

Another dose for headaches

LAST MONTH'S COLUMN discussed headline writing — not that we exhausted the subject. We spotlighted the “duh” headline, exemplified by several late entries:

- “Older blacks have edge in longevity”
- “Bible church’s focus is the Bible”
- “Fish lurk in streams”

Just as troublesome to careful headline writers as the “duh” is the double *entendre* headline. It’s also funnier, but unintentionally so.

Deliberate double entendres can be funny and clever. A famous one, from “The Silence of the Lambs,” is Hannibal Lecter’s statement that he’s “having an old friend for dinner.” Because the story has to do with cannibalism, the double meaning of “having” a friend for dinner amuses the audience.

Most headline double entendres are accidental, however, and therefore mistakes. While they may delight the readers, they dismay the headline writer.

Double *entendre* headlines are especially amusing when an unintended meaning is off-color or negative or insulting. The headline “Prostitutes appeal to pope” is an example of a double *entendre* headline, “appeal” having more than one meaning. Such bloopers are one reason good headline writers are so attentive to a word’s various meanings and possible intents. Let attention flag, and you can end up with headlines like these:

- “President wins on budget, but more lies ahead”

In this example, “lies” can be a verb meaning remains (or is in store), or a noun meaning falsehood.

- “New vaccine may contain rabies”

The choice of “contain” in this head is a problem because the word can be both a verb meaning to control or limit, or a verb meaning include.

- “Never withhold herpes from loved one”

This headline is amusing because, while it intends to caution against withholding information from a partner about sexually transmitted disease, it instead seems to mandate not withholding the disease itself.

- “New study of obesity looks for larger test group”

The expression “larger test group” creates a double *entendre* in a headline about the obese.

- “Teacher strikes idle kids”

Two words in this headline can be read more than one way. “Strikes” can be both noun and verb, and “idle” can be both verb and adjective. And each part of speech

yields a different meaning, with unintentionally humorous results.

- “Clubs help women cope with money problems”

“Wait till they find out about spears and guns,” wrote the reader who sent this headline, a double *entendre* because “clubs” can be read two ways.

Ambiguity in headlines comes from many more sources than the double-meaning word, however. It arises as well from odd word pairs or juxtaposition, dangling modifiers, or entire statements that can be taken more than one way. The careful headline writer must consider all those possibilities when writing a headline. No wonder writing good headlines is such a challenge.

- “Police begin campaign to run down jaywalkers”

“Run down” is unfortunate phrasing when the subject is jaywalking.

- “Fish pedicure banned in Fla.”

The pairing of “fish” and “pedicure” would be amusing even if fish had feet.

- “Six children charged with battery on bus”

We quickly eliminate the image of a battery “charging” children when we lose that double-meaning word “charged,” and when the modifier no longer dangles: “Six students on bus accused of battery.”

- “Lung cancer in women mushrooms”

All we have to do to fix this howler is to fix the modifier, but if we do the first thing that comes to mind, we get another blooper: “Lung cancer mushrooms in women.” It’s best in this case to retire that trouble-causing and double-meaning word “mushrooms” and choose a more singular verb: “Lung cancer rate increases in women.”

These headlines, sent from readers, exemplify the “whole statement is ambiguous” category:

- “Man shoots neighbor with machete”
- “Body discovered in Plainfield cemetery”
- “Sunday’s plane crash is pilot’s 2nd fatal accident”

(The reader who sent that headline writes: “Not everyone takes full advantage of a second chance.”)

Some headlines are so ambiguous as to be mystifying:

- “CIA chief in secret visit to Pakistan”

Hey! That was supposed to be a secret!

And, finally, some ambiguities defy categorization and in fact move immediately beyond ambiguity to downright bewildering, as exemplified by the following:

- “Hikers find 70 shoes filled with butter” ❖



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