

# GUIDELINES FOR WRITING HEADLINES

Listed below are the standards by which headlines are judged:

1. Wording is specific, accurate; unnecessary wording is omitted.
2. Contains subject and verb. No labels.
3. Emphasis on active verbs.
4. Written in future or present tense.
5. Split headlines (modifiers, verbs) avoided.
6. Redundancy in wording avoided.
7. Does not sacrifice accuracy for creativity or cuteness.
8. Main headlines not dependent on kickers, decks.
9. Secondary headlines (kickers or decks) emphasize unusual, significant aspect of news.
10. Grammar, spelling, punctuation correct.

All of the above apply to The Signal headlines. More specific guidelines are listed below.

1. Read the entire story first. Then write a headline that best forecasts or characterizes the main point or points of the story. Only **then** should you wordsmith to fit the space available.
2. Write your headline with these goals in mind:
  - You want to hook the reader – but remember #7 above.
  - You must **accurately** characterize the story.
3. Subject plus verb plus object is the best construction – it is direct, vivid and easy to read.
4. Use active voice. Use present tense. Use future tense when story describes future event, but remember your publication date – there may be times you are writing a headline for a story about an event that will happen before the paper hits the stands. In that case, if the story is not written from that perspective, it must be called to the attention of the editor for rewrite.
5. When space is tight it is appropriate to use telegraphic style – eliminate articles (a, an, the) and conjunctions (and, but). The exceptions to this are when elimination makes for bad or inaccurate copy. Never eliminate articles that are part of a proper name.
6. Humor should not be used in the place of accuracy. Humorous headlines should usually be used only when followed by kickers or decks.

7. Photo hammers may be treated more liberally in the use of humor. However, they should never be forced; they must be appropriate to the subject matter of the photo.
8. Do not repeat the lead in the headline or use the same words used in kickers or decks.
9. Put no facts in the headline that are not in the story.
10. Avoid slang, jargon and provincial expressions in headlines.
11. Use numerals. Round numbers are preferred unless exactness is the point of the story. Spell out million – it's shorter than zeros. Spell out the numeral 1 when standing alone.
12. Round off the cents in dollar figures unless the cents is the point of the story.
13. At line ends do not split verbs, separate adjectives from nouns, divide hyphenated words, split prepositional phrases, or separate adverbs from verbs.
14. Alliteration is acceptable for feature headlines only – and then rarely.
15. A statement qualified or limited in a story must be qualified in the headline.
16. Do not abbreviate streets, days, months, titles or state names standing alone in headlines – Only N.Y. and L.A. will be accepted.
17. Do not change tense within or between decks, hammers, kickers or headlines.

## HEADLINE PUNCTUATION

1. Use commas instead of conjunctions, but only if resulting copy makes sense and is accurate.  
*example: Staples resigns, names successor*
2. Use semicolon to separate two main points. This is acceptable only when there are, in fact, two main and equal points to the story or when the use of only one point would be misleading.  
*example: Budget cuts made; rifts to follow*
3. Use colon to indicate a quote and attribution – also use single quotation marks in headlines instead of double quotation marks.  
*example: ‘Program gone to hell in a handbasket:’ Smith*  
Colons may also be used to replace a verb, but try to avoid this if possible.  
*example: Headache time: Exams begin Monday.*
4. The dash should be used sparingly in headlines – it is strong medicine. It may be used to emphasize a short phrase or single word or to add a twist to a headline.  
*example: Comedian to perform on campus – maybe*
5. Periods are used only after abbreviations, **not** at the end of the headline.
6. Do **not** use *exclamation points* or *parentheses* in headlines, kickers, hammers or decks.

# HEADLINE COUNT

Unit count is used to take the guesswork out of making the headline fit the space allocated. When working for a publication that uses pagination, especially larger publications, the copy editor usually writes the headline for the stories he/she edits. In this case, the copy editor is usually sitting in front of the computer monitor and can easily tell whether a headline will fit. However, when working in a situation where one can't see how well a headline will fit its designated space, it is convenient to use the following unit count schedule. The specifications given will look something like this: 3C 30B, meaning the headline will cover three columns and will be 30-point letter size in bold-faced type. This specification, according to the following table, would allot between 31 and 33 units for the headline:

## Unit Count:

<b>Lower case letters f, l, i, t, j</b>	<b>1/2 unit</b>
All other lower case letters	<b>1 unit</b>
Except <b>m, w</b>	<b>1 1/2 units</b>
<b>Upper case letters I, J</b>	<b>1/2 unit</b>
All other upper case letters	<b>1 1/2 units</b>
Except <b>M, W</b>	<b>2 units</b>
All punctuation, including a space	<b>1/2 unit</b>
Numerals	<b>1 1/2 units</b>

## Point Sizes:

<b>36 pt.:</b>	<b>30 pt.:</b>
5 columns = 43-45 units	5 columns = 53-55 units
4 columns = 34-36 units	4 columns = 42-44 units
3 columns = 24-27 units	3 columns = 31-33 units
2 columns = 16-18 units	2 columns = 20-22 units
1 column = 7- 9 units	1 column = 9-11 units
<b>24 pt.:</b>	<b>18 pt.:</b>
3 columns = 37-39 units	3 columns = 49-51 units
2 columns = 24-26 units	2 columns = 32-34 units
1 column = 11-13 units	1 column = 15-17 units

Counting units is not difficult. The headline, "President announces decision," would be counted using 1-1/2 units for the "P," 1 unit for each of the other letters except the I's and the t, which count 1/2 each, and 1/2 unit for each space, giving a total of 25-1/2 units.

