

HOW TO WRITE A GOOD TITLE FOR JOURNAL ARTICLES*

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Writing the title takes just a fraction of the time you need to put down your work on paper. Nonetheless, this starting point is very important one, because it may influence the impact of your work and the number of readers that it will attract. With the increasing digitalization of research, more and more people are using abstract databases to find articles relevant to their work. That's why, if you want your article to come up in the search results, you should make sure that its title is a good summary of your work and that it addresses the right audience. How can you do this? Here is a step-by-step guide with some useful tips.

Start with a draft

Writing a paper can be a lengthy process that may take anything from a few days to several months. During this time, it is natural to decide to change some aspects of your paper or to come up with new ideas that you haven't thought of before. That's why, it's a good idea to start with a draft title in the beginning and then focus on writing the rest of the paper. If you come up with a good idea in the meanwhile, just write it down and continue with your work. Once you are ready with the whole text, you can return to the title and decide on the final version. In some cases, this strategy can make a huge difference because you may get so distracted from all the editing and rewriting that you may simply forget to make changes to the title as well.

Choose what type you want to use

Titles of journal articles come in a variety of ways and you probably have encountered most of them. For example, Hartley (2008) lists as many as 13 different types but for the sake of clarity we can summarize the most common formats in just three types (Jamali & Nikzad, 2011):

Declarative titles – state the main findings or conclusions (e.g. 'A three-month weight loss program increases self-esteem in adolescent girls')

Descriptive titles – describe the subject of the article but do not reveal the main conclusions (e.g. 'The effects of family support on patients with dementia').

Interrogative titles – introduce the subject in the form of a question (e.g. 'Does cognitive training improve performance on pattern recognition tasks?')

Each of these three types is useful and you should choose a format depending on what kind of information you want to convey to your audience. Declarative titles are generally used in research articles and they convey the largest amount of information. They are also good if you want to emphasize the technical side of the research you have carried out. Interrogative titles, on the other hand, are less common and they are more suitable for literature review articles. But out of the three, descriptive titles seem to be most common type in journals (Jamali & Nikzad, 2011).

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How to formulate your title?

Here are a few tips that can help you avoid some of the most common mistakes when writing titles:

- Follow the guidelines of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2009). The manual recommends simplicity and the use of concise statements when formulating your title. Moreover, words that carry little or no meaning should be avoided as they increase the overall length and may mislead indexing services.
- Avoid titles that are too long. The recommended length of a title is no more than 12 words (APA, 2009). Longer titles can be more difficult to remember and, as Jamali and Nikzad (2011) found, articles with longer titles are downloaded slightly less than those with shorter titles (at least in biological sciences).
- You can sometimes use a colon to add additional information to the title, such as the methodology that was used (e.g., 'Brain activation during perception of face-like stimuli: A fMRI study'). However, using a very long subtitle can sometimes be cumbersome and counterproductive (e.g., 'Self-esteem: Can it improve interpersonal relationships among community-dwelling adults in North America?'). In such cases, you can try to rewrite the title without the colon and see if any crucial information is lost (Hays, 2010).
- Do not use acronyms in the title without spelling them out (Hartley, 2012). Readers who are not familiar with their meaning may simply skip your article even though it's relevant to their search.
- Irony, puns, and humor in the title may help you attract more readers but they should be avoided most of the time (Hartley, 2008). The problem with them is that they may not be understood by readers who are not native speakers and they also tend to be culture-specific. Moreover, your article will probably appear less often in the search results if you decide to replace the words carrying the main meaning with a humorous phrase.

Write a few variants

Take the time to write a few possible titles and to experiment using different types or alternative formulations (Hays, 2010). In this way, you will be able to analyze how they would function in reality and possibly generate some new ideas. Sometimes, just by looking at different variants, you can come up with a better idea that combines the best aspects of two or more tentative titles. Once you're ready with the generation of ideas, just pick the best variant and put it in the place of the draft title.

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