

Tips on Writing Subheadings

When writing articles for the Internet, you have to break big chunks of text into smaller, more digestible chunks, and introduce each using good, clear subheads. Many readers simply scan through articles to see what grabs their interest.

Subheads tell your reader what you will discuss in each section, and help readers decide whether they want to read all or just parts of your article. Other readers are just looking for a quick answer, and they will likely just skim through your document to find what they need.

Providing good, clear subheads will help your reader get the information they are looking for faster. Here are five tips for writing informative and effective subheads:

Make Your Subheads Complete

Your reader should be able to tell exactly what each section is about just from reading its subhead. Your subheads should be as clear and concise as possible so that there is no question in your reader's mind as to a section's content. For example, a subhead like "Migraines" is not so clear. Your reader might ask himself, "What about migraines?" A more exact subhead is needed. A subhead like "Dealing with Severe Migraines" is appropriate. This tells the reader exactly what will be discussed in that section.

Use Subheads Frequently

If you find that you've gone over a page without a break in text, then you've probably gone too long without a subhead. Look over what you wrote. Can it be broken into two sections? Did you perhaps talk about the benefits and risks of taking aspirin daily on the same page? If so, split up the information and place the benefits information under one subhead, and the risks information under another. This will save your reader time by allowing him to go right to the information he is interested in.

Make Your Subheads Active

With a lot of nonfiction articles, especially how-to articles, you are asking your readers to do something, to perform some kind of action. Because of this, it makes sense to start your subheads with an action verb. For example, when writing an article on how to perform various actions using a word processor such as [OpenOffice Writer], the following subheads are not very informative:

- New Documents
- Tables
- Pictures
- Printouts

These can be changed to a clearer group of subheads that begin with an action verb:

- Opening a New Word Document
- Inserting a Table
- Inserting a Picture
- Printing a Document

Use More than One Level of Detail

If you have first-level subheads throughout your document, then you are off to a good start. Even better, however, is to add another level of detail: second-level subheads. It's a busy world and if you can help your readers pinpoint what they are looking for in a hurry, they will thank you. For example, if you have a subhead that says:

- Setting Up an Exercise Program

You can break it down further by adding these second-level subheads:

Setting Up an Exercise Program

Choose a Time to Exercise

Select the Type of Exercise

Gather your Workout Gear

Make Your Subheads Parallel

Parallelism between your subheads is key to producing a professional piece of writing. Creating unparallelled subheads is a mistake amateurs quite frequently make in their writing. Take a look at this group of subheads from an article on how to find a literary agent:

Talk to Other Authors

How Do I Search Online?

Writer's Conferences

Read these subheads in succession and you can probably hear that the flow is off. The first subhead begins with a verb. The second subhead asks a question. The third subhead is a noun. To make these parallel, you need to choose one style and carry it out for the entire grouping of subheads at that same level. By beginning each subhead with a verb, I've now made these subheads parallel:

Talk to Other Authors

Search Online

Attend Writer's Conferences

You can use any subhead style as long as you carry it out for the entire level. If you want your first-level subheads to ask a question, then all of your first-level subheads should ask a question. Second-level subheads under each group of first-level subheads must also be parallel with each other but do not need to be parallel with the first level.

Keep these five tips in mind when working on your next article and start writing "web friendly" stories.

Source:

Springer, Kristina "Five Tips to Writing Great Subheads"

Online article

"Getting Started: A Step-by-Step Guide to Launching Your Writing Career"

Accessed on 28 February 2011

<http://www.writing-world.com/basics/subheads.shtml>