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# WRITING AN EFFECTIVE TITLE

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How to Write a Research Paper: An Editage Series



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## ABSTRACT

Internet statistics show that on an average, for every 500 individuals who read the title of a research paper, only one is likely to read the complete paper. One might wonder: Does the title of the paper have anything to do with these readership numbers? Old research, in the form of the work of peers or contemporaries, usually forms the basis for new research. While it is common to browse and shortlist relevant papers from a searchable database, researchers or students may also come across a relevant research topic either in the contents section of a journal or in the references list of a paper. One can therefore say that the title of a paper directly affects the impact or visibility of a work, or that it is one of the factors that can affect the readership of a journal.

Although the impact of the results (or conclusion) is reason enough for a work to be read and further cited, the title of a research paper is equally important in generating reader interest and providing the right exposure or visibility.

This issue discusses the qualities of a good title, its importance, and offers tips on writing effective titles. A brief note on translated titles—a focus area for nonnative speakers—is also provided.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE TITLE?

When parents choose a name for their child, they make a conscious effort to select a name that represents a certain quality that they would like the child to be associated or identified with. For an author, a major piece of writing can seem like a child—something new being brought into the world. The most appropriate title for a book will represent the essence of the story and attract readers. (Often, the publisher is more concerned about the latter!)

Typically, researchers refer to studies conducted on related topics while conducting their own research, and may search through hundreds of titles to select those that seem most relevant. Of the papers actually read, only a few will go on to be cited in the published study. Skimming through research titles is one mode of selection and possibly the most common one. Thus, using a well-

written, effective title is the first step to attract readers and visibility. The converse—a poorly written title—will deter readers and discourage citation, even if the contents of a paper are important.

WHAT MAKES A  
GOOD TITLE?

The basic function of any title is to provide a terse summary of the content. It may also inform the reader of the most novel finding of a study. Therefore, it should be specific, concise, and informative. A wordy, uninformative title can mislead a reader or simply dilute the impact of the research. Research titles should not be designed to sensationalize a topic. In fact, “catchy” titles often detract serious readers from taking note of the study. A good title is straightforward and uses keywords that researchers in a particular field will recognize. Alternatively, it may introduce new words or phrases in a way that helps to create new keywords for a particular research field but this cannot be done if the paper itself does not substantiate the wording of the title.

HOW TO WRITE  
AN EFFECTIVE TITLE?

While it may seem like a simple task, writing an effective title is an art. A study conducted to assess the effect of drug XYZ on the cardiac muscles of the snail *Achatina fulica*<sup>1</sup> was given the following title:

► **Measuring muscle contraction in snail**

Let’s evaluate the title based on the criteria defined in the previous section.

1. **Is the title concise? Yes.**
2. **Is this title specific? No.**

**Reason:** Undoubtedly, many researchers have conducted studies on muscles in snails. The most novel finding of this study may be the results associated with the use of the drug. This title does not provide any information about the nature of the research (study design) and lacks specificity in relation to the animal species, muscle type, and the drug.

**Outcome:** This title will only deter a reader from referring to this article.

3. **Is the title informative? No.**

**Reason:** A fellow researcher working on a similar topic is likely to search using keywords such as cardiac or heart muscle, *Achatina fulica*, or the drug name. Thus, this paper may or may not be listed in the search results.

**Outcome:** There is a distinct possibility that this paper may be overlooked in the search results.

It is important, therefore, for authors to review the title of their study to ensure that it reflects the novelty of the study, which in some cases may be the uniqueness of the research question or hypothesis.

*Note: We have used a fictional study topic to explain the construction of a title.*

An effective title captures all aspects of the research—the subject, methods, results, and novelty. As is customary with most types of writing, research writing is done in the stages of outline, draft, and final. Thus, a title may not always be determined at the beginning of a study and often evolves as the study progresses. The next two sections concern the drafting and finalizing of a title.

DRAFTING A  
WORKING TITLE

A “working title” may be written during the research or at the manuscript development stage. It is usually rewritten or rephrased in the final stage. (*Refer to the section on Finalizing the Title.*)

A working title can be drafted in two ways.

Technique 1:

Write the hypothesis as a question and then write out the conclusions or results in a bulleted format. Work by eliminating the unnecessary words or phrases to form a single sentence. This forms the basis for the “working title.”

Technique 2:

List the possible components of a title and arrange them to form a concise statement.

TECHNIQUE 1

Step 1: Write the hypothesis as a question.

Does drug XYZ induce muscle contraction in the cardiac muscles of *Achatina fulica*?

Step 2: Write the results or conclusions.

Drug XYZ induces muscle contraction in the cardiac muscles of *Achatina fulica*.

TECHNIQUE 2

To understand and follow Technique 2, it is important to first identify and list the different grammatical elements that form a title. The working title can then be drafted as a simple sentence, with the following structure:

subject + verb + object.

Although this technique is more elaborate and laborious than the first one, it makes the author choose words carefully and rearrange or rephrase the title to convey the best meaning.

The process of constructing a title can be divided into three main stages:

1. **Word selection** (selecting the right grammatical element or words)
2. **Word order** (arranging the string of words)
3. **Review**

Given below are simple steps that can be followed for each stage.

1. **Word selection**

Identify the subject 

**The subject (noun) usually defines the nature of the research or study**

**design.** The following table provides a list of noun categories that can be used to describe the events in a study.

Nouns associated with research project	Examples
Phenomena	Localization, migration
Event	World War II, tsunami
Technique	Polymerization, endoscopy
Study design	Randomized control trial, cohort study
Type or presentation	Report, case study, or survey

Identify the verb **V**

In the study conducted on snails (*described in the previous section*), the noun describes the outcome of the study.

Effect of drug XYZ. A verb identifies the action performed. In this case, the verb is **assess**.

Other common verbs include

- analyze
- observe
- conduct
- develop
- isolate

Identify the object **O**

The object (noun) is the recipient of the action. In this case, the object is **cardiac muscles of snail *Achatina fulcia***. Objects, being nouns, can be classified as

Names	Microorganisms, Animals, Plants, Humans
Places	Geographical Regions, Periods, or Eras
Things	Elements, Mixtures, or Compounds

## 2. Word order

Arrange the **subject**, **verb**, and **object** in a sentence format



Write a complete sentence by adding the necessary articles, conjunctions, and prepositions.

**The effect of XYZ was assessed in the cardiac muscles of snail *Achatina fulcia*.**

At this stage, the title is usually a sentence that answers the question: what was done in this study?

Note: The tense usually changes from present to past at this stage (*assess* becomes *assessed*).

In order to communicate all the relevant details about the study it is important to initially write the title as a complete sentence, as shown above. Having achieved that, the next step is to make it concise and thereby improve readability. Thus, the final title is usually not a complete sentence.

The following steps will demonstrate how to modify a complete sentence into a concise title.

### 3. Review

Rewrite the sentence to construct a brief title



#### ▶ Assessing **the** effect of XYZ on **the** cardiac muscles of snail *Achatina fulica*

Word count = 13 words

Here, the word “assessing” is redundant because “effect” implies assessment. Also, the two definite articles (the) can be omitted for brevity. Thus, a concise and informative title would be

#### ▶ Effect of XYZ on cardiac muscles of **snail** *Achatina fulica*

It could be further improved by eliminating the word “snail.”

#### ▶ Effect of XYZ on cardiac muscles of *Achatina fulica*

Word count = 9 words

Notice that the readability of this title is much better! It is specific, concise, and informative. One could also announce the findings or results of the study in the title itself. For example,

#### ▶ XYZ induces differentiation of cardiac muscles in *Achatina fulica*

Note: There are mixed opinions on whether a title should state the results of a study. This is a decision that the author needs to take. There are instances where the title could include the results if they are pertinent and conclusive; that is, the results are a novel finding. In the above example, the finding that the drug induces muscle contraction is a part of the result and constitutes the title. The author has ensured that the novelty of his study is conveyed to readers at the first instance, that is, even if they only read the title.

The most common error zone for nonnative speakers is the linking words conjunctions, prepositions, and articles which, if placed incorrectly, can cause confusion and kill the research impact.

The following erroneous titles illustrate this point.

#### ▶ **The effect on drug XYZ in cardiac muscles**

The above title contains misplaced and incorrect prepositions and unnecessary article. The title should be written as

#### ▶ **The effect of drug XYZ on cardiac muscles**

The title is still vague. It does not communicate the relevance of the study.

#### ▶ Better: **Drug XYZ induces cardiac muscle contraction**

Often, prepositions have similar meanings and can be used interchangeably. Commonly confused and misused prepositions include *during* and *in*, *of* and *for*, etc. So refer to a good dictionary to clarify the correct meaning in the given context and choose the prepositions accordingly.

DO'S AND DONT'S

Do's

- Use active voice whenever possible.
- Use only common acronyms\* such as AIDS or HIV and NATO or UNDP. This is recommended by most official style guides (across subjects) and journal guidelines.

It is important to note that often acronyms overlap across subjects. For example, an acronym such as LED has up to 12 different full forms.

Acronym: LED

Full Forms: Light Emitting Diode/Law Enforcement Desk/Lawyers Edition/ Ledig (German: unmarried)/Lethality Enhancing Device/Library Education Division/Light Emitting Device/Linear Energy Density/Logical Error Detection/Logic-Evolved Decision Model/Lupus Erythematosus Disseminatus/St. Petersburg, Russia-Pulkovo (Airport Code) Source: [www.acronymfinder.com](http://www.acronymfinder.com)

Such ambiguity can confuse the reader. Thus, it is advisable to use acronyms and abbreviations of only well-known organizations, diseases, chemicals, etc.

Don'ts

- × Writing the title in a question format, unless it is relevant to the study design and the study provides a concrete answer.
- × Using contractions such as *doesn't*, *can't*, *won't*, etc.
- × Citing company names, trademarks, brand names, etc.

WORDINESS IN TITLES

Lengthy titles that include excessive details on the subject, methods, or results may confuse the reader or overshadow the findings. The title should be a brief statement and is not necessarily a complete sentence.

A good title is composed of 8 to 15 words, though this is not a hard-and-fast rule.

The following are a few common errors that often lead to wordy and uninteresting titles.

- Unnecessary articles
- Redundant or obvious phrases such as “study of” or “evaluation of” (since almost every paper is a study or evaluation of something)
- Unnecessary adjectives such as “excellent application of,” “novel study of,” etc. Use adjectives that describe the more distinctive features of your work, e.g., reliable, scalable, high-performance, robust, low-complexity, or low-cost.
- Double negatives, e.g., “is not absent” can be written as “is present.”

Occasionally, one does come across titles with more than 20 words. Such length is acceptable if the words convey information that is critical to the research. The word count, though important, is a criterion that should be considered last.

For instance, if one of the unique features of a research project is the location or population under study, then the author(s) should include these details in the title as the application or newness of the study will specifically interest readers. For example, consider the following title.

- **Fire Ecology in the Ponderosa Pine Community of the Blue Mountains in Eastern Oregon and Washington**

## FINALIZING THE TITLE

Try to imagine what you would want to see in the title if you were searching for the same topic using keywords. Whichever style you choose, short or long, ensure that the title is clear and reflects the nature of your work and the discovery.

The following checklist will make this task easier.

- Does it clearly indicate the nature of the research or study?
- Is it accurate? Does it provide complete information about the study? (The title shouldn't be too broad or general.)
- Does the title indicate the specific technique or method employed?
- Does it specify the object that was studied?
- Do the verbs accurately describe actions performed in the study?
- Does the title contain the keywords of the study?
- Is the title free of jargon and acronyms that might be unknown to the reader?

## TRANSLATED TITLES

Working with a translated manuscript can become a daunting task, depending on the skills of both the writer and the translator. It is advisable to examine a translated title very carefully before submission. Small errors in the order of words, spelling, or prepositions can be detrimental.

Let's use the example of a study that discusses recent changes in trade relations between India and China.

The translated title is as follows:

- **A few remarks on IC border-area trade and conditions realted to the progression of the IC border trade**

Observe the following aspects of the title:

1. The author has simply assumed that the reader will know what IC stands for, although it is not a common abbreviation.
2. The title is wordy (word count = 18 words).
3. It is not interesting. It fails to catch the reader's attention.
4. There is a gross spelling error (realted = related).
5. "A few remarks" is a very vague expression.
6. Incorrect word choice: "progression" could be replaced with "progress," "development," or "promotion," depending on the actual content of the study.
7. Incorrect article (there should be no article before "IC border trade").

In addition, the author has not specified whether the study is based on recent trade relations or is conducted over a long period. Providing this information would benefit the reader. For example, the following title would clarify such speculation for the reader.

- **Recent progress of India-China border trade**

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CONCLUSION

The information, or the words, conveyed in a title is crucial to the visibility and impact of a research paper. Always give close attention to the word choice and order in the title. Try preparing 3-4 titles and use the one that seems best.

Remember, the title is the first part of your paper that your colleagues will see, and you want it to stimulate curiosity. Your article will appear in a crowded journal containing dozens of other research articles, so choose the title carefully.

Ask yourself, if you were to read a list of titles, would this title interest you. Read the title aloud; as a researcher, if it makes you think “Ah, that’s interesting” or “What’s this study about?” or “This is a new discovery; I must read it,” then you can be more confident that your title will attract the attention of a sizeable number of readers (besides impressing the editor, of course!).

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