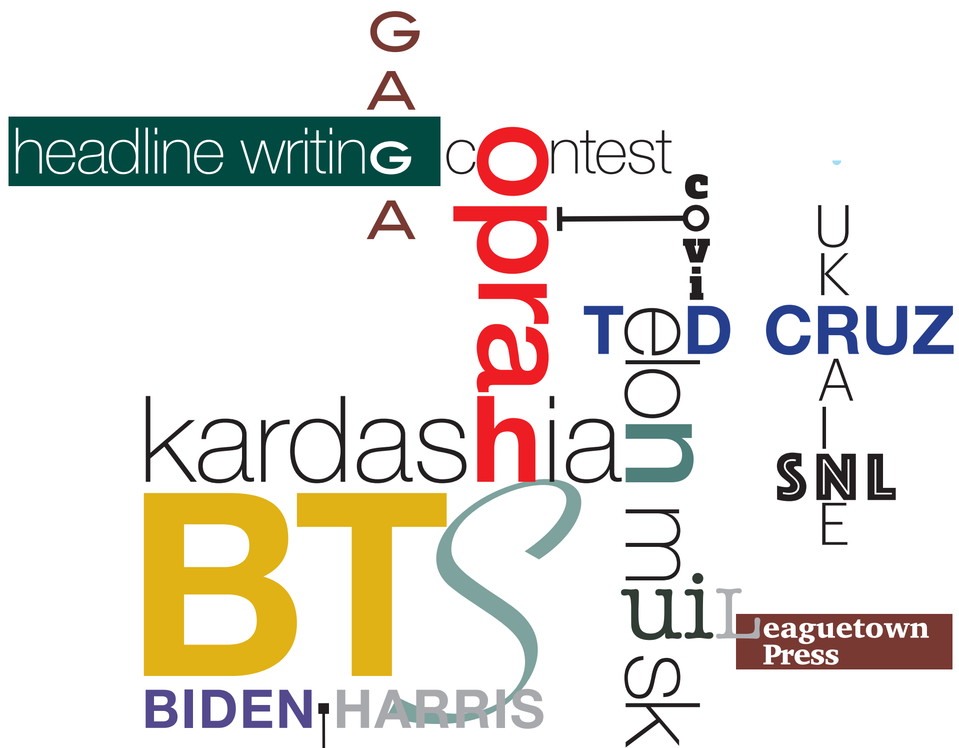

Headline Writing Manual

By Bobby Hawthorne

HEADLINE WRITING MANUAL

Written by
Bobby Hawthorne

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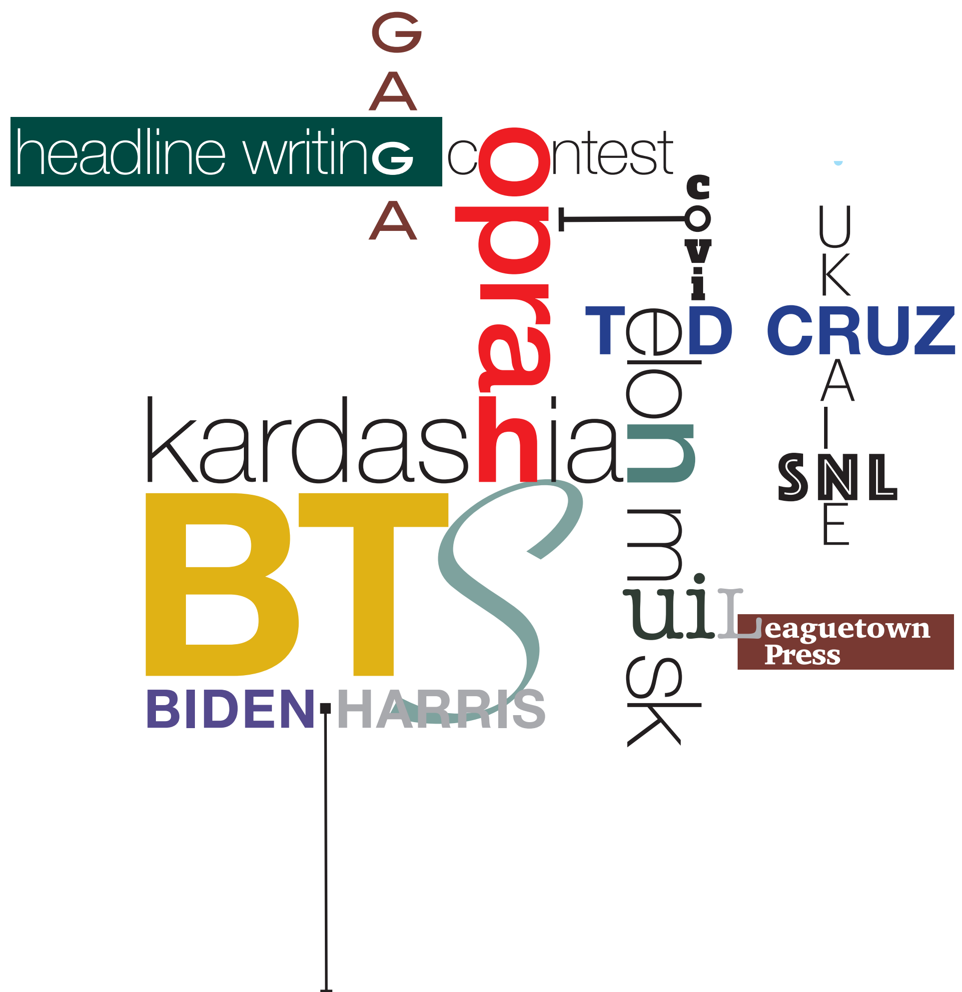

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1

Get your head in the game

You scanned the headlines on this page before you began reading the text, didn't you? I know you did. It's human nature. Big type generally dominates little type.

The eye jumps to the 72-point headline first, then hops to the next largest headline, and so forth and so on until it arrives at the 18-point secondary headlines and the 14-point pull quotes and then whatever else is left. That would include this 11-point body text.

Of course, this all makes a lot more sense if you know what a "point" is, at least in terms of publication design as it relates to headline writing.

Printed words and symbols and so forth are measured in units called "points," and 72-points equals approximately 1 inch in height. Publications use big type when a story about someone, someplace or something is so essential, so profound, so stitched into the shirt pocket of the American wardrobe that it demands Page 1 above-the-fold treatment.

It mostly depends on the publication. If it's the Washington Post, the word might be "Trump" or "Biden."

If it's the Austin American-Statesman, it might be "Abbott" or "Longhorns."

If it's Vanity Fair magazine, it might be "Brad" or "Kardashian" or "Beyonce."

So, it's the combination of content and treatment that determines how a message is interpreted. You could place my name in 72-point type on Page 1 of the Washington Post, and I doubt anyone would bother to read the story. If I put Elon Musk's name in 72-point type on the front page of the New York Times, I guarantee you everyone would read it.

So, lesson one: a big headline about Musk or any one of the two or three dozen Kardashians merits at least as big as the headline that might announce the discovery of a massive meteor that is headed our way.

Huge headlines at the top of a page send a clear message: "Stop scanning and skimming and read this story."

Now, once you've at least looked at the big story, you might want to look at the other stories, so they need headlines too, and every headline can't be an inch or two high, so this we have a problem. How do we get people to read the little story about a lost Irish setter puppy that was miraculously plucked by firefighters out of a storm drain?

Well, perhaps with this headline:

It's a dog-gone miracle

Or, if you wanted to riff off of the Irish setter angle, you might try this headline:

Pup has pluck of the Irish

It plays off the adage, "The luck of the Irish." If you don't know that adage, you should read more. Good headline writers know idioms and adages and such because they read. It's impossible to turn a phrase if you don't know any phrases.

By the way, the font here is Baskerville, and it's a "serif" typeface. Serifs are

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the little strokes at the end of letters. Here are three different serif fonts — Bodoni 72, Palatino Regular and Superclarendon Regular.

abc PQR 123
def QRS 234
ghi RST 345

They aren't that different. Bodoni 72 is tall and slender — sort of the Taylor Swift of typefaces. Palatino is Tom Hanks. It can perform almost any role. Superclarendon is thick and muscular. It holds its place on stage. Think of it as Chris Pratt or Russell Crowe. Now, here are two more: Alfa Slab One and Savoye LET.

jkl STU 456
mno TUV 567

Alfa Slab One is Dwayne Johnson, and Savoye is fun and offbeat. Kate McKinnon, perhaps. Each has its own personality and communicates a particular message.

Now, if you're not into little strokes at the end of letters, you will want a sans serif font. The words you're reading right now are set in Helvetica Neue Regular. Notice that there are no little strokes at the end of any letter. Why did I choose Helvetica Neue Regular for this text? Because I like the way it looks, and it's no more complicated than that.

Sans serif fonts are just as diverse as serif fonts. They come in all shapes and sizes, and the only thing they have in common is the absence of little strokes at the end of letters. Let's look at a few: Graphik Light, Avenir Roman, DIN Alternate Bold, Impact Regular and Skippy Sharp Regular.

pqr ABC 123
qrs DEF 234
rst GHI 345
stu JKL 567
tuv MNO 678

Now, is it necessary for competitors in the UIL's headline writing contest to know the difference between serif and sans serif? Is it necessary to know that Baskerville has serifs but Avenir does not?

Is it necessary for competitors to know that type without serifs is called "sans serif," which means "without serifs." Is it necessary for competitors to know that "sans" is Latin for "without," as in "without little strokes"?

Is it necessary for competitors to know the difference between a typeface and a font or that type comes in different weights? Is it necessary for them to know that the height of letters is measured in points, and that 72-points equals 1 inch?

No. It isn't. But it doesn't hurt. Headlines are an essential graphic element. The size, the font, the type, the weight, the color and a dozen or more other factors determine whether the verbal message will be seen and how it'll be interpreted.

In a nutshell, this is what headline writers do: They use words to spin webs they use to attract and trap readers. For example, you pick up a newspaper or magazine and begin thumbing through it, and suddenly, a

Type comes in different weights, ranging from ultra light to thin to thick as mud. Most of them come in a condensed form, too.

ULTRA LIGHT
Italic
LIGHT
Italic
REGULAR
Italic
MEDIUM
Italic
DEMI BOLD
Italic
BOLD
Italic
HEAVY
Italic
BLACK

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piece of type catches your eye. Perhaps it's a name — Michelle Obama, Brad Pitt, Santa Claus, Bill Gates, Taylor Swift or Jeanne Acton.

Maybe it's a specific word or a bit of information about a topic that interests you — the Legislature, the Longhorns, the Chess Club, Churchill Downs, the Battle of Guadalcanal, hazelnuts, COVID-19, the Mars Rover craft or leopards.

Maybe it's a shocking statement that compels you to slow down, stop and read for detail in the pursuit of information that builds knowledge. For example:

Leopards escaped from China safari park still on the prowl

The story was about three leopards that escaped from a Chinese safari park, and the owners of the park forgot to inform authorities or residents that the big cats were hungry and on the prowl.

At any rate, the word "leopards" caught my eye because you don't see a lot of stories about them, so I figured this was something new and different.

At any rate, the headline writer's job is to drag readers into a story. It's not as simple as it sounds because they're regularly dealing with too many words and too little space. It takes an artist to parlay talent and skill into visual and verbal messages that tickle the most esoteric personal whims and satisfy the most immutable industry standards.

Frankly, the best headline writers seem to be either mouthy writers who use puns, alliteration, hyperbole, similes and sarcasm to talk their way into or out of trouble, or they're smart, hard-working writers who practice, practice, practice.

Official information about the UIL headline writing contest is available online at www.uiltexas.org. Go there for the latest contest rules and clarifications.

The UIL's Journalism Contest Manual also offers invaluable information about headline writing, and the ILPC section contains helpful PowerPoint presentations on all of the UIL journalism contests.

Finally, there are countless websites and YouTube videos on the subject, and Hexco has a full slate of practice materials and tests for invitational meets.

While I see no reason to cut and paste from the UIL's Constitution and Contest Rules, I have no qualms about paraphrasing and explaining because the C&CR can be dreadfully dull.

The contest

(1) The contest aims to teach students to read critically, to understand what they've read, to figure out what's most important and then to express that clearly, accurately, precisely and occasionally with a dash of flair.

(2) Contestants are given a sheet of paper which includes three stories on one side and three stories on the other. Each story will come with instructions as to how many lines and how many counts are required per line.

So, let's say the fact sheet includes a story about how the governor said he doesn't think legalized gambling will pass during this legislative session. This might be your 3-line head:

Hopes for legal Texas casino gambling still not in the cards

The author

Bobby Hawthorne became involved in scholastic journalism in 1969 as a junior at a tiny high school in Northeast Texas. The town was so small, it wasn't on the official map of Texas until two or three years after he graduated.

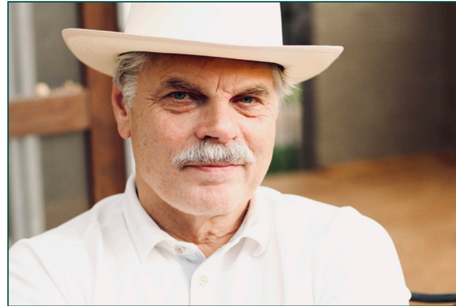
Hawthorne wrote for the 8-page, bi-weekly school newspaper as well as for the yearbook, and his talent for crafting "Have you ever" leads caught the eye of the local daily newspaper's sports editor, who hired him as a stringer and then as a full-time sports writer.

Hawthorne did that for two years before moving to Austin to earn an undergraduate degree in journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. He then bounced around, working as a sports reporter, general assignment reporter and assistant editor at a couple of so-so newspapers.

In 1977, he returned to Austin to join the UIL as media liaison and assistant to Dr. Max Haddick, who directed the UIL's spring meet journalism program as well as the Interscholastic League Press Conference, which was and is one of the nation's largest student press associations.

Hawthorne wrote the original "UIL Journalism Contest Manual" and produced the first UIL journalism contest judging criteria.

He moved from journalism director in 1999 to become UIL director of academics, and then retired from the League in 2006 to pursue several writing and teaching opportunities.



Over the course of his career, Hawthorne has taught journalism in all but three or four of the U.S. states as well as in Hungary, Romania and the Netherlands. He has been honored by the scholastic journalism community more than enough, and his textbook — "The Radical Write" — is the top seller in its genre.

Hawthorne also wrote "Longhorn Football: An Illustrated History," published by the University of Texas Press. In 2010, he wrote and designed a history of the UIL as part of the organization's 100th anniversary celebration. Shortly after, he produced the text for "Home Field: Texas High School Football Stadiums from Alice to Zephyr," a book of photographs by Jeff Wilson — also for UT Press.

Hawthorne writes feature stories and personality profiles for several magazines, completed his first novel in 2021 and continues to judge as many UIL journalism contests each spring as he can squeeze into his schedule because he likes to.

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