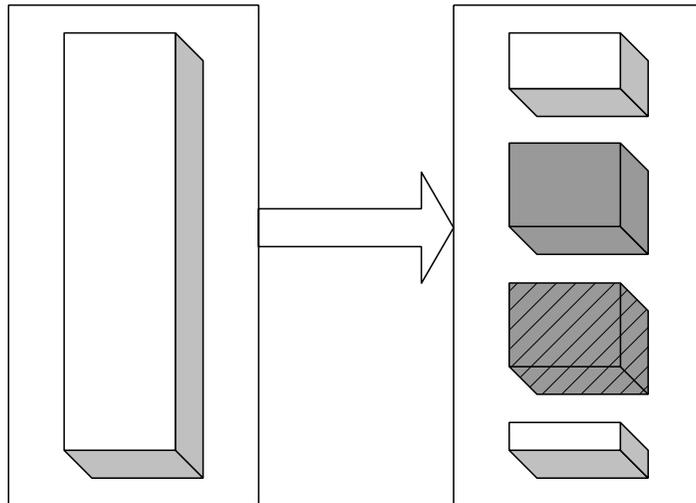


Insert Meaningful Headlines and Subheads



BACKGROUND |

Headings should blaze the trail

In the snowy woods, making a trail that skiers could follow, we cut chunks out of big trees on either side of the route. Looking back, we could see the bright exposed wood in half a dozen trees. Those signs led the cross-country competitors through a dense forest where snow covered up the narrow trails made by animals heading down to the swamp for a drink and the wider paths tropped by humans during dry weather. Only the blazes on the trees showed where to go. Your headings and subheads should act like blazes.

As readers scroll, they become lost, and headings help mark the way. (Spyridakis, 2000)

A good heading predicts what content will follow, letting visitors decide whether or not to read the content in that section. Headings and subheads act as visual dividers, marking the chunks along the

way and helping people skim to the next point, like skiers zipping cross country.

Use two or three levels of headings

Break your articles up into two or three levels of headings—a general page heading, plus some subheads, and, occasionally, some sub-subheads. This approach helps people skim for your main ideas, and structure.

In general, insert more headings than you feel comfortable with on paper.

A single chunk of 100 words can still benefit from two or three subheads. (Kilian, 1999)

Plus, if a blind person is using a screen reader, nested headings make access easier, allowing the software to jump to the next heading, rather than narrating the entire text, one word at a time.

Headings reveal relationships

Write a series of headings and subheads so their text articulates the way their text chunks relate to each other. Guests skim your headings to get a sense of the way you have organized your page, mentally comparing one heading with another, building up a conceptual model of the structure. If you put extra thought into the relationship between the headings, you help people grok the structure without too much thinking.

Critical review: Look at your headings and subheads as a group, distinct from the text, to make sure that a casual user can see why you have arranged them in this order, and why you have grouped some and not others.

Announce a new topic

Reread the paragraph you wrote just before the heading. Can you see how the heading announces a related but **new** topic? If not, rewrite.

Reading comprehension studies indicate that you should “Use anything you can to signal the transition from one topic to the

That must be wonderful! I have no idea what it means.

—Molière

next.” (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). Headings and subheads bring that news.

Not too cute

When Jonathan was learning the “user-friendly” style at Apple, he once got his first draft back from an engineer with only two words scrawled across it: “Too cute!”

On the Web, cute headlines don’t reveal the content of their chunk, and don’t show the chunk’s relationship with others on the page.

Watch out for analogies and metaphors, too. Users often misinterpret the comparison, take it literally, or start wondering what the heck you meant, getting distracted in their own imaginings. Also, headings based on a comparison demand that people read the rest of the text to figure out what the heading meant, a chore most folks are unwilling to undertake.

79 percent of our test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word by word. (Nielsen and Morkes, 1997)

Therefore, write headings that mean a lot, rather than showing off your cleverness.

EXAMPLES

Before

MRP can handle two kinds of manufacturing—discrete and repetitive. They differ in regularity and costing. When you need to make products in groups or batches, you use discrete manufacturing. You give each batch a job number, a manufactured part number, a quantity (for that particular job), a start date and end date. Because you have a discrete job, you can charge all production costs to that job. With job costing, you can open a job, collect the charges for a job, close out a job, analyze and report costs and variances by job. On the other

After

We Can Handle Two Kinds of Manufacturing

MRP can handle two kinds of manufacturing—discrete and repetitive. They differ in regularity and costing.

Discrete Manufacturing Works in Batches

When you need to make products in groups or batches, you use discrete manufacturing. You give each batch a job number, a manufactured part

hand, you may have to manufacture some products continuously. Instead of discrete groups, you have a nonstop flow of products through the line. You define your schedule by the daily rate of production, and you charge the cost of production to the product, on a lump or unit basis. You never close out a schedule; you just vary the rate of production. So you analyze costs by period; when the period closes, you total all charges, and divide that number by the number of products, to get a unit cost, and usage variances, during that period. You choose one method or another for a product when you set it up in the inventory. From that point on, MRP will plan production based on the method you have chosen—discrete or repetitive.

number, a quantity (for that particular job), a start date and end date.

Costing: Because you have a discrete job, you can charge all production costs to that job. With job costing, you can open a job, collect the charges for a job, close out a job, analyze and report costs and variances by job.

Repetitive Manufacturing Just Goes On and On

You may have to manufacture some products continuously. Instead of discrete groups, you have a nonstop flow of products through the line. You define your schedule by the daily rate of production, and you charge the cost of production to the product, on a lump or unit basis. You never close out a schedule; you just vary the rate of production.

Costing: You analyze costs by period; when the period closes, you total all charges, and divide that number by the number of products, to get a unit cost, and usage variances, during that period.

You Decide

You choose one method or another for a product when you set it up in the inventory. From that point on, MRP will plan production based on the method you have chosen—discrete or repetitive.

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

More headlines, more fun, if your users want to jump around. But if you are offering a chance to settle into your world, absorbing your point of view, then long passages without headings work just fine.

TO LEARN

Headings help users search, understand, and recall.

TO ACT

Headings guide the user visually and intellectually to the point of action.

TO BE AWARE

Making your work more skimmable can't hurt. But face it, to put in more headings, you have to get organized... and you may not like thinking structurally.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Helpful and courteous, even in e-mail.

See: Ameritech (1997), Bricklin (1998), Hartley and Trueman (1983), IBM Ease of Use (1999), Kaiser (2000), Lorch & Lorch (1985, 1995), Lynch (2000), Lynch & Horton (1997), Kilian (1999), Mayer, Dyck & Cook (1984), Morkes & Nielsen (1997), Nielsen (1997a, 1997b, 1998b, 1999d, 1999f, 2000b), Spyridakis (2000), Sun (2000), Van Dijk & Kintsch (1983), Williams (2000).

For your review only.

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