

Punctuating Headlines

(Online Headlines and the uses of punctuation)

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Abstract

The headline is critical, summarizing and drawing attention to the story; its telegraphic style is probably the best known feature of news reporting. The idea of summarizing an entire story into just a few words is extremely challenging. And what makes it even harder is the ability of the writer to make the headline powerful, unique and attractive.

Headlines, as parts of newspapers articles, should follow certain techniques and restrictions. It is true that most writers tend to avoid punctuating headlines unless necessary since they slow the process of reading and headlines are meant for speed reading; yet punctuation in headlines can perform many functions: visual, rhetorical, dramatic and syntactic.

This research deals with the uses of punctuation marks in newspapers` headlines. Headlines on news, technology, entertainment, economy and culture were taken from the websites of the CNN, New York Times and Los Angles Times. It highlights the matching between the rules of using punctuation in headlines and the headlines which catch our eyes everyday. Is it possible for the writer- even when surrounded with rules- to stamp his (or her) headline?

Theoretical backgrounds concerning writing headlines, the rules of punctuation and writing headlines online were given in the first two sections .The main marks of punctuation were listed followed by their applications in different examples.

Key term : punctuation , news headlines, online articles

1-1 Headlines

A writer needs many gifts to succeed. One of those gifts which primarily affects the texture and effectiveness of writing is choosing an appropriate, zingy and marketable headline.

Headlines are meant to capture the reader's attention and often determine whether people choose to read an article at all. In many instances, they are the only information readers derive about a story "headlines reach an audience considerably wider than those who read the articles, since all those who buy the paper will glance, if only fleetingly at the headline " (Develotte and Rechniewski ,2001 : 2) . Moreover, their impact is even wider than on those who actually buy the paper, since headlines are often glimpsed on public transport, displayed on fliers etc.

This is particularly true of front page headlines, which also draw the casual observer to conclude the importance of a particular issue which has been given prominence in this way.

The impact of headlines on the reader is likely to be all the stronger because certain linguistic features of titles make them particularly memorable and effective, " since the headline precedes other details, it greatly influence the reader's interpretation of information that follows in the text . For these reasons, it is especially important that newspaper headline be consistent, accurate and specific "(Passner, 2003:1)

The impact of headlines on the reader is deliberately sought through the use of puns, alliteration, the choice of emotive vocabulary and other rhetorical devices.

Claude Abastado (1980:149) argues that " headlines encapsulate not only the content but also the orientation" because newspapers contain not only strictly informational but also evaluative material, comments and views of the news-writers, especially characteristic of editorials and feature articles

Milo Schield and Robert Raymond (2009: 1) believe that headlines must focus on the essentials of a story in a very limited space and what they focus on is what the reader learns- perhaps the only thing e.g. (One American Dies every 12 minutes due to no Health Insurance), (Lack of Health Insurance Cause 44789 Deaths in the United States). The vocabulary used here is neutral and common literary, but apart from this, a

newspaper has its specific vocabulary that can be found in its other features-editorials, articles and advertisements.

1-2 The Language of Headlines

As the newspaper also seeks to influence public opinion on various social, political or moral matters, its language frequently contains vocabulary with evaluative connotations and emotionally colored elements into the matter- of- fact, linguistically neutral news items, e.g. (Health Minister Made his Shock Announcement in the Commons) (Time- 2003) or to indicate a lack of surety on the part of the reporter or his\ her desire to avoid responsibility. e.g., (Mr. Brown was said to have opposed the proposal. He was quoted as saying) (BBC, 2008)

David Burton (2008:2) suggests that the vocabulary used in newspapers` headlines is neutral, literary, accurate, but it has as well its specific features such as the intensive use of:

1- Special political and economic terms (stability, elections, anti- terror, human rights, budget deficit)

2-Bookish words including certain phrases based on metaphors and thus emotionally colored (war hysteria, escalation of war overwhelmingly majority, and a storm of applause)

3- Newspaper clichés, i.e., stereotyped expressions, commonplace phrases familiar to the reader (free markets, public opinion, long- term agreements, and zero – tolerance).

4- Abbreviations: News items, press reports and headlines are full of abbreviations of various kinds. Among these abbreviated terms: names of organizations, public and state bodies and political associations e.g. EU (European Union), WTO (World Trade Organization), DWI (Driving While Intoxicated), BAC (Blood Alcohol Concentration)

The widespread use of initials in newspaper language has been expanded to the names of persons e.g. JFK (john Fitzgerald Kennedy). Sometimes the whole statements are referred to by their initials e.g. WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get), FAQ (frequently asked questions).

5- Neologisms: they are very common in newspaper vocabulary. The newspaper is very quick to react to any new development in the life of society, in science and technology. Hence, neologisms make their way into the language of newspaper very easily and often even spring up on newspaper pages.

Now neologisms relating to computers and the internet outnumber all others e.g. cyber sickness (a feeling of illness caused by using a computer for long periods of time), key pal (someone with whom one regularly exchanges e- mail), MP3, online auction ...etc.

1-3 Punctuation

The written language reflects to a certain extent, the elements and rules that together constitute the grammar of the language. The independence of words is revealed by the spaces in the written string; but in languages where words are composed of more than one morpheme, the writing usually does not show the individual morphemes, even though speakers "know" what they are. In fact many languages such as Japanese or Thai don't space between words, although speakers and writers are aware of the individual words.

The sentences of some languages are indicated in the written form by capitals at the beginning and periods at the end. Other punctuation, such as question marks, italics, commas and exclamation marks are used to reveal syntactic structure and to some extent intonation, stress and contrast; but the written forms of other languages do not use such punctuation.

These signs and symbols, commonly called "punctuation marks", are very important; the purpose of punctuation is practical, not ornamental. The reason for using punctuation is to make the meaning clear; punctuation plays various roles in clarifying meaning. Putting a word in inverted commas, for example, can indicate that the writer considers it unfamiliar, inappropriate, and so on.

Commas are used to indicate the structure of the sentences, sometimes clarifying potential ambiguity, and without punctuation a string of words may be complete nonsense. The possible ambiguity in the meanings of some sentences can be prevented by the use of commas:

1- The Greeks, who were philosophers, loved to talk a lot.

The Greeks who were philosophers loved to talk a lot. 2-

Sentence (1) means: The Greeks were philosophers and they loved to talk.

Sentence (2) means: Among the Greeks, it was the philosophers who loved to talk a lot.

Similarly, by using an exclamation point or a question mark, the intention of the writer can be made clearer.

3- The children are going to bed at 8 o'clock. (statement)

4- The children are going to bed at 8 o'clock! (an order)

5- The children are going to bed at 8 o'clock? (a question)

These punctuation marks reflect the pauses and the intonations that would be used in the spoken language.

6- John said he's going

7- John said, "He's going"

In sentence (6) he can refer to either John or someone else, but in sentence (7) the pronoun must refer to someone other than John.

(Al- Hassan and Razzak, 1966: 90-92; Wray and Bloomer, 1960:70; Fromkin and Rodman, 1988: 352-354)

1- 4 Punctuation and Headlines

Considering the fact that this research deals mainly with headlines taken from the websites of the CNN, Los Angeles Times, New York Times..etc, it is important to mention that and according to (Gilmore and Ludwig, 2005 : 121) news publication on the internet has the potential to reach a much wider audience; and online headline writers need to keep that in mind. For the most part, headlines should follow the same guidelines for print publication, using present tense and active words, eliminating articles and such. But online headline writers don't face the same space constraints that print headline writers face. So the potential is less for awkward heads caused by space limitations, although many will limit a headline to one line at a standard screen width. There is no need to replace a slightly less desirable synonym to make a head fit; editors should just use the best word.

It is believed that punctuation should be used in headlines only when necessary because punctuation slows reading and headlines are meant for speed reading. The best headlines are those that require no punctuation. According (Burton, 2008:1-4; La Rocque, 1931:3-7; the styleguide, 2010) there are common rules for punctuating headlines; the following are the main punctuation marks and the rules to be followed in using them in newspapers` headlines. These rules are followed in different examples chosen by the researcher for the sake of comparison with these rules.

1- Period: It is usually avoided except when needed in abbreviations. The most common uses of periods are in U.S and U.N .Headlines do not generally include periods or other ending punctuation.

A bankruptcy Sale that Echoes G.M and Chrysler

(On companies' financial problems)

Stephen Lubben, New York Times

Apple, Microsoft, Dell and H.P

(On the fierce competition between computers` companies)

Ashlee Vance, New York Times

U.S. Widens Inquiries into 2 Jail Deaths

(On the criminal investigation of two terrorism suspects)

Eric Schmitt, New York Times

2- Comma: The comma replaces "and" because it wastes space

Fake Earthquake Disaster Drill Tests Facebook, Twitter

(On the relation between natural disasters and internet users)

Davy Gross, CNN

Google Turns 12, Gets Virtual Cake

(On Google's 12th birthday)

Stephanie Goldberg, CNN

3- Semicolon: It can be used instead of a period for a full stop e.g. (South Africa Bomb Kills 9; Voters Growing Anxious)

The semicolon replaces periods when there are two complete thoughts.

The Dodgers Protect Jamie Hoffman; Add him to 40- man

(On the tactics of the Dodgers team during the season)

Los Angeles Times

Ehud Netzer Dies at 76; Archeologist Unearthed Herod the Great`s Tomb

(On the death of a prominent archeologist)

Thomas Maugh, Los Angeles Times

4- Question mark: Questions are generally avoided, but they can be used when appropriate. Question marks can be effective, if the content answers the headline question. Generally, though, a direct statement is better, e.g. Are Polar Bears in Decline? (For an article about a study finding that, yes, the polar bear population is in decline)

Rim on the Edge of a Big Move?

(On the plan of certain companies to face the financial crisis)

Erica Ogg, CNN

The social Network Mystery: Where are the Lawsuits?

(On Obama administration's social system reforms)

David Kaplan, CNN

Talk Deeply, Be Happy?

(On the relation between being in good mood and talking)

Roni Robin, New York Times

Facebook to Add Location Features?

(On the attempt of facebook to give it's users new privileges)

CNN

Can Talent Outweigh Size in Hollywood?

(On the relation between fame and overweight in Hollywood)

Breenam Hare, CNN

So You Wanna be a Youtube Star?

(On people's desire to show their talents using youtube)

Kevin Vought, CNN

Lashes or Pardon? That is the Question

(On king Abdullah's initiative in the Middle East)

Octavia Nasr, CNN

Alec`s is Ready: but is Oscars?

(On the race to the Oscars)

Randee Dawn, Los Angles Times

5- Exclamation mark: It is usually avoided. They mark an attempt to add excitement that should be conveyed by strong words instead, e.g.

Dolphin Helps Diver Find Sunken Treasure!

Dolphin Leads Diver to Sunken Treasure

Although generally avoided; David Crystal (2003:219) believes that "the abbreviated exclamation with its punchy style, is highly favored in dramatic newspaper headline".

The following examples show that exclamation mark is rarely used in political headlines while it is- on the other hand – heavily used in headlines on entertainment and sports because such topics require excitement, dramatic effects and an appraisal factor of the writer.

Fifty-eight, Fifty-nine, Sixty!

(On a test to end the craving for cigarette by counting to 60-then the craving ends because it lasts for a minute)

Christopher Mathews, New York Times

Scorecard! Louis Vuitton Wins!

(On fashion and the icon Vuitton)

Alison Cohn, New York Times

Michael Hiltzik: as Seen on TV!

(On jazz music TV reality show)

Los Angeles Times

Move Over Cosmo!

(On patient safety programme)

Los Angeles Times

Preach it, Right, Right!

(On Howard Stern- the radio personality show and TV host)

Los Angeles Times

6- Quotation mark: Only single quotation marks, not double ones, are used.

Clinton Calls Israel's Moves 'Useful'

(On Middle East tension)

Mark Landler, New York Times

Haiti after ' The Event'

(On Haiti disaster)

CNN

Iranian President: 11\9 was ' Big Lie'

(Naiad's comments on September attacks)

CNN

'Systemic Failure' is no Excuse

(Obama's speech on Umar Farok`s attempt)

CNN

Dubai ' Drip Feed' on Hamas Leader's Killing

(Dubai's role in the investigation of the murder of Almabhoh)

CNN

7- **Colon:** It is used sparingly. It typically introduces a list, a direct quotation or a topic.

Dubai: Local Moves, Global Implications

(On Dubai's international status)

John Deferios, CNN

US Diplomat: Iran Wants More Enrichment

(On Iran's nuclear problem)

Tom Evans, CNN

'Real Housewives': Simon and Tamra Barney's Bitter End

(The reality show Real Housewives)

CNN

Toyota Chief to Employees: We Must Restart

(Toyota car crisis)

CNN

Kristie Alley: I've lost 50 Pounds

(The famous actress talking about her diet)

Mark Marino, CNN

8- Hyphen: The hyphen is used to clarify the relationship of words. It is never used to break a word from line to line or to end a line.

China- Japan Fight Goes Deeper than Islands

(On the border tension between the two countries)

David Leonhardt, New York Times

Flat – Screen TV Prices to Plunge for Holiday Season

(On the relation between market prices and holiday season)

David Goldman, CNN

Republican's Deficit- Cut Pledge Lacks Specifics

(On the budget of the American economy plan)

David Leonhardt, New York Times

9- Dash: It is seldom used in headlines

Fat, Sugar, Milk— --100 Years of American Eating

(On the American kitchen)

Los Angeles Times

Conclusions

1- The headlines of news items, apart from giving information about the subject matter, also carry a considerable amount of appraisal (the size and placement of the headline, the use of emotionally colored terms and the employment of certain types of punctuation marks; especially exclamation and question marks) thus indicating an interpretation of the facts in the news items that follow.

2- It is the appraisal factor and the fact that punctuation marks can perform different visual, rhetorical and dramatic functions are the reasons which urge writers to violate the rule which says that punctuation marks should be avoided in headlines and should be used only when necessary because they slow reading.

3- Based on the examples mentioned in this research; exclamatory and question marks are generally avoided in news (or political) headlines while excessively used in headlines on entertainment(music, movies and celebrities), sport and technology. The examples presented have shown that the evaluative material (comments and points of views of the writers) is the reason behind the use of question and exclamation marks which can be dramatic and effective when carefully used.

4-The other marks of punctuation vary between normal uses that match with the common rules and this includes (semicolons, periods, commas and question marks) and rare uses (especially dashes).

5- This research attempts to highlight the fact that punctuation in headlines is a vital tool which helps the writer – if carefully used- to inform and connote within the limited space he has.

6- The discussion of the relation between headlines and punctuation, along with news and headline writing is expected to be of vital importance in the field of news discourses and consequently indispensable to journalists, writers and students of English language.

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استخدام أدوات التنقيط في عناوين الصحف الالكترونية

الكلمات المفتاح : ادوات التنقيط ، العناوين الالكترونية ، المقالات الالكترونية

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المستخلص

للعنوان أهمية كبرى ، فهو يلخص المقالة في كلمات وجيزة ولذلك تكمن أهميته في أنه يلفت نظر القارئ وبالتالي يجب ان يكون لافتا وموجزا في بضع كلمات ، الامر الذي يشكل تحديا حقيقيا للكاتب .

من المعروف ان صياغة العناوين تتبع قواعد ونظم معروفة ، ومنها تجنّب استخدام ادوات التنقيط - الا للضرورة القصوى - كونها تُبطئ القراءة وتعيق عملية استيعاب المعلومات . خاصة ان الغرض من استخدام العناوين هو الايجاز والتلخيص والرؤى السريعة . ورغم ذلك نجد ان استخدام ادوات التنقيط في صياغة العناوين يمكن أن يؤدي عدة اغراض ومنها : بصرية ، بلاغية ، اسلوبية ونحوية .

يتناول البحث استخدام ادوات التنقيط في مقالات من (نيبورك تايمز ، سي ان ان ، لوس انجلس تايمز) وفي مواضيع شتى ومتنوعة . ويركّز البحث على اساليب تطبيق قواعد استخدام ادوات التنقيط من عدمها اضافة لقدرة الكاتب على فرض شخصيته او بصمته الخاصة الى جانب تطبيق النظم السائدة في هذا المجال .