

A blue megaphone icon is positioned on the left, with three teal sound waves emanating from its horn. The entire graphic is set against a white circular background, which is itself on a dark blue banner that tapers to the right.

# READ THIS NOW

A concise guide to the art of the headline

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## INTRODUCTION

Whether you are writing titles for blog posts, subject lines for email newsletters, text snippets for social media posts, or headlines for print advertisements, brochures or direct mail, your objective is to get potential customers to stop and pay attention to what you have to say.

You have just a moment to capture someone's attention as you compete with hundreds (or thousands) of marketing messages directed at your prospective customers every day.

Read on to discover how to create headlines that will mean the difference between obscurity and success.

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## THE 50/50 RULE OF HEADLINES

If you have a blog post, article or newsletter that's really important to your business, you should spend just as much time creating your title as you do creating your content.

## KEEP IT SHORT.

One of the casualties of the digital age is the attention span of your reader. They just won't hang around for the punch line of a long headline. Compounding the problem is the fact that most email clients, search engines and social media sites will truncate long titles.

## HOW SHORT?

4-7 words, or a maximum of 50 characters, is the ideal length for someone to read and comprehend your message at a glance from any device. It can be challenging to get your point across in just a few words, but if you can't capture attention with your title you won't be able to do so with the more detailed information in your blog post or newsletter.

## MINIMIZE A BORING DETAIL

With so few words to work with, it is important not to waste even one character on unnecessary information. Phases like: "New blog post" or "News from" are a complete waste of words.

## GET TO THE POINT

Another approach when you are short on space is to go directly to the point. Think of the police detective on the old TV show Dragnet who reminds witnesses to give him "just the facts, ma'am."

This style of headline works well when you have already established a value for your product. Maybe people already know the quality of what you are offering, or have purchased from you before.



## EXAMPLES

- Fresh Melons – 30 Percent Off
- Free SEO E-book
- Schedule Now and Save!



## THE GAIN HEADLINE

How will your reader benefit from spending time with your content? Make it clear. For example, "Increase your open rates by 50% today" is more appealing than "How to increase open rates."

Here are some gain headline examples. Choose any of these, fill in the blanks and you're on your way to engaging titles.

- 
- Where \_\_\_\_\_ Is and How to Get It
  - How to Become \_\_\_\_\_ When You \_\_\_\_\_
  - There's Big \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_
  - You Don't Have to Be (or do) \_\_\_\_\_ to Get \_\_\_\_\_
  - The Lazy Person's Guide to \_\_\_\_\_
  - How to Make People Line Up and Beg to \_\_\_\_\_
- 

## PAIN AVOIDANCE

People want to avoid pain. The drive to avoid an unpleasant outcome is actually stronger than the drive to reach a positive one. That's why these headlines, which essentially promise a way to protect yourself from disaster, work well. Just like gain headlines, these can be a simple fill-in-the-blank format.

- 
- How to Ruin Your \_\_\_\_\_
  - Do You Recognize these Early Warning Signs of \_\_\_\_\_?
  - If You Don't \_\_\_\_\_ Now, You'll Hate Yourself Later
  - The Biggest Lie In [your industry] \_\_\_\_\_
  - X Shocking Mistakes Killing Your \_\_\_\_\_
-

## KEEP IT PERSONAL

No one likes talking to a robot. Think about when you call a company and can't reach an actual person. It's frustrating, right? This goes for email as well.

**Never use “noreply@company.com.” I repeat, never use this email address.**

Not only does it make it look less personable (therefore less likely for your recipient to open it), it also stops people from adding your email to their address book.

Go one step further and make your readers feel special by tailoring subject lines to specific groups of people. Maybe they have responded to an offer in the past, live in a certain geographic area or fall into a defined demographic group. Lead with a problem that is relevant to the reader.

- 
- For People Who Already Own...
  - Winter Accessories Every Bostonian Needs
  - Talking To Aging Parents about Money
  - For Small Business Owners Who...



## EXAMPLES

### BE PERSONAL-

**Use words like “you”, “your”, or “we”**

- What You Need To Know About Your Personal Finances
  - Find out What We Can Do for Your Home Today
  - 7 Ways to Improve Your Morning Routine
-



Plenty of social media expert types are rolling their eyes at this suggestion, but trust me, numbered list blog posts always perform well. People understand exactly what they're getting, and know they'll be getting it in short bites instead of huge text boxes. Are they a cliché? Maybe. But they're clichés that get clicks because these lists answer the question "Why? Why should I read this?".

## NUMBERS

Numbers pique human curiosity. When you use a number in a subject line, people have a hard time resisting the urge to click. People are also time-starved. They want something that's concise, easy to read and provokes thought or learning but doesn't take too much of their time. They think: "Only 3 tips? Or top 10 reasons? I have time to read that".

This can be done for almost any category. Simply fuse a common theme to bring your points together. Then count the number of points. For some reason odd numbers 3, 5 and 7 seem to do really well.

### There are other ways to use numbers:

- 1 Use them to identify a series of promotional messages leading up to a big sale, fundraiser or event.
- 2 Use numbers in a campaign designed to educate, inform or call your customers to action.
- 3 Use a number to show potential customers the versatility of your product.



## EXAMPLES

- Reason #3: Entertainment by Boston Band
- Reason #4: There Will Be Wine
- 6 Out of 10 People Say They Prefer Gold
- 56 percent! Thanks to our Supporters
- 17 Different Outfits From One Scarf



## TOP APPEAL

Like the ordinary numbered list, the top appeal is comprised of a quick list of easily digestible pieces of information. The difference, these subject lines focus on the very top or the very bottom of a category. Sites like BuzzFeed are built on our overwhelming desire to see the top of everything.

### **These subject lines pull you in immediately.**

You want to know the hottest, latest and trendiest. As a result there you are reading about the 25 Worst Dressed Celebrities at the Oscars."



## EXAMPLES

- 
- 7 Must-Haves for Fall
  - 3 End-Of-Year Tax Tips
  - Top 10 Best Beauty Products this Year
  - 3 Deadliest Pests
-



## AN AIR OF MYSTERY

Writing a statement that piques one's curiosity and makes a reader think, "Huh? What could this be about?" is effective. You can use it to make them laugh or inform them after opening, but use it sparingly and make sure to deliver an expected punch – you don't want to be deceptive.



### EXAMPLES

- Headless Body in Topless Bar
- Cocaine Marketing : It Takes More to Get High

The first example from a headline in the NY Post was so outrageous, you just knew the story would be as well. The second one from the Roundpeg blog surprised and even shocked a few people. They wondered if we were seriously talking about selling drugs.

## NEGATIVE PHRASES STAND OUT

Every day, an unimaginable number of blogs are written with titles that include the words improve, common mistakes or tips for success. They all sound nice, helpful and boring. Readers skip these nice, helpful articles to check out the "bad" ones.



### EXAMPLES

- How to Ruin Your Carpet
- Why People Hate Your Website.

## LEAD WITH ACTION

Want a title that commands attention? Start the title with an action verb. It is implied that you are speaking directly to the reader, calling them to action.



### EXAMPLES

- Read this Now!
- Look at Me When I Talk to You





A news headline is pretty self-explanatory, as long as the news itself is actually, well, news. A product announcement, an improved version, or even a content scoop can be the basis of a compelling news headline. Think "Introducing Flickr 2.0" or "Exclusive Interview With Steve Jobs".

## URGENT NEWS

Stop readers in their tracks. Using headlines like "Today Only" or "24-Hour Giveaway" will encourage your reader to act now, instead of putting it off until later - when there's a chance they may forget.

## SCARCITY TACTICS

Activate a reader's FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). No one likes to miss out on something they want or care about, so try using this with your next subject line. For example, I got an email the other day for something I'd been looking at, but I didn't open it soon enough and the offer had expired. I was upset for missing out, but I'd completely bypassed the subject line because it wasn't apparent that the offer was urgent or that it would expire.

If you're offering something that is limited, spell this out in your subject line. Dates work really well to grab attention too.

## USE WITH CAUTION

Don't go to the "urgency well" all the time. Titles like "Today Only" or "By Close of Business" will have more impact if the offer really is just for that day.



## EXAMPLES

- Only 1 Day Left!
- Limited Time Offer – Don't Miss Out!
- Only 12 Seats Left – Get Your Ticket Before Friday
- You Won't Believe What We Have In Store For You



To be honest, I only half-listened to my 12th grade English teacher as he talked on and on about literary techniques. I was pretty sure I was never going to find a use for onomatopoeias, allusions, alliterations or chunking. But I was wrong.

In the ongoing quest to find a way to break through the clutter on social media or craft a subject line that is sure to get my next email opened, I often find myself turning to one of these literary techniques. So, if it has been a few years since English class, here is a quick refresher

## ONOMATOPOEIA

CRASH, BOOM, POW! These words, which describe sounds, capture attention because they generate an auditory sound or memory in a readers' head. They usually convey a sense of action and pair well with an exclamation point.



### EXAMPLES

- Splish, Splash! Rain Gear on Sale
- Sputter, Sputter, Pop - Time to tune up your engine!

Use this style sparingly or you will look as if you are shouting all the time. Think about it this way: a loud crash will make you turn your head, but a constant drum beat becomes background noise, so reserve this style for big impact events, stories and updates.

## ALLUSIONS

If you are up on pop culture, allusions are perhaps one of the easiest to write fun, quirky headlines. Think about lyrics from popular songs, or commercial catch phrases that can relate to your industry.



### EXAMPLES

- Who Let The Dogs Out? We Did! (pet store)
- We Came In With A Wrecking Ball (construction company)

The allusions only work if your audience gets the pop culture reference, so be careful to use references that your audience will recognize. If you are targeting seniors, they might recognize "Where's the Beef?" but a millennial probably won't get the joke. Conversely, Kanye's "Imma Let You Finish" would be a great attention-grabber for a clothing store targeting teens, but would simply look like a typo to older customers.

## ALLITERATION

With this technique, you grab attention with words that all start with the same letter. Using the same initial letter creates a memorable rhythm, which catches attention because it is more interesting than the vast majority of what people see in their inbox each day.

It takes a little more flexing of the brain muscles and the help of a thesaurus to come up with synonyms, but it can be really fun.

Start the process with a simple headline like: "Winter Soup Recipes". Pick one of the words as your starting point and rewrite the headline with words that all start with the same letter.



### EXAMPLES

- Wonderful Winter Warmers (or just Winter Warmers)
- Sensational Seasonal Soups (or Savory Soup Suppers)
- Bountiful Bisque and Bouillon

## CHUNKING

At some point in our lives we learned to "chunk things together" to help us remember them. It is actually a psychological concept for grouping things together for better and quicker memory absorption. Think about a recent trip to the grocery store. If you just needed a few items you might have found yourself repeating, milk, eggs and bread in your head a few times to remember to buy these items.

You can use the technique in two ways. The first is to put things that belong together in the title. For example, a power company warning about service interruptions caused by winter storms might use something like: "Severe Storms, Frozen Pipes and Power Outages Ahead".

Another strategy is to bring in something that doesn't really fit. When one piece seems out of place it will intrigue the reader.

### "Chocolate, Wine, and Santa"

While chocolate and wine go together, Santa does seem a bit out of place. Curious readers will try to figure out how he fits.



A question headline must do more than simply ask a question, it must be a question the reader can empathize with or would like to see answered. Aim for the reader's curiosity and introspection.

When they're thinking about attainment in their own lives, you can appear in their inbox or blog roll with some self-improvement advice, and hook them with your subject line and content. Make sure you really deliver on the question you're asking. Then, wash, rinse and repeat.

**Asking a question in your subject line also draws readers in.  
Engage with them by asking a question.**



## EXAMPLES

- Are You Making These SEO Mistakes?
- Do You Know What Your Website Is Doing Wrong?
- How Can We Help Your Business Grow?
- Do You Feel Prepared For This Winter?
- Would You Know What to Do if You Saw This?

## GOT YOUR TITLE? GET READY FOR CONTENT

Remember the 50/50 rule. A good copywriter will tell you that you should spend as much time on your title as your copy. Hopefully these tips can help you streamline your title development techniques.



**For help developing the rest of your content, check out our Blog Basics Workbook.**