon. Like so:

Car hits pole; 3 killed

Is it better to have active voice verbs in headlines? Yes, most of the time. Then is *die* better here? Well, no. *Killed* is the stronger word. There isn’t much action in dying; the idea of being killed, however, is more vivid. With a tighter count, you could go with *Car crash kills 3*.

Tightening the noose

Sometimes the lead tends to defy headline writing. Take this example. What headline would you write for a story with this lead? You have four words.

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina—The deadly rioting over economic austerity in Venezuela last week has sparked fears of similar social explosions across Latin America and has lent new urgency to calls for relief from the region’s staggering foreign debt.

Assuming that the lead is accurate, we start with the skeleton approach and see how far it can take us. One obvious problem is that we’re facing a *double-barreled lead*; it introduces two different but complementary themes. The first skeleton would be this: *Rioting in Venezuela sparks fears across Latin America*. The second skeleton would go something like this: *Rioting in Venezuela lends urgency to debt relief*.

Now which do you pare down using the condense and patch approach? With a double-barreled lead, the first statement is usually the most important one and the other provides a secondary idea. Sometimes the main idea goes in the main headline and the secondary idea goes in a secondary headline. Because we have just four words, we’ll concentrate on condensing the first skeleton.

Rioting in Venezuela can become Venezuelan riots. We get a kick out of *sparked fears* because it’s the classic case of a writer using headlines, those short words or expressions that headline writers must use because of tight counts but which writers should never use to replace simple, common language. Can you imagine flying in a plane, being jolted by turbulence and saying to the person next to you, “That sparked fear in me”? Never! You would say “scared me,” or “frightened me,” or “worried me,” or something like that. So for the headline, let’s say *worry*.

Now this headline writing task has come down to one challenge: How do you say *across Latin America* in one word. Here’s where many headline writers stumble. They conclude it’s impossible, begin tearing up what they’ve done and inevitably end up with a bad headline. Sticking to the skeleton focuses the challenge. Headline writers succeed or fail based on their ability to condense ideas fairly and accurately. How do you say *across Latin America* in one word? How about *region* or *neighbors*?

Our headline for this story would be this:

Venezuelan riots worry neighbors

Now compare this with your idea. If you went with *Latin riots*, you need to be more specific. If you tried to work in the debt angle, you probably didn’t do either skeleton idea justice. There just wasn’t enough room.

A little bird told me

Twitter has become an important tool for journalists, advertisers, public relations people and just about anyone who likes to spread the news. For the journalist, tweeting during an event has become part of the job. In advertising and public relations, Twitter is a powerful tool in the hands of a skilled writer.

Adweek.com’s Shea Bennett says two things are most important in your tweets: maximum readability and maximum retweetability.

Here are his tips for writing tweets:

1. **Think like your readers:** Craft your tweet accurately and pleasingly to ensure that it will appeal to the largest number of readers.
2. **Use consistent excellence to stand out from the crowd:** Bennett means what you tweet and when you tweet it to keep your feed fresh and lively. But his advice also applies to writing in a clear, concise way.
3. **Sell the headline (in a non-salesman way):** Bennett says a good tweet sells itself “in a way that makes it seem like you’re doing something else.” Jakob Nielsen, an expert on how to write for the web, advises us to avoid “marketese,” the hype that often finds itself in advertising: Best ever! You won’t find a better detergent! No. 1 across the board!
4. **Use correct (and acceptable) punctuation:** Poor punctuation distracts the reader, Bennett says, and reflects poorly on the writer. He advises us to use periods and commas, apostrophes in the right places and quote marks when needed — and to avoid exclamation points.
5. **Accept nothing less than flawless grammar and perfect spelling:** One trick Bennett suggests is to write your tweets using Microsoft Word or another word processor that has a grammar and spell-checker. He advises against using ALL CAPITAL LETTERS (looks like shouting) and to “avoid text-speak at all costs.” Forget about LOL and other gems of social media.
6. **Observe the magic retweet number:** You might believe that you have 140 characters in each tweet. The professional knows that some characters must be available at the end of the tweet for a shortened URL and for the reader to retweet. For him, the magic number is 100 characters: 100 for your message, 20 for your URL and 20 blank characters for a retweet.
7. **Shorten All Links With Bit.ly (And Nothing Else):** Bit.ly is Twitter’s URL shortener of choice.

Writing short is labor intensive, but so is anything worth doing right. Look over this story lead:

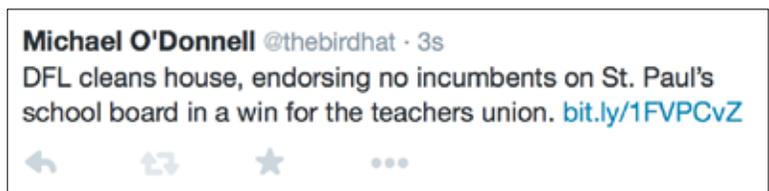
DFL party delegates Sunday voted to clean house on the St. Paul school board, endorsing none of the three incumbents in a resounding victory for the teachers union.

The lead is 164 characters (remember that spaces and punctuation count). How do we get it down to the magic 100? Use the condense and patch method.

1. Take aim at the modifier *resounding*. Delete it to gain 11 characters. Remember, you lose a space with each word, too.
2. What about *delegates*? If you leave in the shorter word *party*, and add *the* before *DFL*, you can delete *delegates*. Can you make it just *DFL votes...*? This depends on how confident you are in your readers knowing what the DFL is. Let’s assume our audience is St. Paul and around the state.
3. Tweets, like headlines, can be written in the historical present tense. Change *voted* to *votes*.
4. The time element, *Monday*, can be deleted when tweeting in real time; each tweet has a time stamp.
5. Do we need to add the state, *Minn.*? This is a judgment call that depends on your primary audience. If your main readership is in St. Paul and around the state, you can assume readers will know where St. Paul is located. Make *St. Paul’s* a possessive to eliminate *the*. Here is what we have so far:

DFL votes to clean house on St. Paul’s school board, endorsing none of the three incumbents in a victory for the teachers union.

6. This is 128 characters, including spaces. Now comes a tough decision: Should some element of the story give way in favor of another? Should we keep the idea of *cleaning house*? We could go right to *endorsing*. Here’s one version:



DFL endorses none of three incumbents on St. Paul’s school board, a victory for the teachers union.

This 100 characters, perfect. This next version keeps the idea of cleaning house:

DFL cleans house, endorsing no incumbents on St. Paul’s school board in a win for the teachers union. <http://bit.ly/1FVPCvZ>

This one is 101 characters without the link, 123 with it. Close enough.

Sizing up your material

When we write headlines, titles and tweets, we will have to deal with three types of information:

1. Serious topics demand straight, serious treatment.
2. Light, even humorous topics demand bright, clever treatment.
3. Topics that can go either way are the toughest and require good judgment.

The school board and car crash stories fall into the straight, serious category. The same goes for the Venezuelan riots story. The home buyers story falls into the last category.

Although we will struggle with tight space, particularly those four or five word dandies, we can be excused for falling short of what needs to be said: We just did not have enough room.

The stories that demand bright, clever headlines, titles or tweets, however, offer no easy out. The same is true for advertising copy, where cleverness is a prized commodity. These types of messages also tend to render the skeleton approach and the condense and patch approach useless, so we'll need another strategy for them.

The seed approach

Let's say we're writing a title for a story on our WordPress site. About 10 words is the maximum for blog titles. Jot down your idea.

Sally Johnson learned the hard way that love can hurt. This Valentine's Day, she sent her boyfriend a card expressing her affection, but the man's mother intercepted it. Now Sally, beaten and bruised, lies in a hospital bed, and the man's mother is facing battery charges.

Remember, the first step in writing short is to check your information. While this lead is factually correct, some might believe such a lead is inappropriate. But titles and headlines must reflect the tone and mood of the story. Consider how different the title challenge would be with a story like this:

A 53-year-old mother was charged Monday with battery in connection with the Valentine's Day attack on a woman who sent a message of affection to the older woman's son.

It's true that stories dealing with injury most often will demand a straight, serious title and will be written in a formal tone, but that's not always the case. Sometimes, odd as it might sound, something can be amusing about the circumstances of injury, such as those in this case. Clearly, we would have to take an entirely different tack if the woman had been killed. But that's not true, so let's go with the original lead.

Using the skeleton approach, you would end up with a headline like this:

Woman learns the hard way that love can hurt

That's exactly the point, but it's a bad idea for the title because you would be repeating the lead. The skeleton approach fails us here, so let's turn to the seed approach.

1. First, identify a word or idea that must be represented. This story would be timely around Valentine's Day, so an obvious seed would be *valentine*.
2. Now brainstorm expressions that grow out of the seed, and then focus on ones that can be used to tell the story. Think of *valentine*. What ideas come to mind? Valentines are red... and what else? Turn over some expressions with red in them: red hot, red sun, red sky at morning, seeing red. Bingo. This is an expression for being angry, like the boyfriend's mother. You have a start on a title: *Son's valentine makes mother see red*.
3. What other angles must be covered? For sure, the women's injury should be in the title. Playing off what you already have, you could write this:

Woman sees stars after valentine makes mother see red

4. Keep going. Don't be satisfied with your first effort, although it might turn out to be your best. What else can you do with red? What about the Valentine's Day rhyme, "Roses are red, violets are blue"? With a twist, you could write this title:

Roses are red, valentine sender black and blue

5. What if you can find a seed but get stuck thinking of expressions? Turn to a good dictionary and look up *valentine* or *red* or *Cupid*, then check for ideas from the definition. Or better yet, look for idioms listed at the end of the entries.
6. Another trick is to do a Google search of the terms *love*, *valentine* and *quotations*. Such a search turned up the proverb, *All's fair in love and war*. You can see where this might lead you.

The secret to success with the seed approach is to keep in mind that you need just one good idea to make a good title. Most of the expressions that come to mind will be bad ideas and should be discarded quickly. Don't waste time trying to force an expression into your headline. Look for another idea that will fit naturally.

The seed approach and advertising

We often hear students say, "I'm just not creative." It's true that some of us have better memories than others; sometimes that can be mistaken for creativity. Some of us are more perceptive or have a more wicked sense of humor. But creativity also can be a process. The seed approach is one such process.

Gary Koepke, chief creative officer for North America at SapientNitro, said he invites all sorts of people from across the agency to come to brainstorming meetings — even people not with the agency.

Speaking to a panel convened by Advertising Week, Koepke said: "Ultimately what I like is the random molecule idea. Invite someone who maybe has nothing to do with anything. Maybe it's an artist or a musician. Maybe it's my mom. Anybody to say, 'Why are you doing that?' or 'What's this?' or 'You guys always do the same thing.'

"I believe everybody is creative, so it doesn't matter who's in the room, as long as they've been briefed properly and somebody is managing that process."

Developing an advertising campaign is an involved process that includes many participants. It starts with the brief, a statement from the client of what product or concept is all about. Next comes extensive research on the client and its products, the audience, the competition. From this a campaign plan arises through brainstorming, sketching, writing and rewriting. Execution of the plan comes next, then evaluation.

Somewhere in this process, a copywriter will try to come up with the exactly right words, and the seed approach is one way to approach this task. Consider some of these famous ad slogans:

