

2 Hitting the headlines

Learning objective

- Understand how headline writers choose and omit words to engage the reader

In newspapers and on news websites, it is the headline writer's job to grab the reader's attention and make them want to read the whole article.

Activity 1

Headline writers use lots of different techniques to grab your attention. Look at the headlines below.

1 Top of the drops!

2 DIY dunces

3 Is this the luckiest man in Britain?

4 Huhne MP to HMP

5 Police ram van in bomb plot swoop

Glossary:  
MP: Member of Parliament  
HMP: Her Majesty's Prison

Now look at some of the techniques headline writers use – and a list of definitions:

Headline techniques	Definitions
a pun	A A shortened form of a word or phrase
b rhetorical question	B Dramatic word choice to evoke an emotional response in the reader
c abbreviation	C Two or more words that begin with the same letter or sound
d alliteration	D A question asked for effect and not intended to be answered
e emotive language	E A joke which relies on two words that have different meanings but sound similar

- 1 Match each technique with the correct definition, then with a headline that uses that technique. For example, if you think that headline 4 uses a rhetorical question, and that this means using two or more words beginning with the same letter, then one of your answers would be: 4, b, C.
- 2 Why did the writer of the headlines above write them in this way? Choose two of the headlines above and write a sentence or two explaining how the writer has written them – and why.

Humour engages the reader.

It intrigues the reader, making them wonder what the article will be about.

It makes the reader want to find out the answer.

The writer can get more information into a small amount of space on the page.

It makes the headline sound 'punchy' and gives it impact.

It makes the story sound really dramatic.

WRITER'S WORKSHOP: Writing an effective headline

How can I write short headlines that have impact?

Headlines have to be short and punchy because they must:

- be big and bold but be short enough to fill a small space
- have maximum impact on the reader.

One way in which headline writers achieve this is by using ellipsis: omitting words that carry less meaning.

For example, this headline:



carries the same meaning as:



Look at the kinds of word that can be omitted:

- determiners → an, the
- auxiliary verbs → has been
- prepositions → as
- adjectives → new

How could this long headline be given more impact without losing its meaning?

The local council has decided to fine people who put rubbish that could be recycled into black bin bags

Try taking away one word at a time and then reading the new headline aloud. Does it still give the reader enough information? How short can you make the headline without losing its meaning?



Auxiliary verbs are verbs like 'do', 'be' and 'have', which come before the main verb and add information about time or emphasis.

I have waited for years.

I do love it.

I am still waiting.

auxiliary verb

main verb

WRITER'S WORKSHOP: Writing an effective headline

How can I choose powerful vocabulary to give my headlines impact?

Synonyms are words with very similar meanings.

For example, all the words below are synonyms and related words.

happy cheerful pleased delighted glad ecstatic overjoyed

A lexical field is a group of words or phrases that are all associated with a particular subject or category.

For example, all the words below are items, actions or descriptions that could be included in the lexical field of cookery:

boil saucepan stew chopping board recipe delicious sauce

Headline writers use synonyms and related words and lexical fields to help them choose language for effect.

For example:

Top of the drops!

This headline uses the word 'drops' – a word that we associate with the lexical field of 'litter' – to create a pun on the well-known phrase 'Top of the Pops'.

DIY dunces

This headline uses the word 'dunces' instead of other possible synonyms and related words, e.g. 'idiots', 'fools', 'twits', because 'dunces' alliterates with 'DIY'.

This headline uses the word 'ram' instead of other possible synonyms and related words, e.g. 'collide with', 'bump', 'smash' or 'crash into' – because 'ram' is shorter, more emotive and rhymes with 'van'.

Police ram van

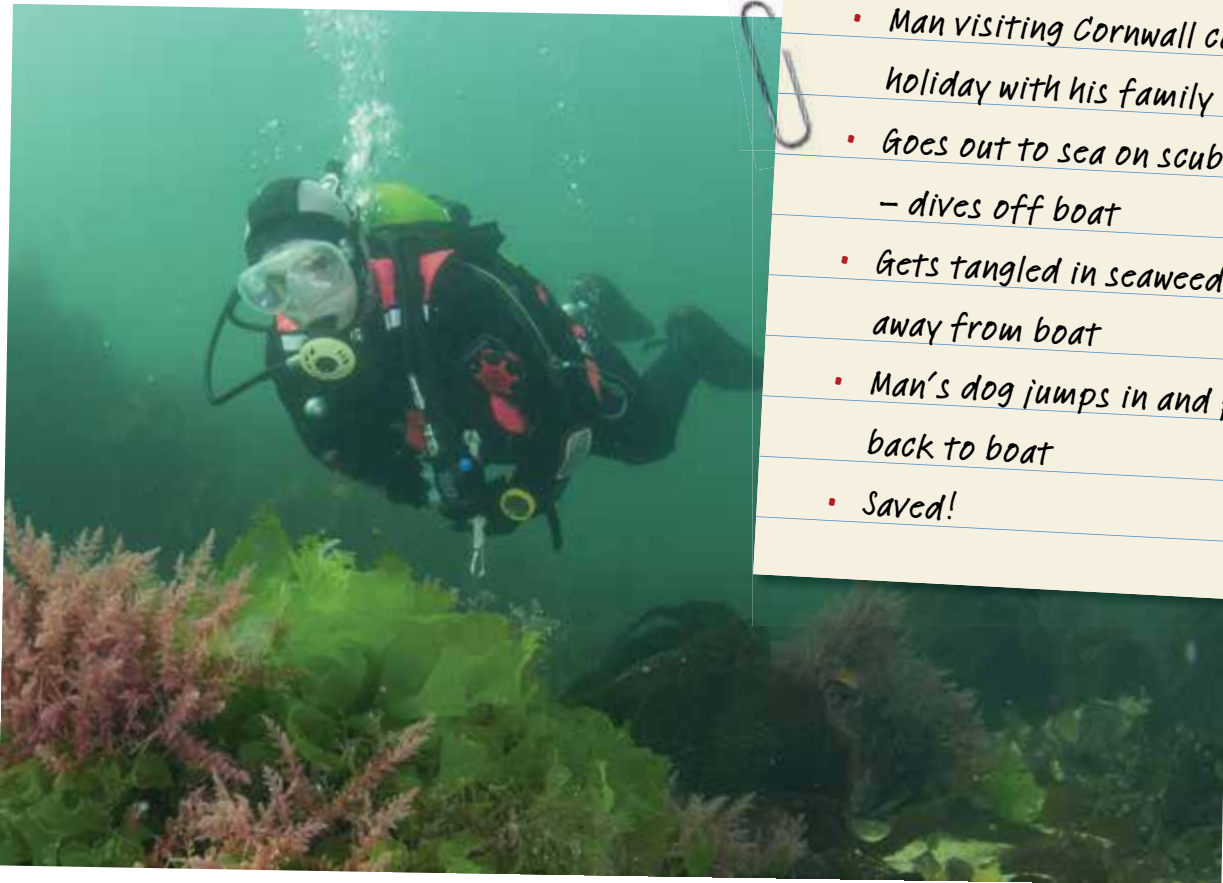
Which of the three headlines above do you find most appealing and intriguing? Why?

What do better writers do?

Better writers think about the impact they want their writing to have on the reader. They carefully consider which language choices and which language devices will help them achieve that effect, choosing every word intentionally.

Activity 2

Look at this journalist's notes for a newspaper report:



- Man visiting Cornwall coast on holiday with his family
- Goes out to sea on scuba diving trip – dives off boat
- Gets tangled in seaweed – drifts away from boat
- Man's dog jumps in and pulls man back to boat
- Saved!

- a Write one sentence summing up this story.
- b Turn your sentence into a headline by removing the least important words. They could be adjectives, determiners, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, etc.
- c Think about the lexical fields synonyms and related words you could use to improve your headline. Complete a table like the one below, adding as many different words as you can.

Lexical field of boats and diving	Synonyms and related words for...	
	Dog	

Add your own ideas here

- d Use your ideas from the table to create a headline for the article, using alliteration, emotive language, a pun, or a combination of techniques. Aim to make your headline as intriguing and engaging as possible.



## 2 Imperfect perfection

### Learning objective

- Understand how writers can use adverbs, adverbial phrases and sentence length to control the pace of action in a narrative

On pages 54 and 55 you learnt about the idea of utopia: a world that is perfect in every way. However, writers often portray societies or worlds that are far from perfect – places where everything seems to have gone wrong. These are called 'dystopias'.

### Activity 1

In the book *Gone*, the author Michael Grant describes a world with no adults – a perfect world, you might think! However, it is far from being a perfect world.

- Read the text below. It is one student's summary of the book's opening.

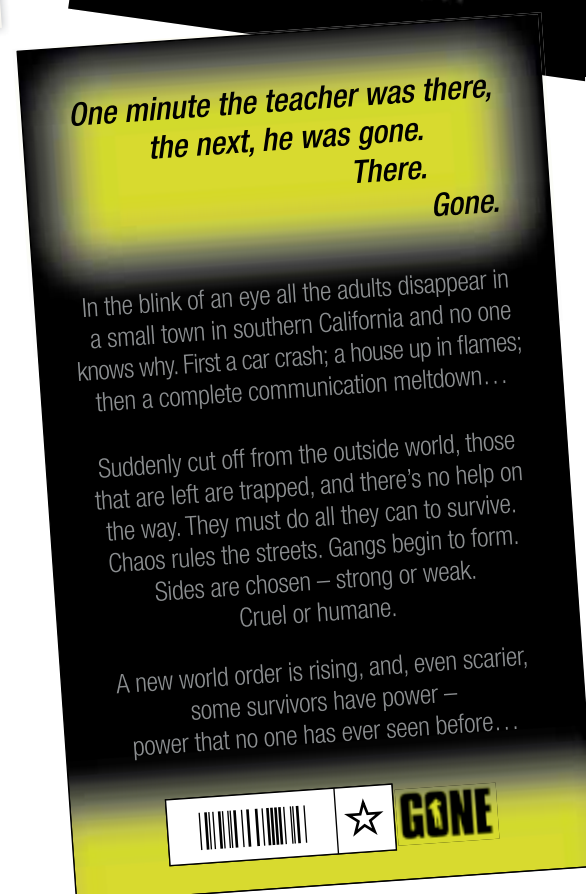
*This book is about a strange series of events in a small town in southern California when all the people over the age of fifteen disappear. Unexplained events take place starting with a car crash, then a house burning down and finally the breakdown of all means of communication. Isolated from the rest of the world, people begin to panic. The book is about how people form groups to survive, either by behaving in a kind and humane way, or by being cruel and ruthless.*

- Now read the book's blurb on the right. It was written to encourage new readers to buy the book.
- Compare the quotations below, taken from the student's summary and the book blurb.

The book is about how people form groups to survive, either by behaving in a kind and humane way, or by being cruel and ruthless.

Gangs begin to form. Sides are chosen – strong or weak. Cruel or humane.

- Which do you think makes the book sound more exciting?
- Look carefully at the text which you feel is more exciting. How has the writer suggested that the novel is set in a world of fear and danger?



## WRITER'S WORKSHOP: Creating a sense of drama

Writers of dystopias make a range of choices to create a sudden transformation: a world that is changing almost beyond recognition.

### How can I use adverbs and adverbial phrases to give the reader a sense of a rapidly changing world?

You can use **adverbs** and **adverbial phrases** to add more information about a verb or an adjective. They are a great way of adding detail to a text and can appear almost anywhere in a sentence. Adverbs and adverbial phrases can give information about:

- the **order** in which events take place:

**First** a car crash; a house up in flames; **then** a complete communication meltdown...

- when** or **how quickly** the action is taking place:

**Suddenly** cut off from the outside world, those that are left are trapped.

**In the blink of an eye** all the adults disappear in a small town in southern California and no one knows why.

adverbs related to time

adverbial phrase which helps to show manner

adverb related to manner

Why do you think the writer chose to place the adverb or adverbial phrase at the beginning of these sentences? Where else could they be positioned in the sentences? How would this change their effect on the reader?





### How can I structure my sentences to create a sense of drama?

You can use **sentence structure** to create a fast-moving, dramatic pace in your writing. For example, look at the sentences in the second paragraph of the book blurb.

Suddenly cut off from the outside world, those that are left are trapped, and there's no help on the way. They must do all they can to survive.

These longer **complex sentences** explain the situation to the reader.

Chaos rules the streets. Gangs begin to form. Sides are chosen – strong or weak.

The writer then uses three short **simple sentences** to describe the sudden and dramatic changes in the world of the novel.

Cruel or humane.

Finally, the writer uses a **minor sentence** – a sentence which contains no verb – to emphasise the stark choice which people face in this desperate and dangerous new world.

Practise reading this second paragraph of the blurb aloud to make it sound as dramatic as possible. How does the sentence structure help to make it sound dramatic?

### What do better writers do?

Better writers:

- use adverbs and adverbial phrases to signal in what order, or when, or how quickly events take place. They can use them to control the pace of the action in a narrative.
- control the pace of their writing through their choice of sentence structure. They can use short simple sentences to create a sense of sudden and dramatic change. They can use minor sentences to emphasise a dramatic idea or moment in the story.

### Activity 2

- 1 Look carefully at the sentences used in the student's summary of the book opening from Activity 1 (page 58). How are they different from the book blurb?
- 2 Can you find any other specific words and phrases in the book blurb that are used to engage new readers? Look particularly for words that add pace by focusing on time.



### Activity 3

Look again at the sentences from the blurb of *Gone*, below.

In the blink of an eye all the adults disappear in a small town in southern California and no one knows why.

A new world order is rising, and, even scarier, some survivors have power – power that no one has ever seen before...

- 1 Try experimenting with the sentences by:
  - a adding or removing adverbs or adverbial phrases
  - b restructuring each sentence as a sequence of simple and/or minor sentences.

In how many different ways can you rewrite them?
- 2 Look at the changes you have made to the sentences. Annotate your sentences to show:
  - a the changes you have made
  - b the different effects your changes have made to their impact or meaning for the reader.
- 3 Plan a story in which a character wakes up one morning and finds a suddenly and dramatically changed world. Decide:
  - a what has changed
  - b how this change affects the main character and the people they are close to.
- 4 Write a dramatic blurb to tempt readers to read the story you have planned. You could use:
  - adverbs and adverbial phrases to suggest the sudden and dramatic change
  - short simple sentences to explain the consequences of the change
  - minor sentences to focus the reader on the impact of this change.

### CHECK YOUR WRITING

- ➡ Read your blurb aloud with a partner. Discuss what is good about your blurb and what could be improved.
  - Does it sound dramatic?
  - Have you used adverbs, adverbial phrases and different sentence structures to create or highlight sudden and dramatic change?
- ➡ Write one or two sentences reflecting on what you have done well and one or two sentences about what you might be able to improve, and how.
- ➡ Re-draft your blurb, making the improvements you want to make to your writing.