

# 10 questions to help you write better headlines

By Matt Thompson • August 1, 2011

If you need any proof about the power of headlines, consider this: what do you imagine drew the majority of people to this post? Chances are that you and others made the decision to click here after coming across the headline. So I'm not going to dwell on why headlines are important.

Instead, I want to give you a checklist, a quick heuristic diagnostic you can refer to anytime you want to make your headlines sing. Print out the list if you'd like, put it by your desk. But I recommend putting every headline you write through this gamut of questions until they become second nature.

## 1. Is the headline accurate?

I'm surprised how often I and others trip over this most basic of questions: Does the headline accurately convey the content of the material? The acts of writing a headline and writing a story often happen separately, and it's easy for factual discrepancies to creep in between those two processes.

One of the reporters I work with is Leslie Berestein-Rojas, who covers immigration-related issues on her site Multi-American. When the Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Jose Antonio Vargas revealed in a New York Times Magazine essay that he's an undocumented immigrant, Berestein-Rojas wrote about it as a high-profile case in an ongoing movement among the undocumented to reveal their immigration status. In her piece, she mentioned another Pulitzer winner, Ruben Vives, whose status as undocumented was revealed earlier this year.

When I suggested the headline “Why Pulitzer winners are coming out as undocumented,” Berestein-Rojas pointed out that Vives had in fact been outed by a colleague at the Los Angeles Times, who had asked Vives for permission before publicizing his status. So a headline implying that Vives had revealed his own status would have been wrong. We went with “Why a Pulitzer winner is coming out as undocumented” instead.

## **2. Does it work out of context?**

On the Web, most people who encounter your headline probably won’t have any context for it. Imagine your headline not as it looks above your article, but as it looks on the home page of an unrelated site, in someone’s Twitter or Facebook streams, in a search result. Would someone unfamiliar with your site get what the story’s about?

Pay special attention to entities and acronyms. If folks don’t know you cover immigration, they may not get that “ICE” refers to “Immigration and Customs Enforcement.”

## **3. How compelling a promise does it make?**

Think of your headline as an emissary for your post, written to travel around the Internet, selling the material to potential readers. Imagine those readers asking your headline, “What will this story do for me?”

There’s a genre of headline I like to call “Undergrad Essay.” It usually includes lots of broad conceptual nouns, no verb, and a colon. I cringe whenever I come across the likes of “Friday Night Lights and Sunday morning sermons: Faith, ritual and belonging in Dillon, Texas.” To me, that promises vague reflection and minimal insight. Why not “How Friday Night Lights treats football like church”? That headline is a clear articulation of a specific argument, giving me a good sense of what I’ll get from reading the post.

## **4. How easy is it to parse?**

Consider the cognitive load your headline places on users. The more complex the headline, the more difficult it will be for users to parse, the more likely they are to overlook it. Try to keep your headlines straightforward and unadorned. Use concise and familiar words, if possible.

The multi-part headline laden with 10 words is a killer. Right now, with the debt ceiling talks in the news, I’m seeing a lot of these: “Legislators, loopholes and liabilities: Why debt negotiations have become the Schylla and Charybdis of U.S. politics.” (If you find yourself writing a colon in

your headline, look critically at what comes before it. Does that little preamble really make the headline better?) It's a bit easier for users to swallow something like "Why our politicians can't reach a deal on the debt."

## **5. Could it benefit from a number?**

As much as writers chafe against the much-derided "listicle," the fact remains that we love numbers in headlines. Numbered lists promise not just a lump of information, but a specific series of insights. In some cases, they even connote hierarchy. And hey, it worked on you with this article, didn't it?

Writing a post as a numbered list can often help make it more compelling when the elements are difficult to cohere in a more straightforward way. Writing an analysis that wraps up the positive and negative portents for the President's re-election campaign? You could take a cue from Marc Ambinder and write "Obama in 2012: Five advantages (and five disadvantages)."

## **6. Are all the words necessary?**

"Omit needless words," said Strunk and White. If you apply that guideline to only one aspect of your writing, let that be headlines. In several of its potential destinations -- Google, Twitter, Facebook, etc. -- a headline that's too long will have to be truncated to fit. Plus, shorter headlines are typically easier to parse.

In retrospect, we could easily have condensed the headline by changing from progressive to past tense in Berestein-Rojas' post about Jose Antonio Vargas, referenced above. "Why a Pulitzer winner came out as undocumented" is just as good, and slightly tighter.

## **7. Does it obey the Proper Noun Rule?**

"Name the known, omit the obscure." If the subject of your post is well-known to the audience you care about, feel free to include the subject's name in the headline. But an unfamiliar name might encourage many users to skip over the item.

There's no use in writing a post about Sarah Palin called "The many travails of an Alaskan ex-governor." At the same time, unless you write for a trade publication about military infrastructure, it's probably best to keep the name of that Assistant Deputy Under Secretary in the body of your story.

Pro tip: Sometimes names might be unfamiliar to many users, but still a big draw for a fraction of your audience, and you might be tempted to keep them in the headline for the sake of search engine optimization. If you use a CMS such as WordPress, you might be able to alter the permalink for your post to add the name to it. This will make the name prominent for search engines, but less prominent for users.

## **8. Would it work better as an explanatory headline?**

Gawker Media CEO Nick Denton said it this way: “When remotely possible, turn news into explanation.” If you’ve got a scoop -- that, is breaking news of compelling interest -- a news headline works well. But in most other scenarios, an explanatory headline might trump a straightforward “here’s what happened” headline. Even when reporting breaking news, if it’s already widely reported, take an explanatory approach in the headline.

As I write, for example, news sites are filled with headlines reporting that Republican and Democratic leaders have offered up dueling deals for handling the nation’s debt. Perusing Google News, the news headlines all run together as some spin on “Boehner, Reid unveil rival debt plans.” At the moment, a headline such as “How Boehner and Reid’s rival debt plans compare” could cut through the clutter.

## **9. Does it focus on events or implications?**

As well as explaining the news, addressing the implications of the news can also help a post stand out in a crowded environment. Try focusing not on what’s happened, but on what it means. If we don’t yet know this, try making the headline interrogative; ask what the implications are. (“Will Congress’ rival debt plans help or hurt chances of a deal?”)

That leads me to a slight side note about interrogative headlines: Do they work? I’ve found they do. As I look at the leading headlines on the Argo Network’s Chartbeat account this very moment, the top item is a question -- “For at-risk youth, is learning digital media a luxury?” It’s followed closely by “What killed Google Health? And what does its untimely demise mean?” and “What is the California Dream Act?” So questions certainly aren’t an impediment to a headline catching on. Most of those could also have been written as declaratives: “What killed Google Health, and what its death means”; “What’s in the California Dream Act”; etc. But I don’t have any evidence that the question hurts or helps the post’s appeal.

But remember that bit about your headline making a compelling promise? The implicit consequence is that you have to deliver on your promise. So if you ask a question in the headline, your post should either answer the question or frame and encapsulate it in a

compelling way.

## 10. Could it benefit from one of these 10 words?

When I'm stuck on a headline, I often refer back to this list of words: Top, Why, How, Will, New, Secret, Future, Your, Best, Worst.

Each of them has different merits. Many of them reinforce the advice I offer above. "Why" and "how," for example, help to frame the headline as explanation ("when" and "what" also work well for this). "Top," "best" and "worst" are natural partners with a numbered headline. Some of them tap into universal desires: We all want access to "secret" knowledge, and we all want to know the "future." Words like "your" help me to reframe wonky, technical headlines around what they might mean to the user.

With that, I'm going to go back and retitle this post: "The 10 secrets that will lead to top headline success in your future." Or not.

*For additional resources, check out News University's [SEO and Online Headlines Training package](#).*

***Print and clip:*** *Quicklist of 10 questions to ask while writing a headline:*

1. Is the headline accurate?
2. Does it work out of context?
3. How compelling a promise does it make?
4. How easy is it to parse?
5. Could it benefit from a number?
6. Are all the words necessary?
7. Does it obey the Proper Noun Rule?
8. Would it work better as an explanatory headline?
9. Does it focus on events or implications?
10. Could it benefit from one of these 10 words? Top, Why, How, Will, New, Secret, Future, Your, Best, Worst.

### AUTHOR INFORMATION

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I serve as an Editorial Product Manager at NPR, where I work with member stations to develop niche

websites. Before coming to NPR, I worked with the Knight Foundation and the Reynolds Journalism Institute. As deputy editor of [StarTribune.com](http://StarTribune.com), I launched the award-winning, social, arts-and-entertainment site [Vita.mn](http://Vita.mn). I also managed the creation of the Star Tribune's politics website [Politically Connected](http://PoliticallyConnected), the development of an internal taxonomy, and other editorial projects related to community interaction and technology. Outside the Star Tribune, I'm probably best-known for being the voice and co-creator of [EPIC 2014](http://EPIC2014), an alternative history of the media, set in the future. Previously, I was the [Fresno Bee](http://FresnoBee)'s first online reporter/producer, and the [Naughton Fellow for Reporting and Writing](http://NaughtonFellow) at the Poynter Institute. I currently sit on Poynter's National Advisory Board. You can find me and Robin (EPIC's other co-creator) blogging at [Snarkmarket](http://Snarkmarket). **My best Snarkmarket posts on journalism:**[The Attention Deficit: The Need for Timeless Journalism](http://TheAttentionDeficit) (8/07)[The Press' New Paradigm](http://ThePressNewParadigm) (6/06)[When Vox Populi Attacks](http://WhenVoxPopuliAttacks) (1/06)[Three Rants on Rick](http://ThreeRantsonRick), parts I & II, [part III](http://partIII) (11/05)[The Era of Slow News](http://TheEraofSlowNews) (7/05)**Websites you should really check out:**[We Feel Fine](http://WeFeelFine)[Journerdism](http://Journerdism)[PopURLs](http://PopURLs)

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