



10 BEST PRACTICES FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE WHITEPAPER TITLES

IT'S ALL IN THE NAME!

As cliché as it sounds, a title can make or break the success of your marketing asset, no matter how strong the writing itself is. Consider the following: Copyblogger and Quicksprout report that about 8 out of 10 people will read the headline of a marketing asset, but only 2 out of 10 will actually read the asset in its entirety.

Clearly, writing a headline that attracts and captures people's attention is crucial. And as long as you deliver on what you promise within the content itself, headlines have an effect on conversions, as well as leads.

With that said, let's examine some of the most popular and successful headline practices for whitepapers.



HOW TO CRAFT A HEADLINE THAT MAKES HEADS TURN

There are many systematic ways to create titles. However, we found the method developed by the team at Buffer to be particularly useful. They separate the different approaches to writing headlines into three categories:

- The **psychological approach** employs words and expressions that appeal to readers' desires or needs, their intelligence, and their curiosity.
- The **formulaic approach** presents a handy way of crafting headlines that follow a specific formula, which is easily recognized by readers and carries a practical message.
- Finally, the **scientific approach** to creating good titles is based on solid research, including studies conducted by Buffer, Hubspot, and Outbrain that will be explored throughout the whitepaper. This approach analyzes which words capture and attract readers' attention based on data and statistics.

Often, these three approaches overlap and support each other: the formulaic approach can utilize psychological triggers, or it can make use of certain words that have shown to be successful in captivating readers.

Conversely, you may also find that these approaches are sometimes at odds with each other. Still, the rules remain the same – test, analyze, draw conclusions, then try again. Let's go into more detail with some hands-on tips.



THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CREATING WHITEPAPER TITLES

1 Create Surprise

Surprise is an essential component of a headline that draws attention. It works by creating a break in the norm. When readers expect something to read one way, it can be beneficial to surprise them by inserting words that create a dissonance between their expectations and what is offered.

For example, we could have titled this piece, *“Use These 10 Best Practices on Titles for Whitepapers – or Risk Failure”* with the hopes of stirring people’s interest. (The negative twist at the end is something we’ll explore later.)

EXAMPLE

Be the Shakespeare of Facebook: The Enormous Guide to Writing Spectacular Social Media Updates

By Kevan Lee



The Shakespeare of Facebook? What?!

When it comes to using surprise in a headline, what’s the difference between using a catchy vs. a clickbait title? Clickbait might be effective for catching the reader’s eye (leading to more traffic), but there’s also an irksome aspect to it, which in the long run might turn away your audience.

Your title can still be catchy, punchy, or even cheeky, but there’s a fine line between those types of words and clickbait. The main distinction between the two is that good content delivers on the promise it has made, sustains interest, and most importantly, offers value.



2 Ask Questions

Good content communicates with its audience. A title that strikes up a conversation by asking a question is therefore a great way to attract readers' attention. [Questions pique curiosity](#) by challenging what readers know and understand. And if they don't know the answer, a question urges them to continue reading until they discover it.

EXAMPLE

Can You write a Better Headline Than This? Not Using Old Headline Formulas You Can't



An example of a [question headline](#) from Kissmetrics

When formulating headlines as questions, be careful that you don't fall into the clickbait hole. Many writers have a negative view of titles that ask questions because they often come across as merely attention-seeking. Furthermore, according to [Betteridge's Law of Headlines](#), if you can answer any "question-headline" with a "no", it's probably not particularly useful or informative.

To avoid this pitfall, provide readers with a solution to your challenge. For instance: *"Want to Know How to Craft the Best Whitepaper Headlines Here Are 10 Tried and Tested Approaches"*.

EXAMPLE

A Scientific Guide to Writing Great Headlines on Twitter, Facebook and Your Blog

By Leo Widrich



3 Engage Curiosity

Curiosity and surprise go hand-in-hand. One way to trigger readers' curiosity is by inferring that there's something valuable within your content that they may not already know.

Buffer offered [writing guidelines based on science](#) as a way to pique readers' curiosity.

For example, you could test their knowledge directly: "So You Think You Know How to Create Great Whitepaper Titles? Let's Find Out!" This title promises to either appeal to the reader's ego by affirming what they already know, or to give them new information altogether in other words, it sparks curiosity with the implicit promise of widening their understanding.

4 Be Negative

Being positive can work, but sometimes being negative is better. By analyzing more than 65,000 titles, [Outbrain found](#) that titles utilizing the negative superlatives “*hever*” or “*worst*” performed 30 percent better than titles without superlatives, while those with positive superlatives had a 29 percent lower performance than neutral ones.

EXAMPLE

Stop Writing Boring Headlines: 11 Types of Headlines That Pique Reader Interest

By Nell Patel

Neil Patel uses two negative words [here](#) that draw attention - “stop” and “boring”

Similar results were also [reported by Oribi](#) several years ago: when using “*without*,” “*stop*,” and “*no*,” content saw a drastic increase in click-through rate (CTR) and overall performance. These results might be explained by people’s suspicion of overly positive things, which often can seem too good to be true.

Whether it’s “*10 Tips for Crafting Whitepaper Headlines You Can’t Do Without*” or “*10 Whitepaper Title Tips That Will Kill It*,” make sure you try out a number of options before deciding on whatever title feels most engaging, yet also intriguing.



THE GOLDEN FORMULA(S) FOR CREATING THE BEST WHITEPAPER TITLES

5 Tell Them “How to”

A “How to” headline promises that the forthcoming content will provide clear, structured steps to take in order to achieve something; it speaks to the audience’s desire to have clarity, and even predictability at times. Human beings have often been described as “*cognitive misers*,” which simply means that we usually prefer clear directions that help us navigate the world and perform our job more easily, without the added effort of having to figure it all out by ourselves.

EXAMPLE

How to Drive Traffic to Your Blog With a Few Easy Optimizations

By James Johnson



This “How to” headline from CoSchedule also highlights something “easy”

Therefore, the “How to__” formula is always a good call whenever you have tips, advice, and guidance to offer that are both practical and specific. Variations of this formula allow you to supply further details or specify the target audience. For instance, “How to Create Whitepaper Titles Like a True Marketing Expert” is one such example.

Other examples include:

- “How to ____ for Beginners”
- “How to ____ in ____ Steps”
- “How to ____ Without ____” (this makes use of a negative word, as well)

Furthermore, you don’t necessarily have to begin with “How to.” Testing your titles may show that in certain instances, “The [Beginner’s] Guide to __,” “An Introduction to __,” “The Secret of __,” and “X Ways to __” may work better than the classic “How to” title.

6 Make A List

Much like “How to” titles, lists help us manage our expectations by creating clear expectations about what we will receive from the content. The occasional “+” after a number may engage readers further, as offering “more than” a certain number of something can create a sense of limitlessness. Furthermore, bigger numbers, as well as odd-numbered lists, have also been [found](#) to generate more attention than even-numbered ones.

EXAMPLE

30+ Ultimate Headline Formulas for Tweets, Posts, Articles and Email

By Kevan Lee



Some of Buffer's most successful posts are lists.

The Ultimate Headline Formula, [as described by Lenka Istvanova](#) makes use of this approach and combines it with a number of other techniques.

The formula goes like this: "Numbers + Adjective + Target Keyword + Rationale + Promise" Here's how we could reframe this whitepaper's title using this technique: "10 Best Practices for Whitepaper Titles That Incease Traffic." Simple, but powerful.

7 Address You Readers

Directly addressing your target readers (also called "audience referencing") is useful because it clearly specifies who an article or whitepaper is speaking to. Much like asking a question in the title, audience referencing strikes up a conversation with your intended audience or buyer persona. Generally, people prefer to be named and identified, and specifically addressing them could mean they will be more likely to respond.

This can be done by using the second-person personal pronoun "you," or by addressing them by a title they identify with - marketer, CEO, chef, blogger, banker, and so on.

EXAMPLE

Publishers: Thinking of Incorporating Ecommerce Into Your Business?

Written by Corey Beale

A Hubspot headline that addresses the audience directly and asks a question

For example, "10 Killer Whitepaper Headline Techniques for B2B Marketers" combines the technique of using a list, a fairly strong and even negative word ("killer"), and specifying that it is for professionals who operate in a B2B environment.

8 Make Your Title SHINE

Another great technique to employ when crafting your headline is the [SHINE formula](#), developed by Kissmetrics, which stands for Specificity, Helpfulness, Immediacy, Newsworthiness, and Entertainment value.

EXAMPLE

How Kissmetrics Helped Smart Increase Monthly Revenue by 120%



This Kissmetrics headline perfectly exemplifies the SHINE formula

Although this formula doesn't enforce a particular set of words or a specific structure, it does offer a set of components which, when brought together, supply both the necessary information and incentive that readers look for in a title. Of course, this can be combined with other formulas and techniques we've previously mentioned.

Here's how we could revamp the title of this whitepaper using the SHINE formula: "10+ (specificity) Great Practices for Whitepaper Titles (newsworthy) You Can Learn Now (immediacy) That Will Help You (helpfulness) Rock It (entertainment)".

THE SCIENCE OF CREATING EXCEPTIONAL WHITEPAPER TITLES

9 Use Brackets

In analyzing headlines and titles, Hubspot and Outbrain came across [a number of findings](#) about the power of brackets in relation to the use of certain words. Through their research, they measured the effect that words and symbols in titles have on the traffic, engagement, and conversions they generate.

EXAMPLE

How to Make an Animated GIF in Photoshop (Tutorial)

Written by Lindsay Kolowich

Hubspot often uses [brackets in headlines](#) - and their research shows it's worth it

One useful finding that made is that the use of bracketed clarifications in titles (such as [Infographic], [Template], [Free eBook], or [Free Download]) significantly increases the CTR on articles, as well as page views and conversion rates (CR), since they specifically detail the type of content readers can expect to get. Among these, infographics and templates fare particularly well.

10 Use “Photo,” “Who,” “Amazing,” and “Need”

Other interesting findings from Hubspot regarded the use of words like “photo” and “who,” which showed a consistent and significant increase in CTR.

By including “amazing” in your title, you are risking a decrease in CTR, but Hubspot’s data shows that on the other hand, it may cause a notable increase in page views and conversion rates. In other words, those who are not turned off by that word tend to engage with your content and eventually convert better.

Finally, using the word “need” shows similar results with regards to CTR and page views, because it comes across as pushy and too urgent. Yet interestingly, it can increase conversions.

EXAMPLE

The Amazingly Simple Anatomy of a Meaningful Marketing Story (Infographic)

Written by Demian Farnworth

A great example of a Copyblogger headline that makes use of both “amazing” and brackets

Hubspot also found that words such as “magic,” “trick,” “always,” and “best,” as well as “you” and “how to,” have low and even negative indicators with regards to CTR, page views, and conversion rate. This is partly due to the effect that clickbait titles have had on viewers over recent years.

On the other hand, the interpretation of that data depends both on the context you are writing in, as well as on the other words in your titles, so don’t feel the need to completely eliminate “you” and “how to.” When implemented correctly, a “How to” structure can yield tremendous results.

ANALYZE YOUR TITLES

If you’d like to get a second opinion on your whitepaper titles (apart from your colleagues’ thoughts), a number of helpful tools are available.

In particular, CoSchedule’s [Headline Analyzer Tool](#) and Advanced Marketing Institute’s [Emotional Marketing Value \(EMV\) Headline Analyzer](#) are two that offer complementary thoughts on the value of your title. These tools provide further food for thought regarding what your headline communicates. They can also raise questions as to whether or not it is tailored to your audience.



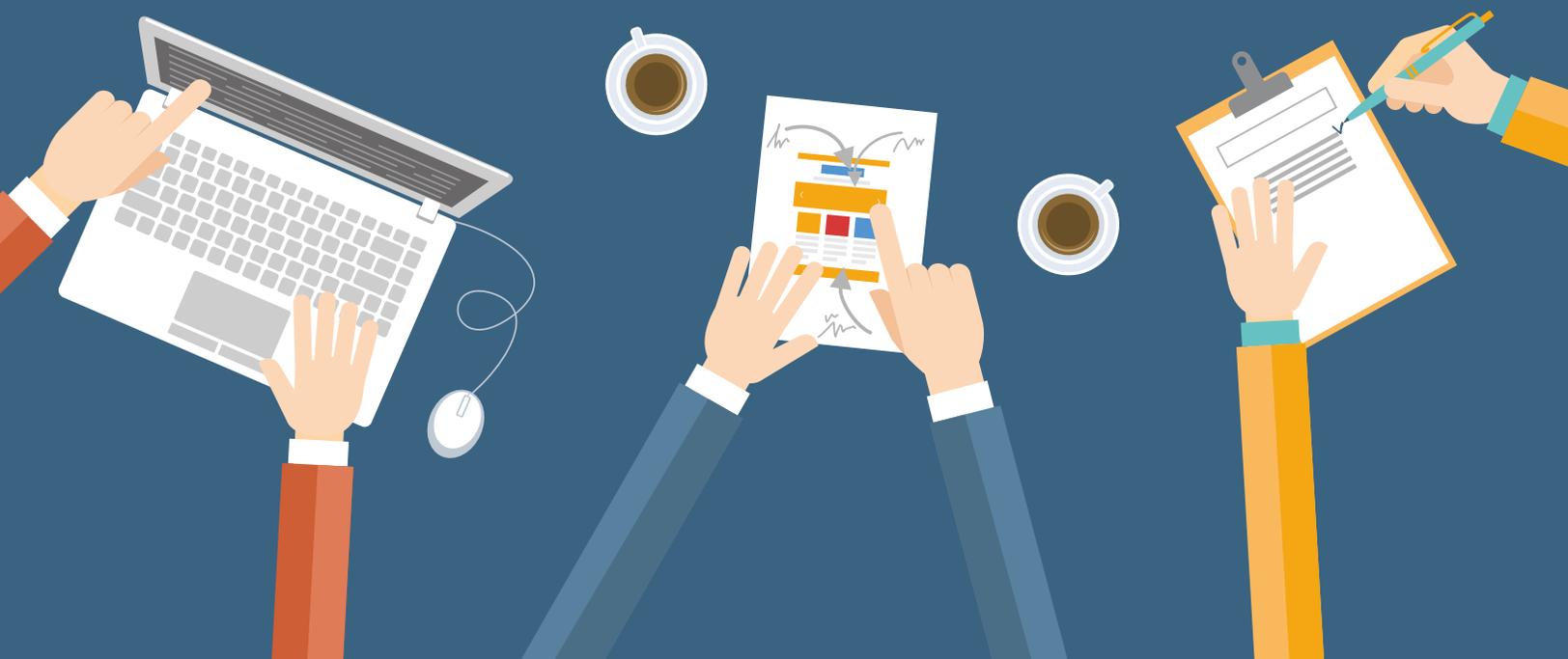


READY TO WRITE SOME TITLES?

The point of the above practices, tips, and tools is to make us aware of what writing a compelling headline entails. In the end, marketing should be guided by results, analytics, and internal and external feedback so that it remains true to its context, audience, and industry.

This should also help lessen the confusion surrounding what the “ideal” headline is - the ideal headline is only part of a greater whole and is not a guarantor for success. It simply increases the likelihood of your content being noticed and engaged with. It may increase page views and conversions as research has shown, but only if you deliver on what you promise.

So in coming up with strong whitepaper headlines, be sure to double check that they deliver on the value they promise, paying careful attention to how they address readers and whether they are specific enough. Once you’ve mastered that, you can play around with them until you find what works best.



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