

How do I write a great title for my academic essay?

Overview

An academic title is probably the first thing your readers will experience about your paper. This handout will show you two approaches to creating paper titles, one that is more informative, and another that is more creative. The first is most often used for formal academic papers. The second is more likely to be used for narratives or personal essays, but it can sometimes be used for academic papers as well.

General Considerations

Before deciding on a title, be sure to think carefully about your audience. Who will be reading this paper and what are their motivations? Do they want to be entertained? Are they concerned with acquiring information as clearly and concisely as possible? How do you want your reader to feel about the content of your paper? Asking questions such as these will help you determine the appropriate tone for your title.

A great academic title should tell your readers as much as possible about your paper's central claim and its significance. Good titles often include:

- A hook
- A set of key terms
- A source

Approach #1: Titles for Academic Papers

Good academic titles reveal not only the topic of the paper but some idea of your specific approach, argument, and area of discussion. Here are some typical and useful academic titles:

- Good Bye Lenin!: Free Market Nostalgia for Socialist Consumerism
- The Artful Thunder as Dramatic Technique in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*
- The Effects of Light and Temperature on the Growth of Populations of the Bacterium, *Escherichia coli*
- "The Machine-Language of the Muscles": Reading, Sport and the Self in *Infinite Jest*

Though representing a range of disciplines, each of these titles is clear, independent and self-explanatory. Notice how each title is relatively long and contains multiple phrases. Academic writing is complex and demands equally complex and purposeful titles. If you look carefully at the sample titles, you will notice that each has three separate elements:

1. **The hook** – This is a creative element that draws in the reader. Typically this is a catchy, readable phrase that advertises the paper's specific subject. The hook is sometimes a direct quotation from a text or a sudden introduction of a new and exciting element of your topic.

2. **Key terms** – These are crucial words or phrases that are indispensable to the topic at hand. In academic writing, scholars are often asked to identify a few select terms that will identify their paper in an index. Similarly, the use of key terms in a paper’s title will make the paper more searchable in a database. You want to load your title with important terminology as a way to orient the reader to the concepts under discussion in the paper to follow. The best titles are like very brief summaries of the paper itself.
3. **The source** – Sometimes called a “location,” this is the place in the title where the concepts under discussion are to be found. Depending on the discipline, your source might be a piece of writing, the name of a text, a geographical place, a person, an existing debate, an organism, and so on.

Good titles never state the obvious nor do they apply a generic label to a paper. Titles like “Paper #1” or “Lab Report” are clearly too general and unhelpful. Similarly, titles that rely too much on large abstractions are not welcome: “Society and its Many Problems.” In this title the reader has no idea which society is under discussion, what the particular problems may be, or why this is at all current and significant. Avoid clichés at all costs as well: “A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words”. This title is virtually meaningless. If it feels like a common title to you, it will likely seem as common to another reader. Remember, the assignment may be given by the instructor, but the title is your first chance to make the paper your own. Remember also to center your title at the top of your first page of your text. Use the same font and size as the rest of your paper.

Analyzing an Example of an Academic Paper Title

Consider this title from above:

“The Machine-Language of the Muscles”: Reading, Sport and the Self in *Infinite Jest*

This title’s parts are all clearly visible. The hook is a direct quotation from the novel under discussion, a well-chosen particular that advances an important theme in the novel. The next part: “Reading, Sport and the Self” contains the title’s key terms. The title is making a promise here to the reader that the paper will engage these three critical concepts. Finally we see the source of the title, prompted by the preposition “in”. Someone reading this title or searching for it in a database would easily identify it as a study of a particular book, in this case, a novel by David Foster Wallace, which is concerned with the ideas of reading, sport and the self. In the humanities, you will often see writers divide their titles into two distinct parts, as in this example, marked by a colon that allows the hook to introduce the rest of the title.

Here is another example, this time from the sciences:

The Effects of Light and Temperature on the Growth of Populations of the Bacterium, *Escherichia coli*

Science writing rarely uses a hook in the same way as papers in the humanities. The hook in a science paper is often simply a highly relevant but exciting and direct introduction of a new approach or discovery. What you mostly find in science writing titles is a catalog of key terms that corresponds directly to the paper’s thesis, significance and methods. Here we see a number of key terms: light, temperature, growth, and the bacterium itself. This title would be highly searchable and is very informative. The final part is the source which simply and clearly identifies the bacterium under discussion.

Approach #2: Titles for Narrative and Personal Papers

Being simple and clear can be very useful in a formal academic essay, but what if you aren't writing an analytical paper? How do you write a title for a personal essay or statement? How about a title for that English paper that asks you to write a narrative or share an observation? These types of papers might well demand titles that simply sound interesting and creative rather than strictly academic.

In these cases you may want to use an interesting phrase from your paper. Perhaps there is a humorous or dramatic anecdote you offer in your creative paper that sums it all up. Perhaps there is a quotation or phrase that could serve as the title. In these cases you simply want to interest the reader by making the paper seem unique. Here is your opportunity to really put your stamp on the paper and to intrigue the reader. Here are some interesting and intriguing titles for creative essays:

"Why I Screen My Calls"

"The Week of Rental Car Disasters"

"My Son, the Burglar, Revisited"

"What's So Wrong with the Brady Bunch?"

Each of these titles is provocative. The first two offer the agenda for the paper; presumably you will learn the hilarious and awful history behind each title by reading the paper. The final two titles depend on humorous and contrary bits of information: a father writing about his burglar son, which seems at odds with what we might expect a father to write about his son (and in this case "revisited" is a provocative word since perhaps the son has burgled again). The Brady Bunch title is also funny because it promises a defense of an unexpected position or at least an eminently arguable one, which makes it an intriguing paper title.

In Practice

Imagine you are a student writing a paper for a class on animal behavior. You have a particular species to study, you have done the field work, and you have some conclusions to offer. Here is your first attempt: "Monkey Behavior".

This is very general and tells us nothing about the kind of monkey or a particular behavior. It does little to attract the reader.

Your second attempt is a little better: "The Effects of Sugar on Monkey Behavior".

This title is a little clearer and even mildly amusing. Now, at least we have some idea of a cause and an understanding of some important concepts. But can you be more specific? Wouldn't it make sense to add more key terms from the paper itself? Readers already can conjecture that sugar would have some effect on monkey behavior, so this title needs to be less mysterious and more precise. Here is a better academic title:

"Sugar Stimulates Intensity of Tail-Twitch Social Behavior in Panamanian Monkeys"

Now you have a title that is full of specific key terms, includes a clear location, and provides a bold and specific claim before the text of the paper begins. This is incredibly helpful to your readers.

Exercise

Try your hand at creating an academic title for a paper with the following topic:

“Write a 5-7 page paper analyzing any work of the author and illustrator Dr. Seuss. You may make reference to one or more of his books, but you must analyze the text(s) based on at least one of the following: Seuss’s use of metaphor, imagery, symbolism, or rhyme. You must also make a connection between this device and his drawing technique or subject matter. Use quotes to support your argument.”

HINT: This is a tough (though potentially interesting) assignment prompt, but remember the three parts of the academic title: hook, key terms, and source. Your hook could be a quote, perhaps a direct quote that shows either metaphor, imagery, symbolism or rhyme. This would be a smart move because you would reveal in the title which of the four options you chose for the paper topic. In other words, by quoting, you would already have an example before you introduce your argument. Your key terms would likely be lifted from the assignment prompt itself (metaphor, imagery, etc. . .). The source would be just that: the name of the book you chose to explore.

Now challenge yourself to make a creative title for this paper. The possibilities are endless here. Think in terms of being clever and witty and actually making use of the terms and techniques the assignment asks you to consider.