

World's Best Headlines: BBC News

by [Jakob Nielsen](#) on April 27, 2009

It's hard enough to [write for the Web](#) and meet the guidelines for [concise, scannable, and objective](#) content. It's *even harder* to write Web headlines, which must be:

- **short** (because people [don't read much](#) online);
- **rich in information scent**, clearly summarizing the target article;
- **front-loaded** with the most important keywords (because users often [scan only the beginning](#) of list items);
- **understandable out of context** (because headlines often appear without articles, as in search engine results); and
- **predictable**, so users know whether they'll like the full article *before* they click (because people don't return to sites that promise more than they deliver).

For several years, I've been very impressed with BBC News headlines, both on the main BBC homepage and on its dedicated [news page](#). Most sites routinely violate headline guidelines, but BBC editors consistently do an awesome job.

Concise and Informative

On a recent visit, the BBC list of headlines for "other top stories" read as follows:

- Italy buries first quake victims
- Romania blamed over Moldova riots
- Ten arrested in UK anti-terrorism raids
- Villagers hurt in West Bank clash
- Mass Thai protest over leadership
- Iran accuses journalist of spying

Around the world in 38 words.

The average headline consumed a mere **5 words** and **34 characters**. The amount of meaning they squeezed into this brief space is incredible: every word works hard for its living. I'm rarely that concise.