

Email Subject Line Formulas

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Like templates, formulas should be used to guide your copywriting, not as a crutch.

They give you a strong starting-off-point, and they can help you turn your good subject line into a great one. Just be sure to tailor for your audience, use your voice, stand out in the inbox... and avoid using formulas word for word. Because people do, in fact, notice the repetitive stuff. And that ain't good for anyone.

The Report Formula

New {agency/institute} approved {process/device} + {benefit}

Innovative {system/process/product} + {benefit}

Introducing {technique/system/process} + {benefit or mystery}

Introducing the Picasso: How to design if you suck at design

The Data Formula

I'd personally recommend adding a "why" or "how" to the front of most of these or a "here's why" to the end of them. Alone, they feel like TLDRs, which doesn't necessarily compel the open.

{Percentage} + {unexpected thing}

{Known entity} is rated as {rating} for {rated thing}

{Trendy thing} {percentage change}

Why 19% of Harvard graduates can't find work

USA is rated the worst of 20 countries on 14 eco points

Snapchat loses 13% of its users overnight – here's why

The How-To Formula

{Attention-grabber}: how to {avoid or get attention-grabbing thing}

How {world-class example or average joe} {does amazing thing}

How to {do amazing thing}

How to {do amazing thing} without {unpleasant thing}

Nickelback is back? How to avoid waking up with their song in your head

How Elon Musk sleeps (Nikola Tesla would be proud)

The Open Loop Formula

This formula creates pure click bait. The idea is that you give away just enough to make people want to open, and then – importantly – you give them what they were seeking in the email body itself.

So rather than write a “TLDR” or summary-style subject line (which is generally crap for emails except when it’s a subject line for a promotion or it touches on scarcity and/or urgency), you’d give a fraction of the story, like any of these subject line formulas will do for you:

I messed up

{Person or pronoun} said it was the {right / wrong / scary} thing to do

FYI... You should be {doing / seeing / reading} this

FYI... You shouldn't waste another second {doing / seeing / reading} this

{High-value something} for you

The {superlative} thing to happen to {industry} since...

In case you haven't heard

Let me emphasize: the email itself needs to close the loop.

You can then open a new loop with the body of your email, compelling the reader to click to close the loop or bringing the reader back tomorrow to read your loop-closing follow-up email. Whatever you do, close the loop within a reasonable amount of time.

Seth Godin made me do it

FWIW... you should be on SnapChat, too

Here's some CEO-worthy report fodder for you

In case you haven't heard

In case you haven't heard, Seth Godin made me

The What-in-Two-Parts Formula

This subject line formula is explained here. You can swap the industry for a role, or you could get creative and – if your CRM is good – populate the blank field with the person’s name, their role or the name of their business.

What {industry or name or role} needs to {verb}

What Lance needs to do better

What Copy Hackers needs to remember

What cat owners need to think about

What copywriters need to know

The Announcement Formula

As they said on Mad Men all the time, the word “new” is a powerful thing. That’s what this subject line is all about. Use it like so:

Introducing {Name}

Introducing {Name}: {short value prop}

New! {Name}

New! {Benefit of new thing without mention of name}

Now open: {registration}

Campaign Monitor found that adding the word “introducing” to a subject line increases opens by an average of 9.45%. And adding the word “new” to it increases opens by 3.26%.

Introducing Airstory

Introducing Airstory: how modern teams write together

New! Airstory

New! How modern teams write together

The Empty Suitcase Formula

An “empty suitcase” is what we call it when you use the word “this” without a noun to follow it. So, like, you might find yourself writing, “Tune into this to hear me drone on”, and you’d be using an empty suitcase because we don’t know what “this” is.

In the world of writing, this is a no-no. (See that? I used one there.)

In the world of subject line copywriting, this is a yes-yes.

The beauty of the empty suitcase is that, like the open loop formula, it forces your subscriber to click to get the whole story. I know, I know: forcing isn’t good. Fine, then. It compels. Same difference. Any way you slice it, the empty suitcase subject line is great for open rates.

{Name}, this is for you

This is how you {do desirable or undesirable thing}

I learned this from watching _____

I {past-tense verb} this. The world changed.

I eliminated an ingredient I'd used my whole life. The world changed.

Lance, this is for you

This is how you sell your first screenplay

I learned this from watching a panda push a zookeeper into the water

The Inquiry Formula

There's power in that little question mark! Or better: Is there power in that little question mark?

Who / What / When / Where / Why / How {question}?

{Brief statement}?

What were you thinking?

Where have all the good people gone?

Nuts?

The Quote Formula

The idea with the endorsement formula is that you either reference an authority or use quotes in your email subject line. So formulas like:

“{Quote}” by {author}

“{Quote}” – know who said that?

“{Quote}” – agree?

{Author} said this about {audience interest}

{Event / Group Name}: “{Quote}”

“{Unattributed quote}”

The quotes are obvious – but the “unattributed quote” option is particularly useful. Quotation marks draw the eye. So if you can put an important marketing message in “quotes”, you may get more eyes on your subject line. Definitely worth testing.

Ramit Sethi recently used this subject line formula for 3 emails in a row in his sales sequence:

“I don't even have an idea for a business”

4 links: Killing “sacred cows”

“I don't have time to start a business”

The Punctuator Formula

For your subject line to earn an open, it needs to get noticed in an inbox. To do that, we use punctuation marks. Truly. That's what punctuation is for in subject lines: to get eyes on the line.

I'm not going to list out all the ways you can use punctuation to your advantage with this formula, but the goal is twofold:

1. To visually break up the line of copy that is your subject line
2. To visually distinguish your subject line from that of all the others

Here are examples from businesses you probably know:

Brian Dean

How to get higher rankings in 2015 (without any new content)

How I email busy people (and get responses)

I just opened enrollment for SEO That Works (but it closes Friday)

Groupon

You + These Top Deals = Love?

Solve This Puzzle: D E A _ S

Psst... Slimming Secrets Inside

Tim Grahl

Argh! I need help!

#1 New York Times bestseller... used this tool to do it

This is it... Conquer your fear in 2015

The Shorty Formula

It's a one, two or three-word subject line. It stands out beautifully among all the long subject lines in an inbox. Nathan Barry uses this formula a lot with subject lines like these:

Unsolicited advice

60 minutes

Authority

Tomorrow?

Quick question

The {First name} < > {First name} Formula

The ultimate formula for introducing people to one another and/or introducing people to your product or service! Works like the rather common {First name}, meet {First name}, which is also good.

Although this subject line is intended for one person connecting two people, there's no reason you couldn't test it as a subject line for your marketing emails. For example, if you were to host a webinar with a special guest like Unbounce's Georgiana Laudi, you might write:

{First name} < > Georgiana

It feels extremely personal – so use sparingly. Because you do not wanna be crying wolf.

And as a nice li'l bonus, here are a few variations on this introduction subject line.

Lance < > Elon

Lance + Elon = free beer

Lance < > Tesla Driving Team

Lance < > Chief Designer of Tesla