



PIXIES NEED FAIRY DUST

Headlines and trails written for websites need to tell the readers exactly what is going on, says HUMPHREY EVANS

HEADLINES ON websites have to work fast. One commentator* suggests you have just two hot words at the beginning of a headline which are all that readers take in when scanning for information that interests them. This is a useful discipline for headline writers of all kinds: stick two info-laden words up front so readers know what's going on.

But there's a new kind of headline peculiar to websites, which at the Guardian they call "pixies", presumably because they're little pics. Some call them picture trails or come-ons. They're important in getting readers to click through to the stories. You need to make sure the meaning is clear if they're going to work.

Every pixie has two lines. You could call them decks, of a single line with up to 16 characters. Line 1, which they call the trail strap, sets the general topic. Line 2, the link text, conveys something more specific.

A rollover caption, which shows up when the cursor hovers over the picture, can run to 55 characters and wavers between adding extra headline-style information and acting as a standfirst.

One Guardian pixie featured a photo of Johnny Depp in full Pirates of the Caribbean mode under the double headline Piracy and Zut Alors! Unrevealingly elusive, n'est-ce pas?

The rollover text read: "Sarkozy backs new policy to tackle French downloaders". This shows what is wrong with the headlines – there was no mention of computers and no direct reference to France.

"Piracy" and "Zut alors!" make some sort of sense when we know that the story is about internet piracy. But that is the wrong way round.

People writing headlines, particularly headlines for websites, must continually remind themselves that readers have no idea of what is about to hit them. The subject should be spelt out, rather than alluded to. In this case you might think about "Internet piracy" and "France cracks down".

Remember, too, that print usually provides more context. An article on internet piracy in France in the print version of the Guardian, for example, would have been in the technology section. Material on websites usually has to stand alone.

*Find out more at www.useit.com where the commentator and researcher Jakob Nielsen outlines his findings