

HEADLINES AND STYLE GUIDES

Sixth mini assignment:

Choose three publications and identify the house style of each. Re-visit your week one article and write a headline and stand-first (if appropriate) suitable for each publication (no word count).

You should also provide details on the publications you've selected and how they are different.



SCHOOL'S OUT FOR WINTER

'Unis MUST shut!', implores top NHS Director

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I decided to start this task with something that completely juxtaposed my original headline, which was written with The Guardian in mind.

Sadly, I was unable to find a style guide for The Sun. Instead, I decided to analyse a selection of online headlines. What I found was that the majority of articles simply displayed a photograph, alongside a headline. The headline was accompanied with a witty title (to categorise?) but not a standfirst.

Two symptoms of a Sun headline, I found, is hyperbole and sensationalism. It seems as though a sub-editor takes the main peg, oversimplifies it and condenses it into a small, few word sentence. Because of that, meaning can sometimes be skewed. I wouldn't want to accuse anyone of creating *clickbait* titles, but some examples on The Sun's website is not too shy of that.

Finally, the actual wording is usually quite punchy. 'Implores' and 'MUST' was an attempt to replicate that, even if not wholly truthful.



Coronavirus: Uni closures may be only way to curb spike

The only way to lower the infection rate of Coronavirus could be to close universities and schools, NHS Director, Ian Plant has warned.

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- What impact would closure of educational settings have on students?
- How could this restriction aid with the lowering of 'R'?

Having explored the tropes of a tabloid-style paper, I wanted to analyse something completely different. The BBC provided stark contrast, not only in the way they write headlines, but also in online presentation. Sophisticated, clean and informative, compared to the embellishing nature of The Sun.

When writing a headline for the BBC, there were certain rules to abide by in their style guide. Unsurprisingly, there was a character limit and some grammatical instruction (where and how to use commas; not using speech marks). However, one of the more interesting points raised was,

'A cryptic headline, out of context, may be meaningless.' (BBC style guide)

BBC seems to be focused solely on providing factual, accurate headlines that direct a reader to the correct article. Whereas The Sun seems to be a tiring sea of exaggerated phrases, designed to generate as many clicks as possible, with careless disregard as to whether an audience would even read the whole article, or simply click on the next headline. This can also be seen in the standfirsts, or lack of in the case of The Sun. The BBC provide small bullet points, in addition to a standfirst, of what the article might be about, The Sun doesn't add that luxury.

As Coronavirus spike grows, university closures might be inevitable, says NHS Director

A day before new lockdown measures are planned to be announced, NHS Director of Continuing Healthcare for London stated that University closures, like the ones we saw in March, are 'inevitable' as we move towards Christmas as a result of the spike in cases.

Whilst this news would likely only be published for UK audiences, I was interested to see how one of the most prestigious papers might write a headline. There are certainly some similarities between the BBC and The New York Times, but one of the biggest differences off the bat is the rigidity of rules. Where the BBC had a couple of sentences, covering the basics like character limit, The NYT had pages of advice, from which verb to bin first to where you can and can't put full stops. Ironically, however, there didn't seem to be a character limit, just simply that 'headline writers should strive to fill out lines to avoid awkward breaks, short lines and widows.'

I found this headline the most difficult to write, and don't actually feel like it could pass as a Times headline. Maybe I spent too long accurately trying to follow the guidance and too little time trying to craft something pleasing to read, that it came out short of both. Having said that, it does match the first rule.

'Should ideally be written in the standard English of a simple sentence. As a test of the reader's comfort, it should be possible to convert a headline into a straightforward sentence merely by restoring the "little words" that have been omitted for copy fitting.'
(New York Times style guide)

Overall, this task has not only highlighted the differences in writing headlines and standfirsts for different types of publication, but has also shed light on what type of paper I might want to work at in the future. I fear that journalism is accelerating towards the first example, where the goal is not to inform, but to gain profit. Hopefully this will reverse in the future, and we might see more elegant headlines again in the mainstream media.