Headlines and those who write them play an extraordinarily important role in today’s frenetic competition for readers. Put simply, headlines either lure or lose surfing readers. They need to be clear and, when possible, clever. To put it another way, clear needn’t mean dull, but clever shouldn’t mean cutesy or clichéd.

Here are a dozen or so dos and don’ts of headline writing, some of them culled from Paul LaRocque’s excellent, 97-page “Heads You Win.” It’s the best primer we know for headline writing.

1. Good headlines sell and tell the story.

Or, as LaRocque writes, “they capture reader interest [and] they capture the essence of the story.”

This two-word news head atop USA Today about news of the NSA’s data mining played off the line of a song and quickly summarized the story’s main point, too.

Spying eyes

The drop head was weak, however, because it repeated the word “spy,” a redundancy a second deck should avoid. It also adds little:

    Obama’s
    Spy plan
    Includes
    Internet

This two-deck, front-page Wall Street Journal head about the invasion of sea birds during home San Francisco baseball games again plays with words well. And in this case, the second deck clarifies the wordplay and builds on the main head.

    San Francisco Giants fans find
    diamonds are a gull’s best friend

    Stadium is attracting aggressive birds
with bad manners and a taste for nachos

2. Headlines work best when they say one thing well, not two

It is *Killer tornado cuts mile-wide swath through Missouri town*, rather than: *Killer tornado hits Missouri; rescue workers seek survivors.*

This double-barreled *USA Today* is abrupt and somewhat foolish. Police, after all, investigate all homicides.

Johnson's* death ruled homicide; Police investigating

It would be better to write:

Police investigating Sam Johnson’s death as homicide*

*The name here has been changed

3. Headlines are spare but (selectively) specific.

Say something substantive.

It is: *Fertilizer-plant fire kills 12, officials say.* It is not: *Many killed in fire at fertilizer plant.*

4. Headlines build off key words and fresh language.

Avoid empty calories – words like plan and process and panel – and look instead for something specific from the plan or panel or in the process.

Writes LaRocque: “How would you react if a friend greeted you with, ‘The panel acted on the aid plan’? You’d probably run off shouting over your shoulder that you were late for a meeting. Thinking of headlines as conversation openers. They should stop readers and make them read the story.”

This head, from the front page of the Florence, Ala., *Times Daily*, does not.

Rosenbaum house ads staging area

As writing coaches at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Fla., frequently asks professional journalists at workshops there: “What’s the point and why should readers care?”

Here it turns out the famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright built this place. And that staging area? It’s an elementary school across the street. “School” and “historic house” offer more promise than “Rosenbaum” and “staging area” as key words.

5. Verbs drive most headlines.
Prosecutors detail Bulger’s alleged arsenal of guns
— Boston Globe

Man stabbed in front of home in city’s 24th homicide
— San Jose Mercury News

New York’s Grand Central turns 100
— Los Angeles Times

6. Writers cast headlines in the present tense and active voice.

It is: Traffic deaths SPIKE in first quarter. It is not: Traffic fatalities WERE HIGHER in first quarter of year.

7. Headlines pare away extraneous words. (Such as “away” in the previous sentence.)

Nouns and verbs anchor headlines. Beware of prepositions (of, by, for). Recast sentences to eliminate them.

8. Headlines attribute opinion and unproven information.

It is: Judge says settlement too low in Silicon Valley hiring case. It is not: Settlement is too low in Silicon Valley hiring case.

And it is: FICO changes may save consumers billions – but not soon, experts say. It is not: FICO changes may save consumers billions – but not soon.

But better yet, skip the alphabet soup of acronyms altogether unless they’re better known than FICO. How about:

Experts: Credit-scoring changes could eventually save consumers billions

9. Key words frontload headlines. The reader sees them first. So do search engines, which leads to better placement in online searches.

So it would be: Syria threatens retaliation (subject-verb-object). Not: After bombing, retaliation threatened by Syria.

Though both are OK, it’s more effective to write, as BBC did: Ebola Outbreak: Nigeria Calls National Emergency than to write Nigeria Calls National Emergency in Ebola Outbreak.

Why? Because Ebola and not Nigeria is the key word of this headline.
10. The “second deck” or summary/readout below main headlines conveys new information. It advances information rather than echoing it.

This example from the *San Jose Mercury News* violates the rule.

**MAIN HEAD**

San Jose shooting leaves man dead

**SECOND DECK**

*A man was shot and killed in San Jose late Wednesday, just a couple of hours after a stabbing left a 21-year-old man injured, police said.*

The main head already has said he’s shot and dead.

Here are examples in which the second deck elaborates on and complements the first:

**Strikes in Syria raise alarm**

*Damasculus blames Israel for blasts that some fear risk widening civil war (second deck)*

*Wall Street Journal*

11. Clarity counts most.

When a headline is ambiguous, the writer faces ridicule. Here are a few bloopers among hundreds shared online. These come from the *Columbia Journalism Review’s* “The Lower Case,” a compendium of poorly written and humorously misleading headlines.

**Efforts meant to help workers batter South Africa’s poor.**

— *New York Times*

**Schools: Abstinence still focus, parents can opt out**

— *Asheville (N.C.) Citizen-Times.*

**Court allows liquidation of Hostess**

— *New York Times*

**1 million get shot to save on loans**

— *USA Today*

12. DON’T!

- Parrot the story’s lead in the headline.
• Settle for alphabet soup (*FBI, CIA in rift over NSA program*)
• Try to stuff in too much into a single head (*Mortgage rates approach 4%, unemployment steady at 6.3%*)
• Sacrifice clarity for cuteness.