

Writers' Workshop

Finding the Best Words for Summary and Narrative Headlines

In this Writers' Workshop you will:

- Create and evaluate summary and narrative headlines and decks.

Finding the Best Words for Summary and Narrative Headlines

Mini-Lesson: Identifying Key Words

Readers may imagine that reporters write their own headlines, but that is rarely the case. The editor who lays out the page or posts the story online, or the copy editor who has gone over the text several times, has that privilege.

Journalists usually write headlines only after they know the final size, shape and content of the story.

How do you come up with headlines that fit the available space or letter count, that communicate clearly to your audience as well as to search engines, that are interesting and at the same time absolutely accurate?

The first step is to read the story and cutlines and look at the graphics and images several times to make sure you understand them all and know what the story is about.

In this news story the reporter found a local angle to report on a new state law.

Would you catch an interurban bus on school mornings at 6:13, transfer twice and ride over an hour just to get to Homestead High School?

And would you get off almost a mile from school and walk for 20 minutes?

HHS sophomore Duane Goodall—not his real name—does just that.

Why?

“So no one will find out I don't live here anymore. I could get kicked out of school.”

When Duane was a freshman, his family lived with an aunt near Homestead High, but

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halfway through his freshman year his aunt moved out of state.

His mother, who works full time in retail, was unable to afford an apartment. For almost half a year they lived in motels, then in their car. Duane never missed a day of school.

“The only thing that saved me was first-period PE. I got a shower every day, so I didn't smell like I lived in a car.”

Things started looking up for his family last summer when they moved into the Gresham Salvation Army Family Living Shelter, where they are safe and have their own beds, shower and a small kitchen. The only drawback—the shelter is three school districts away from HHS.

Duane's mother hopes to save enough to rent her own apartment this spring, creating another move for Duane and his sister.

“School's the only thing that doesn't change pretty often for us,” Duane said.

Beginning in January a new law will give Duane one less worry, and he will be able to ride the bus all the way to school, skipping the mile walk.

The Indigent Student Attendance bill, passed last spring, will allow homeless students to remain in their original schools no matter how many times they move or how far they go. Their addresses—or lack of a permanent address—will no longer be a secret.

They can participate in sports and other activities as full members of their school communities.

This will be good for students like Duane and probably good for schools.

According to the California Dropout Research Project, changing schools during high school makes a student much more likely to quit school. In Los Angeles Unified School District, only about one in three students who changed high schools graduated on time.

Homestead Assistant Principal Jean Koerner said, “We don't go looking for ways to kick kids out of this school, but when

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enrollments are up or when there are discipline or attendance issues, it's important to attend in your home district.

"We don't know for sure how many students this will affect. I'd guess three or four dozen," Koerner said. "Up until now, students rarely tell us when they are in these situations.

"The new law will make things a lot clearer for us and for the students."

Headline writers ask several questions before they write a summary or narrative headline. How would you answer each one of these?

1. What is this story about?

If you answered *Duane Goodall*, you made a common mistake. You focused on the local face to the story, the example that makes the story concrete. It is easy to do. After all, the first 12 paragraphs are about Duane. But the news story is really about the new law.

2. What are the key terms, phrases or ideas in the story?

January, new law, homeless, dozens of students, remain at Homestead High School, fear, out of district, dropout rate

The key terms should suggest a draft headline, perhaps something like this:

New law will allow homeless students to remain at Homestead High School

But this is slightly too long for a digital headline and much too long for print, especially a one-column story. In addition, it fails to utilize the valuable SEO term *dropout rate*.

3. What can I trim for headline style?

First trim all unnecessary words and use the school's initials, an easily recognized abbreviation.

~~New law will allow homeless students to remain at Homestead High School~~ HHS

Now apply the conventions of headline writing, such as the infinitive for future tense.

Law to allow homeless to remain at HHS

Clearly you have lost accuracy as you trimmed for space. It sounds like a homeless encampment is moving onto the football field. Here your school's nickname may help. If your team is the Cavaliers or the Fighting Friars or the Osos, you may be able to use *homeless Cavs* or *Friars* or *Osos* to regain accuracy.

Law to allow homeless Osos to remain at HHS

Shorter yet would be

New Law: Homeless Osos may remain at HHS

Look back at your key phrases. One is missing, one that could drive Internet traffic to your site: *dropout rate*. Adding the phrase will attract search engine hits as well as increase the depth of your headline and focus your readers' attention on the cost of homelessness.

New law aimed at dropout rate: Homeless Osos may remain at HHS

A more narrative deck below the summary head might add:

Dozens here with no permanent address will be helped

Apply It!

1. Working alone or in pairs, locate at least one news story from the professional press that gives a local angle or a human interest angle to a more distant news event. Carefully remove and preserve the main and subsidiary headlines. Put your names on the headless story.

2. Switch stories with other individuals or pairs in your class or group. Develop a strong summary headline and a narrative deck by asking the headline writer's three primary questions:
 - What is this story about?
 - What are the key terms, phrases and ideas in the story?
 - What can I trim for headline style?
3. Discuss the headline you created with the students who provided the story. Evaluate it—and suggest improvements—for
 - clarity,
 - accuracy,
 - headline language and
 - brevity.
4. Compare it to the professional headline. Which is stronger and why?