

# It's all in your Head(line)

By Bobby Hawthorne, former UIL Academic Director

*Revised by Jeanne Acton, UIL Journalism Director*

# The Headline Writing Contest:

- Six stories, six headlines
- 45 minutes (about 7 minutes a story)
- Count parameters
- About speed and creativity

**Sell the story.** A good head involves readers much like a clever ad.

**Tell the facts.** Precise and specific heads inform readers instantly of what they may or may not want to read.

**Be accurate.** All facts, names, numbers, whatever must be correct.

**Be objective.** Don't editorialize.

**Simple but precise.** No fancy words. No weird constructions. Find the right word to communicate the meaning.

**Make tone fit content.** Serious story. Serious headline. Funny story. Funny headline.

# Kinds of Head(line)s

- 1-line-headline

Bricklayers engage in mortar combat

- 2-line-headline

Backers hot for chili  
as U.S. official food

- 3-line-headline

Principal adds  
six electives  
to summer school

- Main/secondary headline

## Standing tall

5'-4" guard rises to challenge of leading Tigers

- Main/secondary headline

# Driven to destruction

Police play game  
of cat and mouse  
with illegal racers

- Main/secondary headline

# Whole new ballgame

Nolan Ryan makes smooth transition to job helping oversee state's parks, wildlife areas

- Main/Secondary headline

## Up to date

Senior makes over dad  
for e-bay auction

- Be as specific as possible in your headline.  
Get to the heart of the news.

(not good)

**School board discusses items  
at heated Tuesday meeting**

(better – more specific)

**2 board members walk out  
over budget argument**

- Avoid semicolons. The headline should be a single sentence, not a collection of sentences.

Hurricane strikes;  
School swamped;  
Pep rally cancelled

Better:

Pep rally cancelled  
after hurricane  
slams into school

- Don't pad headlines with school initials or dates. Also, avoid initials and abbreviations in headlines.

Too vague...

**2004 MHS FFA plans  
to hold annual rodeo**

- More specific...

**Willie Nelson to appear  
at FFA rodeo Saturday**

- Put all parts of a verb on the same line  
avoid be verbs and linking verbs. Action. Shoot  
present tense or future tense.

(weak)

Spongebob will  
attend Mensa meeting  
purely as spectator

(better)

Spongebob to attend  
Mensa meeting  
purely as spectator

## A few more rules ...

- Avoid contractions
- Do not end a headline with a period
- Avoid names unless they are easily recognizable
- Always use single quotes in headlines

- No articles. Use a comma instead of “and”

**Heat wave blisters California, Texas**

- No clichés.

Swimmers dive into season

Golfers swing into action

Exchange students say 'Hasta la vista'

Math Club multiplies

Football team tackles opposition

Drama Club acts up

Military recruiters say, 'I Want You'

- Do not repeat key words or phrases from the main headline into the secondary headline

**Pocket lasers banned**  
**Authorities ban laser pointers**

Just in case you didn't catch it, the repetition is the word "laser" and "ban"

# Pocket lasers banned

**Principal cites injuries, class disruptions**

This headline provides  
twice as much  
information in the  
same amount of  
space! Yippee!

- Avoid "headline-ese" either in the form of simplified spellings or odd synonyms.

Board to meet  
Tuesday nite

Vball team destroys  
Southside in finals

Senior play  
to continue  
thru Easter

- Avoid initials or abbreviations, unless the initials are instantly recognizable. From the UT-Austin's Daily Texan:

## **ACLU considers lawsuit for SFA's YCT**

- Avoid passive verbs in headlines.

Internet fraud is  
cause of worry  
for administrators

Better:

Internet fraud  
concerns  
administrators

- It is permissible to use implied passive verbs.

Mosquitos (are) biting into summer fun

Federal grant (is) renewed

- Put modifiers and words modified on the same line

Fire guts Fred Astaire  
Dance Studio, 2 injured

- Put all parts of a verb on the same line

Strive for present/future tense, action verbs

(weak)

Nichols will  
not appear  
in court

(better)

Nichols avoids  
district court  
appearance

- Put all parts of a verb on the same line

(weak)

Big surprise: Nader will  
run for president again

(better)

Big surprise: Nader to run  
for U.S. president again

- Do not end a line with a preposition

Baseball team ready for  
playoff game, coach says

- Do not end a line with a preposition

No love lost between  
Longhorns, Sooners

- When separating two sentences in a headline, do so with a semi-colon.

Bardwell named Educator of the Year;  
experts call it sign of plunging standards

- The main headline should never be dependent on a kicker or other secondary headline.

(incorrect)

**If elected in November, Obama**  
Says he will get U.S. out of Iraq

(correct)

**Getting out**  
Obama promises to end Iraq war

- Alliteration in headlines should be used sparingly and in appropriate situations.

Acceptable:

## New Planetary Puzzlers

A distant, oversize world causes cosmic confusion

# Take 'meowt' to the cat show

Annual festival of felines begins today

- Unacceptable:

# Cheney's chest chink

Vice president's thumper goes thud

- The headline should reflect the mood of the story.

**Band itching for practice  
as soon as mosquitos killed**

- Be careful of word use and misinterpretation.

## Bears capture playoff birth

Bush, Kerry  
butt heads

Panda mating fails;  
veterinarian takes over

Be sure to eat  
right before surgery

Kicking baby  
considered  
to be healthy

Crowds rushing to see  
Pope trampled to death

Police Say Man Hid  
Crack in Buttocks