Subject Line
Formulas

How To Go **From Zero To 50,000** Subscribers
With Email Marketing

Master Collection of Email Subject Line Formulas

Email subject line formulas by Copy Hackers

The first subject lines are by Jared Kimball, who wrote a book called 14 Email Subject Line Formulas, which you may want to pick up if you dig his formulas.

The Report Formula

Kimball provides a handful of specific formulas within each of his formulas:

New {agency/institute} approved {process/device} + {benefit}

Innovative {system/process/product} + {benefit}

Introducing {technique/system/process} + {benefit or mystery}

Kimball gives examples like:

Introducing the Picasso: How to design if you suck at design

The Data Formula

I'd personally recommend adding a "why" or "how" to the front of most of these or a "here's why" to the end of them. Alone, they feel like tldrs, which doesn't necessarily compel the open.

{Percentage} + {unexpected thing}

{Known entity} is rated as {rating} for {rated thing}

{Trendy thing} {percentage change}

For example:

Why 19% of Harvard graduates can't find work

USA is rated the worst of 20 countries on 14 eco points

Snapchat loses 13% of its users overnight – here's why

The How-To Formula

You'll recognize some of these as very similar to our headline formulas earlier in this guide.

{Attention-grabber}: how to {avoid or get attention-grabbing thing}

How {world-class example or average joe} {does amazing thing}

How to {do amazing thing}

How to {do amazing thing} without {unpleasant thing}

For example:

Nickelback is back? How to avoid waking up with their song in your head

How Elon Musk sleeps (Nikola Tesla would be proud)

Campaign Monitor adds that the key to success with this formula is to focus on the benefit or value. That's good advice for good copywriting.

The Inquiry Formula

There's power in that little question mark! Or better: Is there power in that little question mark? 😉

Who / What / When / Where / Why / How {question}?

{Brief statement}?

For example:

What were you thinking?

Where have all the good people gone?

Nuts?

The Endorsement Formula

Influential people are influential. …Yeah, I just wrote that. If you're a word nerd, you're like, "Woah! Tautology, y'all!" …Yeah, I just wrote that.

Okay, the idea with the endorsement formula is that you either reference an authority or use quotes in your email subject line. So formulas like:

"{Quote}" by {author}

"{Quote}" – know who said that?

"{Quote}" – agree?

{Author} said this about {audience interest}

{Event / Group Name}: "{Quote}"

"{Unattributed quote}"

The quotes are obvious – but the "unattributed quote" option is particularly useful. Quotation marks draw the eye. So if you can put an important marketing message in "quotes", you may get more eyes on your subject line. Definitely worth testing.

Ramit Sethi recently used this subject line formula for 3 emails in a row in his sales sequence:

Ramit Sethi	Inbox	joanna@copyhackers.com	"I don't even have an idea for a business" - gt
Ramit Sethi	Inbox	joanna@copyhackers.com	4 links: Killing "sacred cows" - gt;ramit@iwillt
Ramit Sethi	Inbox	joanna@copyhackers.com	"I don't have time to start a business" - gt;ram

(Ramit Sethi subject lines)

The Open Loop

This formula creates pure click bait. The idea is that you give away just enough to make people want to open, and then – importantly – you give them what they were seeking in the email body itself.

So rather than write a "tldr" or summary-style subject line (which is generally crap for emails except when it's a subject line for a promotion or it touches on scarcity and/or

urgency), you'd give a fraction of the story, like any of these subject line formulas will do for you:

I messed up

{Person or pronoun} said it was the {right / wrong / scary} thing to do

FYI… You should be {doing / seeing / reading} this

FYI… You shouldn't waste another second {doing / seeing / reading} this

{High-value something} for you

The {superlative} thing to happen to {industry} since…

In case you haven't heard

Let me emphasize: the email itself needs to close the loop.

You can then open a new loop with the body of your email, compelling the reader to click to close the loop or bringing the reader back tomorrow to read your loop-closing follow-up email. Whatever you do, close the loop within a reasonable amount of time.

The Empty Suitcase

An "empty suitcase" is what we call it when you use the word "this" without a noun to follow it. So, like, you might find yourself writing, "Tune into this to hear me drone on", and you'd be using an empty suitcase because we don't know what "this" is.

In the world of writing, this is a no-no. (See that? I used one there.)

In the world for subject line copywriting, this is a yes-yes.

The beauty of the empty suitcase is that, like the open loop formula, it forces your subscriber to click to get the whole story. I know, I know: forcing isn't good. Fine, then. It compels. Same difference. Any way you slice it, the empty suitcase subject line is great for open rates.

{Name}, this is for you

This is how you {do desirable or undesirable thing}

I learned this from watching _____

I {past-tense verb} this. The world changed.

What {industry} needs to {verb}

This subject line formula is explained here. You can swap the industry for a role, or you could get creative and – if your CRM is good – populate the blank field with the person's name, their role or the name of their business.

For example:

What Joanna needs to do better

What Copy Hackers needs to remember

What cat owners need to think about

What copywriters need to know

The Announcement

As they said on Mad Men all the time, the word "new" is a powerful thing. That's what this subject line is all about.

Use it like so:

Introducing {Name}

Introducing {Name}: {short value prop}

New! {Name}

New! {Benefit of new thing without mention of name}

Now open: {registration}

Campaign Monitor found that adding the word "introducing" to a subject line increases opens by an average of 9.45%. And adding the word "new" to it increases opens by 3.26%.

The Scarcity + Urgency Formula

Fabulous for campaigns and product launches! You won't be surprised by these formulas, but they're a great reference when you've got a limited number of X to offer in a short period of time.

Only {#} {days/hours/weeks} left to {X}

Just {#} {X} left

Last chance to {action}

Get {valuable thing} if you {action} in the next {#} {days/hours/weeks}

Keep a swipe file of all the emails you'll get, and you'll see these subject lines used any time an offer is closing.

The Punctuator

For your subject line to earn an open, it needs to get noticed in an inbox. To do that, we use punctuation marks. Truly. That's what punctuation is for in subject lines: to get eyes on the line.

I'm not going to list out all the ways you can use punctuation to your advantage with this formula, but the goal is twofold:

- To visually break up the line of copy that is your subject line

- To visually distinguish your subject line from that of all the others

Here are examples from businesses you probably know:

Groupon

You + These Top Deals = Love?

Solve This Puzzle: D E A _ S

Psst… Slimming Secrets Inside

Tim Grahl

Argh! I need help!

#1 New York Times bestseller… used this tool to do it

This is it… Conquer your fear in 2015

The Shorty

It's a one, two or three-word subject line. It stands out beautifully among all the long subject lines in an inbox.

Nathan Barry uses this formula a lot with subject lines like these:

Unsolicited advice

60 minutes

Authority

Tomorrow?

Quick question

{First name} < > {First name}

The ultimate formula for introducing people to one another! Works like the rather common {First name}, meet {First name}, which is also good.

Although this subject line is intended for one person connecting two people, there's no reason you couldn't test it as a subject line for your marketing emails. For example, if you were to host a webinar with a special guest like Unbounce's Georgiana Laudi, you might write:

{First name} < > Georgiana

It feels extremely personal – so use sparingly. Because crying wolf.

Digital Marketer Top 10 Email Subject Line Formulas:

#10 Distract Their Attention.
EXAMPLE: "Did you see these 4 girls fight?" [VIDEO]

You might recognize this is the number one opening line for pickup artists, and dating experts. The shock factor alone peaks the reader's curiosity.

#9 Make a Prediction
EXAMPLE: "Amazon to buy Google in 2014, how to profit"

People love predictions. Take a look at a National Enquirer in December and you'll see the entire cover riddled with predictions for the coming year.

#8 Report News
EXAMPLE: "Obama CUTS Social Security Today by 12.77%"

Newsworthy items are easy to find. Remember, when you use a news headline you need to spin the news to your message inside the body.

#7 Quote a B.U.D.A.
EXAMPLE: "New York Times: New software KILLS banking"

A B.U.D.A. is a Big Undeniable Dominant Authority. The New York Times, Amazon, Google, the FDA, the President of the United States etc. When they make quotes that prove your points, it's great to use them as subject lines.

#6 Extend an Invitation
EXAMPLE: "Your VIP Warroom Invitation Inside" [Open Now]

Exclusive invitations are rare invites for your readers to become part of something special. Make it clear in your subject line that your reader is invited to something and they'll open up.

#5 Offer a FREE Gift
EXAMPLE: "Free WEIRD Little Knife Enclosed – OPEN NOW"

Now were getting in the saucy stuff — volume. Offer a free gift and you will get the most opens to your email. Be sure that the readers don't feel tricked once they get inside.

#4 Pique Curiosity
EXAMPLE: "The ODDBALL Widget ENDS Toenail Pain [PIC]"

Curiosity killed the cat. And curiosity will get people to open your emails. Websites like popurls.com are a great source curiosity driven headlines.

#3 Flatter your reader
EXAMPLE: "Only for YOU The Top 2% of CEOS" ß Exclusive

Everyone wants to feel special. This is a law of human nature. Flatter your readers and let them know that they're in a very special group.

#2 Promise a benefit
EXAMPLE: "Have more energy than a 12 year old again"

As obvious as it seems, people still fail to demonstrate benefit or a "what's in it for me" for their readers in their subject lines. This is the single most powerful force to get opens from your readers.

#1 Ask a question
EXAMPLE: "Would you do THIS for money?" [VIDEO]

Lastly, everyone wants to give you their opinion. Opinions are free and usually worth exactly what you pay for them, but your readers if asked, will respond, or at least open the mail.

There you have it, the top 10 formulas for email subject lines. We write multiple versions of these for each promotion we do and we never run out of email creative.

Here are a few other weird little facts…

Numbers in subject lines almost ALWAYS increase response

EXAMPLE: "4,526 people did this and lost 6,839 pounds"

Weird characters almost always increase response

EXAMPLE:"® Hoffman Richter Brand Knives 62% off"

Weird words like "Weird" almost always increase response

EXAMPLE: "Screwball Brain Scientist's 3 WEIRD Discoveries"

Combine these 3 little tricks and the 10 formulas above and you should easily DOUBLE your email open rates overnight.

Remember… you HAVE to be congruent inside the body or you're just pissing up a rope.

"SUBJ: Naked pictures of your mom" is gonna get opened, but if it's followed by…

"Great news! Now you can save 15% on your car insurance by switching to Blyco," you are totally screwed.

Here is the test, when you complete your email subject lines ask yourself these three questions VERY honestly…

#1 Did your subject line LOOK different and stand out from all the others in their email box?

#2 Did your subject line look too valuable to simply delete without opening?

#3 Did your subject line get your prospect to open your email with the proper expectation and mindset to what's inside?

Pass all three and you have a winner!

Campaign Monitor Email Subject Formulas

1. The question subject line

Questions make great email subject lines because they get the reader to think about how the subject matter applies to their own life.

The best questions will resonate with the reader and their past experiences, while arousing a sense of curiosity to learn more about the subject and whether their experiences are similar to others.

For example:

- Do you check your emails when you first wake up in the morning?
- Are you a zombie without your morning coffee as well?

These subjects lines work because the reader can relate to these behaviors, but are also drawn to click-through to possibly learn more about whether others have similar experiences and what the possible implications of that behavior is.

2. The 'How to' subject line

There's an old saying in copywriting circles that you can't write a bad headline if it starts with the words 'How to'.

The 'How to' subject line formula works so well because it forces you to describe the content of the email in very clear language. Take these 3 subject lines for example:

- How to get better marketing results through beautiful design
- How to win friends and influence people
- How to get 1,000 new email subscribers in 1 day

By reading these subject lines, you know exactly what you are going to learn from opening the email.

The key to success with this subject line formula is focusing on the benefit. Nobody actually wants to learn another process or methodology, instead they want to get the end benefits of better marketing results or new email subscribers, so make sure when using a 'How to' subject line you focus on the benefits and not the process itself.

3. The scarcity subject line

Scarcity is a powerful driver of human behavior. When something is in short supply, our fear of missing out kicks in and we are compelled to act.

Adding a time or availability limitation encourages readers to open and act on your email before it's too late. For example:

- Only 2 days left to get 50% off shoes
- Hurry! Only 3 consultation spots left.
- Get free shipping if you order within the next hour

The key to using scarcity in your email subject lines is importance. If the reader doesn't have any intention of purchasing from you, they are not going to care that they can get free shipping if they purchase in the next hour. You need to make sure the offer you are presenting is important to the reader before you bring scarcity into it to try to compel them to act quicker, otherwise the time or availability limitation you are imposing is irrelevant to them.

4. The announcement subject line

Using words like "Introducing" and "New" in your email subject line gives the reader a feeling that your email contains new, breaking information they haven't heard yet.

In our recent study on power words in email subject lines, email subject lines that included terms like 'Introducing' and 'New' increased the chance of the email being opened by 9.45% and 3.26% respectively.

Examples of this formula in action include:

- Introducing Canvas: A better way to send emails
- Update to our iPhone App
- See our new design gallery

By using words like 'Introducing' and 'New' in the subject line, you are letting people know that your email contains new information they don't know yet and are encouraging people to open the email and learn more.

5. The number subject line

Using numbers in your email subject lines is a great way to set people's expectations and provide a structure for the content of your email.

Every time we A/B test our blog post headlines, we find that the version of the headline containing the number outperforms the one that doesn't. For example, when we A/B tested '3 steps to measuring the success of your email marketing with Google Analytics' against 'How to measure the success of your email marketing with Google Analytics', the subject line with a number got a 57% increase in opens.

So where possible, use numbers to make your subject line more specific. For example:

- 30 ways to build your email list
- 3 steps to sending beautiful email campaigns with Canvas
- 10 product announcement emails reviewed for conversion

The key to success with this formula is the number you use. If you are suggesting effort a reader needs to expend (like steps in a process for instance), then using a low number works better as it suggest the process is quicker and easier. However, if you are providing value to the reader (like a number of ways to increase email subscribers)

then a higher number will work better as it increases the reader's perception of the value your email will provide them.

6. The curiosity gap subject line

Viral websites like Buzzfeed have built publishing empires off the back of a psychological phenomenon known as the curiosity gap.

Professor George Loewenstein coined this term to describe the gap between what we know and what we want to know. When we notice a gap in our knowledge, it produces a feeling of deprivation that prompts us to go looking for that piece of missing information in order to stop feeling deprived.

However, curiosity requires a little bit of initial knowledge first. We're not curious about something we know absolutely nothing about. However, as soon as we know even a little bit, our curiosity is piqued and we want to learn more.

So try leaving a small curiosity gap in your subject lines to encourage opens. For example:

- Dave Richardson asks the most basic question ever, and stumps our smartest politicians
- This little-known copywriting trick will increase your email click-through rate
- 9 out of 10 Americans are completely wrong about this fact

As you can see, these subjects lines leave just enough information out to pique your curiosity. What is the question Dave asked? What's the fact that 9 out of 10 Americans are wrong about? By piquing people's curiosity, you provoke the sense of deprivation and compel them to open the email to learn more.

7. The surprise subject line

Everybody loves a good play on words or a pleasant surprise. In fact, studies on brain activity show that these unexpected occurrences light up the pleasure centers of the brain.

Whether it's a small chuckle or an unexpected offer that benefits the user, using surprise in your subject line causes the reader to pause while scanning through their inbox and piques their curiosity enough to open the email and learn more.

Some examples include:

- Warning: Unattended items in your shopping cart may be eaten by gnomes
- What Elvis Presley can teach you about email marketing

The key here is not so much to use a specific formula, but just to surprise the reader with something they wouldn't expect.

In fact, during Barack Obama's presidential election campaign his team used the subject line 'Join me for dinner?' in one of their email campaigns. Whilst 'Join me for Dinner' is certainly not a surprising subject line, the fact that it came from the President of the United States certainly surprised a few people.

8. The personalized subject line

Working your subscriber's name into the subject line of your email adds a personal touch that is likely to catch your reader's eye. Any time you can make your reader feel like you're connecting with them on a very personal level, it builds a sense of sincerity.

In fact, in our recent study on power words in subject lines we found that using the recipients first name in the subject line increased the chance of the email being opened by 14.68%.

This can be combined with some of the other formulas for maximum impact. For example:

- John, are you a zombie without your morning coffee as well?
- John, 9 out of 10 Americans are completely wrong about this fact.
- John, there's only 2 days left to get 50% off boots.

By including the subscriber's first name, you create a feeling that you are speaking directly to them and give your email a sense of relevancy that encourages them to open it and consume the content.