For the past few months I’ve contacted countless writers from websites like Inc, Buzzfeed, Forbes, Entrepreneur, and my home site, The Huffington Post, to get their input on what makes a great headline. In the broader sense, I also want to know what makes some articles go viral on social media while others get left on the homepage, collecting dust.

I had the great fortune of having two incredible writers respond back to me for input, while most of the others I contacted either had too much to do, or didn’t respond to me at all. Those writers were John Rampton, a serial entrepreneur who, crazy enough, contributes at Entrepreneur.com, and Matthew Jones, a life coach and licensed therapist who regularly contributes to Inc.com.

Matt told me during our communications that “Headlines are the most underestimated and the most significant factor in viral articles.” If a contributor at Inc.com is telling me that, those reading best believe this is the truth.

Along with their responses, I also decided to take it upon myself to do some of the legwork. I scoured the internet for my favorite headlines, wrote them all down, and analyzed the crap out of them to find out what made me want to read them.

Together with the generosity of those writers that did respond to my inquiry, I believe I’m ready to deliver something well worth your time. Let’s jump right in.

**Audience**

First off, I hate generic pointers like “know your audience.” What does that even mean? Should I go knock on their door and have dinner with them?
After analyzing 17 different headlines, along with looking at a few of my own that had success, I’ve surmised that humans read headlines for three reasons.

To Escape

Work (most times) sucks, the daily grind sucks, and sometimes we want to look at 42 hilarious Tumblr posts featuring cats. In a broader sense, when I say “escape,” there’s two parts to that—humor and drama. We read articles because we want to get lost in laughter or heart-pounding drama. Liken this to the same reason we read books or watch movies.

To Be Moved Emotionally

Some of the best headlines rock us to our core. They suggest struggle, and pain, and a new way of looking at life. Sometimes we have no choice but to click and read the entire thing.

To Stay Informed

Go on Entrepreneur.com and you’ll find 75 percent of the articles there offer up business tips and advice promising to help us achieve our goals. I, for one, love reading Entrepreneur. They really unlock that desire for me to become the best person I can be, which is something the best headlines do with ease.

Understanding your audience really means understanding human beings in general. We all like to be entertained, moved, and informed. Chances are if your headline hits a bullseye on any one of these, you’ll be golden.

Before We Start, Let’s Look At Statistics

After dissecting 17 articles, I found that most times their headlines never exceeded 11 words. In fact, the average came out to be somewhere near 10 words per headline. WebpageFX, a full-service internet marketing company in Harrisburg, PA, released a brilliant article stating that most times you shouldn’t exceed 8 words in a headline. I actually used one of their tips when crafting the headline to this article.

5 Headline Practices for Clicks, Shares, and Links

https://t.co/q0BpMYm1OK

— WebpageFX (@webpagefx) September 24, 2016

Also, five of the eight list-based articles exceeded 20 items on their countdown. So if you’re going to write a listicle, keep the headline between 8-11 words, and include 20 actionable items.

Now let’s really get into it.

1. Honesty

7 Shortcuts To Writing A Damn Good Headline
I found that two of the seventeen articles I picked had “brutal truth” located somewhere in the title. One of those articles belongs to my friend Matthew Jones who writes at Inc.com.

Matt told me, “My most successful article to date is 20 Brutal Truths About Life No One Wants to Admit, which accrued over 700,000 views in less than 72 hours. This article was successful because it was genuine, honest, and contained the right amount of depth to support the title.”

700,000 views? Incredible.

The other article I rather enjoyed was Nicolas Cole’s 20 Brutal Truths All 20-somethings Need To Hear. It’s funny how we hate honesty from our friends, but are quick to jump at it when we find it on the internet.

I also put Travis Bradberry’s “10 Bad Habits You Must Eliminate From Your Daily Routine,” under this category as well.

2. Create Drama

In our communications, Matt Jones revealed a secret to me about crafting headlines that I’ve tried to mimic in my own work. He said, “When you’re writing a headline, you need to create a central conflict and drama that entices others to click. Without spending enough time crafting titles, your best work won’t get read.”

Some of the best headlines I saw reflecting this recently was Entrepreneur’s “Before You Use The Public Wifi, Read This” as well as Rachel Ritlop’s “9 Signs You Have No Work Life Balance”

I grouped these first two points at the top because they’re closely related to one another. Drama and honesty go hand in hand.

3. Thrust Your Audience Into The Action

There’s a reason why authors love to get right into the thick of things in the first sentence of their books. Good writers do this on the internet as well with their headlines. Prime examples of this are Samantha Soika’s “Sir Ian McKellen’s Charming Attempt At Getting Cogsworth A Song In Beauty and the Beast,” as well as Liz Ryan’s “The Recruiter Said, ‘You’re Lucky To Get An Interview’”

We’re immediately thrust into a situation, whether it was on purpose or not, and now it’s enticing because we simply have to find out where the rest of the story goes.

4. Tell a Story

Headlines with the promise of a story are simply irresistible to us. The Establishment’s “How I Finally Figured Out I’m Queer In My Late Thirties,” is a good example of a looming story waiting to be told. The same can be said
A great story, no matter what the heck it might be about, is hard for us to resist.

5. Use Humor

Let me just say that Buzzfeed writes some of the best headlines on the internet. They’re fantastic because they’re hilarious. Andy Golder’s “21 Hilarious Harry Potter Tumblr Posts That’ll Make You Realize Some Shit,” comes to mind immediately. I also quite enjoyed an article by Kat Angus called “23 Tumblr Posts About Dogs That You Won’t Get Through Without Smiling.”

Gosh, I just love dogs.

Buzzfeed pretty much built their entire site off of compelling subject lines, and if you want a quick lesson on writing them, besides this article of course, head over to their front page and start taking notes.

Other hilarious headlines I came across were Lilly Workneh’s “Solange Rocked Her First “SNL” Performance Like The Queen She Is,” as well as Michelle Lema’s “Literally Just Adorable Disney Animal GIFs.”

Literally.

6. Hacks

I have a theory as to why seeing the word “hacks” in a headline makes us want to click. The word suggests something unknown—a secret. I believe my friend Matt Jones used this in his article, “The Ultimate Secret About Life (That No One Wants You To Know).”

I remember when my elementary school friends used to lean in and tell me their crushes on the playground. I thought I was getting a breaking story hot off the press.

We LOVE a headline that suggests a hidden truth, or hidden information that not many people know about. As I said before, this is a part of human nature—this is a part of your audience.

Other great examples I saw were Ginger Dean’s “Save A Few Thousand Dollars With These 12 Money Hacks,” and Larry Alton’s “6 Travel Hacks From Experienced Business Travelers.”

7. The Promise Of Fulfilling Your Dreams

The biggest motivator for me personally is self-actualization. I want to do so many things, like write for more platforms, gain readers for my travel blog, and just be a kind, healthy, and successful person.

When I see articles like Han-Gwon Lung’s “5 Rules of Marketing That Will Help You Find The Right Niche and Thrive,” it makes me want to dive right into it. “Thrive” is the key word in that headline. Any article that suggests we’ll get one step closer to our goals by reading what’s inside is a step in the right direction.
I also quite enjoyed John Rampton’s “20 Signs You Are On Your Way To Becoming A Millionaire.”

Like my friend Matt Jones said, a great headline makes or breaks an article. It doesn’t matter whether your content is on the same level as the “The Great Gatsby” in terms of quality—if it doesn’t have a great headline, it won’t get read.

So remember—be honest, sneak in some drama, create a story, be funny, lean in to tell a secret, and speak to our dreams. Oh, and do this all within 11 words.

Happy hunting.

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