

Basic Newspaper Feature: The Headline

The headline (the title given to a news item or an article) is a dependent form of newspaper writing. It is in fact a part of a larger whole. The specific functional and linguistic traits of the headline provide sufficient ground for isolating and analysing it as a specific "genre" of journalism. The main function of the headline is to inform the reader briefly what the text that follows is about. But apart from this, headlines often contain elements of appraisal, i.e. they show the reporter's or the paper's attitude to the facts reported or commented on, thus also performing the function of instructing the reader. English headlines are short and catching, they "compact the gist of news stories into a few eye-snaring words. A skillfully turned out headline tells a story, or enough of it, to arouse or satisfy the reader's curiosity." In some English and American newspapers sensational headlines are quite common. The practices of headline writing are different with different newspapers. In many papers there is, as a rule, but one headline to a news item, whereas such papers as *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* often carry a news item or an article with two or three headlines, and sometimes as many as four, e.g.

BRITAIN ALMOST "CUT IN HALF"

Many Vehicles Marooned in Blizzard

(*The Guardian*)

STATE AUDIT FINDS NEW CITY DEFICITS IN LAST
2 BUDGETS

Asserts Bookkeeping Errors Led Controller to Overstate Anticipated Revenues

\$ 292-MILLION INVOLVED

FIRE FORCES AIRLINER TO TURN BACK

Cabin Filled With Smoke

Safe Landing For 97 Passengers

Atlantic Drama In Super VC 10

(*The Times*)

Such group headlines are almost a summary of the information contained in the news item or article.

The functions and the peculiar nature of English headlines predetermine the choice of the language means used. The vocabulary groups considered in the analysis of brief news items are commonly found in headlines. But headlines also abound in emotionally coloured words and phrases, as the italicized words in the following:

End this Bloodbath (*Morning Star*), Milk Madness (*Morning Star*), Tax agent a cheat (*Daily World*)

No Wonder Housewives are Pleading: 'HELP' (*Daily Mirror*). Roman Catholic Priest sacked (*Morning Star*)

Furthermore, to attract the reader's attention, headline writers often resort to a deliberate breaking-up of set expressions, in particular fused set expressions, and deformation of special terms, a stylistic device capable of producing a strong emotional effect, e.g.

Cakes and Bitter Ale (*The Sunday Times*). Conspirator-in-chief Still at Large (*The Guardian*)

Compare respectively the allusive set expression cakes and ale, and the term commander-in-chief.

Syntactically headlines are very short sentences or phrases of a variety of patterns:

a) **Full declarative sentences**, e.g. 'They Threw Bombs on Gipsy Sites' (Morning Star), 'Allies Now Look to London' (The Times)

b) **Interrogative sentences**, e. g. 'Do-you love war?' (Daily World), 'Will Celtic confound pundits?' (Morning Star)

c) **Nominative sentences**, e.g. 'Gloomy Sunday' (The Guardian), * 'Atlantic Sea Traffic' (The Times), 'Union peace plan for Girling stewards' (Morning Star)

d) **Elliptical sentences**:

a. with an auxiliary verb omitted, e.g. 'Initial report not expected until June!' (The Guardian), 'Yachtsman spotted' (Morning Star)]

b. with the subject omitted, e.g. 'Will win' (Morning Star), 'Will give Mrs. Onassis \$ 250,00' (New York Times);

c. with the subject and part of the predicate omitted, e.g. 'Off to the sun' (Morning Star), 'Still in danger' (The Guardian)

e) **Sentences with articles omitted**, e. g. 'Step to Overall Settlement Cited in Text of Agreement' (International Herald Tribune), 'Blaze kills 15 at Party' (Morning Star).

Articles are very frequently omitted in all types of headlines.

f) **Phrases with verbals** – infinitive, participial and gerundial, e.g. 'To visit Faisal' (Morning Star), 'Keeping Prices Down' (The Times), 'Preparing reply on cold war' (Morning Star), 'Speaking parts' (The Sunday Times)

g) **Questions in the form of statements**, e.g. 'The worse the better?' (Daily World), 'Growl now, smile, later?' (The Observer)

h) **Complex sentences**, e. g. 'Senate Panel Hears Board of Military Experts Who Favored Losing Bidder' (The New York Times), 'Army Says It Gave LSD to Unknown GIs' (International Herald Tribune)

i) **Headlines including direct speech**:

a. introduced by a full sentence, e.g., 'Prince Richard says: "I was not in trouble" (The Guardian), 'What Oils the Wheels of Industry?'

b. introduced elliptically, e.g. 'The Queen: "My deep distress"' (The Guardian).

The above-listed patterns are the most typical, although they do not cover all the variety in headline structure.

The headline in British and American newspapers is an important vehicle both of information and appraisal; editors give it special attention, admitting that few read beyond the headline, or at best the lead. To lure the reader into going through the whole of the item or at least a greater part of it, takes a lot of skill and ingenuity on the part of the headline writer.

(Galperin, I. R. English Stylistics)