

BBC. The language of headlines

What is a headline?

The headline of a news story is the short summary which introduces the story at the beginning of a TV or radio news broadcast, or which appears above articles in a newspaper or on a website.

I. *The following headlines all appeared on the BBC World News website on 4th December 2000. Match the headline with the news stories.*

1. Gore pins hopes on Florida court
2. University attacked over ‘tobacco money’
3. Space station hit by hitch
4. Beckham to reject £80,000-a-week

a) Cancer care and research charities have attacked a university's decision to accept £4m sponsorship from British American Tobacco.

b) Democrat Al Gore appeals to the Florida Supreme Court in what his lawyers say is likely to be the last stand in his battle for the presidency.

c) David Beckham is to reject Manchester United's new and improved contract offer, according to Sunday newspaper reports.

d) Astronauts from the American space shuttle Endeavour have had some difficulties in installing a new solar power system on the International Space Station (ISS).

II. *Headlines are not full sentences, but short summaries designed to attract attention. As a result, some words are omitted. Look at the headlines again. Try to write the headlines as complete sentences.*

The grammar of headlines

Which types of words do you need to add to make the headlines full sentences?

Parts of speech: The aim of a news headline is to grab your attention. Therefore, any ‘unnecessary’ words are often left out. These include:

Articles: The space station has been hit by a hitch.

Auxiliary verbs: The space station has been hit by a hitch.

Possessive adjectives: Gore has pinned his hopes on the Florida Court.

What do you notice about the forms of the verbs used in the headlines?

Verb forms: News broadcasts and newspapers are designed to make you think that news stories are happening NOW. Try changing the forms of the verbs they use to indicate that something happened very recently.

Present simple: Gore pins hopes...

The present simple tense in the headline replaces the **present perfect simple** or the **past simple** tense in the news story. The effect is to say that the story is happening NOW rather than in the very recent past.

Past participles: University attacked over tobacco money.

The full form of this headline should read: The University **was attacked** over the tobacco money.

When the passive voice is used in a headline, it is usually just the **past participle** form which appears. Auxiliaries make the headline long and detract from the immediacy.

Infinitives: Beckham **to reject** £80,000 a week.

When the story refers to the future plans of the subject, the headline usually uses a verb in the infinitive form.

The headline above is a shortened form of the sentence: David Beckham **is going to reject** the new, improved contract which has been offered to him.

Language task

Here are some titles for news articles – but the sentences are too long to be headlines. Can you shorten them?

- a) A victim of a car crash has learned to walk again.
- b) A new drug will cure ‘flu this winter.
- c) The police questioned a suspect in a robbery yesterday.