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Technical Blogging, Second Edition
Amplify Your Influence

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To my incredible wife, Jessica. And to all the kind souls who helped us in the aftermath of losing our home in an arson fire.

Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people.

➤ *Eleanor Roosevelt*

Creating Remarkable Content

You worked hard setting up and customizing your blog. Now we'll bring all your work to fruition as we shift the focus to what your blog is really about: your content.

Content Is King

In the world of Internet marketing, the common adage is, *Content is king.* All your other efforts are useless if your content isn't compelling. No amount of marketing is going to save you.

From an SEO perspective, content certainly is king. Search engines determine when to show your site on their result pages on the basis of its content. If your article isn't relevant to the user's query, Google won't show it to the user.

So the more articles you have, the more opportunities you have to rank for a wide range of matching queries. The length of the content is also a factor. Long content will naturally match a larger number of queries, and Google tends to favor longer articles over short ones.

It's not just about organic search traffic, though (as opposed to paid traffic, such as traffic acquired via paid ad campaigns). Real people will read the words you write. Boring or poorly written content may trick search engines in delivering traffic your way (though, it should be noted, increasingly less so), but it won't please intelligent humans once they're on your site. They won't stick around or remain interested for long. Above all, they won't sub-scribe, perform your calls to action, or come back to your blog again. It even hurts your SEO, given that Google considers time on page a signal for ranking.

Blogging's many benefits all originate from well-written, original content. Great articles will be linked to more often, be shared more on social media,

and receive more positive comments. No matter your primary reason for blogging, great content is the *conditio sine qua non.*

Now to put things in mathematical terms, content is necessary but not sufficient. The quality and quantity of your posts are key; however, you also need to promote your content to have a successful blog. This chapter delves into the quality side of the equation. The next will take a gander at the role that quantity plays in your blogging. Finally, in , you'll master how to go about letting the world in on your writing.

Tip 21	Write epic content you'd love to read yourself.

Write for the Web

Writing for the web is different from writing a book or a letter. Web visitors skim content rather than reading it word for word. So you need to make the most of their skimming approach. You must lead the user to the essence of your message while arousing their curiosity to read the whole thing.

You only have a few seconds to captivate a visitor, who often has the attention span of a chipmunk on crack. How then do you capture the reader's attention? Let's consider a few do's and don'ts when writing for the web by addressing the three main components of your posts.

Write Killer Headlines

The headline of your posts is what people will notice first. On social media, in Google's result pages, within their feed reader or inbox, most prospective readers will only ever read your headline. It has to be good enough to grab readers' limited attention.

Attention is a precious resource that everyone else on the web is fighting for as well. So it's vital that you write a catchy headline that tells people what the article is about and intrigues them enough to click.

Headlines affect click-through rates more than anything else in your post. All things being equal, a catchy, informative headline will lead to more people checking out your article than if you went with a boring headline.

Inexperienced bloggers will often consider the headline as an afterthought. They'll write their post and then hastily put together a title. That's a mistake. On the other end of the spectrum, you'll have people who write shameless *clickbait* headlines in the format, "X Facts About <TOPIC>; Number Y Will

Shock You!" I call those "BuzzFeed headlines," after the blog that popularized them. I'd stay away from those if you care about your credibility.

Tip 22	Write your headline before your post. This will give focus to your writing.

Enticing, factual headlines can help you succeed without misleading your readers with false promises or offending their intelligence with blatantly clickbait-y headlines. Let's see this at work with a practical example.

Assume that you're writing a review of the search engine DuckDuckGo. Within it, you compare DuckDuckGo to Google. What should the headline be?

1. "Review of DuckDuckGo": This is boring and doesn't tell people what DuckDuckGo is within the headline.

2. "Google and DuckDuckGo: A Tale of Two Search Engines": Definitely honest and interesting. It also contains the keywords *search engines.*

3. "DuckDuckGo Review: A Google Alternative You'll Love": It's catchy, apt to grab the reader's eye, and highly likely to pique their curiosity. You're being bold by telling your readers that they'll love the alternative search engine, but you are not being overly sensationalistic.

4. "The Search Engine That Will Put Google Out of Business": There is bold and then there is unnecessarily sensationalistic. This title would attract clicks, but you stand to lose the respect of many of your readers in the process. The content would, in fact, have to be outrageous to try to justify the indefensible position promised by the headline. Or alternatively, the content might not address the issue in the title at all (and thus be misleading).

The degree of catchiness that you can get away with also depends on your audience and where you promote your articles. For example, Hacker News is a community with little tolerance for sensationalism. In fact, it even frowns upon numbers in lists and the use of exclamation marks, so much so that its moderators remove them from submissions when a story becomes popular.

OK, relevant, catchy, honest. You got it. What else should you consider when writing headlines? Quite a few things, as it turns out. Here is a list of tips you can use to write successful headlines.

- Make your titles stand out by using capitalization. For example, "JavaScript Promises Tutorial: Master Asynchronous Programming" looks better than "JavaScript promises tutorial: master asynchronous programming"

in the title of a post. Style guides (e.g., *APA*, *AP*, *Chicago Manual of Style*, etc.) differ somewhat about which words should be capitalized, but it doesn't matter which one you opt for, as long as you're consistent. I'd recommend using a tool like headlinecapitalization.com to help with capitalization.

- Your titles are a key on-page SEO factor. You should incorporate your main target keyword near the beginning of the headline. If the focus keyword you intend to rank well for is *javascript promises*, the headline "JavaScript Promises Tutorial: Master Asynchronous Programming" is somewhat better than "Master Asynchronous Programming with JavaScript Promises," and both are better than "Asynchronous Programming in JavaScript," which doesn't even include the target keyword. You'd also want to ensure the slug reflects your focus. In this case, perhaps something like /javascript-promises-tutorial.

- You want an SEO-friendly headline, but that doesn't mean stuffing your headlines with keywords. Your headline is not a turkey at Thanksgiving. Write the headline with the user in mind. Yes, it should include your focus keywords, but it needs to read naturally. "Master JavaScript Promises, JavaScript Futures, JavaScript Async, JavaScript Tutorial" not only won't help you to rank, it might hurt you. Google understands the concept of synonyms and what you are trying to pull. In the early days of the web, keyword stuffing was a widespread problem, so Google got really good at finding and punishing such black hat techniques.

  Adopt the mantra, *What's good for the reader is good for my blog.*

- Your headline is typically included in the title tag of your post by your blog engine. It will be the clickable headline shown by search engines and social media sites. It will also be shown by browsers in the title bar or if the reader bookmarks the page. What this means is that you don't have an unlimited amount of characters to work with. If the headline is too long it will be truncated past a certain length. The exact cut-off point varies, because with proportional fonts different letters take a different amount of space, but you should generally aim for headlines that are below 60 characters or so in total. Five- or six-word headlines tend to look good on average. If you use Yoast SEO in WordPress, you'll be able to see if the headline is too short or too long (in orange) or just right (in green). You'll also have a preview of how your post will appear as a result in Google.

- Start your headline with a number. For example, "13 Awesome Features Introduced by ES6." Numbered lists (so-called *listicles*) are always popular

among users and quite fun to write as well. Just ensure to intersperse them with posts of other types. A ratio of three regular articles for each listicle you post would be fair.

- Remember to be useful to your readers. Your headline should sell your audience on the benefits of what you're conveying instead of the features within your article. Why should they bother reading it? Why read it now? In fact, consider introducing an element of urgency, if one is applicable. For example, "Free TypeScript Webinar. Sign Up Before the Deadline!" In this particular case, a strong call to action (i.e., needing to sign up) has also been put out to the reader. If you have a post-specific call to action, including it is a good idea (e.g., "Take My Survey <rest of headline>").

- Don't be afraid to craft question headlines. They directly draw in readers, who'll be eager to express their opinion on the topic and start a conversation with you (e.g., "What Minimum Specs Should Your Development Machine Have?").

- Leverage human curiosity. Whether in the form of a question or a statement, it's okay not to give away the punchline right in the headline. Piquing the user's interest will impact your click-through rates for the best.

- If your post provides *statistics* or *trends* in your industry, definitely include those two keywords in the headline. This is particularly powerful when combined with the listicle format (e.g., "33 Chatbot Statistics and Trends in 2019." When journalists (and other bloggers) are writing articles on a topic, they'll often search for statistics and trends (e.g., *chatbot statistics*). If they find you, they might cite you and usually link to you from a site with high *authority*. This will boost the SEO for your article and, to a lesser extent, your whole blog. It's not unusual for other news outlets to follow suit after the first journalist published linking to you. This can be manna from the sky to a blogger. As usual, don't count on it, but it's possible if you publish relevant content.

- Don't include a year in your headline because it will date your content. Would you really be interested in an article about the "Top JavaScript Frameworks to Learn in 2012" if you come across it in 2019? Probably not. *But Antonio,* I hear you thinking, *you just put 2019 in the headline example within the previous point.* So let me rephrase this. You need to handle years in your headlines with special care. Including a year can be useful. In fact, if I see a headline with 2019 in it and it is 2019, I'm more likely to click on it because I know it's going to be current content and not some obsolete article from a few years ago. I might even place 2019

directly in my initial search query. This is particularly true in the tech space, where information becomes obsolete quickly. So you have a choice to make. You can either skip the year altogether or include it and then yearly go back to update the year (and the content) to keep it current. In light of this possible approach, I would keep the year out of the slug for your post (e.g., /33-chatbot-statistics-and-trends rather than /33-chatbot-statistics-and-trends-in-2019).

- Compare these two headlines: "Tips for Writing Headlines" and "17 Scientifically Proven Ways to Write Better Headlines for Your Blog." Which one are you more drawn to? Most people would opt for the latter. Words like, *proof*, *proven*, *fact*, *scientific*, and *established* add credibility to what you are promising to deliver. Include them when applicable.

- Include *you* or *your*. Typically, people care about one thing above everything else: themselves. So popular headlines that are shared and clicked at large tend to include either of those two words. It tells the prospective reader that the usefulness of the content will directly benefit them. "10 Tips to Improve as a Programmer" doesn't resonate with people as much as "10 Tips That Will Make You a Better Programmer."

- Use superlatives and, more in general, words that inject some emotion into your headline. Superlatives like *best* make your headlines bolder, a positive provided you can justify the claims. Emotional words like *inspiring* or *joy* also can have a positive effect.

- If your post contains an infographic image, a cheat sheet, a video, or other special resources, you'll want to include that in the headline. You could even highlight it by placing it between square brackets (e.g., [VIDEO]).

- Mimic viral headlines with care. Certain partial phrases are common in viral headlines and tend to drive clicks and shares. Examples of these partial phrases are *wait till you see*, *will blow your mind*, *you need to know*, *that will make you*, *what happens when*, and the aforementioned *will shock you*, to name a few. They do work, but in tech circles they'll make your headlines sound like shameless clickbait. Since you're not running a site like BuzzFeed, I would caution you to use them sparingly, if at all.

| Tip 23 | Use an odd number for your listicles. They perform better. |

A Formula for Your First Paragraph

Immediately after the headline, your first paragraph is your article's most visible component. As mentioned before, visitors often (but not always) follow an F-shaped pattern with their eyes when scanning a web page.[1] Your first paragraph has a significant impact on whether your visitors, who were interested enough to click on your article, are actually going to bother reading it.

It's tempting to provide a lot of background info and slowly work your way up to the essence of your post. I recommend that you don't.

Instead, you should adopt the so-called *inverted pyramid* approach to writing that many journalists use. Put the most important information first, starting with the headline and your first paragraph. Proceed to unravel other important details and background information as the article carries on.

Your goal is to prevent people from losing interest and leaving your blog. You need to hook them right away. The tricky part is how to accomplish that. For many technical posts there's a formula that works quite well:

1. Describe a problem that affects the reader.
2. Empathize with them.
3. Promise a solution in your post.

Let's say that you're writing an article on choosing a JavaScript framework. It's going to be a comparison between React, Angular, and Vue for people who are confused about the fast-moving world of front-end development.

You read my previous section and you might come up with the following headline, "React vs. Angular vs. Vue: Which JavaScript Framework Is Right for You?" Great, it even rhymes. Now, let's compare a first paragraph that doesn't use the formula above with one that does.

No formula:

> Modern JavaScript frameworks allow us to build incredible web applications. The common choices are React, Angular, and Vue, though obviously many other choices are available. React was created by Facebook in 2013 to make it painless to create interactive UIs. Angular was created by Google...

With the formula:

> Modern JavaScript frameworks allow us to build incredible web applications. React, Angular, and Vue are all popular options. The problem is deciding which one to learn. It's a process that can feel overwhelming and frustrating. Having worked with all three of them on several projects, I felt I could offer some guidance

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1. nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/

on the issue. In this article, I'll compare the three JavaScript frameworks and discuss the main differences, advantages, and disadvantages of each. I also included sample code for you to toy with.

You'll notice how it describes the problem (i.e., deciding on a framework), empathizes with the reader (i.e., acknowledging the frustration), and finally promises a solution (i.e., guidance and a thorough comparison). In the process, it also establishes your expertise on the topic and some degree of credibility (i.e., "Having worked with all three of them on several projects").

Tip 24	When possible, establish credibility in the first paragraph.

If readers have experienced the frustration of choosing a modern JavaScript framework before and are trying to decide where to invest their limited time, this first paragraph should sell them on the idea of sticking around to read the rest of the post.

From an SEO standpoint, you'll want to include your focus/target keyword in the first paragraph. This further signals to search engines that your post is relevant to that particular search query. In our case, there are a couple of obvious focus keywords: *React vs Angular vs Vue* and *JavaScript frameworks*. Note that Google is smart enough to ignore punctuation, so your properly punctuated use of versus (i.e., *vs.*) will not impact your ranking even if the user is more likely to search *vs* without the period.

Write a Skimmable Post

You have a catchy, bold headline. You have a great first paragraph that connects with users and informs them about how the article will fix whatever it is they are looking to fix. Now it's time to deliver with the rest of your post.

Our goal is to keep readers interested enough to stay with us paragraph after paragraph. But the reality is that most readers will skim the rest of the post at first. So, we need to make the post *skimmable* and effortless.

Your post should not look, especially from the onset, as though it's going to be hard work to read all the way through. Err on the side of larger fonts. If you don't, not only will your post look harder to read, but it will be painful to do so for older or visually impaired readers (who don't use a screen reader).