WRITING TITLES: DOS AND DON'TS

COMPILED BY THE NORTHWESTERN WRITING PLACE

This resource is adapted from the Graduate Writing Place's workshop "Writing Compelling Abstracts and Titles." For more information about our workshops, see Graduate Writing Workshops.

INTRODUCTION

When evaluating academic work, titles are often the first (and sometimes the only) writing a reviewer encounters. Here are some tips for conveying essential information in titles.

TITLES

Titles serve three main goals:

1. attracting readers
2. stating the main topic of your study
3. separating your article from other articles in the field.

Keep the following tips in mind as you're crafting a title:

TITLE DOS

Technique	Example	Sample Revision
DO name your subject clearly.	"Grotesque Readings: The Language of Violence in Cervantes"	"Grotesque Readings: The Language of Violence in Cervantes' Don Quixote"
DO suggest your argument/results. This is more common in STEM fields, but is an approach that students in every field can benefit from.	"Exposure to Immigrant Culture and Dropping out of School among Asian and Latino Youths"	"The Benefits of Biculturalism: Exposure to Immigrant Culture and School Drop-Outs among Asian and Latino Youths"
DO use searchable keywords.	"Black Faculty Salary Differentials"	"The Black Professoriate: Explaining the Salary Gap for

Technique	Example	Sample Revision
This doesn't mean including every possible keyword in the title, but using the title as an opportunity to showcase multiple keywords that someone might use to search for your research. Use the colon wisely to incorporate multiple keywords.		African-American Female Faculty"
DO avoid density. Try to think about this in terms of avoiding long strings of nouns.	"The George Lopez Show: An American Family Sitcom Redefining Latinidad on Prime Time Through the Logic of Consumer Capitalism and Individualism"	"Redefining Latinidad on Prime Time Network Television: Consumer Capitalism and the American Family Sitcom The George Lopez Show"
DO include a verb, if possible. This can point a reader to your argument, as well as help you avoid density. Be careful of "predictable," or overused, verbs within your discipline.	"Tracking long-distance migration of gray whales with geolocators"	"Tracking long-distance migration of gray whales using geolocators"
DO highlight concepts you want to be known for. If there is a concept (ideology, skill, etc.) that you want associated with your work, DO try to incorporate it into every title you write.		
DO use colons for contrast. In non-STEM fields, a colon can make a title both engaging and informative. In STEM fields, colons are often used to indicate the type of study conducted.	"Women on Top: The Love Magic of the Indian Witches of New Mexico" "Geriatric Care Management for Low Income Seniors: A Randomized Controlled Trial"	

Technique	Example	Sample Revision
Keep in mind that you never want to use the same word on either side of a colon.		

TITLE DON'TS

Technique	Example	Sample Revision
DON'T be too broad. Avoid titles that seem like they could describe an entire book or phenomenon.	"Tradition and the Spread of AIDS in Malawi"	"Risky Traditional Practices Associated with the Spread of HIV/AIDS Among Pregnant Women in the Blantyre and Lilongwe Districts of Malawi"
DON'T use strings of vague terms. Having too many vague terms, especially in a row, makes the entire topic seem vague. It might also indicate that the scope of your paper is too broad.	"Revolution, Change, and Transition: Television in the Twenty-First Century"	"Primetime Television Challenges to the Movie Industry: The Rise of Reality Programming in the 2000s"
DON'T use too many abstract or collective nouns. Aim for no more than two.	Abstract noun examples: analysis, structure, development, education Collective noun examples: students, teachers, patients, subjects	
DON'T use vague or obscure quotes or references or clever puns. You can risk confusing or alienating readers. These also take up valuable space that might be otherwise allocated to important keywords.		
DON'T use a default running head/title.		

Technique	Example	Sample Revision
A running title is a shortened, but recognizable version of your title that still contains the key ideas you want to present. A running title doesn't take the place of a title.		

OTHER TIPS FOR TITLES

- If you always use colons in your title, consider writing one without a colon (or vice versa)
- Consider making your title into a question
    - Example: "Faculty and Student Opinions about E-books"
    - Sample revision: "What do faculty and students really think about E-books?"
- Use your title to set a scene
    - Example: "Parental Involvement in Children's Decisions to Live at Home during College"
    - Sample revision: "When Parents Want Children to Stay Home for College"
- Use words that would be unexpected in your field, especially if they are concrete nouns
    - Example: "The First Strawberries in India: Cultural Portability in Victorian Greater England"

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READING

Here are some additional resources you might find useful:

- If you're in a STEM field, click here for more guidance on how to craft a title: https://www.wtamu.edu/webres/File/Academics/Graduate%20School/Sponsored%20Research%20Services/Craft_A_Winning_Title.pdf
- Click here for Richard Leahy's "Twenty Titles for the Writer" exercise, which can help you to get into the mindset of creating an effective title: http://writing.umn.edu/sws/assets/pdf/quicktips/titles.pdf
- Click here if you want to learn more about metadiscourse in academic writing: https://explorationsofstyle.com/2017/01/31/metadiscourse/