

# Secrets of a Master: Why This Headline Works *By Mark Ford*

One of the oldest ideas about headlines is that they should be short – fewer than eight words. So let's take a look at some of the super-successful direct-mail promotions published in AWAI's "Hall of Fame" to see how this theory holds up:

Trout Spoken Here. (Also Bass. Salmon. And Bonefish.)

What Never To Eat On An Airplane

Profit With The Insiders Without Breaking A Law

Read This Or Go Broke!

Burn Disease Out Of Your Body

A Rare Opportunity To Turn \$5,000 Into \$3.52 Million

Tax Saving Information Most IRS Agents Don't Have

Fearless Conversation!

The Lazy Man's Way To Riches

Endangered Antidotes

11 Medical Breakthroughs That Will Rock The World

The Plague Of The Black Debt

When it's all said and done, 26 headlines in the "Hall of Fame" contain no more than eight words.

And if you stroll through Carl Galletti's "2001 Greatest Headlines Ever Written," you'll find that about 60% of the headlines contain eight words or less.

Most tellingly for me, however, is this: Of all the direct-response promotions that have worked well for my clients, the lion's share had short headlines:

---

Fed Up?

Unlock Wall Street's Secret Logic!

The Coming Oil War!

Not Just For Millionaires Any More

The Greatest Opportunity Of Our Times

So what can we conclude from all this? How about this: Although there are plenty of exceptions, it seems clear that when it comes to headlines brevity is a virtue.

What's so good about brevity? Let's start with the obvious. Short headlines are easy to scan. A headline of five or six words, printed boldly on top of a letter or across an envelope, cannot be missed. Its power to attract the eye is almost 100%.

Contrast that to a headline that is almost a paragraph long. It may very well "work," but only after a significant number of prospects have dumped it in the trash basket because they (a) recognized it as advertising and (b) made an instant decision that they didn't have 15 or 20 seconds to read it. That never happens to a short headline.

However, getting your headline read doesn't guarantee success. Unless your headline says something that links with your promotion's Big Idea, is compelling, and implies a benefit, it will end up in the same trash basket – just a second or so later.

Great headlines – breakthrough headlines – are "tipping-point" phenomena. They encapsulate the cutting-edge thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that a given group of people feel about a specific thing.

When, for example, Lee Euler wrote his blockbuster headline for Strategic Investment, "The Plague Of The Black Debt," he correctly identified what was, at the time, a major investment anxiety. The black-plague metaphor was just the thing, it turned out, to quickly summarize a complex and powerful fear about U.S. debt and the financial markets.

The importance of limiting the length of your main headline doesn't mean you have to scrap longer copy as part of your headline.

If your main headline grabs your prospect's attention in 5 to 8 words, you can build on your prospect's interest and curiosity with strong, compelling deck copy – copy that comes between the main headline and "Dear Friend."

To be successful, deck copy needs to be as powerful and compelling as any headline component. If it doesn't build on the excitement of the main headline, you have condemned the promotion.

Published: August 20, 2007

**Related Content:**

- [The Big Idea is Hidden in This 5-Point Checklist](#)
- [How to Tell the Difference Between Good Sales Copy and Bad Sales Copy](#)
- [How Great Songs Illustrate This Basic Copywriting Principle](#)
- [Mark Ford's Secret for Making Your Headlines Better Than 95% of all Headlines Written Today](#)
- More by [Mark Ford](#)
- More from [The Golden Thread](#)

**Copyright © American Writers & Artists Institute(www.awai.com)**

**American Writers & Artists Institute**

220 George Bush Blvd, Suite D

Delray Beach, FL 33444

(561) 278-5557 or (866) 879-2924