

Titles

An effective title alerts your reader to the paper's topic and can be used to get your reader in the right frame of mind. Don't overlook this opportunity to establish your credibility and authority. A two-part format that gives the topic, followed by a colon and a sub-title containing more specific information, is a popular method for titling academic papers.

Use Key Terms to Aid Database Searches

Databases utilize key terms in titles to help researchers locate articles easily. Even though your essay might never be published, incorporating key words in your title is a strategy that demonstrates your desire to be taken seriously as a scholar, and it allows your reader to identify your topic immediately.

“WHO Says H1N1 Virus Is Stable, Not Yet Mutating”

“Experimental Functional Analysis of Aggression in Children with Angelman Syndrome”

“Names and Forms of Settlements as Sources for the Settlement History of Lower Austria”

Provoke the Reader's Interest and Willingness to Read More

Consider your title as an advertisement for your argument. As such, it should be an intellectual enticement to the reader so he or she looks forward to spending time with your ideas. That means creating a title that contains more than just your topic. A good advertisement doesn't just announce the product; it proclaims the benefit of using that product. For example, an ad for a new refrigerator wouldn't say, “A New Fridge”; it might state, “Keep Your Food Fresher Longer.”

It's a little trickier to think of an academic paper as offering a benefit, so think of it in intellectual terms: your reader benefits by having his or her intellectual curiosity satisfied. Give your reader a foretaste of your main point. A good place to find thought-provoking material is in your thesis, since it is a concise, one-sentence statement of your argument. If your topic is New World exploration, and your thesis argues that it caused extermination, assert that in your title. It's not giving too much away; your reader will expect the paper to argue how and whether it occurred.

Present Your Paper as Thoughtful and Serious

In general, using puns in a title will diminish the perception your reader has of you as an authority. You're not writing a B movie title. Therefore, “European Explorers' Effects on The New World: Oh My God! They Killed Millions!” is not a suitable title for an academic paper. Your reader might entirely miss your pop culture reference, and any rhetorical effect you hoped to make will fall flat. Since your paper will be read by someone who will evaluate it (often in the form of a grade) and wants to take your work seriously, meet your reader's expectations. This doesn't mean, however, confusing “serious” with “dry.” You can still use alliteration and other “high-minded” wordplay in your title. One revision of the above example might be, “Inadvertent and Intentional Extermination: Effects of European Exploration in The New World.”

Create a Title after Writing Your Paper

Mine your paper for a good title after it's completed. While the writer of the New World exploration paper knew she was arguing about intentional extermination, it wasn't until she finished that she realized her topic was more complex than when she started out. Writing an accurate, engaging title was simply the final step in her writing process, and it prepared her reader to expect a thought-provoking argument.