

# 9

# Including Useful Headings

Let's move from the headline at the top of your content to the headings inside the content. Headings – short and in bold or **color** – divide your web content on a single topic into manageable pieces.

In a typical conversation, the people who are talking to each other take turns. Headings – especially question headings – are your site visitors' turns in the conversation.

## Good headings help readers in many ways

Well-written headings in well-organized content help readers

- scan to get the gist
- find just the section they need
- follow the flow of your story
- get a quick “bite” of context for each section
- manage the amount they deal with at one time

## Thinking about headings also helps authors

Headings form an outline of what you are going to write. Planning the headings is a way of analyzing the information you have, grouping it well, and putting it in an order that is logical for your site visitors.

**SEO |**

Headings with keywords your site visitors are using in their searches help your SEO.

**AAA  
ACCESS**

People who listen want to scan just as sighted people do. They can have their assistive software jump from heading to heading – but only if the headings are properly tagged.



Compare Figures 9-1 and 9-2. Which version of the information on physical exercise would you be more likely to read and use?

For both SEO and accessibility, you must tag headings properly: <H1>headline text</H1>, <H2>heading text</H2>, and so on. Bigger, bolder text that is not tagged won't be seen as a heading by either search engines or accessibility software.

## Physical Exercise

The hardest part of an exercise routine is getting started. Once you've established a regular pattern of exercise, you'll find yourself following it. So, how do you get started? Well, first of all, consult your doctor. Your doctor can recommend the specific kinds of exercise for your own individual needs. Generally, however, these guidelines should get you going.

First of all, exercise will only become a habit if it's fun! Pick something you will enjoy doing. If you like being with a group of people, try a team sport like basketball or soccer. You don't have to be a super athlete. Anyone can exercise. Social activities like dancing and mall-walking are also good. If you're more of a loner, try bicycling or swimming.

Don't kid yourself. Be honest about what you realistically think you can do. If you have always hated to climb stairs, step aerobics probably isn't for you. Maybe a walk around the neighborhood would be more pleasant. Many people today are walking toward fitness.

Consider your current state of physical fitness. If you haven't exercised in years, you'll definitely want to start with some modest activities. As you get adjusted, you can increase your activity.

Consider your schedule. Are you a morning person? Then plan to exercise in the morning. If you're addicted to your snooze button, plan to exercise in the evening. Start with just a small block of time, maybe fifteen minutes. As you get into your routine, you probably won't mind increasing to twenty, and then thirty, minutes. In order to be effective, you'll need to repeat your exercise routine 3 or 4 times per week.

Will you exercise at home or at a fitness center? Selecting a fitness center can be a challenge, but you may find the community support motivational. Will you need any special equipment? The variety of exercise equipment available for purchase today can be overwhelming. Be sure to buy the proper equipment.

Figure 9-1 The original web text with no headings

## Physical Exercise: Getting Started

The hardest part of an exercise routine is getting started. Once you've established a regular pattern of exercise, you'll find yourself following it.

Use these tips to start exercising regularly.

**Consult your doctor**

First, talk to your doctor. Your doctor can recommend specific [kinds of physical exercise](#) for your own individual needs.

Also, consider these guidelines. They should get you going.

**Pick exercise you will enjoy doing**

Exercise will only become a habit if it's fun! If you like being with a group of people, try a team sport like basketball or soccer. You don't have to be a super athlete. Anyone can exercise. Social activities like dancing and mall-walking are also good. If you're more of a loner, try bicycling or swimming.

**Be honest about what physical exercise you can do**

Don't kid yourself. If you have always hated to climb stairs, step aerobics probably isn't for you. Maybe a walk around the neighborhood would be more pleasant. Many people today are walking toward fitness.

**Consider your current state of physical fitness**

If you haven't exercised in years, you'll definitely want to start with some modest activities. As you get adjusted, you can increase your activity.

**Consider your schedule**

Are you a morning person? Then plan to exercise in the morning. If you're addicted to your snooze button, plan to exercise in the evening. Start with just a small block of time, maybe fifteen minutes. As you get into your routine, you probably won't mind increasing to twenty, and then thirty, minutes. In order to be effective, you'll need to repeat your exercise routine 3 or 4 times per week.

**Decide where to exercise**

Will you exercise at home or at a fitness center? [Selecting a fitness center](#) can be a challenge, but you may find the community support motivational. Will you need any special equipment? [The variety of exercise equipment](#) available for purchase today can be overwhelming. Be sure to buy the proper equipment.

Figure 9-2 My suggested revision with headings

Both versions are conversational. They have the same words and the same organization. The difference is only in whether you *show* the organization, break up the text, and make the key messages stand out.

## Eleven guidelines for writing useful headings

These 11 guidelines will help you help your site visitors:

1. Don't slap headings into old content.
2. Start by outlining.

3. Choose a good heading style: questions, statements, verb phrases.
4. Use nouns and noun phrases sparingly.
5. Put your site visitors' words in the headings.
6. Exploit the power of parallelism.
7. Use only a few levels of headings.
8. Distinguish headings from text.
9. Make each level of heading clear.
10. Help people jump to content within a web page.
11. Evaluate! Read the headings.

## 1. Don't slap headings into old content

Going through existing content and putting in a heading every so often does not produce good information. Poorly written, arbitrary headings may confuse your site visitors instead of helping them.

### Put headings into old content as a *first* step

To become familiar with the content you have, go through it, trying to write a heading for each paragraph. That can be a useful *first* step in revising.

- If you find it difficult to write a heading for a section of text, it probably means the section is not clear or covers too many points all jumbled together. Clarify the content. Break it into smaller sections.
- If you find yourself writing the same heading over different sections of content, it probably means the material is not well organized. Reorganize it to be logical for your site visitors.

Thanks to Caroline Jarrett for teaching me this technique of putting headings into old content as a *first* step in revision. But as Caroline says, “Don’t stop there.”

Next, list the headings as if they were a table of contents. Do they make a good outline? Do they make sense as a whole? Do they flow? Is this what site visitors want to know? Are these the key messages you should be giving? If not, step back and revise, or even start with a new outline.

## 2. Start by outlining

An outline is just your headings in order. Don’t stress about using Roman numerals, letters, or an elaborate numbering scheme. If you just put down the headings you are going to use in the order you are going to use them, without any text under them, you have an outline.

If you use more than one level, indent a bit for the second level of your outline. You'll see the pattern you are creating.

Figure 9-3 shows the outline for the web content in Case Study 7-1 about the International Aviation Art Contest.

**International Aviation Art Contest**

**Who can enter?**

**Deadline: When is the entry due?**

**Prizes: What can I win?**

- State prizes**
- National prizes**
- International prizes**

**Media: What types of art are acceptable?**

**What will the judges look for?**

**Who must certify that the child made the poster?**

**Where do we send the poster?**

Figure 9-3 The outline for a web topic

I'm now adding to the advice that I gave in Chapter 7, Checklist 7-1. There, I suggested starting by writing the questions that people ask and then putting those questions into an order that will make sense to your site visitors. What do you then do with the questions you've listed?

- Sometimes, you'll keep those questions as your outline, and, therefore, your headings.
- Sometimes, you'll decide that questions aren't the best headings for your material. You may turn the questions into statements (key messages).
- If you find you have all "How do I...?" questions, turn them into action phrases with verbs ("Do x" or "Doing x").
- And sometimes, if you are just labeling parts, it's okay to use nouns as headings.

Let's explore when, why, and how to use each of these types of headings: questions, statements, verbs, nouns.

### 3. Choose a good heading style: Questions, statements, verb phrases

Your three main choices for headings are questions, statements, or verb phrases (calls to action).

#### Questions as headings

When you write questions as headings, you play out both sides of the conversation. You put the site visitor on the page with you – the site visitor asks the question; you answer it.

As I said in Chapter 1, I'm not suggesting that you make your entire site one big section of frequently asked questions (FAQs). Site visitors might never find their specific question. I am suggesting questions and answers (Q&A) as an appropriate writing style for the main content *on each specific topic*.

Questions make very useful headings in all these different types of web content:

- articles
- blogs
- explanations
- handbooks
- introductions to manuals
- policies
- press releases
- regulations
- troubleshooting information

Using Q&A can draw people into a web page. For example, seeing the question, "Why immunize?" on the web site of the U.S. Centers for

If your site has both a main page of content on a topic and a separate page of FAQs on the same topic, think about whether you really need both.

Did the team have to write the FAQ page because the content on the main page wasn't satisfying site visitors' conversations? If so, you probably don't need both.

But don't get rid of the FAQs! Take away the other page. Use or rewrite the FAQ page as the *main page of content* on that topic and don't call it FAQs.

Disease Control and Prevention may draw parents into that article.  
(Figure 9-4).

If parents are asking "Why immunize my child?", this short headline works well.

But if "immunize" is not the word parents use, a better question headline might be, "Should my child get vaccines?"

Statements can be excellent headings. However, this statement doesn't answer "Why immunize?" A better statement might be, "Without vaccinations, rare diseases will come back"

Verbs – calls to action – can also be excellent headings. But headings should be parallel – same structure. This could be, "We must keep vaccinating until the disease is totally gone."

An excellent heading, capturing the key message in one line

Although parallelism is important, interrupting the statements with this question works well. The parents take a turn in the conversation, asking this question – perhaps with an emphasis on "we."

The last heading sums up the whole answer to "Why immunize?" Personal pronouns in a short, strong key message statement make an excellent heading.

**Immunization: Why is it Important?**

Both parents and providers seek information about why immunizing is so important to the individual, community, and worldwide.

- **Why Immunize?**
- **How Vaccines Prevent Diseases**

**Why Immunize?**

**For Parents**

**At a glance:**

Why immunize our children? Sometimes we are confused by the messages in the media. First we are assured that, thanks to vaccines, some diseases are almost gone from the U.S. But we are also warned to immunize our children, ourselves as adults, and the elderly.

**Diseases are becoming rare due to vaccinations.**

It's true, some diseases (like polio and diphtheria) are becoming very rare in the U.S. Of course, they are becoming rare largely because we have been vaccinating against them. But it is still reasonable to ask whether it's really worthwhile to keep vaccinating.

It's much like bailing out a boat with a slow leak. When we started bailing, the boat was filled with water. But we have been bailing fast and hard, and now it is almost dry. We could say, "Good. The boat is dry now, so we can throw away the bucket and relax." But the leak hasn't stopped. Before long we'd notice a little water seeping in, and soon it might be back up to the same level as when we started.

**Keep immunizing until disease is eliminated.**

Unless we can "stop the leak" (eliminate the disease), it is important to keep immunizing. Even if there are only a few cases of disease today, if we take away the protection given by vaccination, more and more people will be infected and will spread disease to others. Soon we will undo the progress we have made over the years.

**Japan reduced pertussis vaccinations, and an epidemic occurred.**

In 1974, Japan had a successful pertussis (whooping cough) vaccination program, with nearly 80% of Japanese children vaccinated. That year only 393 cases of pertussis were reported in the entire country, and there were no deaths from pertussis. But then rumors began to spread that pertussis vaccination was no longer needed and that the vaccine was not safe, and by 1976 only 10% of infants were getting vaccinated. In 1979 Japan suffered a major pertussis epidemic, with more than 13,000 cases of whooping cough and 41 deaths. In 1981 the government began vaccinating with acellular pertussis vaccine, and the number of pertussis cases dropped again.

**What if we stopped vaccinating?**

So what would happen if we stopped vaccinating here? Diseases that are almost unknown would stage a comeback. Before long we would see epidemics of diseases that are nearly under control today. More children would get sick and more would die.

**We vaccinate to protect our future.**

We don't vaccinate just to protect our children. We also vaccinate to protect our grandchildren and their grandchildren. With one disease, smallpox, we "stopped the leak" in the boat by eradicating the disease. Our children don't have to get smallpox shots any more because the disease no longer exists. If we keep vaccinating now, parents in the future may be able to trust that diseases like polio and meningitis won't infect, cripple, or kill children. Vaccinations are one of the best ways to put an end to the serious effects of certain diseases.

**End question headings**  
with a question mark. But you can leave the period off other types of headings. The bold and space serve the purpose.

The analogy to bailing out a leaking boat makes great pictures with words.

**Figure 9-4** This web topic about vaccinations has some good headings and some that we might improve.

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

When writing questions as headings, consider these four points:

- Answer your site visitors' questions.
- Write from your site visitors' point of view.
- Keep the questions short.
- Consider starting with a keyword.

## Answer your site visitors' questions

Web writers sometimes just put their internally focused information into Q&A style. That doesn't satisfy site visitors' conversations. To write successful Q&A, you must understand your site visitors and what *they* want to know.

To gather your site visitors' questions in their words, use all the ways we talked about in Chapter 2.

**Case Study 9-1** shows you how one group changed from internally focused questions to answering what site visitors really want to know.

### Case Study 9-1

### Answering your site visitors' questions

If you want to complain about a bank in the United States, you might get to the web site of the federal Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC). They regulate *nationally chartered* U.S. banks and federal savings associations.

However, they are not the right place to go if your complaint is about another type of financial institution, such as a credit union or state-regulated bank. Few people know if their bank is nationally chartered or state regulated.

In the first edition of *Letting Go of the Words*, I showed the OCC page as it was then:

In the first edition, I asked questions like these about this page:



How well does this meet the needs of the site visitors it is for? Think about the mental state of people who are upset enough to complain to the government about a bank. Is their first question

The screenshot shows the OCC website's consumer complaints page. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links like 'Search Tips', 'Subject Index', 'Site Map', 'Directory', and 'Contact the OCC'. Below that, a main heading reads 'ENSURING A SAFE AND SOUND NATIONAL BANKING SYSTEM FOR ALL AMERICANS'. A sidebar on the left contains a list of links such as 'Home', 'What's New', 'About the OCC', 'Banker Education', 'Careers at the OCC', 'Community Affairs', 'Corporate Applications', 'CRA Information', 'Consumer Complaints and Assistance', 'Mission Statement', 'OCC Consumer Protection News', 'Customer Assistance Brochure (PDF)', 'Ombudsman Report (PDF)', 'Information Quality (Section 515) (PDF)', 'Anti-Fraud Resources', 'Counterfeit Reporting Form (PDF)', and 'What is the OCC?'.

**Consumer Complaints and Assistance**

The main content area starts with a paragraph about the Customer Assistance Group ready to help customers. It includes a phone number: **1-800-613-6743**. Below this, there's another paragraph about finding Q&A useful for problems, followed by a section of links for navigating the page: [What is the OCC?](#), [What is a national bank?](#), [What Is an Operating Subsidiary of a National Bank?](#), [The OCC Customer Assistance Group \(CAG\)](#), [The OCC's Complaint Process](#), [Contacting a Customer Assistance Specialist](#), [Filing a Formal Complaint](#), and [When you need other help](#).

The first paragraph is key information, but many people will skip over it and go directly to the links.

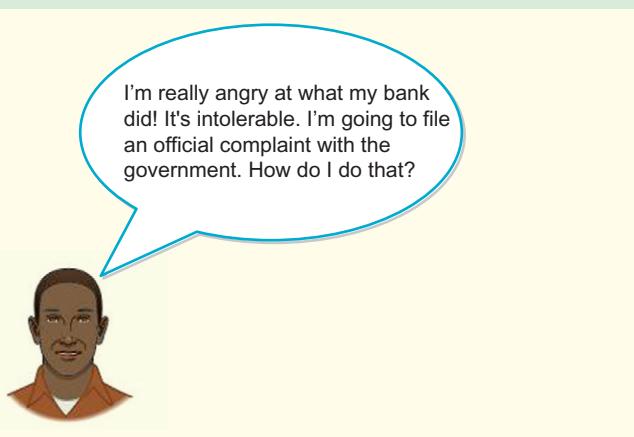
If they notice the phone number, they may call when it is the wrong place to complain.

The second and third paragraphs add no useful information.

Do site visitors ask "What is the OCC?"

The web page in 2006 with my comments from the first edition of *Letting Go of the Words*

"What is the OCC?" Would they click on "What is a national bank?" when they don't yet know it is a question that is important for their problem?



To their credit, the web team at the OCC came up with a great new solution to the problem that I raised. They created a site just for consumers, called [helpwithmybank.gov](http://helpwithmybank.gov). Here's their new page:

**Headline is a clear call to action that matches what site visitors came to do.**

**✓ and 1 encourage site visitors to act.**

**The content talks to the site visitor, not about the agency.**

**2**

**The reference to another “appropriate regulator” in Step 1 should be a link to Who Regulates My Bank. Site visitors may not notice the link on the right.**

The new page (new web site) for consumers who have a complaint

[www.helpwithmybank.gov/complaints](http://www.helpwithmybank.gov/complaints)

## SEO |

The URL, the headline, and the content all help with the site's great SEO. It's the top search result at Bing, Google, and Yahoo for the search string: complain about my bank.

## Write from your site visitors' point of view

Write as if you were recording both sides of the conversation. One good way to do that is to use

- “I” for the site visitor in the question
- “you” for the site visitor in the answer
- “we” for the organization

Figure 9-5 shows you how doctors from the American College of Radiology and the Radiology Society of North America talk to patients on their web site, [RadiologyInfo.org](http://RadiologyInfo.org).

The screenshot shows a Q&A style page on RadiologyInfo.org. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Home, Procedures A-Z, Test/Treatment, Body Part/System, Patient Group, Images/Videos, and En Español. The page title is "CT - Body". On the left, a sidebar says "The in-page links are questions site visitors are likely to ask." Below it, two entries are shown: one for "I" (site visitor asking the question) and one for "You" (site visitor in the writer's answer). The main content area has a section titled "How should I prepare?" with a list of tips and a video player. To the right, a callout box contains a note about leaving items at home or removing them before the exam.

Figure 9-5 In Q&A style, “I” works well in the question with “you” in the answer.

[www.radiologyinfo.org](http://www.radiologyinfo.org)

## Keep the questions short

People often skim a heading just enough to decide, “yes, that’s what I want to know.” They’re anxious to get to the answer.

Why short? At least three reasons:

- Long questions take up precious space.
- Headings are in **bold** or **color**, and large blocks of **bold** or **color** are difficult to read.
- Despite the power of headings, some site visitors use the headings only as landing spots to see where new sections start. They don’t actually read the headings.

Cut your questions to essentials, just as you cut your content to essentials. If you find yourself writing a long question, ask yourself:

- Is the section too long?
- Am I trying to cover several questions at once?
- Should I divide this content into more than one question and answer?
- Am I putting information in the question that should be in the answer?
- Am I using more words than necessary while still connecting with my site visitors and improving SEO?

**SEO |**

As with many aspects of content strategy and content writing, you must balance competing demands. Keep headings short, but try to get keywords in at least a few of your `<H2>` headings as well as your `<H1>` headline. For example, in [Figure 9-5](#), I might suggest adding “for my CT scan” to “How do I prepare?”

## **Consider starting with a keyword**

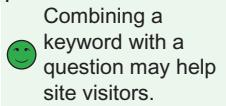
Although questions work wonderfully well as headings, they have one downside. They don’t start with a keyword for the specific topic.



Site visitors who listen to the screen often move rapidly from heading to heading, listening only to the first bit of each one. Sighted web users similarly scan down the page often taking in only the first part of a heading.

A solution that can sometimes help is to combine a keyword with the question, as in [Figure 9-6](#).

Signature: Who must sign the application?



Combining a keyword with a question may help site visitors.

Deadline: When is the application due?

**Figure 9-6** Dual headings like these help people who are scanning rapidly with their ears or their eyes.

However, don’t start every `<H2>` or `<H3>` heading with the same keywords. That would make the content very difficult to scan. If the keywords would be the same for each heading, put them in only some of the headings and don’t put them first. You’ll still get some SEO benefit and people will be able to use your content.

## **Statements as headings**

When you write statements as headings, you assume the site visitor has asked the question. You keep your site visitors in mind and talk directly to them, without putting them on the page with you.

Statement headings work well in the same types of web pages as questions. With statement headings you make your key messages stand out on the page in large bold or colored type. That’s what you see in [Figure 9-7](#).

**How We Protect You**

**Our Privacy Promise to You**

By choosing Iowa Orthopaedic Center, you have expressed confidence in our ability to serve you. We take this responsibility seriously and diligently safeguard your personal information.

**We do not sell your information.**  
For more than 50 years, patients have trusted Iowa Orthopaedic Center with their personal and medical information. Whether you are a current or former patient, Iowa Orthopaedic Center is committed to protecting the information you have shared with us. This commitment to conduct business honestly and with your best interest in mind is the foundation of our Privacy Promise to you.

**Your information is confidential.**  
Iowa Orthopaedic Center's Code of Ethics requires that patient information be held in strict confidence. When we contract with insurance companies to process information, the contract strictly limits how they use information supplied by Iowa Orthopaedic Center and requires they have strong security protections.

**We protect your information.**  
Iowa Orthopaedic Center maintains practices to ensure the security and confidentiality of your personal information. We have physical security at our buildings, passwords to protect our databases, compliance audits, and world-class virus/intrusion detection software in place. Within Iowa Orthopaedic Center, access to member information is limited to those who need it to perform their jobs.

**We Collect Information to Serve You**  
Collecting information about patients makes it possible for Iowa Orthopaedic Center to deliver the kind of personalized service you expect.

At Iowa Orthopaedic Center, we collect and share information within Iowa Orthopaedic Center.

**Figure 9-7** Short statements with key messages work well as headings.  
[www.iowaorthopaediccenter.com](http://www.iowaorthopaediccenter.com)

## Verb phrases as headings

Many web conversations are site visitors asking “How do I...?” If you have one “How do I...?” question with many other types of questions, it’s fine to leave that as a question.

However, if you have a series of questions, all of which would start “How do I...?,” people may have a hard time finding the one they want.



Which set of headings is most difficult to scan and use?

How do I set up an account?	Setting up an account	Set up an account
How do I view my profile?	Viewing my profile	View my profile
How do I change my profile?	Changing my profile	Change my profile
How do I pay online?	Paying online	Pay online
How do I get help?	Getting help	Get help

When you find yourself writing “How do I...?” over and over, take away the repeated words and start each heading with the action word.

Two good ways to write action headings (and action links) are with

- gerunds (the form that ends in “-ing”)
- imperatives (the “Do this ...” form of the verb)

Example with –ing: Look ahead at Case Study 9-2.

Example with imperatives: Look back at Figure 9-2.

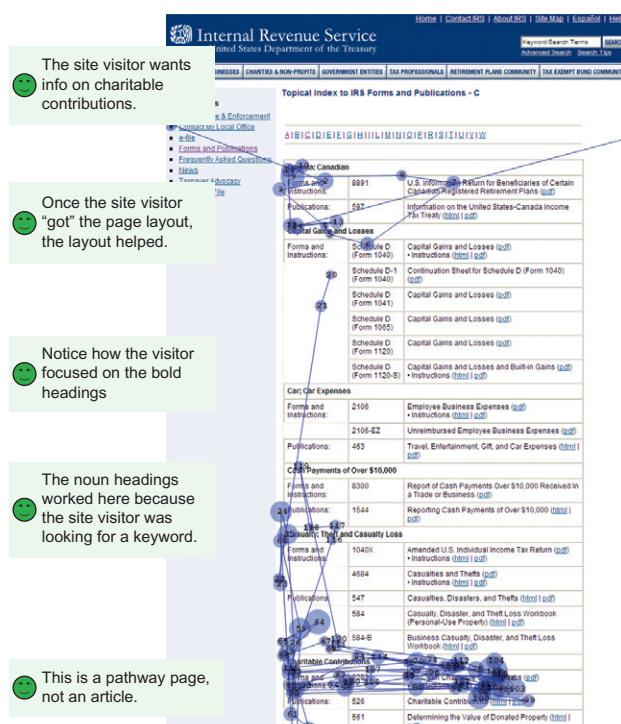
## 4. Use nouns and noun phrases sparingly

I see a lot of nouns as headings. They work sometimes. But more often than not, they don't work because site visitors don't know the nouns or don't give the nouns the same meaning the writer did. Nouns as headings often don't help either writer or site visitor understand the flow of the writing – why one section logically comes before or after another section.

Nouns label things. They aren't conversational. Unlike questions, statements, and action phrases, which provide context and explanation, a noun has to carry all the meaning of the heading in a single word.

### Sometimes a label (a noun) is enough

Yes, sometimes, a label is all you need. Figure 9-8 shows a gaze plot – an eye-tracking picture of one person looking for tax forms and instructions about charitable contributions. In this case, the nouns in alphabetical order as topic headings worked well.



**Figure 9-8** An eye-tracking gaze plot showing the path the site visitor took on this page from the U.S. Internal Revenue Service's web site. The page has noun headings as topic labels. They worked in this case because the site visitor was seeking the same word the site was using.

[www.useit.com/eyetracking](http://www.useit.com/eyetracking)

## But nouns often don't explain enough

With nouns as headings, getting the information into logical order may be difficult. Case Study 9-2 shows how I might revise a set of noun-based headings in the information section of an e-commerce site.

### Case Study 9-2

### Turning nouns into better headings

Let's look at L.L.Bean's online Help Desk page on Tracking Your Order.

The screenshot shows the L.L.Bean website with a focus on the 'Help Desk' section for tracking orders. The page includes a search bar, navigation links for men's, women's, kids', footwear, outdoor gear, hunting & fishing, and luggage. A banner offers 'FREE SHIP' with 'No minimum order'. The main content area is titled 'Help Desk' and features a heading 'Tracking Your Order'. Below it, sections include 'Order Confirmation', 'Tracking Numbers', 'Order History', 'Changes to Your Order', 'Backorders', and 'Shared Email Accounts'. A sidebar on the left provides links for contact, live help, guarantees, purchase history, order tracking, and easy returns. A note on the right suggests moving 'Shared Email Accounts' to the top of the page. The URL 'www.llbean.com' is visible at the bottom.

The headline is a good “-ing” bite that matches what people want to do.

But the headings are mostly nouns: Order Confirmation (two nouns); Order History (two nouns).

“Tracking Numbers” looks like an action phrase – like the headline – but it is not.

The information under “Shared Email Accounts” should probably be near the top of the page.

[www.llbean.com](http://www.llbean.com)

Notice how the first paragraph actually covers much more than how they'll confirm your order. Notice that the last paragraph has a good

suggestion that you might miss because the heading doesn't tell you *why* you should care about shared email accounts.

If we rethink the actions this content describes, we might break it up more, use verb phrases, and put a set of same-page links at the top. Here's what I might do to revise this content:

 <p>Bringing all the headings together at the top gives people an overview and an easy way to get to one section. (See Guideline 10 later in the chapter.)</p>	<h2>Tracking Your Order</h2> <p><a href="#">Getting confirmation of your order</a>  <a href="#">Getting an email when we ship your order</a>  <a href="#">Gift order for someone on the same email? Don't let us spoil the surprise!</a>  <a href="#">Following your order with its tracking number</a>  <a href="#">Checking your order in Order Tracking/History</a>  <a href="#">Changing an order</a>  <a href="#">Checking all your orders for the past year</a></p>
 <p>The long first paragraph of the original covered three topics. I split it into three separate sections.</p>	<p><b>Getting email confirmation of your order</b></p> <p>If you gave us your email address when you placed your order, we'll send you confirmation of the order by email within two hours. This confirmation will give you</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the order number</li> <li>• the total value of the merchandise</li> </ul> <p><b>Getting an email when we ship your order</b></p> <p>If you gave us your email address when you placed your order, we'll also send an email to tell you when we've shipped your order. (Exception: If your item ships from an off-site distribution center, you won't get this email.) We usually provide this information within two days after you placed your order.</p> <p>For most orders, this email will tell you how to track your shipment.</p>
 <p>I broke the pattern of “-ing” headings for the one about keeping gifts secret. I did that to get readers’ attention.</p>	<p><b>Gift order for someone on the same email? Don't let us spoil the surprise!</b></p> <p>The email that we have shipped your order will include information about the individual items in your order. Although the email begins with a notice that it might contain gift information, you still might want to alert the gift recipient not to open email from L.L.Bean. We don't want to spoil a surprise!</p> <p><b>Following your order with its tracking number</b></p> <p>You can track your shipment by using the shipper's tracking number(s) in the email we send when we ship your order.</p> <p>If you deleted or did not get this email, please <a href="#">contact us</a> and we'll be glad to give you the shipper's tracking information.</p>
 <p>I rewrote most headings as action phrases. Notice that the site visitor is the “actor” for the actions.</p>	<p><b>Checking your order in Order Tracking/History</b></p> <p>You can always check the status of your order by going to <a href="#">Order Tracking/History</a>.</p> <p><b>Changing an order or backorder</b></p> <p><b>Order.</b> We're sorry, orders cannot be changed once they've been submitted. We process orders very quickly. Once we have started to put your order together, we can't stop the process. We apologize for any inconvenience. We hope that for most cases our faster processing time works to your advantage.</p>
 <p>Hear the conversation with “we” and “you.”</p> <p>Conversational questions or statements would work as headings here, too.</p>	<p><b>Backorder.</b> Whenever possible, we show up-to-date information about backordered items. You may change or cancel a backordered item. To cancel a backorder, click the Cancel Item button next to the item you want to cancel. If you want to make other changes to your backorder, please <a href="#">contact us</a>.</p> <p><b>Checking all your orders for the past year</b></p> <p>If you set up an account at llbean.com, you can look at all the orders you've placed on the L.L.Bean web site and by phone during the past year. You can use this feature to check your current order(s), review past orders, and find items you may want to order again.</p> <p>To view your order history online, <a href="#">create an account</a>. Your complete order history will be available immediately after you've made your first llbean.com purchase.</p>

My suggested revision.

## 5. Put your site visitors' words in the headings

The headings in your web content must resonate with your site visitors. If you write headings with words your site visitors don't know, they may not recognize that the heading is what they need. That content also might not show up when your site visitors search – either at your site or at an external search engine.

## 6. Exploit the power of parallelism

People are very pattern-oriented. It's faster and easier to scan a set of headings when all are in the same sentence structure.

### Do It Yourself: Wallpaper

- Everyone loves wallpaper
- Preparation
- Removal of wallpaper
- Straight line marking
- Cutting the wallpaper
- Wallpaper soaking
- Hang the first sheet

### Do It Yourself: Wallpaper

- Getting ready to put up wallpaper
- Preparing the walls
- Removing old wallpaper
- Marking a straight line
- Cutting the wallpaper
- Soaking the wallpaper
- Hanging the first sheet



Did you find the headings on the right quicker and easier to scan and remember?

Be consistent (parallel) in the style you use within the same level of heading. Change styles as you change the heading level. Look back at the outline of the International Aviation Art contest ([Figure 9-3](#)): I used questions for level 1 and noun phrases for level 2. Making each heading level its own style helps people see the pattern and hierarchy of your writing.

If you break the pattern, do it for a good reason. Notice how I broke my pattern for one heading in the revised L.L.Bean content. I did it to make that point stand out. The point about keeping your gift a secret is not part of the flow of the process that the other headings describe. It's an "aside," so changing the heading pattern there was purposeful.

## 7. Use only a few levels of headings

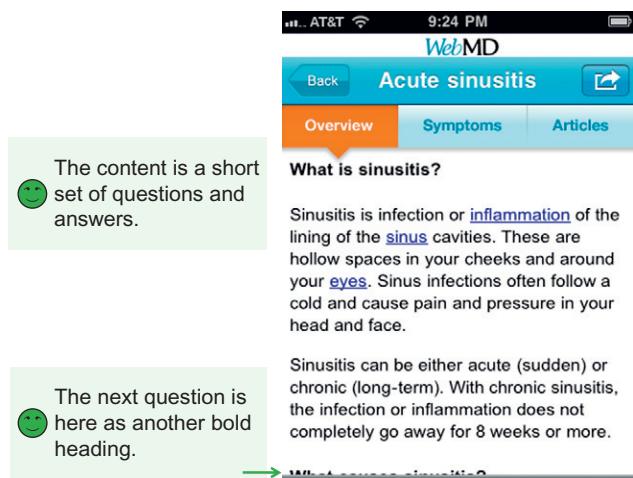
If you think of content as conversation and index cards, you'll realize that the best content is in small pieces with lots of headings – but that the hierarchy of those headings shouldn't go very deep.

A typical web article or blog should have

- one `<H1>`; that's your headline (see Chapter 8)
- at least two or more `<H2>` headings
- rarely, `<H3>` headings

If you find yourself needing a lot of level 3 headings or any level 4 or 5 headings, consider reorganizing the information into a better set of index cards.

And, of course, as you think about mobile, you'll realize how much you need to break up content and how few levels of headings you can use. [Figure 9-9](#) shows a good example from WebMD's mobile content on health conditions.



**Figure 9-9** Mobile content needs headings, too. In general, keep to one level of heading within the text.

[www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com)

## 8. Distinguish headings from text

Here, I'm using "headings" to include all levels (your `<H1>` headline and all the levels of headings in your content under the headline).

Make headings easy to see at glance. Use **bold** or a **color** that stands out and consider these points:

- Don't use **blue** for headings. Save **blue** for links. Most site visitors assume that anything in **blue** is a link, even if it is not underlined.
- Don't use your web site's link color as a heading color. You don't want site visitors to be frustrated trying to click on a heading when it is not a link.

- Don't make **bold** versus color the only difference between heading levels. People have a hard time figuring out whether **bold** is more important than color or vice versa.
- Avoid *italics*. They are not as effective as **bold** to indicate a heading. *Italics* don't stand out enough on the screen.
- Underline a heading only if it is a link. Most site visitors assume that anything that is underlined is a link.
- Avoid ALL CAPITALS for all the reasons we talked about in Chapter 3.
- If you use color for headings, make sure the color is legible against the background of your web page. Before you choose a color, reread the section on color-blindness in Chapter 3.

## 9. Make each level of heading clear

To help site visitors, you must distinguish headings from text and also make the hierarchy of the headings (the different levels) obvious. Good ways to differentiate levels include size, spacing, and placement.

- **Size.** We all associate size with hierarchy – bigger is more important. Type size for the headline <H1> should be bigger than for the headings <H2>. If you use <H3> headings and don't change the placement, make them smaller than your <H2> headings.
  - Make sure the size difference is obvious – but not too huge. About three points difference is often good – making the headline about 150% of the text size and the headings about 125% of the text size. Less difference may be too subtle; much more may waste too much precious screen space.
- **Spacing.** The headline might also have more space after it than other headings. (Look back at the discussion around Figures 3-12 and 3-13 for why it's critical to put headings close to the text they introduce.)
- **Placement.** You can indent a level of headings. Or you can use bold or colored run-in text (not tagged as a heading) – as in this bulleted list.

While we are discussing design for headings, let me add three more really important guidelines:

- **Don't center headlines or headings.** If people are scanning down the left margin of the content, they'll miss the centered headings. If they go to the centered headings, their eyes will want to keep going to the right instead of back to the left margin of the text.
- **Put lines (rules) over, not under.** You don't need lines with headings, but if you use them, consider putting them over (not under) the headings. Lines under push the eyes up into the previous block of text. Lines over help to put each heading together with the text it covers.

This guideline focuses on information design. It connects back to Chapter 3. Designers, content strategists, and web writers must collaborate to get designs that make headlines and headings truly usable to site visitors.



**Make sure everything enlarges together.** When your site visitors change the text size, everything should get bigger or smaller proportionately. It doesn't help your vision-impaired site visitors if the headline or headings stay small when the text gets big enough to read.

## 10. Help people jump to content within a web page

If your web page has several sections with a heading over each section, consider giving people a table of contents at the top. By listing the headings at the top as links, you help your site visitors

- get a quick overview of what's on the page
- jump to a specific part of the page

Figure 9-10 is a good example of same-page links from a U.K. group that is very concerned about making its web site easy to use. (Thanks to Tom Brinck for suggesting this example.)

I'll call these "same-page links" here. I've also heard them called "anchor links" and "in-page links."

The screenshot shows a web page titled "How to get the best out of this site". At the top, there is a yellow navigation bar with links for "How we see", "Looking after your sight", "Problems & solutions", "Text only", "Accessibility", "Home", "Free updates", "Help", "Site map", "Legal", and "Detailed search". Below the navigation bar, the main content starts with a bold heading "How to get the best out of this site". Underneath this heading is a link labeled "How do I get around this site?". Further down the page, there are several other links: "How can I find what I need on your site?", "How do I get back to your site if I leave it?", "How do I change my screen resolution?", "My browser is out-of-date - how can I get a new one?", "Where can I learn more about using the Internet?", and "How do I get around the site?". A green callout box with a smiley face icon points to the "How do I get around the site?" link, stating: "Same-page links. Clicking on one takes you down the page to where that question is a heading." Another green callout box with a smiley face icon points to the "How do I get around the site?" link, stating: "Bold heading. You get here by clicking on the first link above or by scrolling." At the bottom of the page, there is a note: "If you want to go to another area of the site, click with

Figure 9-10 Gathering up all the headings into a set of links at the top of the content helps people. They can see what the content covers and get quickly to one part.

[www.healtheys.org.uk](http://www.healtheys.org.uk)

## Put same-page links first under the headline

Watching people in usability testing, it's striking to see how quickly they focus on the links as soon as a new screen appears. When the screen has links at the top of the content area, most site visitors skip whatever comes before that set of links.

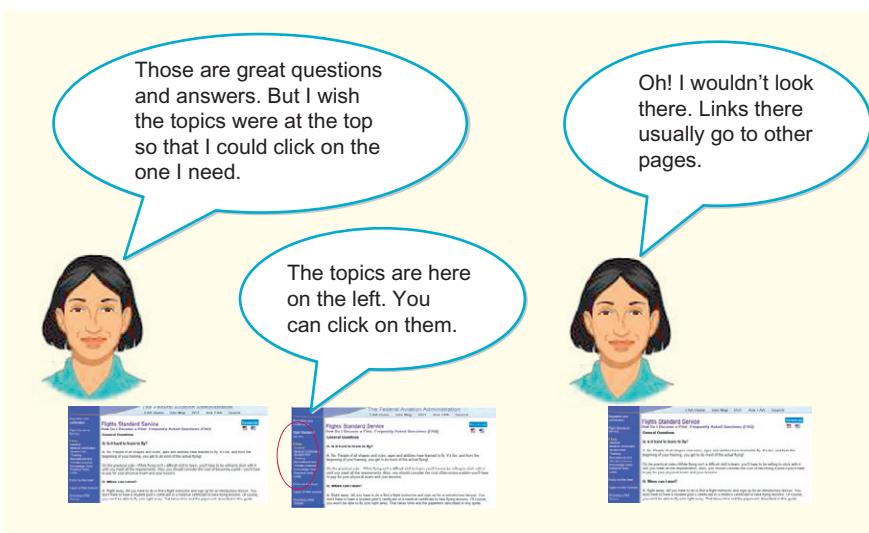
## Don't put off-page links at the top of the content area

Your site visitors bring expectations to your content. If they see links at the top in the main content area, they assume they are links to content further down that page. Don't confuse them. Meet their expectation.

## Don't put same-page links in the left navigation column

Links in a colored bar to the left of the main content on most web pages take site visitors to *other* topics. Don't put your same-page links there.

I recall a “before we revise it, let’s see how people use it” usability test where this is what happened:



The client heard the message. Their new site always has same-page links at the top of the content area. Links on the left go to other web topics.

## 11. Evaluate! Read the headings

How do you know that you have good headings? Of course, the best way is to do usability testing. Before you do that, however, you can do this review yourself:

1. Review your plan for the content.
  - What do you want to happen because you wrote this content?
  - Who are you in a conversation with? Which persona(s) is this content for?
  - What conversation did the persona start with the web site that brought that person to this content?
2. As that persona, read the headline and the headings without any of the text under the headings.
3. Answer these questions:
  - Do you (“channeling” the persona) understand what each heading means by itself?
  - Do the headings tell a coherent story? Do they flow logically from one to the next?
  - Do the headings successfully give you a “big picture”? Can you get the gist of the information on the topic?
  - If you wanted only some of the information, is it clear where you would go for the specific information you wanted?

If you answer “no” as your persona to any of these questions, the headings are not working well. You may need better headings. You may need to rethink, reorganize, and rewrite the content.

**Reviewing as a persona – Chapter 14**  
**Usability testing – Chapter 15**

### Summarizing Chapter 9

Key messages from Chapter 9:

- Good headings help readers in many ways.
- Thinking about headings also helps authors.
- Don’t slap headings into old content.
- Start by outlining.
- Choose a good heading style: questions, statement, verb phrases.
  - Answer your site visitors’ questions.
  - Write from your site visitors’ point of view.
  - Keep the questions short.
  - Consider starting with a keyword.
  - Use key message bites as headings for sections.

- Give calls to action with imperatives.
- Use gerunds (“-ing” forms) for activities that aren’t direct calls to action.
- Use nouns and noun phrases sparingly.
- Put your site visitors’ words in the headings.
- Exploit the power of parallelism.
- Use only a few levels of headings.
- Distinguish headings from text.
- Make each level of heading clear.
- Help people jump to the content they need on the page.
  - Put same-page links first under the page title.
  - Don’t put off-page links at the top of the content area.
  - Don’t put same-page links in the left navigation column.
- Evaluate! Read the headings.
  - Review your content by “channeling” relevant personas.
  - Read only the headings and see if the content is useful to the personas.