

Writing Effective Titles

Often, when researchers set about writing an essay or journal article, they spend the most time on the "meat" or "body" of the assignment/paper. Little thought goes into the title, but this may well hold the key to successful writing. Writers often underuse the helpful tool that is a title. In terms of academic essays, writers may give up on generating a title, or merely label their essays by assignment sequence or task ("Paper #2"). An absent or non-specific title is a missed opportunity: titles help writers prepare readers for the content that is to follow. Additionally, journal websites and search engines use the words in titles to categorise and display articles to interested readers. Often, readers use the title as the first step to determining whether or not to read an article.

A good title:

- Condenses the essay/paper's content in a few words (typically 10-12)
- Uses descriptive terms and phrases that highlight the core content of the essay/paper
- Captures the reader's attention
- Differentiates the essay/paper from others

Here are some steps (with examples for a journal article) you can follow to write an effective title:

- 1. Answer these questions: What is my paper about? What techniques were used? Who/what is studied? What were the results?**
 - a. My paper studies whether X therapy improves the cognitive function of patients suffering from dementia.
 - b. It was a randomized trial.
 - c. I studied 40 cases from six cities in Japan.
 - d. There was an improvement in the cognitive function of patients.
 - 2. Use your answers to list key words:**
 - a. X therapy, randomized trial, dementia, 6 Japanese cities, 40 cases, improved cognitive function
 - 3. Build a sentence with these key words:**
 - a. This study is a randomized trial that investigates whether X therapy improved cognitive function in 40 dementia patients from 6 cities in Japan; it reports improved cognitive function. (28 words)
 - 4. Delete all unnecessary words (e.g., study of, investigates) and repetitive words; link the remaining.**
 - a. ~~This study is a randomized trial that investigates whether X therapy improved cognitive function in 40 dementia patients from 6 cities in Japan; it reports improved cognitive function~~
 - b. Randomized trial of X therapy for improving cognitive function in 40 dementia patients from 6 cities in Japan (18 words)
 - 5. Delete non-essential information and reword.**
 - a. Randomized trial of X therapy for improving cognitive function in 40 dementia patients ~~from 6 cities in Japan~~ ~~reports improved cognitive function~~
 - b. Randomized trial of X therapy for improving cognitive function in 40 dementia patients (13 words)
- OR, (reworded with subtitle and a focus on the results): X therapy improves cognitive function in 40 dementia patients: A randomized trial (12 words).



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Here are three basic tips to keep in mind while writing a title:

Keep it simple, brief and attractive: The primary function of a title is to provide a precise summary of the paper's content. So, keep the title brief and clear. Use active verbs instead of complex noun-based phrases and avoid unnecessary details.

Avoid: Drug XYZ has an effect of muscular contraction for an hour in snails of *Achatina fulcia* species

Better: Drug XYZ induces muscular contraction in *Achatina fulcia* snails

Use appropriate descriptive words: A good research paper title should contain key words used in the manuscript and should define the nature of the study. Think about terms people would use to search for your study and include them in your title.

Avoid: Effects of drug A on schizophrenia patients: study of a multicenter mixed group

Better: Psychosocial effects of drug A on schizophrenia patients: a multicenter randomized controlled trial

Avoid abbreviations and jargon: Known abbreviations such as AIDS, NATO, and so on can be used in the title. However, other lesser-known or specific abbreviations and jargon that would not be immediately familiar to the readers should be left out.

Avoid: MMP expression profiles cannot distinguish between normal and early osteoarthritic synovial fluid

Better: Matrix metalloproteinase protein expression profiles cannot distinguish between normal and early osteoarthritic synovial fluid

References

1. Rodrigues, V. 2013. How to write an effective title and abstract and choose appropriate keywords. Available at <http://www.editage.com/insights/how-to-write-an-effective-title-and-abstract-and-choose-appropriate-keywords>
2. Kulkarni, S. 2013. 3 Basic tips on writing a good research paper title. [Online] Available at: <http://www.editage.com/insights/3-basic-tips-on-writing-a-good-research-paper-title>

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