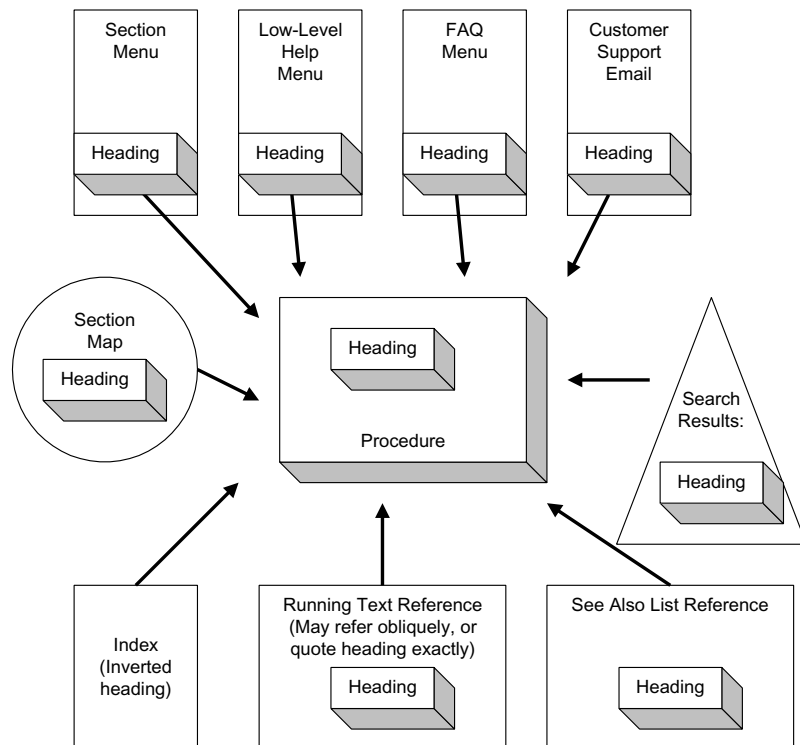


Write a Heading as an Object You Will Reuse Many Times



BACKGROUND |

A heading must be reusable

A heading does more than describe the content right below it. The heading may appear in many other locations—in a menu at the start of a section, in a FAQ menu, inside running text as a link, in search results, and in other menu-like objects. If the heading is also the title of a page, it appears at the top of the window as well.

Plan to use the same heading over and over—as a single object without modification—in almost every location.

*At the day of judgment, we shall
not be asked what we have read,
but what we have done.*

—Thomas à Kempis,
Imitation of Christ

It is reassuring to users to see an item such as Business and Financial Services and, after it has been selected, a screen that is titled Business and Financial Services. (Shneiderman, 1992)

Avoid making people wonder: “Did I land at the page I wanted, or did I make a mistake? Is this the same section I visited before, or is it subtly different?”

Headline text has to stand on its own and make sense when the rest of the content is unavailable. (Nielsen, 1999f)

One exception occurs when you are embedding the heading inside running text, where you lead up to its link, giving some of the context. The full text of your heading may look pretty awkward in this situation. So trim from the end, if you must adjust it. (People expect the beginning text to be the same in both locations).

Generally, though, write so the heading does double duty, acting as the beginning of the article, and—without change—as an isolated advertisement for the contents of that article (as in a menu or search list).

In every circumstance, the heading answers the question: what is this article about?

Write longer headings

Brevity is not a virtue in headings. The purpose of a menu is to reveal all the choices open to a user, but extremely terse headings may be impenetrable, or so general as to be ambiguous. If your team has spent three weeks trying to come up with one-word names for departments, and you keep forgetting the distinction, well, what will your guests think?

Our menus have to explain what a given function does, not just where to invoke it. Because of this, it behooves us to be more verbose in our menu-item text. (Cooper, 1995)

Make the heading fully expressive of the content, so users can distinguish this section from others like it in a menu or a search list. And if you have a department that posts new articles every week, go beyond the department title to describe this week's column in some detail.

Promote topics, articles, guests, or features specifically and dynamically (for example, “This week, Jon Stamos on Freudianism in TVTalk”) as opposed to generically promoting a section of content (for example “See stars in TVTalk”). (Keeker, 1997)

The menu item (a.k.a, the heading) should be distinctive, specific, and long enough to be clear, but not any longer.

Explain what the article is about using terms that a guest might use. No puns, insider jokes, or metaphors—just the gist of the content. Teasing headlines may get people to click and go, only to find the page is nothing like what they expected. As a result, people grow leery of any heading that might mean several different things, or may glance at its subject sideways.

If possible start off with a keyword, so someone skimming through a search list can spot your article under that topic. Of course, struggling to express the content of the article fully, while distinguishing one heading from another, may make it difficult to put an important, information-carrying word first. No one said writing headings would be easy. But the hard work is worth it because guests rely so heavily on the headings when trying to understand your overall structure, predict content, and make efficient choices.

Make the heading complete on its own, too. Do not depend on some higher-level heading as if it were the beginning of a sentence, completed by this heading. Guests may never have seen that higher-level heading.

Compare your heading with others in its menu

Because people may encounter your heading in a menu before they read the page, edit the heading in the context of the other items on that menu.

Precise knowledge is the only true knowledge, and he who does not teach exactly, does not teach at all.

—Henry Ward Beecher

Thought is subversive and revolutionary, destructive and terrible; thought is merciless to privilege, established institutions, and comfortable habit.

—Bertrand Russell

Group together items that refer to the same thing, and then write each heading so a user can tell the difference between each item in the set. In this way, you help users compare, contrast, and choose.

Ensure that items are distinct from one another.
(Shneiderman, 1992)

To show that several headings refer to the same kind of topic (a procedure, say, or a product description), write all these headings in the same grammatical form. Consistency makes people more successful in spotting what the items have in common, and then making a choice.

EXAMPLES

Before

Introduction

Boolean Conditionals

Organizing

Ordering

Outlining

Structuring

Estimation Fundamentals

Pre-submission Circulation

Follow-ups on Comments

Submission Process

After

Introducing the Unified Process

Writing IF, THEN, and ELSE Statements

Organizing Your Time in a Plan

Putting Sections of a Document in Order

Creating an Outline for your Document

What Goes on When You Structure a Document

1. Starting your Estimate

2. Getting In-House Feedback on your Estimate

3. Revising the Estimate

4. Submitting Your Estimate to the Client

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

When people want to be entertained with double meanings, “punny” headings may amuse. But remember that many guests use search engines to discover your page, and a terse, joking, or abstract heading may repel.

TO LEARN

No jokes, please. We’re in school. Flat-footed titles and headings work best.

TO ACT

Make the heading indicate that you are going to tell people how to do something. Use an infinitive, or gerund—*To do*, or *Doing*.

TO BE AWARE

You can’t avoid multiple overtones, and deliberate ambiguity, so ignore the guideline.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Straightforward, consistent headings and titles reassure your readers.

See: Conklin (1987), Cooper (1995), Farkas and Farkas (2000), Keeker (1997), Mandel (1997), Nielsen (1999f), Raskin (2000), Shneiderman (1992), Shneiderman and Kearsley (1989).

For your review only.

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