



March 2015

PRINTtips

Engage Your Readers With... Effective Headlines



TechneGraphics INC
Professional Printing Providers

2002 Ford Circle Suite D
Milford, Ohio 45150

513.248.2121

Fax: 513.248.5141

info@techgra.com

www.tgiconnect.com

Interactive Print Experts

- Launch a Website
- Save Contact Info
- Make a Call
- Send an Email
- Display a Note
- Create a Mobile Site



SCANLIFE
tgiconnect.com

Ask About Our New...

CLICKABLECAROUSEL™
ClickableCarousel.com

When you are writing a marketing communication piece – print ad, sales letter, direct mail piece, brochure, blog entry, press release, newsletter, webinar – where do you start? You may be surprised to learn that experts advise starting at the top by writing the headline.

The headline is your promise to readers, a statement of what they can expect if they continue reading. Promises are first made, and then fulfilled. So make the promise to readers through the headline, and fulfill it in the content.

The importance of headlines is not a new concept. Writing in 1923 in his book *Scientific Advertising*, Claude Hopkins said, “We pick out what we wish to read by headlines.” Forty years later, in his 1963 book *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, advertising legend David Ogilvy wrote, “On average, five times as many people read the headlines as read the body copy. When you have written your headline, you have spent eighty cents of your dollar.” Continuing today, busy people decide what to read on web pages, e-mail, or blogs based the strength of the headline.

How a Good Headline Works

The objective of a headline is to engage the reader’s curiosity by answering three questions for the reader:

1. Does this article pertain to me?



2. Is it something I care about?

3. If I read it, will I get a benefit?

If the answer is yes to all three questions, the reader’s curiosity is aroused and it becomes almost impossible not to continue reading. Essentially, the headline dares the reader to read the article, doesn’t overpromise or deceive, and delivers on the promise.

A good headline has four jobs: to attract reader attention, to select the best prospects, to deliver a complete message, and to pull readers into the body copy. The size and placement of the headline as well as the words will attract attention. This is necessary but not sufficient because the headline also has to attract the right people for the right reason. Do this by using key words and phrases that will catch the eye of the audience you are seeking (for example, Wanted:

Engage Your Readers With... Effective Headlines (cont.)

30 New College Graduates).

Delivering a complete message means being clear and focused. Do not tease the reader with misleading words. Avoid being cute or clever since that may confuse or deceive the reader.

A reader will be drawn into the body copy if the headline arouses his curiosity, makes a provocative statement, asks a question, promises a reward, provides useful information, or gives news.

Headlines That Attract Readers

The web presence management company Conductor tested different headlines to determine which were most influential with readers. By analyzing a large sample set of headlines from online publications and social networks, Conductor determined there are five types of headlines; normal, question, how-to, number, and address-the-reader. Here are examples from Conductor:

- **Normal:** Ways to Make Drinking Tea More Delightful
- **Question:** What are Ways to Make Drinking Tea More Delightful?
- **How-to:** How to Make Drinking Tea More Delightful
- **Number:** 30 Ways to Make Drinking Tea More Delightful
- **Address-the-reader:** Ways You Need to Make Drinking Tea More Delightful

Conductor found that readers preferred number headlines by a wide margin (36%) followed by address-the-reader (21%). How-to (17%), normal (15%) and question (11%) lagged the top two. The preference for number headlines was even more pronounced among women – 39% versus 32% for males. In addition, the Content Marketing Institute found that odd numbers have a 20% higher click-through rate than headlines with even numbers.

Characteristics of Good Headlines

Depending on the content of its article, the headline could provide news or helpful information, appeal to the reader's self-interest, arouse curiosity, or connect to the reader in a quick and easy way.

- **Provide news or information.** Headlines that teach, explain, or help people begin with the key words how to, how, why, which, who else, wanted, this, because, if, and advice. News headlines begin with introducing, announcing or words that have an announcement quality (finally, presenting, just released, new, now, at last) or have a date in the headline. Readers are always looking for new products, a new way to use an old product, or new improvements in a product.
- **Appeal to the reader's self-interest.** These headlines promise a benefit to the reader – How Women Over 35 Can Look Younger.
- **Arouse curiosity.** Headlines that arouse curiosity lure the reader into reading the article or ad. Words that arouse curiosity include how to, suddenly, now, announcing, introducing, it's here, just arrived, important development, improvements, amazing, sensational, remarkable, revolutionary, startling, miracle, magic, offer, quick, easy, wanted, challenge, advice to, the truth about, compare, bargain, hurry, and last chance.
- **Connect to the reader.** Attract the reader's interest by using the words introducing, announcing, now, at last, finally, how to, why, which, this, new, you, your, who, people, want, easy, simple, money, and free.

To be effective, a headline must be factually correct, easy to understand, attract attention, and set the expectation for the article content. Blogger Jeff Goins demonstrates these principles in his formula for writing headlines:

Number or trigger word + adjective + keyword + promise

“Delivering a complete message means being clear and focused.”

“Conductor found that readers preferred number headlines by a wide margin...”

“To be effective, a headline must be factually correct, easy to understand, attract attention, and set the expectation for the article content.”

Engage Your Readers With... Effective Headlines (cont.)

The number is just that – a number. The trigger word is what, why, how, or when. The adjective modifies the following key word. Jeff’s list of interesting adjectives includes effortless, painstaking, fun, free, incredible, essential, absolute, and strange. The keyword is a concrete noun such as reasons, principles, facts, lessons, ideas, ways, secrets, or tricks. The promise is a valuable reward such as learning a new skill, doing something for the first time, or solving a mystery. Applying the formula yields:

7 Fun Ways You Can Lose Weight

How You Can Effortlessly Sell Your Home in 24 Hours

Here is an alternate formula:

Target key phrase + colon + number or trigger word + promise

Using this formula, the headlines would read:

Weight loss: 7 Fun Ways to Make It Happen

Selling Your Home in 24 Hours: 7 Steps to Success

The TACT Test for Headlines

According to Dr. Merlin Mann, a journalism

professor at Abilene Christian University, all headlines must pass the TACT test:

- **Taste.** Is the headline in good taste? Is any part of it offensive or able to be taken the wrong way? Do any words have double meanings?
- **Attractive.** Does the headline attract the reader’s attention? Can it be improved without sacrificing accuracy? Does it contain any unnecessary words?
- **Clear.** Does the headline communicate clearly? Does it create any confusion or contain any odd words? Is it easy to read? Is it complete?
- **Truth.** Is the headline true and grammatically accurate? Does it mislead the reader? Does it contain exaggeration?

After the Headline: What’s Next?

If the headline is successful, the right people will continue reading for the right reasons. Now the emphasis shifts to the copy itself: a great introduction, well-written body copy, a persuasive ending, and a clear call to action, including a sense of urgency. This is the promise fulfilled by a successful headline.

“If the headline is successful, the right people will continue reading for the right reasons.”

Headlines and Direct Mail Marketing

Another application for headline writing is in direct mail marketing. Writing the text for teaser copy on the outside of the mail piece or for a Johnson Box at the top of a sales letter is much like writing a headline.

Here are six tips for writing effective teaser copy:

- Make sure the teaser relates to the offer. Don’t mislead the customer just to get them to look inside.
- Think benefits with teaser copy. No benefit, no reason for the audience to look inside.

- Urge action. A call to action should always be in a teaser — something like Limited Offer.
- Tie the teaser copy on the outside to what’s on the inside. If you do, the audience will better understand what you are offering.
- Ensure the graphics and copy work well together. Make sure they complement the issue, not confuse it.
- Explain what the customer will gain in words he understands. Speak with the customer rather than at or to them.

“Writing the text for teaser copy on the outside of the mail piece or for a Johnson Box at the top of a sales letter is much like writing a headline.”



TechneGraphics INC
Professional Printing Providers

**Engage Your Readers With...
Effective Headlines**

TechneGraphics INC
Professional Printing Providers

2002 Ford Circle, Suite D
Milford, Ohio 45150

Address Service Requested

513.248.2121

Fax: 513.248.5141

info@techgra.com

tjconnect.com

Do Grammar Rules Apply to Headlines

Yes – an effective headline is grammatically correct and concisely written. Misspellings and bad grammar detract from headlines exactly as they do in body copy. Here are some guidelines for writing headlines:

- 1. Use active voice.** There are two voices in English – active and passive. Active voice, in which the subject of the sentence performs the action, is preferred for headlines because it is clearer and more succinct than passive voice.
- 2. Use present tense.** Tense is the indication of the time at which the event described by the sentence occurred. In headlines, use present tense for immediate past events; past tense for more distant events, and future tense for coming events.
- 3. Use numerals.** Unlike text, numbers are

allowed at the beginning of a headline and do not have to be spelled out if below 10. An exception is the number one.

- 4. Use a comma in place of the word “and”.** In addition to its normal use, a comma may be used in place of and in a headline. Example: GM, Chrysler Open Talks
- 5. Use short, action verbs.** Action verbs describe something a person, animal, or object can do.
- 6. Avoid words that can be read as either a verb or a noun.** Some examples are love, bait, drink, bowl, exit, fly, park, ship.
- 7. Use short words.** Find a short synonym for a long word as long as it doesn't change the meaning. For example, panel or group is better in a headline than committee. And remember that adjectives are unusually not needed.

“Misspellings and bad grammar detract from headlines exactly as they do in body copy.”