

Heads up



By [Gwen Watkins](#), issued by [Freelancers Writing Services](#)

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Effective headlines captivate audiences, essential as attention span is now around 15 secs (think billboard). Media websites want click-through, print media want purchasers - all depend on great headlines.

Your press release could sink or swim judged purely on the headline, which you put in the subject line of your email. Editors are swamped with messages and subject lines that read, "Here is a groundbreaking story about an innovative discovery from my client that I am sure your readers want to know about," will be deleted within a nanosecond. Also, scrap the words 'media release' in the subject line - that is obvious.

Headlines are not a sentence, they don't have the or an; they need active verbs and they should come in at under eight words.

How some African farmers are responding to climate change and what we can learn from them (16 words)

Climate change lessons from African farmers (6 words)

Keep the reader in mind – engineering magazines can use abbreviations known to their audience.

Kubayi sets 77c/kWh price cap and October deadline for signing of 26 renewables projects (15 words)

IPP projects could be signed in October – Minister (8 words)

Forget clever headlines with puns, as in a multi-cultural, multi-lingual society they often are misunderstood or misinterpreted. Do not put your headlines in upper case or sprinkle capital letters everywhere – it just annoys the copy editor who has to change it back to lower case. IT'S WAR is one of those exceptions but the average press release is not usually that riveting.

Headlines should tell the story – a good example is **Marcos Vizcarra wins Peter Mackler Award for Courageous & Ethical Journalism**, which does break eight-word rule but the Award title is lengthy. A poor example is **Young learner finalist in literature competition** – short but uninformative – no who or what.

Finally, though you may have created a great headline, the copy editor may change it – publication style, wringing a new slant out of it or just to exercise a small spark of creativity in a dull job – don't be discouraged – after all the story made the cut and is out there to be seen – so you were successful.

ABOUT GWEN WATKINS

Gwen Watkins, head of Freelancers Writing Services, is a freelance writer, editor, subeditor and author with 35 years international experience in industrial and commercial writing. Her Master NLP Practitioner skills give expert grounding in brand communication and native advertising. She has lectured on advertising, marketing, conferences, events & exhibitions and journalism. She could be described as a 'Fairy Grammar'!

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