

Writers are not responsible for headlines

By [Philip Ochieng](#)

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Talking of sub-editors, one recently gave me the headline: "Thank God, I am an atheist". Even I was a tad puzzled.

Yet I was the target of e-mail attacks. How could I thank God for anything as despicable as disbelief in God?

But even more surprising was the public's ignorance that reporters, analysts, columnists, correspondents and other writers are not responsible for the headlines atop their stories.

Headlines are the work of "word technicians" known as "sub-editors".

Africa's English-language newspapers borrowed this term from a group of Fleet Street dab hands who came out of London to introduce us to the techniques of journalism and newspaper production.

Why they are called sub-editors is easy enough to see. They work under respective managing editors.

Collins defines a sub-editor as "...a person who checks and edits text for a newspaper or other publication..."

More difficult is the term copy-editors by which they are known in North American newsrooms.

The explanation that they are called so because they edit "copy" raises the question: What is "copy?" No, "copy" has nothing to do with "aping" or making things look like others.

Copy is the publishers' term for the written raw material that he may receive for printing. I have not the foggiest idea why such material is called copy.

But, having served as chief sub-editor of a major Nairobi daily newspaper, I know that what arrives is often barely literate and grotesquely amorphous.

The sub-editor it is who knocks it into a yum-yum form for public consumption. Sub-editors are every publication's gatekeepers.

The chief sub-editor answers to the managing editor (who answers to the board and the shareholders) for everything that enters a newspaper - in such terms as saleability, accuracy, fairness, language, structure and decency with regard to the political climate and such legal constraints as libel.

I have no clue either why the words atop a story are called a "headline". I can understand the "head" part of it. But why the "line"?

Probably because, originally, every heading ran, like a rail line, on a single deck all the way across the page or across many columns, so that you could read it with one sweep of the eye.

However, with varying layout techniques, some stories were soon running on single columns, necessitating many-decked headlines.

But these are by no means the only "lines" that a sub-editor deals with. What about "straplines", "datelines", "bylines" and suchlike? As her/his main headline, a page designer may choose a very large font-size.

In that case, there will be no space for the headline to contain too many words. Such a headline may, therefore, be too cryptic.

A strapline is a sub-headline used above or below the main headline to give further information. A dateline - such as "Geneva, Sunday" - tells you where the news story originated from and when.

For its part, a byline tells you who the author is - such as "By Philip Ochieng" and "From Our London Correspondent". The injustice is that the sub-editor is never bylined.

Source: allAfrica.com.

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