

Write your own headlines (like a journalist!)

Overview:

Explore the promises and limitations of a headline and how the words chosen can change understanding.

Summary:

Students will craft their own headlines. They will be given story information and conditions.

Students can also update their headline to see how bias can slip in.

Learning objectives:

- Students learn how media organizations and media creators craft headlines
- Students identify how their headlines differ from their peers and understand how using different language changes how people interact with and react to the content
- Become more thoughtful creators and consumers

Grade levels:

Grades 9-12



Steps:

Warm up:

Bring up a trusted local or national news outlet and scroll through the headlines.

Ask the students to think about the headlines they see.

Are there certain words that interest them?

Are there certain emotions they feel when they read some headlines?

What makes them stop on a news story on social media?

Part 1:

Explain the importance of headlines

Reputable news organizations take time to thoughtfully craft headlines. The goal of a headline is to provide information to your audience. Good headlines make you, your mom, your neighbor, your grandpa want to click on them. They should also be optimized for search engines. While writing your headline, think about the things you would search if you were trying to find this story.

But don't forget the primary tenant of a good headline: You are making a promise to the person who clicks on the story. Make sure that it aligns with the facts.

Part 2:

Write your own headline

One of the hardest parts of writing headlines are the restrictions to adhere to. For example, headlines with more than 70 characters (including spaces) are cut off in Google searches. And most content management systems limit the characters to less than 100.

Give students a scenario to run with. Our example is on the next page.

Close:

Let students share their headlines in small groups or as a classroom discussion.

Prompt questions:

- How were your headlines different from your classmates?
- Could you have crafted your headline differently to favor one side or get a different reaction?

Our example:

Here are a set of facts for a news story (*everything in this example is fake, the people and places are real*). We made this one up for students at Ben Davis High School in Indianapolis, but you could craft your own based on recent local or national stories. Provide the facts and let them run with it, or take our example and localize it to your school. Give students a few minutes to take a crack at writing their own headline.

The story “facts”:

- Who: Wayne Township Superintendent Jeff Butts
- What: Proposed building a \$6 million swimming pool and demolishing McClelland Elementary School
- When/Where: At the September school board meeting
- Why: He wants to compete with Kranert and Indy Parks to drive funding back to the district
- Why do we care?: There’s no plan to deal with the nearly 800 elementary students who wouldn’t have a school. When questioned about it, he said “who wouldn’t want to go to the library down a water slide?”

Write your own headline!

Maximum 100 characters including spaces

What is the most important information people need from your story? What’s going to get them to click on it?

What keywords would someone use to search for this story on Google?

Make sure your headline makes promises your story lives up to

(Example headlines from our news team):

- Butts proposes \$6M swimming pool, offers no plan for displaced McClelland Elementary students
- All pool, no school: Butts shares \$6 million plan to replace McClelland with public swimming complex
- Butts makes a splash with proposed school demolition for new swimming pool
- ‘Go to the library down a water slide’: Butts proposes McClelland demolition to drive district funding