

How Great Writers Write Great Headlines?

To capture your audience's attention it's essential you have an effective headline.

As the great copywriter David Ogilvy once said, "On average only 1 in 5 readers gets beyond the headline".

So it doesn't matter whether it's the subject heading of an email, a blog, an advert, the headline of a sales letter, the headline in your e-news or e-shots and so on, unless they are powerful and grab attention what follows is likely to go unread.

Headline writers in newspapers tend to use tried and tested formulas for headlines – they have been around for decades and for good reason – they work! So what is it that underpins a good headline?

I think you can build them around one of five themes:

- One that promises a benefit
- One that asks a question
- One that is thought-provoking or sparks curiosity
- One that instills worry, fear & anxiety
- One that has 'How to' in the headline

Let's look at these in detail.

One that promises a benefit

In benefit terms, it's often said that the word 'free' works best but unfortunately it's over used. But everyone wants to gain from a benefit offered for example something that makes life simpler or easier for the reader or reduces risk or takes away problem e.g. 'Get rid of spam email once and for all'.

One that asks a question

Questions have always made powerful headlines because we want to answer them. It's like a reflex reaction e.g. 'How safe is your home from burglars?' Or 'How can you tell whether you are a heart attack risk?' Your subconscious will be working in the background until it comes up with an answer but you will want to read on.

One that instills worry, fear or anxiety

A classic headline in this theme might have 'warning' in it, such as 'Weather warning: gale force winds on the way'. The word 'warning' is so powerful that it almost doesn't matter what you put after it. Another example of an anxiety headline would have the word 'Trust' in it such as 'Can we trust Wikipedia?' Or in the same way, using words like 'mistake' in the headline – after all, no one wants to make a mistake e.g. "The top five mistakes we make as parents".

One that is thought-provoking and sparks curiosity

If we're curious we're likely to read on – it's that simple.

'Curiosity' type headlines will have common approaches – perhaps the word 'secret' in the headline – let's face it we all have a tendency to believe others are deliberately withholding success secrets from us e.g. "Secrets of Britain's richest businessmen".

Or it might have 'alert' in the headline e.g. 'Car buyer alert: the latest rogue dealer scam'.

One that has 'How to' in the headline

It's been called the 'Granddaddy' of all headlines and has been used for well over 100 years in countless winning ads and articles and with good reason: we are naturally biased toward a message that says it will help us do something.

We don't just want ideas we want an expert to show us how to apply ideas in a practical way. Business books with 'How to' in the headline have sold more than any other headline e.g. 'How to get customers queuing round the corner'.

So the next time you need to write a headline stop and think. What would grab my attention? What theme can I use?

Can I use a tried and tested formula that has worked a thousand times before? And don't rush the headline – take ten times longer on the headline than the rest of the article or copy because if the headline isn't right the rest of what of you have to say is wasted.

