6.

Heads That Pull in Readers

We found out early that subject matter was more important than layout, style, illustrations or anything else. If an editor could guess what readers would be excited about at the time the paper hit the mail box and could deal with that subject, the readership score would be high.

On a head, then, the first thing is to make sure that it indicates what the copy is about. This sounds easier than it is. For one thing, it means using terms that are well-known.

One horrible example came in the Starch survey of Wallaces Farmer (October 15, 1960.) The poll article dealt with methods of getting cropland out of production, but the head played up the technical term “cross-compliance.” One result was that the Read Most score for men was only 26 per cent, one of the lowest ever scored on a poll story.

This was an error in editorial judgment. I had thought “cross-compliance” had been talked about enough so that farmers knew what it was. I was wrong.
If the article is about hogs, get the word "hog" in the head. If it is about fertilizer, say "fertilizer." The label has value.

You want more than a label, of course. One stock head that always registers is "What Price for Hogs Next Fall?" For a human interest story, there is a wider range. "What Happened to Mary Jones" was the head of an article tracing graduates of a rural high school.

An early head about retired farmers said "To Town, to California or to Heaven." This off-beat head probably did better than a label "Retired Farmers," but we didn't try a split on it. There is danger in trying to be too bright and original at the cost of making the reader guess as to what you are talking about.

In the early years of the poll, we didn't score heads by themselves. We figured that if the Read Some score was good, that proved the head was all right. Since then, we have tried scoring heads from time to time and find once in a while that a good scoring head is not necessarily followed by a good score on the following copy. The important thing still is whether the head pulls the reader into the article. If only the head is read, it isn't much good even if it does seem to score high.

Actually I have some doubts about the accuracy of these head scores. It is harder for a respondent to remember noticing a head than to remember actually reading some of an article.

Should the head use a question or a command?

A double split was tried out in Wisconsin Agriculturist (November 2, 1957). Heads were as follows (Figure 6.1):
A - "New Concentrates Will Sell More Milk"
B - "Will New Concentrates Sell More Milk?"
A - "Will New Hormones Change Crops?"
B - "New Hormone Could Change Crops"

Combining the two splits for Read Some, the statement got 52 per cent with men and the question 48.5. Young men readers especially seemed to prefer the statement to the question. Women leaned slightly toward the question.

In Wallaces Farmer (November 5, 1949) the following heads were tested:

"Don't Plan Too Many Spring Pigs"
"Are You Planning More Pigs?"

Here the statement scored higher than the question. Apparently the readers were looking for advice, and the positive statement had more appeal.

One thing we are more sure of is this: Don't limit the size of your audience by your head. In Wallaces Farmer (March 4, 1944) a head, "Dairy Association Hears Report" scored 20.8 Read Some for men. "Reports Fight on Oleo" or its equivalent might have done better.

Similar disadvantages come from putting the name of a country in a head, from using "4-H" in a head or the label of any minority group. Farm Bureau, because of its large membership, can be used in Iowa.

Minority groups should not be ignored. We are entitled to use a 4-H story occasionally, a sheep story, even a bee-keeper's story. But the scores are bound to be low.
If there is any way to handle the head or copy to get the majority interested in the minority theme, use it. "These Boys Build Beef Herds" is better than "4-H Boys Build Beef Herds." On the first, you'll get the 4-H readers and some others. On the second, your audience may be limited to 4-H'ers.

Do decks (sub-titles) help a head? We have been using two lines of 18-point Bodoni and have run a number of splits to see whether this addition or others to a 36-point or 42-point head increased readership.

Here is one typical split from Wallaces Farmer (January 18, 1948):

A — Head: "More Profit From Early Beef Calves"
(No deck)

B — Same head as A plus deck: "Early Calves Make Better Use of Pasture; Weigh More at Market Time"

Men had 57 per cent Read Some for A and 49 per cent for B.

Another split in same issue on the same subject was:

A — Head: "Soil Insect Control"
Deck: "Deep Placement of Starter Fertilizer Calls for Shift in Soil Insecticide Application"

B — Same head, no deck

On this A had 56 per cent for Read Some for men and the same for B. Combining scores, 52.5 Read Some for men on head and deck; 56.5 for head without deck. Apparently this kind of deck did no good. Similar
tests on other types of decks indicated the same answer. Apparently the standard two-column head does well by itself.

Some experiments with lead-ins—a short line leads into the head—indicate this way of supplementing the head may have some value.

In *Wisconsin Agriculturist* (February 18, 1956) we tried a lead-in to a one-line head “When Does It Pay To Add More Land” as against conventional two-line head and two-line deck. Read Some for men was 75 per cent for the lead-in and 65 per cent for the regular head.

Although the differences are not significant, the edge is certainly toward the lead-in.

A two-line head was run against a one-line head in *Wallaces Farmer* (November 21, 1959). The one line did a little better, 27 to 22 for Read Some with men; 57 to 49 with women.

Another test of heads came in *Wallaces Farmer* (January 18, 1959). A used the head “Collect Dividends with Farm Records” and B “Need a Fulltime Secretary Soon?” No change in type was made.

Read Some favored A with men (52 to 43); women favored B (32 to 26). Perhaps “secretary” pulled the women in.

Advertisers have experimented with head splits. Starcross Alfalfa in *Wallaces Farmer* (January 17, 1959), ran a big head on the left-hand page of a split in A and switched the head to the right-hand page in B. The head scored better on the left-hand page (40 to 27 for men) and Read Some on copy was also strong (23 to 10).
Allied Chemical tried a split on heads in *Wallaces Farmer* (March 17, 1956), as follows:

A — “Crops Make Money with Arcadian”
B — “I Like Arcadian 12-12-12”

There was no significant difference, except for a slight edge to A (Read Some, men 22 to 19). Other splits indicate that “profits,” “make money” etc. may sometimes be good labels for ads.

Another test of headlines was made in *Wisconsin Agriculturist* (April 5, 1958) with a fertilizer ad. Here the competition was between “Get 74 Bushel Increase from ‘Tired’ Cornland” and the head “Plow Down Nitrogen for Corn? Sure” (Figures 6.3, 6.4).

On this, the second head came out better, with a score of 33 per cent against 23.2. The stronger headline pulled up copy scores. The Read Some score on sales copy was 24 for the “plow down” head and 15.9 for “74 bushel increase.”

Why did farmers apparently prefer the second head? One guess is that the first head claimed too much. A 74 bushel increase may have simply looked too big. A Wisconsin farmer who averaged 50 bushels might add the 74 to 50, whistle and say, “It can’t be done.”

The second head, incidentally, scored where it counted, among larger corn growers and among those who said they used nitrogen on corn.

*Wisconsin Agriculturist*, working with Herman Felstenhausen of the Department of Agricultural Journalism, University of Wisconsin, checked the influence of using the profit motive in the head. In the issue of April 2, 1960, in eight splits, one head played up profits and
the other head workmanship, interest in conservation or some other non-profit motive (Figure 6.4). Here are two examples. The scores are the percentage of men readers of the issue who read some or most of the article:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Build Corn Profit With Weed Killers</th>
<th>Keep Corn Clean With Weed Killers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Build Better Herd With DHIA Testing</th>
<th>Boost Herd Income With DHIA Testing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>54% vs 46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When all the results were considered, Felstenhausen concluded, “The results showed no preference for one motivation headline over another.” (1)

You can put “dollars” in the headline, but it may not work. Heads stressing conservation, the pleasure of doing a good job or other motives may get just as good a response.

It seems plain that a good deal more work should be done with heads. In case after case, we find instances where a good head has pulled up a mediocre story; a poor head has lowered the score on a good story.

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What should a good head have?

1. The good head should have plenty of white space around it. The jammed up head suffers.

2. The old two-line deck doesn’t seem to have much value. Try more lead-ins.
3. Put a label on the story. Is it about hogs, or dairy cattle, or fertilizer, or what? Sometimes this can be handled as a lead-in.

4. After labelling the story, try to get some color into the rest of the head. Quotes can have value.

5. Perhaps it would pay to have the writer of an article submit four or five heads. Let the desk try to work up a few more. Sort for the best.

6. Don't use words that the reader can't understand. Technical language, in ads or editorial copy, will not get across.

7. If you want to attract a minority group — tobacco growers, honey producers, maple sugar makers — a head so labelled is useful in pulling in these particular folks. But it may repel the rest of your audience. Playing to minorities makes sense at times, but know what you are likely to gain and what you are likely to lose.
Question vs. Statement

The only change in the articles reprinted here is the shift from question to statement in the head. A second split on “Keeping Corn Clean” also showed little difference in response to the two kinds of heads.

An earlier split on “Planning More Spring Pigs” gave the edge to the statement in preference to the question. Sometimes folks want positive advice.

Wisconsin Agriculturist, November 2, 1957
Strong Head Helped This Ad

Only one change was made in this split. The head in A read "Gets 70 Bushel Increase from ‘Tired’ Cornland." The head in B read "Plow-Down Nitrogen For Corn? Sure!"

The B head had the higher score and pulled up the rest of the B ad with it.
Farmers who used nitrogen on corn gave B the advantage.

Men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use nitrogen on corn</th>
<th>Don't use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Farmers with larger corn acreages also preferred B—as did farmers who generally used some kind of commercial fertilizer.

Why did the B head win? One possibility is that A claimed too much. A farmer, who habitually got 50 bushels of corn to the acre, might be dubious about the possibility of increasing the yield 70 bushels, up to a total of 120 bushels.

Wisconsin Agriculturist, April 5, 1958
**Profit vs. Workmanship**

Does it increase readership to put dollars in the head—such as, “Build Corn Profit with Weed Killers” instead of “Keep Corn Clean with Weed Killers” or “Boost Herd Income” instead of “Build Better Herd.”

Farmers don’t always respond to the profit theme. A series of splits found that putting “dollars” or “profit” in the head was not a sure way to high scores.

*Wisconsin Agriculturist, April 2, 1960*

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**Build Corn Profit with Weed Killers**

Just how good are these new chemicals for weed control in corn?

Chemicals—simazine and atrazine—have produced some startling results. They’ve also caused disappointment.

The decision whether or not to use them this spring will need to be made soon. Pre-emergence weed killers should be applied at corn planting time. They don’t work effectively after weeds come up.

There’s no doubt that the chemicals provide a major breakthrough in corn weed control—if conditions are right for their use. But under the wrong conditions they can be an expensive mistake.

Cost is High

Your choice between the two—simazine and atrazine—is nearly a tossup. So says Kenneth Buchholz, University of Wisconsin agronomist. Simazine has been on the market three years. Atrazine came out last year. Atrazine appears a little better in research to date. Their main drawback so far is cost.

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**Keep Corn Clean with Weed Killers**

Just how good are these new chemicals for weed control in corn?

Chemicals—simazine and atrazine—have produced some startling results. They’ve also caused disappointment.

The decision whether or not to use them this spring will need to be made soon. Pre-emergence weed killers should be applied at corn planting time. They don’t work effectively after weeds come up.

There’s no doubt that the chemicals provide a major breakthrough in corn weed control—if conditions are right for the use. But under the wrong conditions they can be an expensive mistake.

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**Figure 6.4**

Heads

Read Some

“Corn clean”

Men 52%

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**Build Corn Profit with Weed Killers**

The spraying should be done at planting time or within the next three days. Early application increases the chances of getting ahead of spring rains.

Equip your sprayer with 20-gallon nozzles and coarse nozzle screens to prevent clogging. Be sure the sprayer has an agitator or a large pump that returns part of the flow to the tank. This constant mixing assures even spray distribution.

Avoid excessive over-dosage. Heavy application may leave a residue which could affect grain crops the following year. Oats are especially sensitive.

If grassy weeds are not a serious problem and if the corn field is well drained, then you can turn to other weed control measures.

After broad leaf weeds come up, 2,4-D works well. Apply it before the corn is 10 inches tall. Later treatment may damage the corn unless drop nozzles are used to keep the spray off the corn leaves.

Perennial weeds require special treatment. Don’t neglect them in planning your weed control pro-

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