

COMPOSING AN EFFECTIVE TITLE

Titles are labels that convey what a piece of writing is or what it is about. After reading your title, your readers will begin to make assumptions about your creativity, preparation, and expertise, so it is important to spend some time crafting a good one. Titles typically highlight the central question an essay investigates, and most will hint at the author's stance on that question.

Although every paper you write for class will have a title, titling conventions vary by discipline. Your readers' initial sense of your authority in a particular subject area will be shaped, in part, by how your title demonstrates your understanding of the conventions in that field.

You should read all of the sections below, as titling strategies in the other disciplines may help you form ideas that would be useful in your field.

Titles and Subtitles

It is common for pieces of academic writing to have both a title and a subtitle. In these works, the title is presented first and separated from the subtitle by a colon. For example:

Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of a Nation

The "title: subtitle" format is rarely obligatory in academic writing, but it is prevalent, in part, because it allows for a greater range of possibilities than using a title alone.

Titles in Humanities Papers

Titles of academic works in the humanities tend to identify both the subject area and the text(s) the paper will analyze ("Representing 'Other' Diasporas in Recent Global Canadian Fiction"). When analyzing a specific work, it is conventional to include both the author's name and the title of the work ("Going Wendigo: The Emergence of the Iconic Monster in Margret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Antonia Bird's *Ravenous*"). Including the author's name is unnecessary if the work you are analyzing is widely known (e.g. *Twelfth Night*, *Moby Dick*, &c.). Titles of humanities papers tend to employ more vibrant, vivid language than titles in other disciplines.

The following title demonstrates several higher-level techniques:

Strange Fruits in the Garden: Surveying the Properties of Lynching

When humanities papers employ the "title: subtitle" structure, the title is usually more suggestive, and its meaning may not become fully clear until the audience has read the paper. Here the author, Sandy Alexandre, makes two allusions, one to "Strange Fruit," a Billie Holiday song about lynching, and another to *The Machine in the Garden*, an influential book of literary criticism. Even if the audience isn't familiar with these allusions before reading Alexandre's work, their meaning will become clearer while reading, thereby bolstering readers' sense of Alexandre's cleverness, attention to detail, and, in turn, her authority.

The subtitle of a humanities paper typically states the subject more directly, as Alexandre's title does. However, by punning on *surveying* and *properties* Alexandre employs an additional strategy for conveying her cleverness. When used as jokes, puns in titles can backfire by suggesting that your approach to your subject is unserious. But when employed as Alexandre does here, puns can convey an author's sensitivity to her subject's many layers of meaning.

Titles in Science Papers

Titles of academic works in the sciences should present their subject with specificity and do so using as few words as possible. The title should provide details specific enough to distinguish the project undertaken in the paper from other studies on the same topic. Consider these examples taken from Jan Pechenik's *A Short Guide to Writing About Biology*:

NO: Factors controlling sex determination in turtles

YES: Roles of nest site selection and temperature in determining sex ratio in loggerhead sea turtles

NO: The control of organ development in fish

YES: The novel gene "*exdpf*" regulates pancreas development in zebrafish

Be economical with your language, but don't be so economical that it limits your specificity. The *ACS Style Guide* offers these guidelines for the language of scientific titles: "Choose terms that are as specific as the text permits, e.g., 'a vanadium-iron alloy' rather than 'a magnetic alloy.' Avoid phrases such as 'on the,' 'a study of,' 'research on,' 'regarding,' and 'use of.' In most cases, omit 'the' at the beginning of the title. Avoid nonquantitative, meaningless words such as 'rapid' and 'new.'"

Titles in Social Science Papers

Titles of academic works in the social sciences present the subject of the paper as simply and directly as possible. According to the APA style guide, the title "should be a concise statement of the main topic and should identify the actual variables or theoretical issues under investigation and the relationship between them." To better understand what this looks like, consider this title:

Effect of Context on Performance Approach Orientation

Read in light of the APA's style principles, we can see how this title concisely states the paper's main topic (performance approach orientation), indicates the variable under investigation (context) and states the relationship between the main topic and the variable (the *effect* of one on the other). Note that the principle of concision extends all the way to cutting the initial *the*. These style principles also hold when the "title: subtitle" format is employed, as in the following:

The Sacralization of the Individual: Human Rights and the Abolition of the Death Penalty

As its title clearly signals, this paper will investigate how the abolition of the death penalty (variable under investigation) affects our understanding of the sacralization of the individual (main topic).

Titles in Non-Academic Works (journalism, creative nonfiction, writing for the web)

Titles of non-academic works must account for the audience's purpose in reading. Are readers hoping to be informed? To have their ideas challenged? Are they seeking an experience? If your audience is reading for information, your title should be direct and informative ("Inland Oil Spill Raises Detection Concerns"). If your audience is reading for an experience, you should strive to compose a title that enhances the way they experience your subject. You might, for example, choose a title that works in conversation with your text, a title whose meaning expands and develops as your essay progresses.

A note on formatting

It is conventional in all academic disciplines for the title to be centered at the top of the first page and formatted in plain text (not bold, italic, or underlined). Rules of capitalization vary by discipline. In humanities titles it is conventional to capitalize the first and last word of a title as well as all "principal words" (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and subordinating conjunctions). Most social science papers capitalize these same words in the title that appears at the beginning of a paper, but capitalize only the first letter of titles that appear in the reference list at the end. Science titles tend to capitalize only the first word and proper nouns. None of these capitalization guidelines are universal within each field, so you may want to clarify the expectations with your instructor.