

Writers' Workshop

Using Allusions

In this Writers' Workshop you will:

- Use the power of allusions.

Using Allusions

Mini-Lesson: Allusions Come with Baggage

When we say someone comes with baggage, we mean he or she comes to a new situation with emotions, relationships and experiences from the past that affect the new experience, usually not in a good way. Allusions also carry baggage, the context of the original idea or expression, but the baggage can be powerful, reminding us of the original events, emotions and ideas.

The original context can be something from popular culture, scripture, classic literature, history or anything else in your audience's common heritage.

When the Los Angeles Times studied the city's aging water pipes, the headline read "Cracking under pressure."

The idea	Pipes are failing, creating serious problems.
The allusion	Someone who cracks under pressure becomes violent or dangerous.
Its power	The mental image.

When Santa Monica considered banning exotic animals (like boa constrictors, monkeys and parrots) from around the pier, the Los Angeles Times interviewed the animal handlers who may be affected. The headline: "Ruffled feathers."

The idea	Handlers are unhappy with the proposed regulations.
The allusion	The common expression for being upset: having one's feathers ruffled.
Its power	Two meanings of "ruffled feathers."

The Los Angeles Times reported that since California passed laws encouraging rehabilitation rather than imprisonment of drug offenders, many of those arrested have been released without either help or punishment, and they are sometimes rearrested and rereleased repeatedly. The headline: "Catch and release."

The idea	The police may be wasting their time and placing themselves in danger for no reason.
The allusion	Fishermen who catch fish for the thrill but throw them immediately back in the water since they are not fishing for food.
Its power	The police action may seem as pointless as catch-and-release fishing seems to many.

The Los Angeles Times business section reported that many women are leaving the tech sector, citing a hostile work environment. The headline: "Not a woman's place."

The idea	Women are not thriving in technology careers.
The allusion	The old saying "A woman's place is in the home."
Its power	The old saying creates anger, as it seems to demean women's abilities. This anger may be transferred to the hostile work environment the LA Times reports.

Apply It!

1. With your group, locate 10 headlines, decks above or below the main headline, or articles that contain allusions. Note if any art or subheads use the same allusion. Fill in a chart such as the one below.

The idea	
The allusion	
Its power	

2. Select at least four articles, either ones you have written for your publication or the work of other journalists. For each article, suggest at least three possible headlines, decks or text that contain allusion. Chart the two strongest allusions for each as you did for activity #1 above. Note any possible art or subheads the allusions suggest.