

# Sell stories! Write great cutlines

A wealth of readership research shows that cutlines are important to the engagement of readers in a newspaper. Yet, in many newsrooms, cutlines are afterthoughts, dashed off by harried copy editors skimming through stories on deadline.

A cutline may well determine whether or not a story is read; photographers, writers, copy editors and page designers should share responsibility for making cutlines as engaging and informational as possible.

In eye-tracking studies, cutlines consistently get higher readership than story text. Here is why:

- Small bits of text, such as briefs, pullout boxes and cutlines, are more attractive to the average, scanning reader. They look easier and quicker than a long slab of 9-point body copy. A reader who doesn't think she has time to read a story may happily take a few seconds to scan a picture and the two or three dozen words under it.
- Cutlines accompany photos and other visuals, which draw the eye and spark the brain three times more often than body copy in a newspaper. Whatever sits next to the showiest stuff in the paper — graphics, illustrations, photos — is more likely to be read. The bigger the visual, the more true this is.
- Type that is larger or bolder than body copy is read at a higher rate, and in most newspapers cutlines are more conspicuous than body copy.
- Photos tend to communicate in an impressionistic way; they are rarely as precise or clear as verbal communication. They beg for confirmation in words; a good cutline satisfies the reader's curiosity quickly.

Cutlines represent an opportunity to snag readers with the most tantalizing information in a story. They can be to stories what trailers are to movies — intriguing, compelling previews. A busy reader's first question is: "Why should I take time for this story?" A well-crafted cutline provides an efficient, direct answer.

How do you get smart cutlines into the paper? Here are some suggestions:

- Consider headlines and other display type when writing cutlines. A cutline shouldn't repeat or contradict the other type readers will see first. A cutline is usually one of two or three bits of text that sell a story; they should all complement each other.
- Place a cutline under the photograph it describes; that's where readers look. A photo often raises questions in a reader's mind; if she can't find the answers quickly, she may become frustrated. Designers sometimes gang up cutlines in multi-picture layouts to "get them out of the way." But for an information-seeking scanner, cutlines are not in the way to begin with. Don't sacrifice information to aesthetics.
- If you must combine cutlines for two or more pictures, limit the depth of the cutline to 1 inch. Cutlines must appear brief and scannable; big cutline blocks defeat that purpose. Avoid challenging readers with "Clockwise from top far left" navigation. That might work for spreads of celebrity photos in glossy magazines; it's less appealing when the subjects are local animal rights activists you've never heard of.
- Add value to the picture with specific information. Don't simply describe the action in the photo, particularly if it is obvious. Weak: "Melinda Orton waves from her front porch." Better: "Melinda Orton remodeled her State Street bungalow last year at a cost of \$46,000."
- Prevent confusion. Anticipate and answer the reader's first questions, even if they are unrelated to the thrust of the story. "Reginald Robertson volunteers in his son's classroom every week as part of an ABC Corporation community program. Here the marketing director, who broke his leg in a car accident last week, reads to the second graders.
- Consider the sequence in which readers are likely to read the pictures and cutlines. Under the biggest or most striking picture, the cutline may take a first-reference approach: "Republican Sen. Mabel Jackson of Cityville begins her day with a wheat-germ milkshake." Subsequent pictures need not be so thorough: "Jackson meets with top aides at the end of the day to plan next steps on the license-plate legislation."