

1 col 24 point heading here

by Steve Finan

Four minutes to edition time.

I sat, as sub-editors do, and waited for inspiration. The presses wait, always hungry. I had the text at “copy fit”. No problem, I was always a good hack. But the heading? Single column, three decks. Headings need to say so much, yet “less is more” is the mantra subs live by. The text told, in six paragraphs, of a local worthy’s cycle-a-thon to raise money to restore a bridge with a long history in the town where I hovered over a keyboard, still unvisited by Mr Inspiration. Morning papers have tight deadlines.

Three minutes to edition time.

I tried:

Wheely

great

effort

Utter rubbish, I know. Been used every time someone does something on wheels to whip up cash. The fund-raising woman deserves more, some innovation at least. A story is just a story to hacks, but remember this will probably be the only time in her life this woman will be the subject of a story in a newspaper. Treat her with respect and your BEST effort, even if it IS a run-of-the-mill item few will read. Or so I tell trainees.

Delete line, delete line, delete line.

I know, how about a film title pun? That sometimes works.

I try:

Bridge

over the

river why

Perhaps the readers would appreciate it. Maybe they’d read the story to discover why the bridge needed saved. The skill in headline

writing is to attract eyes. I looked at it and winced. It's nonsense. If a pun heading is to work, it has to work on two levels. This barely works on one.

Two minutes to presstime. The chief sub is electronically checking the readiness of all pages and will soon shout for blood. Got to get the plates made.

What's the woman's name. Ah, Mrs McAnesspie. That'll never fit single column in 24 point. No help there. I consider asking my colleagues, but that's tantamount to saying, "I'm an old, tired hack who can't come up with a simple heading. You might as well sack me boss."

Empty your mind. Think!

I try:

Pedal

power saves

bridge

It doesn't work, even if I brutally kern the spaces in the middle deck, it won't come in. And anyway, the bridge isn't saved yet, it would be inaccurate. Delete.

One minute to deadline. The chief wants the heading sent to "Done". We print in another town now, gone are the days when the presses in the basement would make the whole building tremble as they rolled out the news. Great days. I had ink for blood then and "the news" was my oxygen. Everyone was a reader.

I never thought I'd be still here all these years later doing the mundane "Around Town" column.

In desperation, I type:

Bike

ride for

bridge

The first line is too loose and it's upper case D for Dull. It isn't really a heading, it's a label. Kids on school newsletters do better.

DEADLINE. The presses can't be late. We'd miss our printslot. Unthinkable.

I send:

Wheely
great
effort

Even though it is stale.

The newspaper industry, as it dies, cannot wait for slow subs. It was different when hot metal ruled. There were better stories, there was more time — either that or Mr Inspiration was my friend instead of a stranger. I was confidently set for Pulitzers and editorships. But now the papers just plumb new depths of shallowness. New tech made the job faster but cheaper.

Me, I can craft sentences so tight they thrum. I used to be good. I should have moved up, not fallen into the small town tender trap. Not that I regret being caught, most of the time. But prams in the hallway roll away brave ambition.

It hasn't been the same since Manda died. I was never so good again. Somehow, it didn't matter so much.

I was always going to write that class. lit. novel anyway.

