



# Creating Effective Titles and Headlines

## A HOW-TO GUIDE

While writers often have plenty of ideas and discussion points, many lack inspiration for headline writing. Writers will create the article and then tack on a headline right before they submit a piece. This approach can be a



mistake, especially since headlines are responsible for [90 percent of web user clicks](#) — not to mention your revenue.

You could have some compelling content, but no one may read it if a boring title gets in the way. This guide will help you dedicate the necessary amount of time to create effective titles and headlines, while, hopefully, making the writing process more streamlined.

## What Are the Basics of an Effective Headline?

You'll find a few standard best practices that everyone tells you to use when you're first starting out. By applying these basic rules, you should be prepped and ready to create standout titles and headlines.

### START WITH THE J-SCHOOL FIVE W'S AND H ...

Your headline should tell readers exactly what they're going to take away from the article. Although this guide is a how-to e-book, a few words could easily change the premise. "Why great titles and headlines are important." "Who writes amazing titles and headlines?" Both of these titles would lead to completely different articles despite the topic remaining the same.

While identifying which of the five W's — who, what, when,

where, and why — gets featured might seem like an entry-level step, that extra bit of vigilance can help you develop stronger topics and let readers know what they're getting into.

Often, great titles and headlines get created in the ideation process, and they tend to be more of a half-thought than a cohesive article idea. For each catchy headline that would attract clicks, create one news headline that answers your W's.

Let's take a look at an example: Your original headline reads, "X Brand Water Bottle Is the Best Product Ever!"

Your news headline could be any of the following:

"Why X Brand Water Bottle Is the Best"

"How People Can Use X Brand Water Bottle"

"The Places You Should Take X Brand Water Bottle"

Now your editor and writers know exactly what to expect in the article even if you choose the original version.

### ... THEN ADD THE FOUR U'S

[Marketing experts Neil Patel and Joseph Putnam recommend](#) the four U's for titles and headlines: be unique and ultra-specific, convey a sense of urgency, and be useful. They admit that one rarely finds all these criteria in one headline, but these items add an extra layer to the headline or title creation process.



Let's go back to the earlier water bottle example. When you follow the four U's, the headline becomes more appealing almost instantly, like in the examples below.

### Unique

"This is the Water Bottle You Want During the Zombie Apocalypse"

### Ultra-Specific

"This Condensation-Creating Water Bottle Will Be Your Bike Companion for Life"

### Urgency

"Get This New Water Bottle Before Your Next Run or You Won't Fully Quench Your Thirst"

### Useful

"This New Water Bottle Saves Bikers Hundreds of Dollars Annually"

Most of these headlines answer the why question, but they are still more detailed than the original. These examples illustrate why you should always try two to three headline alternatives. You can always find something better.

## LEARN THE RULES TO BREAK THEM

Now that you have the four U's, the five W's, and an H, would you like to buy a vowel? Understanding the rules of headline building is a smart place to start, but the next step is to break everything you've learned. With great titles and headlines, you will be able to create tutorials without using the word how or get people to click without an imposing call to action. The rest of this e-book will focus on breaking the rules while still coming up with standout titles and headlines.

## How to Use Common Tools and Formulas to Create Titles and Headlines

If you've been blogging for years but still lack inspiration, it's OK. You may struggle with the initial idea. We recommend using the following tools to generate titles and headlines, and then work backward through your content to come up with something better.

## PLAY WITH SVO-STYLE TOPIC IDEATION

When you're under pressure to create multiple titles or headlines in a hurry or you need to get some thoughts out of your head, write a bunch of words on a whiteboard in three columns:

### Subject

Marketers, Marketing Managers, Interns, Clients

### Verb

Optimize, Improve, Reduce, Grow

### Object

Remarketing, SEO, Budget, Audience

Instantly, you can come up with several headline and topic ideas around this list. You can go from the simple, "How Marketers Can Optimize their Remarketing Program," to something more catchy, "Marketing Managers Want to Reduce Their Audience — Here's Why."

When generating large amounts of content, such as when you're planning your editorial calendar for the month, develop a list of five to 10 different subjects, verbs, and objects, then pair them together to form separate concepts. When most of the topic creation is done for you, you can focus on mastering the title and headline.

## PRACTICE WITH HEADLINE GENERATORS AND INTERNET GAMES

While you have no reason to rely on headline generators to create headlines — we know you can do it better than they can — these tools can be used as a fun game to get your creative ideas flowing. Portent has an [Idea Generator](#) that takes one subject and loops different hooks around it. This tool also explains why it added each hook. [Title-Generator.com](#) creates 700 headlines around one topic all at once.



Image via [Portent](#)

We play with these games when we're bored because they help us discover different leads we've forgotten about. We all get into a rut with "X Tips ..." or "Your Guide to ..." that we forget about distinctive hooks: "Old School Ways to ..." or "Never Suffer the Side Effects of ...."

Making anything a game — headline creation included — and take the creative burden off your brain.

## How to Brainstorm Distinctive Hooks

During the brainstorming process, you need at least three people in the room: someone who knows what has worked for the blog in the past, someone who stays up-to-date with pop culture and the news, and someone who's overly dramatic. Together, your team can build titles and headlines.

### START WITH WHAT MESSAGE HAS WORKED BEFORE ...

Have someone who is familiar with your site content involved in the ideation process to make sure you're not repeating past content. Map out topics that have and haven't been covered, then see if you find new ways that they can be written. Don't worry if you're playing with an old idea, but make sure you have something fresh to give to it.

### ... THEN BRING IN YOUR CURRENT EVENTS EXPERT

The topic is half the battle, but now the time has come to create a great hook. One of the easiest ways is to play with current events. This step is where your pop culture expert comes in to work. Instead of a headline such as, "Why Organic Food Is Good for You," your co-worker will connect the dots and form creations like the following:

"Why Samantha Bee Only Eats Organic Foods — And Why You Should Too"

"Donald Trump Hates Organic Veggies, So Find Them at a Market Near You"

"Forget the FBI, Unlock Organic Apples This Fall"

Instantly, these articles start to form outlines and hooks based on current events. Even if you're looking for a chuckle, adding a newsworthy element to your title or headline can increase clicks and help your overall SEO.

### END WITH AN ELEMENT OF HYPERBOLE

If you're not able to add a news element to your article, or if you think your piece needs something else to end with a flourish, then bring in someone to take the article to the extreme. This addition can give a level of seriousness to the article or lighten the mood.

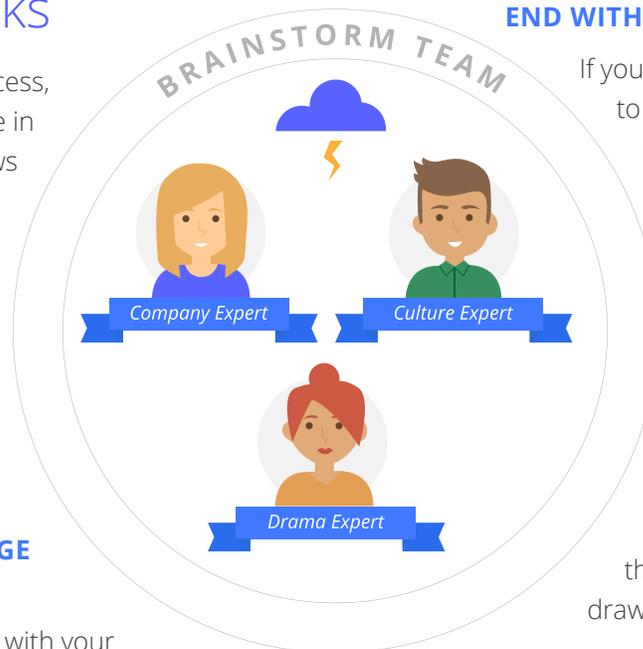
[Think Progress](#) recently covered the effects of global warming on American cities. While they pulled in a direct quote from a scientist, they used a dramatic headline to draw readers into the piece:

*Scientist: 'Miami, As We Know It Today, Is Doomed. It's Not A Question Of If. It's A Question Of When.'*

Meanwhile, [The Bloggess](#), aka Jenny Lawson, often chooses headlines based on her train of thought at that moment, most of which are hyperbolic:

"The 987th argument I had with Victor this week."

Now that you have the basics of title and headline creation and hooks, let's advance a bit. You can expand your headlines for SEO, tailor the message to your audience, and make sure your headline is 100 percent distinctive.



## How to Tailor Your Headlines to Match Your Audience

You might have the best headline concept in the world, but if that idea doesn't click with your audience, then you'll be ignored at worst and receive hate mail at best. Now that you have a bank of catchy titles and headlines, let's find the ones that will actually click with your potential readers — and maybe make a few adjustments.

### YOUR STYLE GUIDE IS YOUR BIBLE

Before you publish any post on any blog, check your style guide to make sure the title or headline choice matches all specified criteria. This check might range from the obvious — avoid swear words and crude references — to the more subtle — write out numbers less than 10.

While the style guide should guide people writing internally, any guest author needs to thoroughly review your guide. Guest authors aren't familiar with your language, customs, and etiquette, so think of the style guide as a crash course on your company culture.

### UNDERSTAND THE SITE'S OBJECTIVES WHEN POSTING

If the style guide doesn't state how to format a title or headline, or if you're still unclear about what's acceptable, then turn to past posts for creativity. Some websites tend to stick to news-based headlines that state the facts, while others get creative to amuse their audience. For example, a little bird landed on Bernie Sanders' podium during a recent speech. News source headlines differed:

- + KY3 TV in Springfield, Missouri  
["Bird joins Bernie Sanders onstage in Portland."](#)
- + The Slot  
["Bernie Sanders Is Literally Snow White Now."](#)

Which is the better headline? The answer depends on your goals. KY3 TV was the source of news and posted the article within hours of the event. Due to its smaller audience and nonexistent audience outside of Missouri, the station hoped to jump ahead of its competition and generate links by being an original source.

The Slot, a subset of Gawker Media, already has a built-in leadership. The author wrote the headline to attract clicks from its already expansive social media base. The author was also able to get more creative because the site wasn't trying to build traffic solely through SEO.

Once you understand why something appears a certain way, and who the website tries to reach, then titles and headlines should flow easily.

### IT'S OK TO POKE THE BEAR

When writing for a new website, pick conservative titles and headlines with limited shock factor. As you grow more comfortable with the style, try getting creative, like adding a metaphor as in The Slot example above.

Long-time bloggers should also variable test headlines to find out whether alternate titles attract more readers. Once your audience starts understanding your formula, the shock factor will wear off, and your engagement will suffer. If the advice to writers is "be careful," then the advice to editors is "give more creative freedom." Take the risk; the headline that turns heads might drive web traffic.

## How to Research Existing Content Before Writing

Content writers produce more than [2 million blog posts](#) each day, so the odds of your title or headline standing out among the rest is slim. However, you shouldn't throw out your amazing ideas or get discouraged by the material that's out there. In fact, when done well, similar existing content can actually make your articles stronger.

### DO YOUR HOMEWORK TO DISCOVER WHAT MATERIAL EXISTS

Start by searching Google and Bing to see what exists. First, search for your exact headline, then expand to general words and phrases for optimization. For example, let's say a pet care blog wants to create an article about dog training:

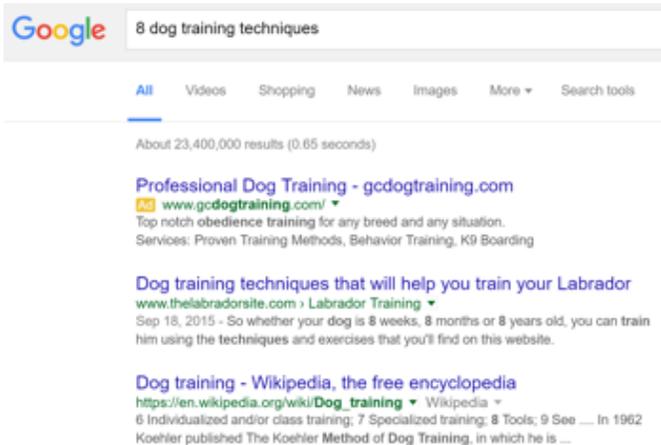


Image via Google

It's OK if your headline exactly matches ones you find in your search — congratulations, Google, you're doing a good job. Take the top articles that display in your search terms and ask yourself how you can make your article better.

- + The top listicle discusses only 10 tips to train a puppy. We could talk about 15 or 20.
- + We could specialize and talk about training small dogs or full litters.

Once you have ideas for exact-search improvements, take a step back and search for synonyms and phrases that an audience might use. Once you fill your inspiration board with synonyms, test them in your headlines:

- + 8 Housetraining Tips to Use When Your Puppy Pees in the Bed
- + How to Housetrain Your Dog Like a Kid

## CONDUCT YOUR SEO RESEARCH

Use the research process to double-check your title or headline for SEO value. You might get so caught up in your own jargon that you forget to add in a specific keyword or phrase. WordPress offers [several keyword tools](#), such as Rank Checker or Yoast, to find a particular keyword's viability. Other tools, such as the Google Adwords keyword section, can display words and phrases that have performed well for you, both organically and paid search, in the past.

You'll find it easier to identify these keywords during the ideation process instead of at the end of writing.

Buzzwords crammed into a headline are easily spotted and tend to ruin the flow. By identifying them early, you have a better chance of creating a title or headline your audience loves.

## IT'S OK TO BE UNORIGINAL. WAIT .... WHAT?

Those words might be blasphemy in a guide about creating original titles and headlines, but listen: It's okay if someone wrote about your article idea in the past — challenge yourself to write one that's better. The research process isn't meant to dishearten you. Instead, it's meant to find the competition and give you an idea of what you need to beat.

With each competitor's article, ask yourself the following questions: How will my article be better? How will my article be different? As long as you commit to quality, then your search rankings will follow.

## How to Adjust Your Headline Before Publishing

At the beginning of this e-book, we called out people who apply a headline seconds before publishing their articles, but we want to be clear about something: It's okay to save title and headline creation for the end of the article if that's what works for you.

### ASK YOURSELF WHETHER OR NOT THE ARTICLE ANSWERS THE HEADLINE

If you want to explain how to do something, does your article actually make an explanation? Do you focus more on the why aspect?

Occasionally, an article gets derailed because the writer gets so focused on a specific point and headline gets ignored. Changing your headline because of your body content is good: It's easier to change 10 words instead of 10 paragraphs, plus you can save your initial headline for a future article.

### REVIEW YOUR CONTENT, THEN SEE IF YOU FIND SOMETHING BETTER

Even if your article technically answers the question or statement addressed in your headline, you could find a

better idea hiding in the body.

The 2016 presidential race is full of examples. Reporters might draft dummy headlines before going into an event, such as “GOP Candidates Debate Foreign Policy,” but the headline quickly changes as the content takes shape. This reality explains how we have such headlines as [“Top GOP Debate Moments: ‘Hand’ Size, Yoga, And Torture, Oh My!”](#) and [“Trump And Cruz Engage In Lofty Intellectual Debate Over Whose Wife Is Hotter.”](#)

One common tactic in headline creation is to pull out one main point when covering a whole topic. In the presidential campaign examples above, media sources cover much more about the debate beyond Marco Rubio’s hands, but that detail is what catches the eye of a casual reader and drives discussion. Review your finished product to pull out a quote, highlight, or subhead that will build interest and generate clicks.

### WARNING: IF YOU’RE GOING TO BE EDGY, GET AN EDITOR

Actually, let’s correct that statement: Always have an editor. With an editor, you won’t publish an article about an [amphibious pitcher](#) taking the mound.



Image via [New York Daily News](#)

However, if you try to push your limits by creating edgy, clickable headlines, ask your editor, friends, or co-workers if you think the style is appropriate. [People get fired](#) for including slang, swear words, and racial slurs in their titles and headlines because they try to be edgy or funny.

You might think your suggestion is hilarious, but the public won’t.

### PUT THE CHICKEN BEFORE THE EGG

Many of our writers ask what comes first, the headline or the content? The answer depends on your writing style. Some people come up with a fantastic title or headline first, then backtrack through the research and writing process. Others create a finished product and crown it with a fantastic title.

If you favor one option over the other, we recommend changing your flow at least once to see how the other type lives. Use different ideation tools to keep your creativity from going stale.

Naturally, you don’t have to use all these steps when writing a title or headline, since some ideas will be more useful than others. You don’t necessarily have to connect an article about baking cookies to Kim Kardashian or Kim Jong-Un. These ideas are more to help make sure you have the best title or headline so that all of your hard work [writing content](#) doesn’t go to waste.

As you set out to write your titles and headlines this week, challenge yourself to dedicate double the time you usually do to position your title. Use that time, even if you have only a few seconds, to research what material is out there or come up with a few alternative hooks to entice your audience. That extra time can make a difference.

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