

In the headlines

Features of headline language

If a story **hits the headlines** it suddenly receives a lot of attention in the news.

Here are two typical examples of headlines from **tabloid newspapers** with comments on their use of language. [popular papers with small papers and short simple reports]

EXPERT REVEALS NEW CLOUD DANGERS

- Articles, prepositions and auxiliary verbs are often omitted from headlines.
- This use of the present simple instead of the past tense makes the story sound more immediate.
- The use of language is often ambiguous. It is not entirely clear, for example, what cloud refers to here. It is actually about the dangers of storing electronic information on a cloud, but it could have referred to dangers relating to the weather. Readers have to look at the story in order to find out.
- Words with dramatic associations such as **danger** are often used.

TV STAR TRAGIC TARGET FOR CRAZED GUNMAN

This story is about how a well-known television actor was shot by a mentally unstable killer.

- In order to attract readers' attention, tabloid newspapers often feature celebrities.
- Alliteration such as **TV Star Tragic Target** is often used to attract the eye in headlines and make them sound more memorable.
- Newspapers tend to use strong, simple words such as "gunman" in order to express an idea or image as briefly and as vividly as possible.
- Strongly emotional words like **crazed** are often used to attract attention. [behaving in a wild or strange way]

Violent words

Violent and militaristic words are often used in headlines, especially in tabloid newspapers, in order to make stories seem more dramatic. For example, people who cause trouble may be referred to as **thugs, yobs** or **louts**.

EU ACTS TO CRUSH TERROR OF THUGS

Crackdown on soccer louts

Palace besieged by journalists

Typhoon rips through town

Playing with words

Many newspaper headlines attract readers' attention by playing on words in an entertaining way. For example, a story about a very heavy rainstorm which caused a landslide on a narrow mountain road was headlined **Rain of terror**. This headline was a play on words based on the expression **reign of terror**, an expression used about a period in which a country's ruler controls people in a particular cruel way.

Another example is the use of the headline **Moon becomes shooting star** to describe a football match where a player called John Moon shot the winning goal. **Shooting star** is an informal expression for meteor. Here it is used to play on the expression **shoot a goal**, and also to link to the player's name, Moon. The headline is particularly effective because of the association between star and moon in the sky.

Exercises

Match the headline to its story and explain the play on words in each case.

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|---------------------|------------------------|
| 1 Bad blood | 6 Hopping mad |
| 2 Happy days? | 7 Flushed with success |
| 3 Shell-shocked | 8 Highly embarrassed |
| 4 False impressions | 9 Round-up |
| 5 Happy haunting | |

A A grandfather's breathing problems were solved when doctors found false teeth at the entrance to his lungs. They had been forced down his windpipe in a car crash eight years before.

B A 25-year-old **terrapin** [small turtle] is being treated for a fractured shell after surviving a 200-foot drop.

C A Shetland teacher has suggested sheepdogs could be used to control pupils in playgrounds.

D A ghost society has been told not to scare off a friendly female apparition at a hotel.

E An unusual travel company is offering adults the chance to experience going back to school again – they will spend a week wearing school uniform, sitting through lessons and eating school dinners.

F An ex-public loo in Hackney, East London, is to be sold for 276,000 pounds.

G A Whitby vicar has attacked the resort's attempts to profit on its connections with Dracula: "a pale faced man with a bad sense of fashion, severe dental problems and an eating disorder."

H A **toad** [a small, brown animal, similar to a frog] triggered a police alert when it set off a new hi-tech alarm system.

I Firefighters had to scale a 30-foot tree to rescue a man who was trying to capture his pet iguana.

Read these headlines. What do you think the stories might be about? Choose one or two and tell the story.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 BLAST TERROR IN CAPITAL | 4 CRACKDOWN ON DISSENT |
| 2 PM TO REVEAL SOCCER LOUPLANS | 5 THUGS BESIEGE TEEN STAR |
| 3 TOP PLAYERS DEFEND COACH | 6 COPS TARGET JOBS |