

FREEPRESS 101:

What's in a headline?

Headlines — they can make you laugh, they can make you cry, and they can make your blood boil, but at a minimum, they should make you want to read the story.

Good headlines are often exercises in staring at a blank headline field long enough that either blood drips from the copy editor's forehead or inspiration strikes and a pithy collection of words flows into the keyboard.

Sometimes we nail it. Sometimes we don't.

What makes headlines difficult to write — and easy to get wrong — is the desire to sum up a 600-word story in a number of words that fit the space on the page, that accurately convey the content of a story and are interesting enough to draw readers into the story. If the story draws out anger, so too should the headline. If the story is sympathetic, positive, heartwarming... the headline should be as well. If there's humour in the story, humour in the headline is a good thing.

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE OVERTORQUED

The Good:

Not quite a feta-ccompli

Burglar busts into cheese shop, doesn't steal edam thing

The humour in this headline — on a burglary at a St. Boniface fromagerie — worked because nothing was stolen, nobody was hurt and damage to the premises was minimal.

The Bad:

Prime minister attends G7 conference, raises many concerns



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Kelly Taylor is a Free Press copy editor and award-winning automotive journalist, and he writes the Free Press's Business Weekly newsletter. He's been a member of the Automobile Journalists' Association of Canada since 2001.

Kelly got his start in journalism in 1988 at the Winnipeg Sun, straight out of the creative communications program at RRC Polytech (then Red River Community College). A detour to the Brandon Sun for eight months led to the Winnipeg Free Press in 1989.

He was named Automotive Journalist of the Year in 2015 and 2002, a runner-up for the same award in 2014 and 2016 and has earned consecutive Gold Medallion and Best in Newspapers awards from the International Automotive Media Competition (2015 and 2016).

This is too vague, too yawn-worthy, too dull. One would hope the prime minister would raise many concerns, otherwise, what's the point of going? Better would be:

Prime minister votes to extend Russia's ban from G7

or,

U.S. demands Canada boosts defence spending

What we do try to guard against is giving those people who only read the headline the wrong idea. We also try to guard against using a strong — or in our words, overtorqued — headline to give a weak story play beyond what it deserves.

Reporters don't write headlines and are not given headlines and told to write the story to fit. It's actually the other way around: reporters don't know where their stories are going to be placed, what type size will be used or the available headline space, so having reporters write headlines makes little sense. Editors' welcome suggestions, particularly if the reporter has had a thought that's particularly clever.

WHAT'S ON DECK?

Headlines often contain two components, the headline and what we call a deck, or a secondary headline. Sometimes, the deck flows from the headline in content, sometimes the deck brings out another point in the story.

The size of the headline is based on a couple of factors: the relative importance of the story and its prominence on the page. The main story for a page should have a headline that uses the largest font of all other headlines on a page, similar to how an interior designer will place a large display item — a fireplace or a large piece of art — as a focal point in a room.

The largest type size, 72 or 80 points, is usually reserved for the front page or the front pages of inside sections, and on the front page, usually only for the most prominent of stories, such as the 9-11 terrorist attack or one of the space shuttle disasters. Strong good news gets big play, too: I suspect one day in the not-too-distant future there will be such a headline on a story declaring COVID-19 over, or at least as over as it can get. (As a matter of fact, we did: on May 6, in 72-point type, we heralded the World Health Organization's declaration that the COVID-19 emergency was "OVER")

Headlines serve as a story's director of marketing, essentially, and aim to sell a reader on the idea of reading the story. The best headlines will comprise words that are specific, not vague and interesting, not dull — but a guiding principle is that a headline shouldn't oversell a story.