

Grab ‘em with Killer Heds

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Early in my career as a journalist I spent a trial week on the copy desk – the “rim” – at The Boston Globe. I didn’t get the job. The reason? My editing was fine, said the copy chief. My headlines (“heds” in old newspaperese), were not so fine. I’ve been a rabid headline reader, and writer, ever since.

How do you become a great headline writer? Fifty percent of the job is understanding how and why good headlines work. The other 50 percent is the same way musicians get to Carnegie Hall: Practice, practice, practice.

Absolute Rule Number One when it comes to writing headlines, as with any other writing, is to know your audience. Know who they are, what they do for a living, how old they are, what excites them, what scares them, what they need or want to know. Until you know all that, you can’t decide what to do next.

Rule Number Two: Writing headlines for print is different from writing them for digital media. One reason is that digital media heds often stand alone, without their context – like an E-Newsletter subject line, or the hed on this article before you clicked on the link. So they have to work twice as hard to lure the reader in.

The other reason is that online readers are in a tearing hurry. Capture them in a few seconds or they’re gone.

The rule for a straight news story headline is that it must contain a subject and an active verb: “Monks Riot in Myanmar” “Glaciers Shrink at Alarming Rate”. The more active the verb, the better.

Feature story heds, on the other hand, can be indirect, even teasing. They’re aimed at capturing readers’ curiosity so they’ll read more to find out what the story is about. Often, these heds use word play or even puns. Again, they work better for print than for digital media.

Some heds are really more like book titles – “A Traveler’s Diary,” for example. These also work better for print, and it’s hard to make them grabby.

For digital media, the How-To hed is usually a winner. (Provided, of course, that the reader wants to do whatever the how-to promises.) Examples: “How to Avoid These Common Grammar Mistakes” and “How to Negotiate a Raise”. And my favorite: “How to Write Headlines Even a Corpse Would Read,” found in Google.

Another perennial winner -- so perennial it's a cliché -- is the numbered list, with all its variations: “7 Steps to Six-Pack Abs”, “5 Ways to Get a Job in IT”, “8 ways to succeed as a copywriter.” It's best to make sure there aren't too many steps – not more than 20. Fewer than 10 is better.

Glance at the tabloids in grocery store check-out lines and you'll see a lot of “Command” headlines: “Lose 20 lb. in 5 weeks” “Learn to Handle Difficult People”. These are used about equally in print and online.

Some heds ask questions readers want answered. “Want to Grow Rich?” “Does Your Boss Value Your Contribution?”

“Secrets of ” heds are often effective. “Secrets of Getting Published” , for example, or “Secrets to Reading Your Teenager's Mind”.

Then there are “What you need to know” heds. “What Communicators Need to Know About the New Media” or “What Bloggers Need to Know about SEO”.

There are many more, which you'll discover just by looking for them as you read.

How to hone your headline skills? Read direct mail pieces. Read the cover heds of magazines, and the check-out line tabloids. Read blogs like Brian Clark's Copyblogger, a real boon to copywriters.

Just one warning: A great headline makes a compelling promise. Write one, and you're obliged to make sure what follows delivers on your promise.