



## HEADLINES

Think of the big ideas and important themes in what you have been learning.

- Write a headline for this topic or issue that summarizes and captures a key aspect that you feel is significant and important.



This routine naturally emerged from our own group's meetings at Harvard Project Zero. Many times when we were discussing an issue or wrapping up a discussion, we wanted to make sure we heard from everyone in the group in a very succinct way and without further discussion. The leader would simply ask everyone for a "headline" that would capture his or her thoughts, impressions, or key ideas about the topic being explored. The routine forced a quick synthesis by each group member and provided a read on where everyone in the group was at with regard to the topic. We adapted this basic idea for use in classrooms, as you'll read.

### Purpose

The Headlines routine asks students to reflect and synthesize as they identify the essence or core of a situation or learning experience. Sometimes it is easy for the activity of the classroom to just continue on and on without the opportunity for learners to consider what is important or central in their learning. However, without capturing the significant essence, it can be difficult for learners to build understanding of big ideas and core principles. They may miss the forest for the trees. If students are not able to grasp the heart of what they are learning, they will find it difficult to make meaningful connections to these ideas in future learning.

By asking students to sum up their current notions of a lesson or concept using a headline, teachers send the message that taking notice of big ideas is critical to understanding. Documenting the group's headlines in some way helps students to consider a topic from multiple angles and create a rich mental picture of what is important to keep front and center in their thinking.

### Selecting Appropriate Content

Since the Headlines routine calls for synthesis, it is often situated within an ongoing arc of learning to help students get a sense of what lies at the core of a topic that may have many layers or nuances. Simply asking students to write a headline for the definitions

of the six types of simple machines might not yield anything compelling that captures ideas of central importance in physics. Students are likely to come up with catchy phrases for levers, pulleys, and wedges that might seem more “list oriented” than heart capturing. On the other hand, asking students to create a headline to express what they’ve come to understand regarding these simple machines—mechanical advantage—and how this all connects to some bigger idea might prove particularly insightful. In this case, the Headlines routine creates an opportunity to capture the essence of a few fundamental physics ideas. The Headlines routine can also be used after a single episode of learning, such as a field trip, reading of a book, watching a movie, or so on. In this context, the Headline helps students to identify what was important or stood out to them about the experience. Getting a better sense of what students see as important can be useful in planning future instruction.

## Steps

1. *Set up.* After students have had some learning experiences, ask them to consider what they think some of the core ideas in what they’ve been learning seem to be.
2. *Write a headline.* Ask the students to “Write a headline for this topic or issue that captures an important aspect or core idea that we would want to remember.” Students can do this individually or with partners, depending on what the teacher desires.
3. *Share the thinking.* Once students have an opportunity to draft a headline, ask them to share their headlines with students around them. It is important that students not only share their headlines but also the story and reasoning behind their choice, unpacking the headline for others. This step is not a competition for the best headline. The goal is to create a forum in which different perspectives and nuances are surfaced.
4. *Invite further sharing.* Once pairs or small groups have had the opportunity to share their headlines and tell the stories of their headlines with each other, you can create a class collection of the headlines that document the group’s thinking. Working with a collection of headlines, you might encourage your class to search for common themes or elements among the headlines.

## Uses and Variations

At Brighton Elementary in Tasmania, Julie Mitchell and her colleagues have found that Headlines is a great way of helping students deal with social conflicts on the playground. Julie felt the synthesizing move called for by Headlines would be useful for students

experiencing social conflicts. She noticed that when conflicts arose, students often ran to the teacher to solve the conflict, tattle, or recount the entire episode of events. By asking students to stop and put the issue into headline form, Julie encouraged her sixth graders to think about what was the core issue at the heart of the conflict or event. This process forced students to calm down and think what it was that they were upset about. Julie and her colleagues found that the synthesizing, coupled with the act of listening to others, often minimized tensions and reduced the incidents in which teachers were playing referee. As students became familiar with this process, Julie introduced the idea of crafting a headline from the other student’s perspective. By asking students to see the conflict from the other side, she was further able to defuse the situation and help students begin to resolve their own conflicts.

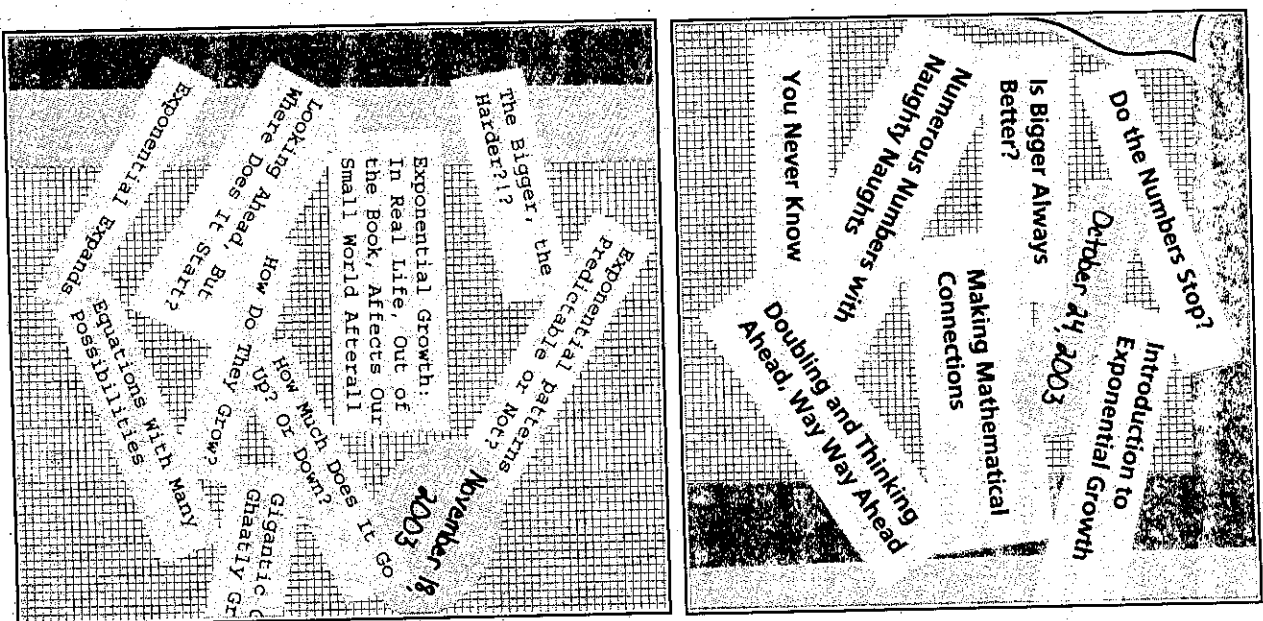
Clair Taglauer, a teacher at East Middle School in Traverse City, Michigan, used a modified version of the Headlines routine when exploring literary themes with her eighth grade language arts students. After her class had read *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson, Clair asked her students to nominate songs from their mp3 players that they felt would best capture a central theme from the novel. For each song selection, students were asked to explain and justify their choices. By keeping the focus on important literary themes, this activity created an opportunity for students to reflect upon all they had read. Their song choice acted like a headline to illuminate a central idea in the text worth remembering. Listening to the class’s mix of song selections for *Touching Spirit Bear* was a memorable way to culminate their learning.

Eli Conde, a preschool teacher at the International School of Amsterdam, adapted the Headlines routine for her three- and four-year-olds by calling it “Story Titles.” She introduced this into class sharing time after students told about what they had done over the weekend. After each child had told his or her story of weekend activity, Eli asked the class, “What title could we give to Carla’s story?” After a response, she would push for more thinking by asking, “What else might we call it?” In this way, she introduced these young students to the idea of summarizing.

## Assessment

Pay attention to each student’s headline as well as the reasoning behind his or her choice. Has the student seen or noticed an idea that could have otherwise been missed? Has this student crafted a headline that highlights an issue that is worth the whole group’s attention? Does the headline do its job in synthesizing and distilling the event or does it focus on tangential elements? What does this headline reveal about the student’s current understanding of the topic?

Figure 5.1 Eighth Grade Students' Headlines Within an Exponential Growth Unit



Of course, it would be unreasonable to expect that a single headline can sum up all the nuances and complexities of topics we teach. Therefore, you'll want to assess the class's entire collection of headlines to get a better sense of what big ideas are resonating with students. In addition, a class collection of headlines has the potential for revealing puzzles or questions that seem appropriate to explore next.

### Tips

The Headlines routine seems straightforward enough. However, teachers have experienced a fine line between creating opportunities for students to put their thumbs on the pulse of a topic and students simply coming up with catchy slogans and titles. It is very useful for teachers to remember that this routine is not about students coming up with a superficial but catchy phrase. It is about inviting learners individually and as a group to gear their thinking toward core, central ideas and elements that are at the heart of a topic being studied.

For example, one student's headline, "Investigation of Exponential Growth," does not reveal exactly what he is understanding as much as another student's headline, "Exponential Patterns: Predictable or Not?" The former is merely a title of what the student is studying, whereas the latter captures more of the essence of what the student is beginning to understand about mathematical patterns of change and growth (see Figure 5.1). If students' headlines seem to be more catchy and clever than revealing, a teacher should not hesitate to probe the ideas a bit more with them to get a sense of what learners believe are the most important ideas of their study.

Since the Headlines routine asks students to summarize, teachers sometimes find it useful to ask for "words behind the headline" to understand why students made the choices they did if it is not evident from the headlines themselves. At times, it can be interesting to ask the class to first think what the "story" might be behind a student's headline before having that student supply a few more words to go along with what he or she has created.

### A Picture of Practice

When Karrie Tufts, a fifth and sixth grade teacher for the Traverse City Area Public Schools in Michigan, first used the Headlines routine in her mathematics classes, she wanted to get a sense of what her students might come up with. After a

mathematics investigation about fractions, Karrie asked her students, "So, what would you say would be a good headline for today's learning?" Though some student examples were straightforward and reported simple facts, others struck Karrie as having an intriguing bit of depth (see Figure 5.2).

As she gained a bit more familiarity with the Headlines routine, Karrie wanted to push her students' reflections and try to get more out of their headlines than surface knowledge. Karrie thought the headlines students were generating were good, but she was left to do a lot of the "interpreting" behind the headlines. Karrie wasn't clear about what theories or ideas her students were putting together about why something works the way it works in the different mathematics topics they were studying. Because of this, Karrie began asking students not only to come up with headlines for what they had been learning but also to share a few sentences on the back side of their papers that gave "a little more of the story." Karrie did not want this to become a laborious exercise for students to undertake, and she found that a few sentences that shared more behind their choice of headlines gave

Figure 5.2 Fifth and Sixth Grade Students' Headlines About Fractions



her significantly more insight into students' thinking. She also found this added explanation helped some students more clearly articulate ideas that they couldn't exactly capture in their headlines.

As the Headlines routine became more a part of the ongoing learning of Karrie's classes, she decided to vary the use of this routine. Whereas early on, Karrie asked students to come up with their own individual headlines, she later began asking them to partner up and collectively generate a few headlines to capture the big ideas behind what they had been studying. By pairing students up, Karrie noticed the power of students exchanging and discussing ideas. An important message she wanted students to receive was how learning can be very powerful when people kick ideas back and forth.

Once pairs of students had come up with a few tentative headlines that seemed to capture the core, Karrie pushed them further by asking them to choose just one to fine-tune and add to the class collection of headlines. Pairs then discussed which of their headlines seemed to be the most powerful. Karrie found it interesting to listen to their reasons for why a particular headline made the final cut while others did not. "These mini-conferences with each pair were very informative and useful for my own sense making of what my students were understanding and seeing as particularly important," reflected Karrie. Each pair then gave their final headline to Karrie for the classroom's display. Karrie wanted the group's thinking to be both visible and shared by all mathematics learners, even across class sections of students.

Karrie found that through Headlines she got a glimpse into how students were or were not connecting to ideas she thought to be particularly powerful in the topics they were studying. Becoming more aware of students' thinking, Karrie felt more informed in making decisions about how she would like her lessons to progress. "Knowing my students' headlines today helped me make decisions for my teaching tomorrow," recalls Karrie. She also found students' headlines revealed some misconceptions or overgeneralizations students had. Because she had created a safe learning environment, Karrie felt confident in addressing these misconceptions in ways that challenged and provoked learners' thinking rather than quickly resolving misconceptions for them.

Students in Karrie's mathematics classroom regularly engaged in hands-on activities. The use of thinking routines opened up ways for students to become more mindful of what they were learning through these active lessons rather than leaving it to chance. Karrie noticed that even struggling students were able to