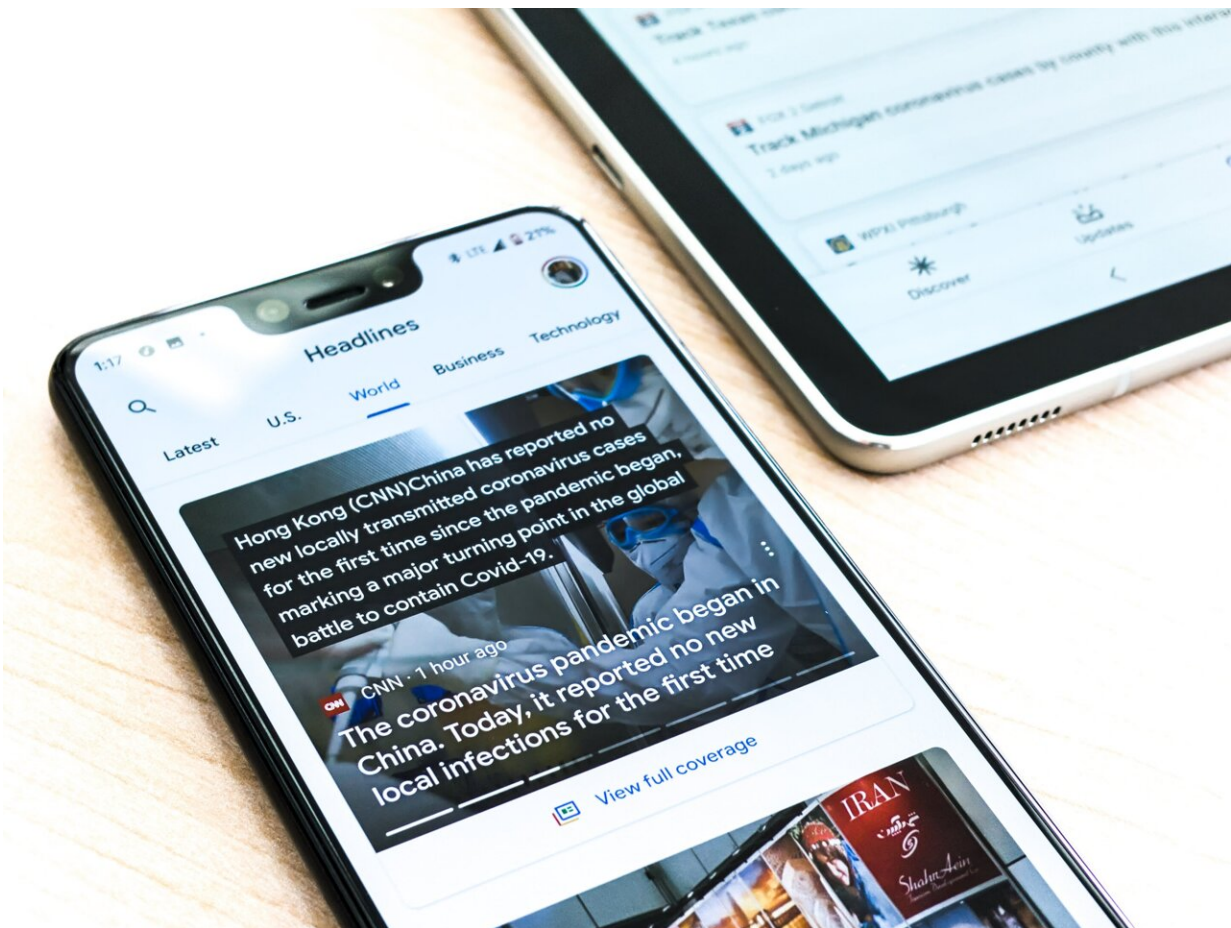


Study finds simple headlines attract more online news readers

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The competition for online attention in today's news environment is

fierce. High-quality news from credible sources must compete for attention with misinformation and a rapidly increasing amount of partisan content.

How can a news organization stand out as a reputable and trustworthy outlet while driving readers to its site?

The answer is simple: literally.

According to research from Michigan State University, news readers engage more with simple writing, suggesting [journalists](#) should write simply—clearly and without ambiguity—to attract attention online. The [study was published](#) in the journal *Science Advances*.

"Newsrooms want engagement, and citizens, in general, want to be informed. Simple writing provides both. It can help news outlets compete in the competitive online attention economy and makes news more approachable to online readers," said David Markowitz, associate professor of communication in the MSU College of Communication Arts and Sciences.

Markowitz and his colleagues on the study, Hillary Shulman, associate professor of communication at Ohio State University, and Todd Rogers, professor of public policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, evaluated over 30,000 field experiments assessing how headlines from the Washington Post and Upworthy impacted how often people clicked on stories. To do this, they developed a simplicity index, which evaluated headlines based on the following criteria:

- Common words, including simple nouns and verbs.
- Readability, reflecting the number of words per sentence and syllables per word.

- Analytic writing, which describes how much a text reflects a story. Texts that score high in analytic writing tend to be more formal and complex.
- Character count, or the raw number of characters per headline.

Data from these experiments found that people engage with and click on linguistically simple headlines more than linguistically complex headlines.

"Simplicity is often preferred linguistically because it feels better than complexity to most people," said Markowitz. "It can impact what people read, what people click on, and how they think about companies and institutions competing for our attention."

"The best way to increase demand for good, credible journalism is to realize that simpler is better," Shulman said.

The researchers also found that complex headlines had less stickiness than simple headlines: readers were less likely to recognize or remember them later, as demonstrated in online experiments.

"Small efforts aimed at increasing the simplicity or fluency of language can increase the attention of casual readers—and also make them more informed and educated about the news of the day," said Markowitz.

And getting the simplicity right can make a significant difference. For example, during the time of the study, the Washington Post had about 70 million unique visitors to its website—that is, readers who did not visit the site twice. If only 0.10% more readers click on a story because it has a simpler headline (2.1% versus 2%) and end up reading three articles on the Washington Post website, that would still equal a difference of more than 200,000 readers.

"This not only makes the news accessible to more people, but it can also help newsrooms with their bottom line. More visitors means ad buyers are more attracted to a publication, which helps a news organization's bottom line," said Markowitz.

Writing for readers

While general news consumers tended to gravitate toward simple headlines, journalists—the ones actually writing the headlines—did not have a preference for simpler headlines and remembered both complex and simple headlines after reading them.

The possibility that journalists are more motivated to carefully read and process the news, relative to general news consumers, may suggest a disconnect between what journalists think audiences want to read and what they actually read.

To combat this, Markowitz recommends that journalism training, whether it be in a newsroom, educational institution or at a workshop or conference, emphasize writing for the average [reader](#).

"It's important that those who are producing news are intentional and thoughtful with their writing," Markowitz said. "In order to get news into the hands of those who need it most, you need a 'keep it simple mentality' and to write for the average reader."

Journalists and writers often refer to themselves as storytellers, and one way to approach simplifying a [headline](#) is to think of it like a story.

"People are more likely to remember stories and experiences. Approaching the news in a more narrative, chronological manner and writing with more common and familiar words makes it more memorable and engaging," Markowitz said.

Markowitz and his colleagues agree that crafting headlines in a simple manner is a small change that makes a big difference.

"Words have power," he said. "Using ones that are clear and concise in news reporting can lead to a more informed public."

More information: Hillary Shulman, Reading Dies in Complexity: Online News Consumers Prefer Simple Writing, *Science Advances* (2024). DOI: [10.1126/sciadv.adn2555](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adn2555).
www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adn2555

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