

Tempting Titles

Writing Resources



Your title is—most of the time—the first thing your reader will read when they open your essay.

For this reason, it is incredibly important that you spend a bit of time devising a title that brilliantly encapsulates the argument about to follow.

Just take what Helen Sword noted in her fabulous book *Stylish Academic Writing*:

“Like a hat on a head or the front door to a house, the title of an academic article offers a powerful first impression. Is the title dry, technical, straightforward? Most likely, the author’s main goal is to transmit research data as efficiently as possible. Does the title contain opaque disciplinary jargon? Perhaps the author unconsciously hopes to impress us, whether by appealing to a shared expertise (“You and I are members of an exclusive club”) or by reminding us of our ignorance (“If you can’t even understand my title, don’t bother reading any further”). Is the title amusing, intriguing, provocative? Here is an author who is working hard to catch our gaze, engage our interest, and draw us in.” (65)

While Sword is referring to a wide range of disciplinary practices here (and not just in literary studies), her first and last points are ones to remember—a well-phrased title does more than simply gesture to your reader what you’re about to argue, but it is so enticing that they can’t wait to read what comes next.

Helpfully, there are a range of formulas to which titles often conform.

The one literary scholars are most fond of is “engaging: informative”. This is also one of the easiest structures to replicate with any given idea, where the *engaging* part is often taken by a quotation from the text: “‘The little wheel that turns all day’: Machine Metaphors in Amy Levy’s ‘March Day’” and “‘The gas-lamps gleam in a golden line’: Lighting in Victorian Literature”.

In order to make the engaging part *engaging* it can’t be any old quote—look out for patterns (e.g. alliteration) or figurative language (e.g. metaphors) or vivid imagery.

However, using this structure often falls into the

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trap of being engaging, but not very informative. Take “The Black Nod”: Gender and Race in Americanah”—although the quote is vivid, ‘Gender’ and ‘Race’ are so vague, the title overall is simply lacklustre.

Aim to avoid titles that are too broad and instead try to be as specific as you can.

Crafting a tempting title means choosing specific language—concrete nouns and vivid verbs—to help ground your essay within a specific critical field/theory.

If you are stuck, use your research question to help compose a title, e.g. ‘How does Amy Levy use images of technology?’; ‘What kind of formal experimentation is going on in this text?’.

Just make sure you don’t use the question as your title.

Equally unengaging and uninformative is using ‘To what extent...’ Titles like this might come from a place of interest, but in actuality restrict the rhetorical force your essay will have.

Titles should be springboards or signposts for argumentation—asking ‘to what extent’ doesn’t suggest any intellectual gymnastics are about to follow. In order to be inviting and intriguing, titles should be short (about a line long at maximum unless your texts have very long titles).

The best inspiration for tempting titles are the articles and books that you read.

Read and experiment as much as you can. Titles should sound like other titles of published books or articles—when you’re reading criticism, look at the structure of their titles.

How do they balance concept, theory, critical field/idea, information about the text, quotation? What is the rhythm of the title; how does it sound? If in doubt, find a structure you like and mimic it. But also look to novels, short stories, and poems—although titles of literary texts have different rhetorical purposes to titles of academic essays, consider their cadence, rhythm, diction.

Once you’ve finished drafting your essay, make sure that you double check your title: do the aims of the title

match the reality of your essay? Or are they off-kilter? Are there any concepts that you ended up discussing frequently that should be in the title? Have you coined a term during the writing process?

Fine-tuning your title as you revise the essay ensures that the very first line your reader reads captures precisely what you’re about to argue.