Cultural Daily

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Style vs. Search

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, July 19th, 2012

Writing in a recent issue of The New Yorker, author John McPhee recounts his earlier days at the magazine, especially his relationship with former editor William Shawn. Shawn had a rule about titles: Titles cannot contain the name of the subject.

"Even if the subject is oranges," writes McPhee, "as was the case in the second long piece I handed in to him, my first as a staff writer. I called it 'Oranges.' That was the topic. What else did anyone need to know? Mr. Shawn took 'Oranges' off the top and set up a proof called 'Golden Lamps in a Green Night.'"

I love The New Yorker's evocative titles, which always glance to the side and illuminate a hidden corner of the story you're about to read.

But they don't work in the world of search engines today, which expect you to make your titles keyword-rich. Rich, direct and front-loaded, as in please make sure the most search-relevant keywords are the first words of your title.

Online article sharing site Ezine instructs, tiresomely: "The first 3-5 words of your article title determine the success of your article in terms of how much traffic your article will generate back to your website. Create keyword-rich article titles that match the most commonly searched keywords for your topic. You can maximize your article marketing strategy by understanding keyword research and creating keyword-rich, intelligent article titles. You can create massive amounts of traffic to your articles and website thanks to the search engines who love smart, keyword-rich titles."

They then go on to suggest some websites that will help you find keywords for your title. I tried one of them. It suggested that the title of this article should be "Keyword Title."

Mr. Shawn would not be pleased.

Since I've been publishing this site, I've gotten better at making my titles search-friendly. I don't particularly like them this way, but I realize it's a fact of blogosphere life.

Yet I've also learned not to pine for days of yore; rather, I prefer to look the future, when search engines will be deep enough, and smart enough, to read a whole article, understand the context and whimsy of its title, and drive a curious seeker to the perfect spot.

Until then, gentle reader, you'll have to make do with the blunt instrument instead of the lancet.

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