

# **The New York Times**

## **Six things to consider in any story**

- 1) **Does the first paragraph, or "lede," work?** *90% of the story.*
  - Is it clear and easy to understand? If it's a hard-news story, ask yourself if you could write a headline based solely on the lede. If not, why not?
  - Has the writer tried to put everything in the first paragraph (or worse, the first sentence)? Look for facts you could take out of the lede and use further down.
- 2) **Are all the basics there?**
  - Who? What? Where? When? How? Are they all there? The simplest things are always the easiest to forget!
  - Is a comparison with something the reader knows, a baseline, required to help understand magnitude (the ever-popular football field, or averages or records)?
  - Is there enough history or background to make the story clear to the reader who has not been following the story?
- 3) **Are there unanswered questions?**
  - Does the story say what's going to happen next? What are the implications?
  - If obvious questions can't be answered, does the story say why?
- 4) **Is it fair and balanced?**
  - When an explicit or implicit accusation is raised, does the target have an opportunity to respond?
  - Are racial, sexual, religious or ethnic references relevant? Is that relevance clearly established in the story? Is it applied equally to all people in the story?
  - Is there "another side" to the story or to the contentions of the main sources? Is that other side, or sides, presented and is it given appropriate weight?
  - Is the subject matter of the story placed in context by including information from an outside or unbiased observer?
- 5) **How well is the piece written?**
  - Is information where the reader wants to find it, or are important details left to the end, or too much detail thrown at the reader at the beginning?
  - Does the writer fall back on jargon or insider terms or frequent use of acronyms or initials for things or processes?
  - Where a term that may not be familiar to all readers is used, can the writer define it gracefully without insulting readers who do know what it means?
- 6) **Do the numbers add up?**
  - Does the math work?
  - If an overall number is given, do the details of the story support that number?

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## Some Headline Rules

- **Write in the present tense -- usually "to read"**  
The present tense is most common in headlines and is used for events in the very recent past, when the action in most newspaper articles has taken place. It is intended to convey a sense of immediacy. Past tense is used for events in the slightly to very distant past, or when the headline contains a specific past time day or date. Future tense is used for actions in the future:  
*Bush and Blair meet* [present tense] *at Camp David* (even though it happened yesterday)  
but  
*Bush and Blair met* [past tense] *Thursday at Camp David* (because there's a specific date)  
and  
*Bush and Blair met* [past tense] *secretly before war* (because it happened a while ago)  
*Bush and Blair will meet* [future tense] *at Camp David* (it will happen in the future)
- **Fill out most heads in print**  
Most headlines in a newspaper should be filled out to within 3 or fewer letters of the end of the line. Centered heads ordinarily should be wide enough to provide at least one letter over each column of type. On a Web page, however, it's impossible to know exactly where a headline will end because different browsers permit different space for the same headline.
- **A comma can replace 'and'**  
A comma can replace 'and' to make a headline fit ("Bush, Blair agree on strategy").
- **Trim articles from the left**  
When you need to remove some articles (a, an, the) to make the headline fit, begin trimming from the left. Once the mental ear hears an article, it expects to continue to hear articles where they would naturally occur. Suppose you need to trim a head that says "The cook's in the kitchen." Notice the difference in these two trims with approximately equal counts: "The cook's in kitchen" and "Cook's in the kitchen"
- **Numbers can be figures or words, depending on which fits better**  
Head writers are allowed this exemption from the standard style rule that says numbers under 10 should be spelled out — they can use either numbers or figures to make the head fit. But many papers say the number "one" all by itself should always be spelled out because the figure looks odd in headlines (and in some type faces looks like a lower-case "L").
- **Don't repeat words**  
A fully furnished headline set of all the display type with a story might include a kicker, a main head, a deck below the main head — often called the readout or subhead — and a blurb. Avoid repeating words, except for the special effect of repetition.
- **Create your own dictionary of short words**  
You need short words to fit tight spaces (an increase may be a "rise" or "hike"; a decrease a "fall"). Words with l's, t's, and i's are highly prized. A thesaurus can help.
- **Avoid bad breaks in multi-line heads in print**  
Under the general rule at The Times, you should not end any line of a multi-line head with a preposition (except the last). Also, adjectives and their nouns and adverbs and verbs should not be on different lines. And headlines should never, ever have words split between lines with a hyphen, even on a Web page). However, bad breaks are unavoidable on Web pages because different browsers break headlines in different places.
- **Always use the spell-checker**  
The greatest sin of a headline writer is to produce a typo. Never submit a headline without spell-checking it, or if a spell-checker isn't available, without carefully proofing it.

SEO



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## **Some widely used reference works**

*(Any list of style and usage references must be subjective. There is consensus on many language rules, but there is also spirited disagreement. For an editor, the goal is consistency, so that the guiding principle is that whatever reference is used, everyone on the staff must use it. There can be endless arguments as to whether some usage is "right" or "wrong," but there can be no argument as to whether it is "our style.")*

### **Elements of Style**

**William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White**

This small, classic book has been handed out in freshman English courses for decades. It offers basic grammar rules that even novice copy editors should know.

### **Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English**

**Patricia T. O'Conner**

A modern guide to grammar that's more extensive and sometimes more fun than Strunk and White. Patricia O'Conner is a former copy editor at The New York Times.

### **The Associated Press Stylebook**

**Norm Goldstein, editor**

The most widely used stylebook and the basis for most newspapers' style. It provides a rule for almost every situation and is the book that most copy editors get started with.

### **Webster's New World College Dictionary**

This dictionary, in its latest edition, is the house dictionary of The New York Times. Computer spell checkers have reduced, but not eliminated, the need for dictionaries as spelling references. But they remain critical for determining if a word means what you think it means or if it's being used correctly. Any good dictionary may be used, but it's critical that everyone on staff use the *same* one.

### **Bartlett's Familiar Quotations**

It's astounding how often famous quotations are incorrectly rendered or wrongly ascribed. (Did Shakespeare write "to the manner born" or "to the manor born"?) Along with its research value, Bartlett's can also be a source of inspiration for headline writers: it's a trove of widely known phrases that can be twisted slightly for headlines.

### **The Synonym Finder**

**J. I. Rodale**

Mark Twain once said that the difference between the almost-right word and the right word is the difference between the lightning bug and lightning. A list of synonyms can help you separate one from the other. Writers can also use synonyms to avoid an "echo," that is using the same word twice in close proximity; headline writers will find the listing invaluable when searching for a word that means the same thing but is shorter.

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