

4th Session

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8 grammar rules for newspaper headlines

Reading newspaper articles is an excellent way for foreign learners to build vocabulary and practice comprehension using real material. It can expose you to different topics, and a variety of language that is rare in spoken English. However, newspaper writing is rarely a representation of common English. Headlines in newspapers, in particular, use different grammar rules to everyday English. This is because they are designed to be short and to attract attention. The following 8 rules are often used to achieve this:



1. Use present simple tense for past events

The present tense is quick and current, and helps emphasize the action happening, rather than its completion.

- ☐ Parliament confirms new stray dog policy
- ☐ Lion escapes zoo

If we want to demonstrate the result of an action, or that something was completed, we can use perfect tenses, and for changing events, the present continuous may be used.

However, these tenses are often shown by using participles alone.

2. Leave out auxiliary verbs

With perfect, progressive and passive structures, auxiliary verbs are not necessary. This makes some headlines appear to be in the past tense, when actually the headlines use past participles, or particles, not the past simple. Similarly, changing events are represented by the present participle on its own.

- ☐ New policy decided by Parliament (*New policy has been decided by Parliament*)
- ☐ Lion escapes zoo – ten killed (*ten people have been killed / were killed*)
- ☐ Four stranded in sudden flood (*four people have been stranded / were stranded*)
- ☐ Temperatures rising as climate changes (*temperatures are rising*)



3. Use infinitives for future events

- ☐ Parliament to decide new policy tomorrow
- ☐ President to visit France for further talks

Using the infinitive, a future time is not always necessary to demonstrate the future tense in headlines.



4. Leave out articles (a, an, the)

- ☐ Prime Minister hikes Alps for charity (*The Prime Minister hiked the Alps*)
- ☐ Man releases rabid dog in park (*A man released a rabid dog in a park*)



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5. Leave out “to be”

- ☐ Residents unhappy about new road (residents are unhappy)
- ☐ Family of murder victim satisfied with court decision (family of murder victim is satisfied.)



6. Leave out “to say”

- ❑ Mr Jones: “They’re not taking my house!”
- ❑ Bush on Iraqi invasion: “This aggression will not stand.”

Reported speech is usually represented by a colon, or a hyphen, with the subject introduced with ‘on...’. This includes leaving out other verbs such as *comment*, *tell*, *argue*, *announce*, *shout* – unless the act of speaking needs emphasising, for instance to demonstrate a promise or official policy.

- ❑ Warlord decrees “Peace by Spring.”



7. Replace conjunctions with punctuation

- ❑ Police arrest serial killer – close case on abductions
- ❑ Fire in bakery: hundreds dead

As with reporting speech, commas, colons, semi-colons, hyphens and so on can replace all conjunctions, or some joining verbs, to join clauses. Commas may also be used to join nouns (more common in American English).

Man kills 5, self

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8. Use figures for numbers

- ☐ 9 dead in glue catastrophe
- ☐ 7 days to Christmas – shoppers go mad



As you can see, the grammar rules for newspaper headlines can lead to ambiguous headlines, as many words are implied and not written. You may also see different vocabulary in headlines, with less common, but concise, verbs, such as *bid*, *vow* and *spark*. There are many additional style issues that certain newspapers use, for instance the capitalization of every word, or joining conjunctions with commas instead of conjunctions. The 8 rules above are the most common and consistent for headline grammar, however.

Presidential debate: Rules to change after Trump-Biden spat

The commission that oversees US presidential debates says it will change the format to ensure the remaining two encounters between Donald Trump and Joe Biden are more orderly.

One new measure could be to cut the microphones if the candidates try to interrupt each other, US media report.

The announcement follows Tuesday's ill-tempered debate that descended into squabbling, bickering and insults.

President Trump's team has already criticised the commission's plans.

The tone and tactics of the first presidential debate were criticised across the US and around the world.

What are the plans for the next debates?

In Tuesday's debate, the candidates were given two minutes to answer moderator questions, before being allowed to address each other's response.

However, President Trump constantly interrupted Democratic candidate Joe Biden leading to a series of chaotic exchanges in which both men talked over each other.

The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) - a nonpartisan body that has organised presidential debates since 1988 - said it would soon announce new measures to help moderators "maintain order" in the remaining two debates.

It said the first debate had "made clear that additional structure should be added to the format of the remaining debates to ensure a more orderly discussion of the issues".

CBS News, citing an informed source, said the commission would spend the next 48 hours drawing up new guidelines and rules for the second debate on 15 October in Miami, Florida.

- How the world reacted to the presidential debate
- Trump ads push baseless Biden earpiece conspiracy

Controlling the candidates' microphones is at the top of the list, CBS said, in order to prevent them interrupting the moderator or each other.

Both campaign teams will be informed of the rules but they will not be subject to negotiation, the source added.