



76 Easy Ways to Write Attention-Grabbing Headlines...

... that will get your reader's attention, convince them to read on, and ultimately lead to more sales

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
It's okay to steal	3
Why so much emphasis on headlines?	3
Originality is terribly overrated	3
Look at what's working for others	4
How to use this guide	5
Who is your reader?	5
Find your benefits	5
Find your appeal	5
Tried-and-tested headline formulas	6
"How to" headlines	7
Testimonial headlines	9
Self-interest headlines	11
Question headlines	13
Fear headlines	15
Prestige headlines	18
News headlines	20
Curiosity headlines	22
Checklist	24
What's next?	25

Introduction

I'm going to let you in on a little secret, one that all the professional copywriters and advertising experts know.

It's okay to steal

Honestly. When it comes to copywriting – and particularly to headlines – it's absolutely fine to pinch other writers' ideas. We all do it. You can too. This little guide will show you some simple short cuts that will help you to write great headlines with minimum effort.

Why so much emphasis on headlines?

Your headline has one job: to get the attention of the right person and make them want to read on. If your headline is rubbish, it doesn't matter how good the rest of your writing is because nobody will read it.

So the headline is, without question, the most important part of your communication. It doesn't matter what form that communication takes – poster, book, advert, blog post or email – the headline is key.

Originality is terribly overrated

Set aside everything your teachers told you about punishments for plagiarism (because that's not what we're talking about here). When it comes to writing headlines, the one thing you don't want to try to be is original.

Let me explain.

Trying to be original will hurt your business because it will take more time than you have. It will also make you cry with frustration. That's not to say that if something strikingly original pops into your head you should ignore it – if it's great, use it! What I am saying is that setting out to be original will eat up all your time and energy.

You're much too busy for that

All the great writers steal from each other. Not just brilliant copywriters like David Ogilvy and Drayton Bird, either. T. S. Eliot (probably) said: “Mediocre writers borrow. Great writers steal.”

Shakespeare stole from the Romans. Almost everyone steals from Shakespeare (including Disney, incidentally. Does *The Lion King* look familiar to you?). They don't steal because they're lazy or bad at what they do. They steal because they're busy. And because there's no need to reinvent the wheel.

Look at what's working for others

If part of your job is to write marketing materials, you should look at what works and then use it. Take those ideas and adapt them for your business.

Look at newspapers and magazines (I recommend *The Reader's Digest*, the *Financial Times* and *The Economist*). Editors' jobs hang on whether or not their headlines work. They know their stuff, so watch and learn.

Develop a swipe file. Keep a note of the direct mail that gets and keeps your attention. Store those emails with subject lines that made you read on. Take pictures of posters that sell their products to you.

Let's be clear about this: I'm not talking about plagiarism. Don't copy word-for-word large chunks of other people's work. I'm talking about tried-and-tested formulas that are proven to get results.

People like Victor Schwab, John Caples and David Ogilvy spent years – *decades* – testing their advertising to see what worked. From their hard work, we know which headlines work best.

I've included many of their formulas in this guide – but don't forget to keep testing your headlines to find out what works best for **you**.

How to use this guide

Read the guide a couple of times. Get a feel for the types of headlines that work and why. You'll start to see patterns.

Then, when you need to write something specific, start here.

Who is your reader?

Think about your ideal reader. The perfect customer. Who are they? What do they like? What do they dislike? How old are they? What keeps them awake at night, and how can you help them with it?

Find your benefits

Write down all the benefits of your product/service/topic. Why should your reader read your headline? What is the benefit to them? What will they gain, save, become or do? If you're not sure whether you have a benefit, try reading it aloud and then saying: "So what?" If you feel daft saying "So what?" you've found the benefit.

Find your appeal

By 'appeal', I mean the main benefit of your product or service, the one that appeals to your reader's emotions. The appeal is the main reason your reader should do what you're asking them to do.

You might not be asking someone to buy directly, by the way. The action may be to download some information, watch a video, email you an enquiry – or simply read the whole of your blog post. But in each case, you need to give your reader a good reason to do so.

Hang that reason onto an emotion. Does it appeal to your reader's pride? Does it help to alleviate something that angers them? Does it reduce a worry? Will they love it?

Tried-and-tested headline formulas

I've included eight different categories of headline in this guide. Each of them includes one of the following appeals:

- Sex or sex appeal (including love, affection and friendship)
- Fear or anger
- Greed
- Pride
- Duty, honour or professionalism

There are more core emotions than this and more formula categories than eight, of course – and you may well come up with some of your own – but I think these are the most useful for starters. You'll find that some of them fit certain topics better than others.

You might not be able to decide between them. If that's the case, read them aloud to someone who doesn't know what you're writing about. If they're interested, it's probably a winner. Here are the categories:

1. "How to" headlines
2. Testimonial headlines
3. Self-interest headlines
4. Question headlines
5. Fear headlines
6. Prestige headlines
7. News headlines
8. Curiosity headlines

You'll find 10 examples in each category. Some of them cross over and fall into more than one category – all the better. Use these examples as a basis for writing your own headlines. Some of them are real, successful headlines; others are examples. They're all effective.

“How to” headlines

The great advantage of the “how to” headline is that it almost forces you to write copy that your reader will find useful. Although your call-to-action may be to buy (or enquire), the headline itself is simply offering useful information. And that’s attractive.

Everyone is looking for a quick fix or a fast source of information to make their lives better or easier. If you can provide a seemingly easy answer to a reader’s problem, you’ll gain and keep their attention.

Not every headline begins with the words “how to”, but they all imply that the reader will learn something useful.

1. The secret of making people like you

This is a classic irresistible headline. Everyone wants to be liked, and this headline implies that there’s a quick and easy way to get what you want.

2. How to win friends and influence people

The famous book with this title sold millions. We all want to do this. The two little words “how to” are what gives this headline power, though. They promise to show you.

3. How I made a fortune with a “silly” idea

Paradoxes work surprisingly well. They jar the reader’s curiosity at the same time as promising useful knowledge.

4. Why some people almost always make money in the stock market

This headline works because it’s believable. The qualifying words “some” and “almost” promise to show you techniques without guaranteeing results.

5. You can laugh at money worries – if you follow this simple plan

This one also uses believability: it promises a benefit, but not without some (simple) effort on your part.

6. Advice for new mothers – how to worry less and sleep more

Target your reader with pinpoint accuracy by speaking directly to them. It's the next best thing to calling them by name. And you offer them a way to achieve something every new parent wants: more sleep and less worry.

7. When doctors feel rotten, this is what they do

Again, this mixes paradox with advice. You don't tend to think of doctors as feeling ill, so that gets attention – as does the word “rotten”, which is slang. And if anyone knows how to feel better, surely a doctor does?

8. Who else wants to look like a film star?

Jump on the bandwagon with the words “who else”. They imply that what you want to do certainly can be done. They also imply that you don't want to get left behind.

9. How I improved my memory in one evening

This famous headline became a household phrase in the old days. If you're concerned about your memory, can you resist it?

10. Discover the fortune that lies hidden in your salary

This is a proven puller. It plays on curiosity and greed, plus a little laziness.

By starting your headline with “how”, “how to”, “advice”, “why”, or “who else” you suggest a way for them to solve a problem and appeal to people's natural curiosity.

Testimonial headlines

Testimonials are powerful things. They're real-life proof that something works or is worth having. You can give your reader your benefits right from the horse's mouth, so to speak.

If you have testimonials from your customers, use them as often as you can throughout your marketing – including in the headlines.

11. They laughed when I sat down at the piano – but when I started to play!

This famous headline is a testimonial and a good example of storytelling. We all have sympathy with the underdog, and this headline adds a final tag line that turns the negative into a positive.

12. Let me tell you how I reduced my household bills – permanently

Testimonials are powerful things, so use one in your headline. This one promises a benefit that plays on most people's minds.

13. I was going broke – so I started reading the Wall Street Journal

The WSJ is famous for its brilliant advertising. This one subtly implies that the paper helped the subject of the headline to turn his finances around.

14. My career was going nowhere – until I started reading The Economist

The Economist is famous for great ads too. My favourite is: "I never read The Economist." Management trainee. Aged 42.

15. How a "fool stunt" made me a star salesman

This plays on curiosity as well as the reader's aspirations. Plus, it appeals to people who need to sell a product or service, but who isn't a salesman.

16. How a new kind of face cream improved my skin in 30 minutes

The true experience of another person is always interesting. This headline promises a measurable, desirable result.

17. I lost my bulges – and saved money too

This headline has double appeal: it promises to get rid of an unwanted condition and save you money. Unusual words like “bulges” also work well.

18. Imagine me – holding an audience spellbound for 30 minutes!

Everyone wants to be a confident public speaker, but few people have the confidence to try. The surprising self-deprecation of the author lends this headline credibility and promises the possibility that you, too, can hold an audience spellbound.

Testimonial headlines have a couple of advantages. Firstly, they sound conversational. It's like someone is right there in the room chatting to your reader. It's the next best thing to a word-of-mouth recommendation. Secondly, they sound real – because they are.

Self-interest headlines

Do you know what your reader is most interested in? Themselves. We humans find ourselves fascinating. So give your reader exactly what they want: a headline all about them.

There's an incredibly easy way to do this: use the second person pronoun in all its forms. "You" is a very powerful word. If you can get it into your headline twice, as in the first example – all the better!

Another way to do this is to put specific benefits into your headline. It's not enough to tell your reader that they'll save money; tell them **how much** money they'll save.

19. How to plan your house to suit yourself

People think they know better than anyone what will best suit their needs and wants when it comes to home décor and planning. This headline promises a quick guide to enable you to do just that.

20. How much is stress costing your company?

Begs the questions: "Is stress costing us?" "What's causing it?" "How can we stop it?" "What's it costing other companies?"

21. Ten ways to make sure your home is keeping you healthy

There are two appeals here: a list, which promises a quick and easy fix for the reader; and staying healthy, which is a prime concern for everyone.

22. Six types of investor – which group are YOU in?

The emphasis on "you" is an immediate pull. This ad was very successful, because investors read about the six types of investors in the ad to see which type they fitted, then asked about the appropriate scheme for their group.

23. Five familiar skin troubles – which do you want to fix?

The reader automatically wants to keep reading to see if they have one of the five problems. Asking “which do you want to fix” rather than “do you want to fix” is an age-old trick that works well.

24. Whoever heard of losing weight – and enjoying three delicious meals at the same time?

Everyone who wants to lose weight will be interested in this ad. Losing weight while eating three great meals sounds dubious. This headline overcomes the problem of believability by addressing it directly.

25. Corn gone in 5 days or your money back

This is a great advert. It identifies the reader and their problem AND solves it in two words – “corn gone”. Then it gets specific – it’ll solve the problem in five days. And finally, if it doesn’t, you get your money back. Perfect.

26. Hands that look lovelier in 24 hours or your money back

Another headline that promises a specific desirable benefit in a measurable timeframe – and a guarantee to boot. The reader has nothing to lose.

27. The last two hours are the longest – and those are the two hours you save

This was a very successful advert for a faster jet flight. Its target readers were experienced air travellers – so it didn’t matter if others didn’t understand it. Experienced travellers know what the last two endless hours can do to their nerves. This ad hits the pain point and solves the problem.

28. Why your feet hurt

The headline targets its reader unerringly and promises to not only explain their problem – painful feet – but also suggests it might be able to help.

Quite a lot of these headlines ask a question – and that’s another way to grab a reader’s attention. Questions beg to be answered, and we usually can’t resist. Which brings me to...

Question headlines

If you start by asking your reader a question, you’re accomplishing several things.

You’re involving them in what you’re writing. You’re making it all about them. You’re arousing their curiosity.

And, if you’re asking the right questions, you’re conditioning them to say “yes” to you.

29. Did you know you can give your dog perfect nutrition?

More powerful than a simple “You can give your dog perfect nutrition”. This headline involves the reader and promises a strong benefit for their beloved pet.

30. Would you believe there are only 150 calories in this chocolate pudding?

People who are watching their weight but who love puddings will be intrigued by this headline. Keep trim AND eat chocolate pudding? Great benefit.

31. What good are frequent flyer programmes if the miles take off before you do?

A more involving and attention-grabbing way of saying that our frequent flyer programme lets you keep your miles as long as you want.

32. Who else wants lighter cake – in half the mixing time?

There are two strong appeals here: a better cake and time saved. Plus the tried-and-tested “who else” trick, suggesting others have gained as well.

33. Are we a nation of low-brows?

The advert attached to this headline helped to sell hundreds of thousands of inexpensive editions of classic books. At the time, Americans weren't particularly addicted to high-brow literature. This headline encouraged sales, but the use of “we” avoids sounding accusatory and insulting.

34. Would you like to know how to write a killer headline?

If your job is sell something or write copy that sells, the answer to this question is going to be a resounding “yes”. So the interested reader will read on – and you're conditioning them to say “yes” to you.

35. Are you losing money you could easily save?

This headline makes the reader question themselves: “Am I losing money?” Plus, it promises a quick and easy saving if you are.

36. Do you want to save money on your heating bills?

A classic formula. Everyone wants to save money on their heating bills.

37. Do you get tongue-tied at parties?

Another headline that selects its audience with pinpoint accuracy. The reader identifies with the ad, and reads on to find out if a solution will be forthcoming.

It's difficult to ignore a question headline, especially if it hits the nail on the head for you.

Fear headlines

We all worry about something. These headlines are sneaky little critters – but they work. They work because they get right to the heart of what’s bothering us, then they offer to help.

38. Do you make these mistakes in English?

This headline is a direct challenge. “These” is the hook that draws the reader in. “Do you make mistakes in English?” is nowhere near as compelling. The reader thinks, “What are the mistakes? Do I make them?” The headline also promises helpful information: correcting English mistakes.

39. Are they being promoted right over your head?

Here, the target audience is the very large and enduring group of people who feel their hard work and skills are overlooked, while less worth people are rewarded. It hits the pain spot perfectly.

40. There’s another woman waiting for every man – and she’s too smart to have “morning breath”

This toothpaste ad certainly got the attention of women readers. It plays on some women’s fear that there are always more attractive women out there, and their husbands will meet lots of them. It’s a bit dated, sure; but it worked a treat at the time. Chances are it wouldn’t do too badly now.

41. The shocking truth about your bank

This is an old trick that works a treat. Most people distrust banks (and even more so nowadays). The headline plays on that distrust, people’s fear of financial difficulties, and curiosity – what have the banks done NOW?

42. Does YOUR child ever embarrass you?

The headline goes straight for parents' jugular. It's direct and challenging, and mentions a common problem. The ad makes the reader uncomfortable as they remember an awkward situation – but it also implies that the reader can avoid such embarrassment in the future.

43. Do YOU do any of these embarrassing things?

This headline hits the target: nobody wants to embarrass themselves in public. We all fear criticism and negative gossip. The reader is almost forced to find out: “Which embarrassing things? Do I do any of them?”

44. Is the life of a child worth \$1 to you?

There's a strong emotional appeal here: if you spend just \$1 to have your brakes relined, you won't kill a child because of brakes that don't work.

45. Whose fault when children misbehave?

Parents will stop in their tracks when they see this headline. Of course, the fear is that it's probably their fault. Misbehaviour is upsetting and reflects badly on the parent. Perhaps this ad tells them what to do.

46. How safe is your child from these online dangers?

This is a sneaky one. It gets you thinking about possible dangers without beating you around the head with a hysterical headline. Plus, it's specific: not just online dangers, but “these” online dangers. You can check them out for yourself – and perhaps find out what to do about them.

47. Can we really trust our accountants?

Headlines that play on financial concerns are almost always successful. Money is one of our biggest worries – so the suggestion that people entrusted to look after it are untrustworthy is unsettling.

Whatever your product or service, you'll probably be able to relate it to one of your reader's worries or fears. Then you can offer them the solution: this may be simply useful information on how to solve their problem, or it may be an advertisement for your product or service.

Either way, you're helping your reader out with something, and that's a good thing.

Prestige headlines

This isn't *just* about keeping up with the Joneses. It's about personal pride and self-improvement too. And it's about not being left behind, being part of an exclusive club (which is what American Express built its business on).

When you buy a Rolls Royce, you're buying it for the prestige, not because you need a car that gets you from A to B (that's what your Escort is for). When you shop at Harrods, it's not because you *need* things from Harrods, it's because it's Harrods.

Use that in your headlines, especially if you're selling luxury items or services.

48. Be a traveller, not a tourist

There's a certain amount of snobbery involved in travelling. People don't want to be seen as the stereotypical naïve tourist; they want to be seen as sophisticated travellers. This ad promises to show you how to do that.

49. The secret of making people like you

Everybody wants to be liked. This ad promises to show you how – quickly and easily.

50. You know all those smug, wing-tipped, perfectly coiffed, \$2,000 suit-wearing, perfect-smile guys you see flying charter? Be one.

A dash of self-deprecation works a treat. This headline acknowledges the fact that the charter guys seem a little shallow and pretentious – but it also acknowledges that they're successful, and many people would like to be them.

51. Because you're worth it.

A famous headline that boosts everyone's confidence and gives the reader permission to indulge. You ARE worth it, so treat yourself to the best.

52. New cake-improver gets you compliments galore!

This headline plays not only on the ability to bake better cakes, but the improved social status. It makes people think that because of what your product does for them, it makes others think more highly of them.

53. It's a shame for YOU not to make good money – when these people do it so easily

These people are making a great living – this ad will show you how you can too. This ad appeals to greed and the fear of being left behind.

54. For the woman who is older than she looks

This headline generated thousands of enquiries – and did better than the alternative: “For the woman who looks younger than she is”.

55. You don't apply for a Centurion card. You're invited to join

This American Express card was invitation-only. Everyone wants to be part of an exclusive club. It generated a lot of enquiries and encouraged people to join American Express in the hopes that they would get an invitation.

56. A wonderful two years' trip at full pay – but only people with imagination can take it

This advert for a business course ran for seven years. It offers a reward for reading (the trip) and the second line has an intriguing challenge.

57. How I became popular overnight

Everyone wants to be popular. Everyone wants a quick fix. This headline promises both.

The headlines above all relate, in some way, to people's personal pride and status. Exclusivity sells. Rolls Royce drivers know that cheaper cars are just as reliable and well-made – but they're not as prestigious.

News headlines

People love new things. And they love news (just take a look at the number of successful news sites on the internet, if you don't believe me).

If you can promise your reader something new and exciting if they read on, they *will* read on.

There are several ways to imply news in your headlines:

58. Introducing the all-new Mazda MX-5

“Introducing” is a good ‘news’ word for headlines. It suggests something new. Fans of a particular car will certainly be interested in a new model.

59. Introducing a new way to save for your retirement

Another ‘news’ headline – this time with the added appeal of a clear benefit: future security.

60. Announcing a new type of tyre

“Announcing” is another good ‘news’ word, suggesting that here is something new and innovative.

61. An important announcement to homeowners

Not only an announcement, but an important one – about the most expensive thing most people will buy in their lifetime.

62. Finally: an exciting new look that isn't retro anything

“Finally” is another good ‘news’ word. This one also conveys an element of relief: a new look without jumping on the tired old retro bandwagon.

63. New method of keeping your personal finances in check

Anything that can promise a simpler financial life is appealing – especially if it's new.

64. Now in paperback!

The word “now” enables you to make something new out of something old – in this case, a book that's been out for a while in hardback.

65. New shampoo leaves your hair smoother and easier to manage

People with unruly hair are always looking for ways to tame it. Every time a new product comes out, they hope that this is the one.

66. Great new discovery kills kitchen odours quick

News plus a clear benefit = winning headline.

67. At last: running shoes that your knees will thank you for

Similar to “finally”, “at last” also conveys a sense of relief. In this case, running shoes that remove knee pain.

Curiosity headlines

The first thing to say here is that curiosity alone isn't enough in advertisements. Here's a headline that failed. It was for life insurance.

Here's one question you shouldn't ask your wife.

It gives no clue as to the topic, and doesn't offer any benefits. If the reader has time, they might read on... but probably not.

If you can combine curiosity with self-interest or news, though, you're onto a winner.

68. How a fool stunt made me a star salesman

I know we covered this one earlier, but it's a good example of how curiosity alone won't do the trick. "I did a fool stunt" will make the reader shrug and turn the page. But the combination of the curiosity and the benefit works well.

69. What's wrong in this picture?

Coupled with an illustration relating to the topic at hand – etiquette. The reader thinks they know, but they're not sure – so they keep reading.

70. I gambled a postage stamp and won \$35,840 in 2 years

More powerful than "I made \$35,840 in 2 years". The reader wants to know how.

71. How a strange accident saved me from baldness

This headline invites the question, "What strange accident? And how could it cure baldness?"

72. Is £200 per day worth a postage stamp?

A variation on number 70, this headline also benefits from the curiosity factor. The reader automatically wants to know how it works.

73. The secret of how to be taller

This is a great one – how can one possibly become taller? The implication is that the secret involves more than simply wearing stacked shoes...

74. The deaf now hear whispers

A very emotive headline: how amazing for a deaf person to recover some hearing. How on earth did they do it?

75. Discovered – amazing new way to grow hair

This targets bald people perfectly – and promises a new and effective solution to their problem.

76. How to turn 40 without turning to bifocals

A common problem: age-related sight problems. This headline grabs the target reader and promises a solution to their problem: deteriorating sight.

Remember: curiosity alone isn't enough most of the time. Don't try to be clever – people don't have time to indulge you. They haven't asked for your advert or article, usually – and even if they have, you still have to give them a reason to read it.

HOWEVER – Drayton Bird has found that curiosity is enough to get people to open, read and reply to emails. Strange but true. As always, though – test your headlines to see what works for you.

Checklist

Are you ready to write? Excellent. Let's check you've not forgotten anything.

- Have you identified your ideal reader?
- Have you written down your benefits?
- What's your USP (unique selling point)?
- Have you decided on your appeal?
- Pick a headline category

Now, get headlining!

What's next?

This really is a quick-fix guide, to help you write better headlines fast. There's more to it though – much more – and of course you need to write compelling copy too.

Luckily for you, you've signed up to my 49 Simple Marketing Ideas, so you'll be getting lots of helpful hints and tips directly into your inbox.

Plus, I'm willing to help you out personally. If you have a headline you've written and are pleased with, but you're not quite sure of it, email it to me at vicky@vickyfraser.com with your headline as the subject line.

I'll turn it into a blog post on my website and critique it for you (anonymously, of course – unless you want me to name you!). That way, you get help from me, others can learn from your wisdom or mistakes, and I get a blog topic to share. We all win!

Do you have any other burning issues that I can help with? Let me know. Email me at vicky@vickyfraser.com or leave a comment on my blog at www.vickyfraser.com/blog.

Happy headlining!

Warmly,

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