Headlines That Work: A Working Summary of Popular and Academic Literature

Popular Literature
From the popular literature, we culled the following advice on writing headlines.

1. **Be Upworthy:** Writers at the news and entertainment website *Upworthy* have earned a reputation for an ability to get people to click on stories. Their “curiosity driven” 2- and 3-part headlines (such as: “In 2 Minutes, 6 Of The Most Amazing Women From History You’ve Never Heard Of”) have led to *Upworthy* being described as “chocolate-covered news broccoli”\(^1\) — attractive headlines with content that delivers. The following strategies are commonly associated with *Upworthy:*\(^2\)
   a. Be outraged by injustice: “Meet The Dude Who Might Just Have The Poorest Judgment In America. Bless His Dead-Inside Heart.”
   b. Be amazed or inspired: “The Earth-Shatteringly Amazing Speech That’ll Change The Way You Think About Adulthood”
   c. Create a curiosity gap (if the headline says it all, there’s no need to click)
   d. Use numbers that suggest getting a lot by investing a little
   e. Embrace classic attractors (sex, celebrity, miracle)
   f. Forget traditional headline rules (Do: ask a question, use first person; Forget about: length, being informative, objective, or grammatically correct)
   g. Juxtapose unexpected words
   h. Over-promise with the headline and over-deliver with the story. It’s only clickbait if the story doesn’t live up to a hyped headline.
   i. Telegraph emotion (“will make you cry,” etc.)
   j. Don’t write for your audience, write for their friends (what people want showing up in their newsfeed)

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2. **Use Psychology:** Usability and analytics tool *Crazy Egg* and social media managing site *Buffer* offer headline writing formulas that purport a psychological basis.3
   a. Make a promise
   b. Pose a threat
   c. Offer social proof (others are already doing it)
   d. Use trusted endorsements
   e. Offer something new/exclusive
   f. Use negatives (“Never ...”)
   g. Promise to teach, but don’t say “how to” Instead of: "How to get better at organizing your day." Try: "The 5-minute guide to organizing your day for more focus and productivity"
   h. Reference the audience “For People on the Verge of Writing the Perfect Blog Post”
   i. Be specific
   j. Use numbers (The bigger the better, Digits not words, Number at beginning)

3. **Go Viral:** Along with the previously mentioned sites, *Gawker, Nieman Lab,* and *Fast Company* share strategies meant to help stories go viral—or be widely shared by users4
   a. Make the most of current events: Tie your headline to news and newsmakers
   b. Call the reader to action with direct action words
   c. Surprise the reader
   d. Make bold claims
   e. Sound like a human, not a robot Instead of: “Gay Veteran who confronted Romney speaks” Try: “Mitt Romney Accidentally Confronts A Gay Veteran; Awesomeness Ensues”
   f. Use words that go viral (Smart, Surprising, Science, History, Hacks, Huge, Critical)
   g. Ask a question
   h. Offer a solution
   i. Make a gif
   j. Tailor for every platform (Facebook = Storytelling, Personal, Shareable. Twitter = News-oriented, easily digestible, topical, headline-driven. Pinterest = Lifestyle-focused, inspiring. Instagram = Personal, eye-opening.)

**Academic Literature**

Below are summaries of insights from “headlines that work” studies in academic literature.

1. Successful headlines **balance context and processing effort**.\(^5\) They give readers the most optimal context for interpreting the story, while also limiting the need for mental processing. Headlines can accomplish this balance by:
   - a. Being short, clear, unambiguous, and easy to read
   - b. Being interesting and new
   - c. Containing names and concepts with a high news value and avoiding names and concepts with low news value
   - d. Connecting the story to previously known facts and prior expectations

   "The art of headline production consists of formulating the headline which meets the maximal number of the above conditions, thus providing the reader with the optimal ratio between contextual effect and processing effort.”

2. **Fonts** make a difference.\(^6\) Readers skimming onscreen headlines were able to recall more words when the headlines were large (24 and 20 point font) and written in Times New Roman or Arial (as opposed to Century Gothic and Book Antiqua). Although this is an older study, and it only looked at four font types, the takeaway message is that news outlets should consider the fonts they are using for their headlines.

3. **Creative headlines** trump other factors.\(^7\)
   - a. Headline readers generally disregard standard norms of length, clarity, and information as long as headlines can rivet their attention in terms of creativity.
   - b. Readers also select headlines based on expectations of relevance.

4. Effective headlines **reduce ambiguity**, and less ambiguity means less mental processing time.\(^8\) In other words, the less a reader has to think about what the headline is saying, the better it is for the reader. Note: this study was done with traditional newspapers – not online.
   - a. Examples:
     - i. Ambiguous: Pentagon Plans Swell Deficit
     - ii. Less ambiguous: Pentagon Plans Increase Deficit
     - iii. Ambiguous: Portuguese Left Votes on Angola
     - iv. Less ambiguous: Portuguese Leftists Vote on Angola

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5. **Information utility matters.** The more useful the information in the headline, the greater attention it will receive from a reader. More specifically, as the magnitude, likelihood, or immediacy of the information in the headline increases, so does reader attention.
   a. **Magnitude** refers to the immensity of the challenge conveyed by the headline.
      i. Low magnitude: “Teens Toss Empty Cans off Overpass on Passing Cars”
      ii. High magnitude: “Teens Hurl Heavy Bricks off Overpass on Passing Cars”
   b. **Likelihood** refers to how probable it is that something will come to pass.
      i. Low likelihood: “Teens Throw Objects off Overpass, Second Case in [Remote City]”
      ii. High likelihood: “Teens Throw Objects off Overpass, Twentieth Case in [Home City]”
   c. **Immediacy** refers to how soon something will occur.
      i. Low immediacy: “Local Police Force Facing Huge Staffing Shortfall in Two Years”
      ii. High immediacy: “Local Police Force Facing Huge Staffing Shortfall in Two Months”

6. People are more likely to select stories with a **negative headline** than a positive headline. Regardless of their preferences as stated in a survey, participants are more likely to select negative content. The bias toward negative content is greater for politically interested respondents.” Politically interested participants are also attracted to **strategic frames**, or coverage that focuses on winners and losers and not the substance of an issue or debate.
   a. An example of a negative, strategic headline: “Donaldson Drubbed in Weak Debate Performance”

7. **Forward-referencing** headlines also may have effects, presumably because they “satisfy the need for creating expectations and suspense.” A forward-reference is a “reference to forthcoming parts of the discourse relative to the current location in the discourse.” Example headlines include:
   a. “This is an A-minus paper” (from BBC)
   b. “If this is the debris of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, what happens next?” (from CNN)
   c. “This Amazing Kid Died. What He Left Behind is Wondtacular” (from Upworthy).

Note: the study was a content analysis of news headlines and acknowledged the presence of such headlines. It did not actually test how effective these headlines are at increasing clicks.

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