

How to Read an Election Story in a Newspaper

Headline Does the Headline match the article? Editors, not by reporters, write headlines. Often the headline is written in such a way as to prejudice the reader. Headlines can be subtly adjusted to alter the tone of the article or to cast a candidate in a certain light. The headline sets the initial impression that the reader will receive while reading an article. For a good example of how a headline can altered from one news service to another, see "*Bush ups ante in attack on democrat*" http://www.griid.org/electionwatch.php?press_id=1

Horsrace Is the story an example of "horsrace" coverage? Is the story a travelogue of the candidates or does it actually provide information on positions, voting records, platforms, donors etc. Hallmarks of horsrace coverage include poll results reported as news, stories concerning candidate travel schedules, and meaningless sound bite slogans. The article "*Kerry 'Express' courts rustbelt voters*" http://www.griid.org/electionwatch.php?press_id=17 is typical horsrace style coverage, going so far as to include a map of the candidates travel route.

Sources Are data and facts mentioned in the article properly sourced? Who is quoted in an article? Are they sourced? Do candidates receive equal print space for their quotes? Are sources provided which would let the reader find out more on the topic addressed in the article? "*Bush calls for renewal of Patriot act*" http://www.griid.org/electionwatch.php?press_id=12 provides a good example of facts being presented without sources. Without independent sourcing of information, reporters run the risk of becoming simply stenographers of official sources.

Context What kind of contextual information is provided? Does the article provide platforms, voting records etc? When a candidate is quoted is the statement placed within the intended context? Are a candidate's comments and promises contextualized by comparing them to the candidate's prior statements and voting record? The article "*Kerry slams alleged Bush-Saudi oil deal*" http://www.griid.org/electionwatch.php?press_id=13 provides quite a few quotes from a candidate but does not contextualize those quotes with relevant information.

Language Does the article use language that affects the tone of the article toward a particular bias or viewpoint? Is the language used to describe one candidate the same as for another candidate? Often language can be used to typecast a candidate, assigning certain adjectives to a particular candidate. One example of this is the continuous referencing of Nader as a "spoiler" or "maverick" as in the article "*Dean gives Kerry a boost*" http://www.griid.org/electionwatch.php?press_id=21

Money Election stories often focus on how much money the candidates have raised. Far less often do they focus on who which organizations, groups, or businesses donated the money and what they got in return. Also seldom addressed is how much revenue a particular media outlet is making from paid political ads and how that might prejudice their coverage. To see an example of how money is typically reported, read "*President way ahead in money race.*" http://www.griid.org/electionwatch.php?press_id=2

Polls Election stories often focus on poll results. It is important to look at the way in which the poll question was asked and what the range of answers provided was. Make sure the methodology of the poll is valid. Beyond that, ask what purpose the reporting of the poll results serves. Poll results reported by themselves are basically a type of horserace coverage. Poll results are often reported in the "briefs" section of the newspaper as in the article "*It's neck and neck again.*" http://www.griid.org/electionwatch.php?press_id=30

Editing Has the article been edited? AP articles often are edited for length or content before they are placed in your local newspaper. Original complete versions of the article can often be found on the Internet. Compare the original to what makes it into the local newspaper. Often the ends of articles edited by simply cutting the end off in order to make it fit in the paper. Other times, lines are cut out throughout the article, as in the article "*Kerry promises jobs, gets heckled.*" http://www.griid.org/electionwatch.php?press_id=10. At it's worst, this kind of editing can omit valuable contextual information or change the framing and tone of the article.

Other Resources for Election Information:

Center for Public Integrity <http://www.publicintegrity.org/bop2004/default.aspx>

Center for Responsive Politics <http://www.opensecrets.org/index.asp>

Project Vote Smart <http://www.vote-smart.org/>

White House for Sale <http://www.whitehouseforsale.org/>

The Campaign Desk <http://www.campaigndesk.com/>

The Color of Money <http://www.colorofmoney.org/>

Progressive Punch <http://www.progressivepunch.org/>

League of Women Voters <http://www.lwv.org/>

For ongoing critiques of election coverage in the West Michigan TV market and the *Grand Rapids Press* go to the **Election Watch 2004** section of the **GRIID** website at <http://www.griid.org/electionwatch.php>

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