

Announcing Your Topic with a Clear Headline

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Headlines online have to do even more than headlines in print. On paper, you usually see the headline and the article together on the same piece of paper. Online (and especially on a mobile), the headline often appears first by itself as a link. It has to do a lot of work, conveying enough context to

- entice and engage the people for whom it leads to useful content
- *not* entice people who will be frustrated because it is a wrong choice for what they need
- signal to search engines what the content that follows is all about

How much do Americans pay for fruits and vegetables?

That's where the information I need will be.



This link from the Economic Research Service leads to just what you expect – data on the price of apples, peas, and other produce.

Roadmap for performance-based navigation

I'm a private pilot. I'll click on this and order road maps.



In a usability test with people who fly their own planes, some thought this was a link to road maps. It's not. It's the title of the government agency's strategic plan.

This chapter is about the first level heading of your content (<H1>).

Journalism and copy writing = headline

Technical and business communication = title

But in the web world, “title” has a special meaning: <Title> is different from <H1>. That's why I'm using “headline” here.

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A headline (<H1>) with keywords that match what site visitors search for can help your ranking with search engines. Note that proper coding is critical. Use the <H1> tag. Just using bigger, bolder letters doesn't tell search engines or screen-readers that this is a first-level heading.

Seven guidelines for headlines that work well

1. Use your site visitors' words.
2. Be clear instead of cute.
3. Think about your global audience.
4. Try for a medium length (about eight words).
5. Use a statement, question, or call to action.
6. Combine labels (nouns) with more information.
7. Add a short description if people need it.

1. Use your site visitors' words

Headlines that work well in your web conversations have words that make good connections in site visitors' minds.

Arrgh! These links don't help me at all! I'll have to click on each one to find out what it's about.



- Abstract, Acknowledgments, Contents, Executive Summary, 435 kb
- Introduction, 109 kb
- Literature Review, 228 kb
- Alternative Designs, 380 kb
- ECLS-K-NHANES III Design, 297 kb
- References, 123 kb
- Appendix A, 150 kb
- Appendix B, 126 kb
- Appendix C, 99 kb
- Appendix D, 86 kb



These links are not useful. Traditional section titles like these don't work online.

2. Be clear instead of cute

Of course, humor has its place. But a cute heading that doesn't match what site visitors are looking for is likely to fail in two ways:

- Site visitors scanning links on the page may not connect what they want with the cute phrasing you've used.
- A search engine may not place the article high in its results because the headline doesn't have the keywords it is matching.

Caroline Jarrett, co-author of the wonderful book *Forms That Work – Designing Web Forms for Usability*, tells a story about herself:

For one of her monthly online columns about designing forms and surveys, Caroline tackled the question of whether to use an even or odd number of response categories in a survey. She called the article, “Piggy in the Middle.” It didn't get a lot of clicks. In hindsight, that's no surprise. How would anyone know what it was about?

In contrast, the column that Caroline published in the same series with the headline “Sentence or Title Case for Labels?” got 100 times as many visitors. Why? At least in part, it must be that the headline clearly foreshadowed the content – and it showed up well in search engine results.

3. Think about your global audience

If you want what you write to have a global reach, be aware of abbreviations, acronyms, and idioms that only locals understand.

This headline appeared not only in the local edition of the *New York Times*, but also in the global edition (*International Herald Tribune*).



Headline = bite.
Statements with
key messages
make good bites.

L.I. Harvests May Signal a Comeback for Scallops



New Yorkers may instantly understand that L.I. = Long Island. (Parts of New York City are on Long Island.) But will other readers around the world?

4. Try for a medium length (about eight words)

Outbrain looked at the click-through rates from headlines or page titles of 150,000 web articles.

This feature	Improved click-through
Thumbnail image with headline	27% higher than no image
Eight words in headline	21% higher than other lengths
Odd number “5 keys to…”	20% higher than even number
Colon or dash and subtitle	9% higher
Headline as question	higher (% not specified)

Source: Kelly Reeves, 5 Tips to Improve Your Headline Click-through Rate, June 3, 2011.
<http://www.contentmarketinginstitute.com/2011/06/headline-click-through-rate/>

This finding is very similar to Jared Spool's earlier finding that links of 7 to 12 words work best (Figure 8-1).

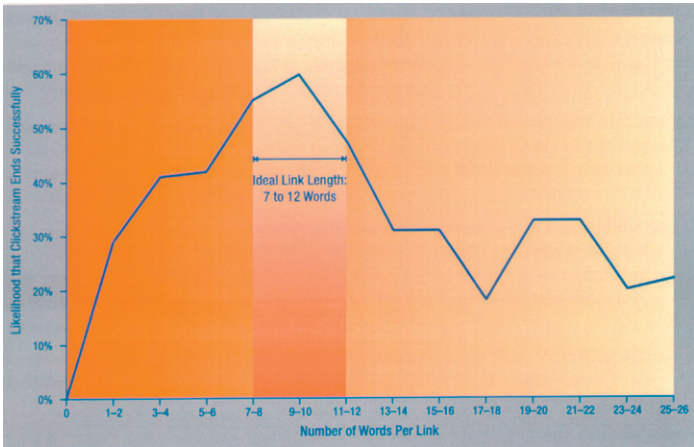


Figure 8-1 Jared Spool and his colleagues found that links of 7 to 12 words worked best in getting people to the information they were seeking. *Designing for the Scent of Information*. www.uie.com

Why do medium-length links work well? They probably

- have better “scent” (see Chapter 5)
- use more keywords that site visitors are looking for and that search engines can match
- are questions, statements, or calls to action that resonate with your site visitors

5. Use a statement, question, or call to action

Statement headlines put the key message first (see Chapter 7). They are likely to bring questions to site visitors' minds. (See the next chapter for how to follow the key message with a good set of questions and answers.)

Question headlines let the site visitor start the conversation – if the headline is a question that your site visitors would ask.

Calls to action encourage people to act.

Figure 8-2 gives you an example of each type of headline.

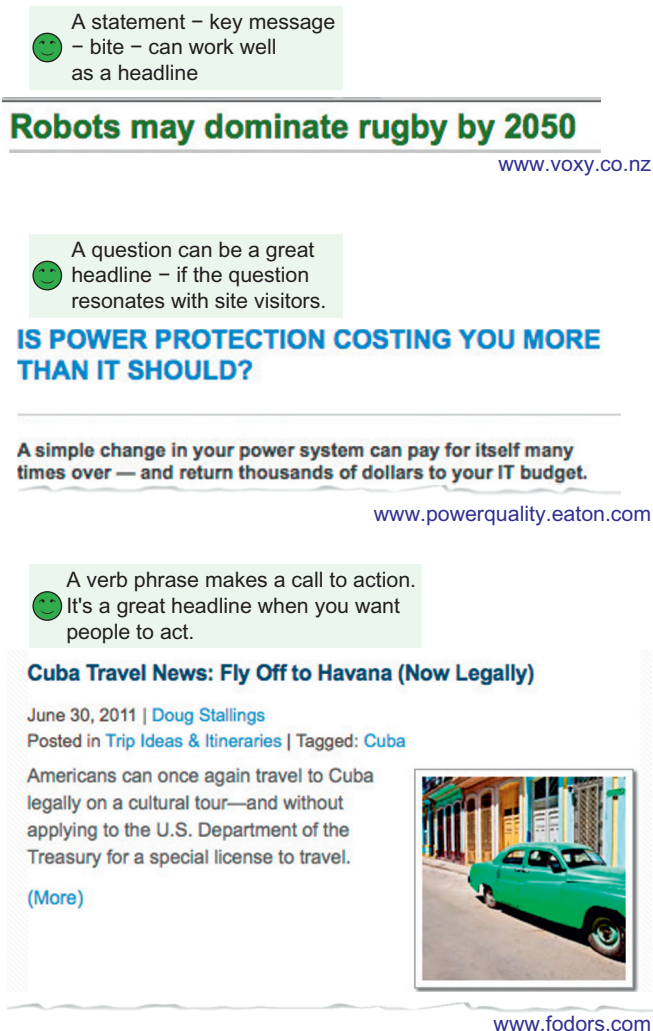


Figure 8-2 Statements, questions, and calls to action work well as headlines.

Lots more about these different types in the next chapter on headings.



Look again at [Figure 8-2](#). Notice the way the three headlines use capital letters. Which is easiest to read?

Did you say the one about robots? When planning your style for headlines and headings, consider using sentence capitalization [Robots may dominate...] rather than all capitals [IS POWER PROTECTION...] or even initial capitalization (also called “title case”) [Cuba Travel News...]. You don’t need capitals. Bold, color, and text size are better ways to show that this is your headline.

Look back at Chapter 3 for more on why not to use all caps.

6. Combine labels (nouns) with more information

Nouns by themselves announce topics. They often work as links for entire sections: [News](#), [Shoes](#), [Site Map](#). They don’t work well as headlines for articles or information pages because they don’t draw readers in. They often don’t give enough specifics for people to know that’s what they want.

The Outbrain study found that combining the topic label with a call to action or other phrase worked better than a label by itself.

Colon or dash and subtitle	9% higher
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Which of these articles do you think our gal will read? Which headline would pull you into the article?

I’m so stressed.
I’m going crazy.
I have too much to do.



Stress relief:
When and how to say no
from www.mayoclinic.com

Stress Management

7. Add a short description if people need it

A headline should serve by itself as the “bite” that entices people to want the snack and then the meal. But you won’t always be able to write a headline where that bite is enough for everyone.

Offer a brief description. [Figure 8-3](#) shows how Fidelity Investments helps site visitors choose the link they need after they choose the tab for Guidance and Retirement.

Also see the example from [shell.com](#) in Chapter 5.

The figure shows two examples of website headlines. The first example, 'Help Me Choose Investments', includes a brief description: 'Strategies to help you build your portfolio — use our tools and insights to help you invest or let us do it for you.' Below the headline is a link labeled 'Investment Guidance'. The second example, 'Help Me Plan for Retirement', includes a brief description: 'Saving for retirement is your responsibility — helping you get there is ours. Let us help you create a plan, invest, and stay on track.' Below the headline is a link labeled 'Retirement Planning'. To the right of these examples are two callout boxes. The first callout box, with a green smiley face icon, asks 'What makes these good headlines?' and lists three points: 'Call to action (Help)', 'Personal (me)', and 'Topic noun on new line (investments/retirement)'. The second callout box, with a yellow neutral face icon, asks 'Might be better in sentence caps:' and shows the headline 'Help me choose investments' in sentence case.

Help Me Choose Investments
Strategies to help you build your portfolio — use our tools and insights to help you invest or let us do it for you.
[Investment Guidance](#)

Help Me Plan for Retirement
Saving for retirement is your responsibility — helping you get there is ours. Let us help you create a plan, invest, and stay on track.
[Retirement Planning](#)

What makes these good headlines?

- Call to action (Help)
- Personal (me)
- Topic noun on new line (investments/retirement)

Might be better in sentence caps:

Help me choose investments

What makes the descriptions work well?

- Short
- Personal (you, our)
- Calls to action
- Connections to what site visitors may want (tools, insights, plan, invest, stay on track)

Figure 8-3 A brief description can help people select the right link.
[www.fidelity.com](#)

Summarizing Chapter 8

Key messages from Chapter 8:

- Use your site visitors’ words.
- Be clear instead of cute.
- Think about your global audience.
- Try for a medium length (about eight words).
- Use a statement, question, or call to action.
- Combine labels (nouns) with more information.
- Add a short description if people need it.