

Web headline guidelines (a.k.a. Web headline Dos and Don'ts)

As part of our efforts to improve web headlines - both for SEO (search engine optimization) and the general usability of the website, Ron Smith, Rusty Jorgensen and Craig Nickels have come up with the guidelines below. Please note that these are not absolute rules. Rather they are broad principles that should guide our thinking as we write headlines for the web.

DO... use first and last names if possible. Titles and positions (Gov., mayor, cornerback, etc.) do not need to be included in the headline, but should be mentioned in the deck if feasible.

DO... try to fit in a **location or organization** when feasible.

NOTE: Whether name, position, organization or location is most important will depend on your subject and area of coverage. "Aaron Rodgers" is probably more recognizable and searched than "Green Bay" or "Packers quarterback." In other cases, the location or organization is probably more important (Kohls hires 300 at Menomonee Falls headquarters). Use your judgment on this.

DO... avoid unnecessary abbreviations and acronyms, including cities and towns. Say "Menomonee Falls" instead of just "Falls."

DO... use deck headlines to get additional terms at the top of the article page. Decks aren't as important as headlines, but they do carry some weight, and they can be a useful way to keep headlines uncluttered. For example, you could say "Ryan Braun" in the headline and "Brewers outfielder" in the deck.

DON'T... write headlines **longer than 70 characters** or so if you can avoid it. People tend to scan websites, rather than reading each and every word. Headlines longer than 70 characters start to get hard to digest when scanning. They can also cause issues on Google, Facebook and Twitter.

DON'T... bury the verb. The verb is usually the news (Braun suspended..., Walker survives recall..., etc). Don't make people sift through excess verbiage to find the news.

DON'T... "stack" terms in hopes of improving SEO. Do not say "Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers defends Dom Capers". In that instance, you have to sift through four mostly useless terms to get to the actual noun, and six to get to the verb.

MOST IMPORTANT... Write clear, concise headlines. Even as we improve SEO, this needs to be our top priority. Often, a well-written headline will also be search friendly. When in doubt, S-V-O construction (subject-verb-object) is best. (Scott Walker signs mining bill, Tom Barrett backs streetcar plan).