

Effective Titles

Ideally, we wouldn't judge a book by its cover...but we do. If you've been persuaded by Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*, you might agree that we do judge books by their covers—that split-second judgments based on fragmentary evidence can be as accurate as and more efficient than those decisions reached by careful deliberation. What's on the cover? Which words do most people first see on the cover? The title.

And the fact is, **titles** are your first place to make an impression on the reader. If that reader is your professor, you do not want the professor to get the wrong split-second impression about a paper from a stale, thoughtless title. Professors are constantly evaluating your writing, trying to classify it according to various criteria. One of those areas that they examine is titles, which reveal whether the paper is **on task**; whether the composition promises to be **original**, and whether the writing is **unified**. Titles help to show those who evaluate your writing how imaginative, cohesive, and clear your writing is. Anyone who reads your writing, not just professors, is served by reading a title that serves to inform about the main idea and entertain.

An effective title has the following qualities: (1) It **seizes the interest** of its audience and (2) It **previews the main idea** of the paper. Titles that effectively address only one of those aspects tend to be either absurd or flat, offering the reader a distorted view of the paper or diminishing the reader's eagerness to read on.

So when should you write a title? Believe it or not, a good title usually manifests late in the writing process. Why? Well if a title previews the main idea of a paper, how can you write a dazzling title before you've written the paper, or know what the main idea is? Consider writing the title near the middle or end of the writing process.

Embrace the Following Approaches to Titles

1. Choose a title that resonates with a key word or phrase in the body of the paper.
2. Consider using a **colon and subtitle** in titles of essays, research papers, and response papers.
3. When in doubt, choose a **specific** title rather than a general one.
4. Create an interesting and relevant title.
5. Use a title that **puns**.

Avoid the Following Approaches to Titles

- A. No title. Yes, the number one error with titles is not to include a title. Take advantage of the opportunity titles provide for showing off your style and helping your reader to prepare for the main.

- B. Titles that poach generalities from the assignment guidelines or the topic. For example, if you're assigned a research paper on genetics, don't call your paper "Genetics" or "Research on Genetics." Don't write "Essay on _____" or "Story about _____."
- C. Titles are NOT supposed to be complete sentences.

Exercise: Characteristics of Good Titles

Directions: Evaluate the titles in each cluster. Circle the letter that corresponds to the title that seems to be most effective. Be prepared to discuss why the titles you rejected aren't as effective as your final answer.

1. A student who wrote a narrative about an unpleasant family trip to Disney is considering the following titles. Which would be the most effective at previewing that main idea and seizing a reader's interest?

- A. My Family Trip to Disney
- B. Disney
- C. Captive in the Dungeons of Disney

2. A student who wrote an essay about people's inaccurate ideas about religion is considering the following titles. Which would be the most effective at previewing that main idea and seizing a reader's interest?

- A. Views of Religion
- B. Chapter and Verse: Misconceptions about Religion
- C. Religion

3. A student who wrote a research paper about ecological paradoxes is considering the following titles. Which would be the most effective at previewing that main idea and seizing a reader's interest?

- A. The Naturalness of the Unnatural
- B. Is Nature Good or Bad?
- C. Nature Essay

4. A student who wrote a harsh review of the movie *Paranorman* is considering the following titles. Which would be the most effective at previewing that topic and seizing an audience's interest?

- A. Critique of *Paranorman*

- B. Paraboring
- C. Die! Die! Die! A Movie for Idiots Only

5. A student who wrote a blog about fashion themes and celebrity style at the Oscars is considering the following titles. Which would be the most effective at previewing that topic and seizing a reader's interest?

- A. Thoughts about a Glamorous Night
- B. Hollywood's Beautiful Celebration
- C. Fashionably Churlish: Dress and Attitude at the Oscars

6. A student who wrote an essay about violence during the French Revolution is considering the following titles. Which would be the most effective at previewing that main idea and seizing a reader's interest?

- A. Robespierre and Despair: How a Righteous Revolution Turned Brutal
- B. Violence during the French Revolution
- C. Essay on the French Revolution

7. A student who wrote a summary and response about racism in James Baldwin's short story "Going to Meet the Man" is considering the following titles. Which would be the most effective at previewing that topic and seizing a reader's interest?

- A. Response Paper on Baldwin
- B. Baldwin's Racist Story
- C. Going to Meet a Racist: Inherited Ideas about Racism in Baldwin's Short Story

8. A student who wrote a composition about her family is considering the following titles. Which would be the most effective at previewing that topic and seizing a reader's interest?

- A. My Family
- B. My Place at the Table
- C. Love for Family

9. A student who wrote a reaction paper about magic in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* is considering the following titles. Which would be the most effective at previewing that main idea and

seizing a reader's interest?

- A. The Prison and Prism of Magic in *Harry Potter*
- B. Magic in *Harry Potter*
- C. Reaction to Ideas about Magic in *Harry Potter*

10. A student who wrote an essay about media bias is considering the following titles. Which would be the most effective at previewing that main idea and seizing a reader's interest?

- A. Bias in the Media
- B. Lying Press
- C. Mass Media's Mass Manipulation