




No Deadheads Allowed

By Dana Kader Robb





I promise this is not an anti-Grateful Dead article. What it is, though, is an anti-bad headlines article. A headline that doesn't have a verb in it is often called a "deadhead." Since the purpose of a headline is to draw the reader into the article, it follows naturally that a boring, inactive headline will send the message that it's a boring article. So you want to avoid "deadheads" like dead fish.

A headline does not have to be silly or a bad pun to be effective – though you'd never guess that from this newsletter. What it does have to be is engaging, active and descriptive. Here are some tips on writing great headlines:

-  The tone of the headline should match the tone of the story. If you are writing about a serious, formal issue then keep your headlines conservative. When the tone of the article is fun and light, your headline can match.
-  Have empathy for the subject. Don't play with a person's name or the name of a company.
-  Use present tense, active verbs.
Bad: "Calendar of Events"



Better: "Spring classes offer fun and fulfillment"
Even Better: "No-one plays hooky: Class schedule provides something for everyone"

-  Limit your punctuation. Headlines almost never have periods and rarely commas – except in lists. What are used frequently are colons. Start with a catchy phrase and then condense the information or message after the colon (see "even better" example in previous point).
-  Don't make the reader say "huh?" Avoid jargon, unfamiliar abbreviations and names that aren't easily recognizable. Eschew words like "eschew." A headline should be simple, concise and inclusive – inviting the potential reader.
-  John Russial of the University of Oregon says that writing headlines is like stretching your literary wings in a phone booth. Make the most out of the limited space you have available.
-  Be aware of the double entendre. During proofreading, have someone check headlines for additional meanings. Don't end up in the same place as the copy editor who wrote the headline for an article about a company that wanted to purchase another business:
"Textron Inc. Makes Offer to Screw Co. Stockholders."