



## The A-Z of writing G-h

From G to h. Next in the series revisiting John Simmons' book *The Invisible Grail*. This week is all about headlines – how you can use them well (and avoid bad ones). Follow the weekly series for a workout in writing agility that will influence and improve your words for work. Next week – H to i, published on Friday 29 May.

**G**otcha! is the headline many British people think of when headlines are mentioned. It appeared on the front page of the *Sun* during the Falklands War when the British navy sank the Argentinean ship, the *Belgrano*. At that time, it reflected the sense of triumphalism Margaret Thatcher had encouraged in the nation when she had proclaimed her own headline (Rejoice! Rejoice!) on the steps of 10 Downing Street after British troops' first success in the war.

We live in a headline age. People at work, obsessed by their own busyness, demand: 'Just give me the headlines'. Of course, we need to absorb information quickly and no one likes to waste time taking in unnecessary information. There's an art to writing the headline that will do the complete job: provide the reader with information and give your emotions a steer too.

“Just give me  
the headlines.”

It's an art that has not improved much over time. Looking at recent British press headlines I see 'Happy Monday' one week and 'Black Monday' another, mining a verbal seam that's close to exhaustion. The *Sun*, supposed masters of the form, on the day I write this (20 May) offers 'Araise Sir Tom' on its front page; which first leads you to jump on what seems a spelling mistake until the

sub-heading informs you that it's about raising money for charity. A heavy dig in the ribs was needed to convey the meaning.

Open up most in-house newspapers/communications and you'll find a whole rash of headlines that are bad tabloid imitations in the form of terrible puns. For me the pun in the headline should be a last resort. A pun rarely works when intended by the writer to be funny. It's easy to end up with the meaning

“Concentrate on the headline that will lead your reader most effectively to the story that follows after.”

being hijacked by the pun, rather than the pun expressing the real meaning. Good headlines are distillations of meaning in a few words. Concentrate on the meaning. Concentrate on the headline that will lead your reader most effectively to the story that follows after.

Headlines are designed for that moment. Time might judge them more harshly. On the day that most UK papers had variants of 'First Virus Death', the *Daily Star* led with 'Life Found on Mars'. Strange times we're living through.

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With a new chapter released weekly, look out for the next in the series, H-i, arriving with you on Friday 29 May. Follow us on [Linked In](#) or via our [Insights page](#) to find your weekly dose of writing inspiration.

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