Formulating an Apt Title for a Research Paper : Some Tips and Techniques

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ORCID No : 0009-0006-0346-2077
DOI : 10.32344/jld/v10/il/2024/11-20

Abstract

An appropriate title must condense the gist of the article in a few words and capture readers' attention. It should not only introduce the research work to the fullest extent, but also be very concise. Therefore writing scientific titles that are at once informative and attractive is nevertheless a challenging task. An effective title is almost the initial step to attract readers and gain it visibility and conversely, a poorly written title will deter readers and discourage citation, even if the contents of a paper are significant. In this backdrop, this paper delves into the ways and methods of formulating appropriate titles for research papers.

Keywords : *Appropriate title, Informative Title, Apt Title, Research Paper*



1. Introduction

It is often said that one must not judge a book by its cover, for it can be misleading, but the same cannot be said about 'titles.' A 'title' must always give the much needed introduction to any write-up. Title is an important part of any piece of writing, more so in the field of academic writing. It must not only give a clue to the content of the article, but also draw the right readers to consume it wetting their interest to read it; thereby creating a community of like-minded readers to come together and share ideas on a chosen subject.

The value of any research paper depends on how many readers find it relevant and cite it in their work. And in order for the research paper to be viewed by the research community and considered for reading, an appropriate title is the key. It is the title of an article that triggers interest of readers, as it serves as the gateway to the contents of a scientific article. From a syntactic point of view, a title "is metadata with a structure that can be a word, phrase, expression, or sentence, that serves to indicate a paper or one of its parts and give its subject" [3]. Title is the first part of any writing that the editors and reviewers evaluate while considering it for publication. And after publication, it is the first (and many a times, also the only) part of an article that readers notice. Based on how the title communicates with them, readers decide its relevance to them. Also, most readers browsing through the search engine or a database get to see only the title. And based on the impression that the title forms, the research article receives its potential and right readers. It goes without saying that in today's world of information explosion with tons of source materials available at ones finger tips; it's a herculean task for researchers to mine the right research articles. Laying hold of the papers that would further their research itself is a challenge, despite subject specific databases. And the title of the paper gets the primacy of providing not just the first clue about the article,

but should additionally helps differentiate that particular article from other papers on the topic as well. Therefore, it becomes imperative for authors to carefully formulate a title that is informative, appropriate, concise and discursive for their research paper.

2. Types of Titles

Although different types of titles can be identified, one can enumerate three basic categories based on how they present the content of the articles - declarative, descriptive and interrogative.

* **Declarative or Informative Research titles** give away the major outcomes of the paper. For example: '**Novel flight style and light wings boost flight performance of tiny beetles**.'

* **Descriptive or Indicative Research titles** describe the article's theme without revealing its findings or conclusions. For example: "**An Analysis of Sleep Patterns and Sleep Quality in Older Adults in India**"

  Descriptive titles include all aspects of the research question studied (participant, intervention, control and outcome). Although, this makes the title rather long, the readers get complete information about the research conducted and as it contains several "keywords" and hence the article's chances of being discovered by search engines, read and cited by other researchers is potentially increased.

* **Interrogative Research titles** restate or rephrase the research question in part or in full; for example: "Does adding video and subtitles to an audio lesson facilitate its comprehension? Such titles evoke the curiosity of the readers to find out the answers and also offer a concise way of presenting the research topic.



Generally, descriptive titles are preferred over the declarative titles as descriptive titles inform the readers about what a study entails but do not divulge the study result which helps maintain the suspense about the outcome. On the other hand, as a declarative title states the outcome it may diminish the curiosity required for reading the entire paper.

One can also consider **Uniform Titles** where papers are in series. [It is also in case of multi-volume books with uniform titles.]

While the above categories were from content and utility points of view, the titles can also be grouped from structure angle. From the construct point of view, titles are categorised as **nominal, compound and full sentence titles.**

A vast majority of titles are "nominal titles" capturing the **main theme of the paper**. For example, "Off-label drug use in cardiac intensive care unit." Titles which are accompanied by subtitles are called compound titles or hanging titles. The subtitles are primarily used to present additional relevant information. For example, *Reinterpreting Holocaust: a Postmodernist Reading*is a compound title as it consists of two phrases on either side of the colon. Full sentence titles are not a common occurrence and are longer and are more assertive about the outcome of the study. For example, "Serum Vitamin D Is Significantly Inversely Associated with Disease Severity in Caucasian Adults with Obstructive Sleep Apnea Syndrome"

In short, the types of titles are similar to that of abstracts, viz., indicative, informative, evaluative, slanting, etc.

A title can contain commas, parenthesis and quotation marks but not semicolons (;) and slashes (/). Commas can be used in the middle of the title and quotation marks only for a part of the title, and not the entire title.



However titles that end with an exclamatory mark for research articles are scarce. Evidence also suggests that the presence of colon in the title increases its discoverability [7] and the length of the title is positively correlated to the number of citations.

3. Guidelines for Writing a Title

Here is an attempt **to indicate steps involved in formulating an appropriate titles.**

At the outset start by asking a few questions about the research paper to be titled, such as:

1. What does the paper seek to answer ? What does the paper accomplish ?
   Answers to these questions must be as brief as possible, preferably in one or two sentences each.

For example: If a hypothetical paper is about finding out causes of Osteoporosis and identifying ways of its early detection and treatment, then the next question would be about the methods/techniques used to perform the study. Suppose - a case study is employed, then the next query would be about- who was the subject of the study? The answer could be – a study of 60 cases of Osteoporosis patients in Belagavi aged between 40-60 years. The next highlight to be considered is about the results of the study. The study would have revealed a connection between lower consumption of calcium in the early years of the patients' lives.

2. Keywords and phrases from the above responses must be identified and listed such as,.- 60 cases; outcomes -Belagavi / ages 40-60 -Osteoporosis patients -positive correlation between calcium deficiency and early signs of Osteoporosis –Ways of early detection- regular calcium tests



3. These keywords must be put in one long sentence like a chain. "This study covered a case study of 60 Osteoporosis patients in Belagavi aged 40-60 years to assess the causes and analyse how early detection could prevent the disease with results indicating a positive correlation between deficiency in calcium in early years with increased chances of being affected by the disease." This sentence is obviously too long for a title, and hence need to be clipped and retailored.

4. To create a working title, the elements that make it a complete "sentence" must be removed while keeping intact what the study is about. So, all the unnecessary and redundant puff words that are not central to the study or that researchers would most likely do not use in a database search must be cropped off. Some words around for proper syntax should be shifted and then rephrased to shorten the length and make it compact and terse. What is left with is: "A case study of 60 Osteoporosis patients in Belagavi aged 40-60 years assessing the impact of early detection of calcium deficiency in preventing the disease." (Word Count: 26) This is also too long for a title, but includes all the important information. The word length of an average published journal article is usually 16 words or fewer. Hence some more words and phrases which are not essential to this title need to be removed without disturbing the meaning.

5. All extra words or phrases must be dropped to get a reasonable word count; keywords must be placed at the beginning or end of the title. As the number of patients studied and the exact outcome are not the most essential parts of this paper, these elements can be removed to reduce the word count. Also, the methods used in a study are not usually the most searched-for keywords in

databases, therefore, ;they too can be cut off. So what can be retained is "Assessing the impact of early detection on Osteoporosis patients" (Word Count: 09). This final version of the title presents the subject and the objectives the study aims to achieve. Note the important terms are written at the beginning and end of the title: "Assessing," which is the main action of the study, is placed at the beginning; and "Osteoporosis patients," the specific subject of the study, is placed at the end. This will help significantly in being tracked in search engine and database queries, meaning that a lot more researchers will be able to locate the article upon its publication. One can also add a subtitle to give more details about methodology or sample. It can be done by inserting this information after a colon : "a case study of Belagavi adult patients ages 40-60." This addition may make it lengthier, but every journal has its own standard formatting and style guidelines for titles, which need to be adhered to while writing the title.

However, apart from observing the above tips as well as those prescribed by specific publishers, some generic tips to be kept in mind regarding formulating titles are **- word count and content**. These can be:

* The title is to be formulated after the paper and abstract are completed, which would capture all the key elements of the paper.
* All of the essential terms in the paper should be included, so as to increase its visibility.
* Titles should be short and to the point (16 words or fewer)
* The titles should be free of any jargon or abbreviations. However there are exceptions. Jargons may be used in highly



professional journals. The term 'Nephrology' may be used in titles *British Journal of Medicine* but if similar article appears in the *Times of India*, titles should use the word 'Kidney Diseases'.

* Keywords that closely relate to the content of the paper should be chosen
* Title is not a sentence, hence should not end with a period

Conclusion

Titles are "a front and summary matter" (Swales, 1990: 179) in the sense that they are the first encounter between readers and any type of document as well as the main indicator of its content. Writing scientific titles is an art and can be challenging. Also, there is no general agreement "on the standard and good title writing practice in different scientific disciplines and genres" [10]. During the short time that the reader spends in reading title; a decision is also being made on the relevance of it for his work. Therefore, if the title fails to capture readers' attention and convey what the research is all about, the information seeker will move on without taking cognizance of the paper, although it might be exceedingly relevant. So, there is always a chance of good research papers being relegated to the obscurity owing to poor titles. Thus titles play a crucial role in making or breaking the visibility of research papers and hence formulating titles must be seriously considered by every researcher.



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Editor's Observations or Comments or suggestions

* Include uniform titles as a type
* The nature of title depends on the type of journal//periodical/ publication
* Jargons may be used in highly professional journals. The term 'Nephrology' may be used in titles *British Journal of Medicine* but if similar article appears in the *Times of India, titles should* use the word 'Kidney Diseases'.
* The types of titles are similar to that of abstracts, viz., indicative, informative, evaluative, slanting etc.