



Writing a Great Title

Writers often struggle to create good titles for their essays. This handout explains why a good essay title is important and suggests some strategies for creating one.

Why are titles important?

Titles are important for your reader(s). Along with the introductory paragraph(s), a good title may be one of the most important elements of an essay.

- A title contributes to the argument developed in the rest of the essay. By identifying the topic, argument, and method of the essay, a strong title begins the work of informing and/or convincing readers.
- In addition, a strong title indicates to your instructor/marker that you have understood the question and the concepts. One of the first things your instructor or marker will look for is whether the assignment question has been answered. A clear title assures the marker that the essay does what was asked.
- Another function of the title is to capture readers' attention and interest by giving them an idea of what the essay is about, and what its main idea is.

Titles are also useful to the writer.

- The title is a "privileged" place in the text, because it draws the reader's most complete attention. Take advantage of that fact. Use the title's privileged position to express your ideas clearly and to articulate your argument.
- A title chosen early in the writing process can help writers stay on track during the writing process. Alternatively, creating a title at the end of the writing process can function as a check for the writer. If coming up with a title is difficult, it may indicate that the essay's main ideas or point is unclear.

What does a great title look like?

Titles for academic essays are often very long. Don't be surprised if your title is two or more lines long. Often, titles are split into two parts, the main title and a subtitle, separated by a colon. The main title and sub title are usually a combination of:

Catchy Phrase, Quotation or Clever Hook
Example: It's a Frog's Life
An Informative Phrase, Including Details about the Content, Organization and Method(s) Used in Your Writing or Research
Example: A Description of the Habitat, Lifespan and Breeding Patterns of the South American Tree Frog

The two parts can be reversed depending on what the writer wants to emphasize.

Catchy phrase as main title
It's a Frog's Life: A Description of the Habitat, Lifespan and Breeding Pattern of the South American Tree Frog

Or

Catchy phrase as sub-title
A Description of the Habitat, Lifespan and Breeding Patterns of the South American Tree Frog: It's a Frog's Life.

Note: These examples are formatted according to MLA style in terms of capitalization and punctuation. Be sure to follow the appropriate style guidelines as well as any instructions provided by your instructor.

You have the tools. We'll help you use them.

How do I develop an appropriate title for my essay?

Write your essay

Most often, titles are written at the end of the writing process, so the first step in creating a great title is to write your essay.

Consider your audience

Of course, you thought about your intended audience before and while writing your essay, but think about who will be reading your work again when choosing a title. Think about what is most likely to appeal to them: content? humour? Go back to the assignment instructions and/or course outline. What style does your instructor use? Can you match it?

Re-read the essay assignment instructions

- Were there any special instructions related to appropriate essay titles? Follow these instructions.
- Use words or phrases from the essay question in your title. Certain key phrases related to methods occur time and time again in essay assignments, and these phrases appear just as often in essay titles: analyze, assess, compare/contrast, define, describe, discuss, evaluate, illustrate, outline, relate, summarize. Turn these verbs into nouns.
 - An Analysis of ...
 - A Summary of ...
- Does the essay assignment ask a question? Asking a question in a title can be an effective way to spark the curiosity of readers, but it's usually a good idea to give the answer in your title.

Re-read your essay

If a good title doesn't suddenly come to mind, write down your topic and key words from your essay. These words reflect the main concept or ideas of the whole essay. Join these words together in a sentence, or sentences. Convert these sentences into shorter phrases.

Re-work your title

Occasionally, a title will pop into your mind fully formed, but most often, titles need to be written, expanded, and edited several times. Make the title as informative as possible, even if it seems long or wordy. Don't hold back—reveal your conclusions. Be direct and enthusiastic.

Final thought

Ideally, this handout helps you understand what makes for a great title and offers strategies for writing one, but don't get too stressed out about finding the perfect title. The important thing is finishing the essay and letting people read it.