Headline Testing with Chartbeat

Best Practices and Instructions

A bad headline can sink an important story, and a great headline can float it to new heights. On many digital platforms, the headline is the only tool we have to pull readers to a story. The same is true in print; what works well online just differs from what works well in the newspaper.

With Chartbeat, we can test any headline that appears on the homepage (and other index pages, such as seattletimes.com/sports). When we run a test on a story, each of the headline variants is displayed to different homepage readers. Over time, one of those headlines may emerge as the most effective at driving two key metrics: Click Through Rate and Quality Clicks.

Click Through Rate (CTR) measures how many people who saw that headline actually clicked on it to read the story. A Quality Click is a pageview during which the reader spent at least 15 seconds on that story. During a headline test, Chartbeat measures the CTR and Quality Clicks for each variant and eventually crowns a winner. (Sometimes, no winner is found.)

5 Tips for Testing Headlines

- Test more than two headlines. Try shooting for four or five headline variants.
- Use distinctively different tones and styles; don't just make small wording adjustments.
- Confer with colleagues. Many of your coworkers have decades of experience writing headlines. Chat in person or in the #headlines-framing-seo Slack channel.
- Discuss headlines with the story's editor if it is sensitive or precise. Be safe and check.
- If your test produces no winners, try again with new headlines. Test hypotheses.

Traits of Successful and Unsuccessful Headlines (from Chartbeat)

Help	No effect	Hurt
- Demonstrative pronouns ("these," "this") - Positive superlatives ("best") - Negative superlatives ("worst") - Interrogatives ("what," "when") - Determinants ("the," "an") - Numbers - Adjectives - Quotations	- Names* - Proper nouns* - Notably long headlines *Keywords such as names and proper nouns are paramount, however, for SEO.*	- Notably short headlines - Question marks - Time references ("tomorrow," "Saturday") - Notably wordy titles ("Seattle Mariners second baseman")

Source: Chartbeat analysis of 95,255 headline tests and 235,494 individual headlines.
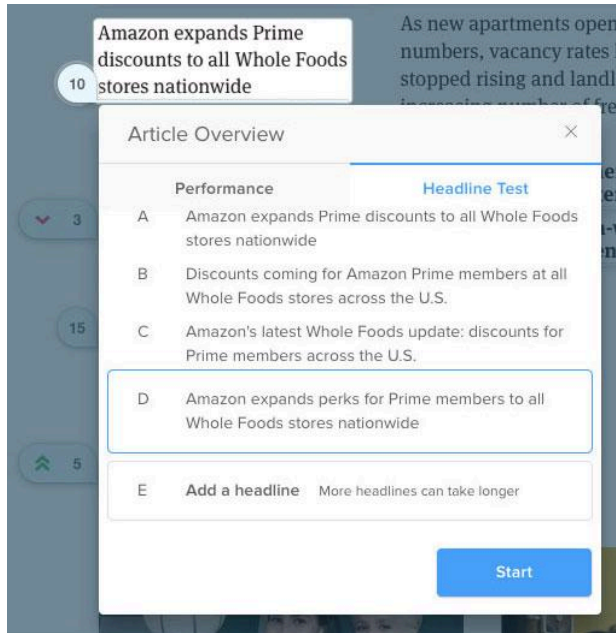
How to Run a Headline Test

Required: [Chartbeat Heads up Display](#) *(HUD) for your browser. Here's how to install it:* [st.news/installhud](#)

Important: *Loop in a hub producer before testing, and discuss with the story's editor and/or reporter.*

Step 1
Choose a headline to test and click on the blue HUD bubble next to it. This opens a pop-up window titled "Article Overview."

Step 2
Click on the "Headline Test" tab. Write your headline variants in the spaces provided below the original headline. Try to write four or five variants, then click the "Start" button.

Step 3
Let your test run. While your test is running, a pie chart will display in the HUD next to the headline. It may take as little as 5 minutes or as long as 4 hours to determine a winner.
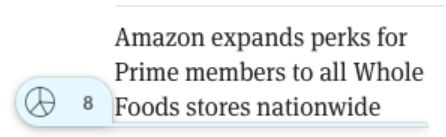
Step 4
When a winner is found, a crown symbol will appear in the HUD next to the winning headline. The winner will be displayed as long as the story remains on the page, but the headline will not change at story level. Edit the story in WordPress to update the main or alternate headline.

Step 5
You can view the results of your test, and previous tests, on the [Chartbeat dashboard](#).
You can also monitor your test from there while it is running live on the website.