



TIPS FOR AUTHORS

Composing the Title for Your Report

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In crafting a title for a journal article, the careful author will remember that the entire report will be a communication to the reader and that the communication begins with the title. If the title is well-constructed, it will speak clearly to the editor, the reviewer, and ultimately (the author hopes), to journal readers, suggesting to each that here is a report containing useful information. Imagine your potential readers scanning the table of contents for articles of interest. Remember also that title readers will include Medline indexers whose choice of index terms will influence the appearance of the article in search-generated lists. A fully descriptive title will help ensure that the report is accurately indexed.

Whether your paper will report research findings or describe a new technique, constructing the title represents a critically important step in preparing your manuscript for publication. In fact, Edward Huth, author of *Writing and Publishing in Medicine* (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1999), suggests that writing the title should be the first step in preparing your report. Huth describes the title as “a highly condensed version of the abstract” and argues that beginning by writing a formal title helps the author to narrow focus on the writing project as a whole (p.121). Establishing focus helps keep the writer on target, and may help avoid, for example, the literature review or discussion section that deteriorates into an unfocussed ramble through peripherally related topics.

Huth characterizes two types of title, the indicative, which describes the subject of the paper – what the paper is about – and the informative, which describes both the subject of the research and the results. Here are two fictitious examples of titles to research papers, a bit oversimplified to make the point: Indicative title: Medication A and Medication B compared in the treatment of pneumonia. Informative title: Medication A is more effective than Medication B in the treatment of pneumonia. Either type of title works. Either supports Huth’s suggestion that composing the title first helps the writer maintain focus as he or she moves on to write the abstract and then the full report. Notice that both begin with the specific subject of the report, i.e. “Medication A” not the more general “A comparison of ...”.

As the paper is revised, the author may conclude that revisions to the title are needed as well. And, of course, the final title will also be influenced by the style of the journal. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to remember that beginning the writing project by crafting a formal and specific title helps the writer to maintain focus on the topic and serves as a reminder that the title is a crucial element in communicating with prospective readers.

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