

That Feeling of Entitlement: A How-To and How-Not-To Guide to Writing Effective Titles

Heading It Up

First off, an effective title must perform the dual main role of arresting the reader's eyes and commanding their total interest. Next, it should caress his curiosity and, in some direct way or perhaps in a more oblique fashion, inform him about the content, argument, and tone to follow. Then, its work is done; the job is passed over to the reader who will decide if he wants to venture further.

Superior titles can cause the reader to exclaim, "Gee, what is *that* book about?" Pretend, for a moment, that you are the reader. Take these titles: *Me Talk Pretty One Day* and *A Confederacy of Dunces*. C'mon—don't tell me that you're not even just a *bit* interested in finding out something more about those books. These titles don't just mutter themselves to you and meekly pass you by; instead, they announce themselves boldly and then go on to plant questions in the mind of you, the involved and discerning reader.

In this essay, I, the Most Esteemed Honorable and Royal Michael Radelich, Esquire (more on inappropriate titles later), hope to offer a somewhat informative, somewhat prescriptive, but largely playful look at what's in an essay, book, or film title, and why it's important for you as a writer to give yours more than a mere second's thought.

You want a title, those painstakingly intentional primary words of yours, to project itself with real clout to the reader's sensibility and to define the essay, well, *definitively*; you want your essay's all-important literal *first words* to be, in effect, *the last word* on it.

Here's another way to think about it:

A passable title is akin to aimlessly watching a plain tabby cat sauntering down a sunny sidewalk. *Yup, there it goes.*

A very good title is akin to that same cat being chased by a frisky black Labrador across a rainy, car-filled intersection. *Wait—yikes!—that poor cat!—that ferocious canine!—what's going to happen next?*

A fantastic title is akin to that same cat being chased by that same dog through that same intersection, except in this case that cat is driving a red Mini-Cooper and the rest of its screeching clowder is toting machine guns, shooting bullets at the midnight blue Fiat madly following behind, packed with barking Labrador police officers, its siren blaring and flashers blazing. *Wait—what?—cats?—dogs?—siren?—robbery?—what?—police?—huh?—WHAT?!*

That's what a great title does.

A World of Titles: One Word, Two Words, Three Words, More . . .

Before you write your own titles, it's a good idea to think far and wide about just what makes successful titles so satisfying. Let's look at some famous titles—short, medium, and long ones—and see what we can discover about them.

Stephen King gave us *It* in 1986, which is truly just about the most minimal title there can be, unless a book were to be called *A* or *The*, or a story

“ .” In 2011, though, King gave us *11/22/63*. Despite its simplicity, this title comes compellingly loaded for those aware of what that date indicates—much as would a book today titled *9/11/01*.

When it first appeared, a book of fiction titled simply with the hero's or heroine's name told the reader nothing about the book whatsoever: *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Anna Karenina*, *Daisy Miller*, *Billy Budd*, *Emma*, *Babbitt*. But decades after, the character and the story are firmly planted in our collective psyche—no other words are needed to evoke a sentiment but *Don* and *Quixote*.

What else is in a name? Quite a bit, perhaps. You might think that P.L. Travers's *Mary Poppins* is merely a character's name, but the title also tells you precisely what she does—namely, *pop-in*. *Nurse Jackie* and *Cherry Ames, Student Nurse?*—um, two *quite* different women. Then there's the simple appellation of a professional moniker; sure, they're all doctors, but can you imagine four men who are as far apart as *Doctor Who*, *Doctor Faustus*, *Doctor Dolittle*, and *Doctor Strangelove?* (No, you can't.)

On the other hand, take Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*, which tells you really nothing about the film; perhaps it leaves you with a feeling that springs from whatever association you have with the word. The quietly poetic *The Silence of the Lambs* derives from only a small part of the whole story, but also reveals nothing. And as far as *There Will Be Blood* is concerned—well, by God, you don't know much, but you *do* know strongly enough that *some* brutally sanguinary punch will strike in the next 158 tense minutes.

A brief title composed of dual, complementary or contrasting nouns can be aesthetically satisfying: *The Red and the Black*, *War and Peace*, *Mason and Dixon*, *Oscar and Lucinda*. And witty and cleverly intriguing is good, as long as it's not too cloying as well: “*Metalheads of All Alloys*”; *Of Dolls and Murder*; *Everything is Obvious, Once You Know the Answer*; *Everything Is Perfect When You're a Liar*.

Longer nonfiction titles like Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, and a technical title such as *Chemical Engineering Design: Principles, Practice and Economics of Plant and Process Design* are useful because they give a simple, clear overview of the topics covered. One of my favorite long titles is that of the film *The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom*, starring Holly Hunter. It is—she wasn't—and she did.

What's a better book title than the deceptively simple *House?* The famous book by Tracy Kidder concerns the building of a residential house from conception to possession, involving its buyers, architect, builders, carpenters, contractors, and tradesmen. Then there's the television drama *House M.D.* (simply known as *House*), about medical detective Gregory House. The title really tells you nothing about the content or themes involved, but when you realize that “*House*” is a synonym for “*Home*,” which is the singular of “*Homes*,” which is a near-homonym for “*Holmes*,” then you see the brilliance of the one-word title for the intelligent television viewer who appreciates intellectual wordplay.

Mad Men works on two levels with its nested subject indicators. The men are first and foremost Ad Men of 1960's *Madison Avenue*. And they are also “*mad men*,” but “*mad*” in what sense? Mere denizens of *Madison Avenue*? Angry? With desire to conquer? With amassing social power? Or all of the above?

Variety in an author's *oeuvre* concerning titles is a good thing. Philip Roth's prodigious output contains a variety of brief, memorable, and semi-provocative

titles. Note the variety, yet the simplicity: *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Operation Shylock*, *The Breast*, *Sabbath's Theater*, *The Ghost Writer*, *Letting Go*, *Patrimony*, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain*—the man can write titles! Edith Wharton's varied and simple titles reveal quite a bit of her twinned characteristic subject matters of society and class structure: *The House of Mirth*, *Hudson River Bracketed*, *Old New York*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Buccaneers*.

Sometimes analyzing a title's origin and its effect can be as much fun as writing one yourself. With the brief prepositional phrase *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote unleashes his terrible tale of an idyllic Midwestern small town soon forever fouled with the stain of gruesome horror. At once direct, grave, and chilling, this title is constructed out of three small words: a preposition, an adjective, and a noun. "Hot-blooded" folks commit sudden crimes of passion, but those who kill with cool, deliberate calculation are instead "cold-blooded." "Cold" applies to the killers, "Blood" to the victims, and "In" clots the words into a memorably potent phrase. Still today all three words can never be separated from the enormously terrible act perpetrated against the Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas in 1959. All of this is compressed into three small words that mirror three small worlds that unpredictably collided: the writer Capote, the family Clutter, the killers Hickok and Smith. Did Capote act this deliberately and pedantically precise when he chose *In Cold Blood* as his title? Most likely not. But the sometimes-laborious act of creating and choosing a final title is an important one, and a carefully chosen, brilliant title will carry its book on into the future and sear it into the minds of millions of readers and the consciousness of society.

Let's Get Practical: The Obligatory How-To Section

When should you write your title? Well, the final title, like the final introduction of your essay, gets written, of course, *last*. But a title bears thinking about early on, once you have a general thesis in mind. It's fun and worthwhile to title your piece from the very start with a *working title*.

Placing your trust in a working title shows that, even from the start, you have a specific, overarching idea in mind that, with only a few words, may help keep your research and writing within certain necessary, tidy boundaries. Whatever you do, always *try* to call your paper something interesting from the start, and always engage your little grey cells in such meaningful wordplay—treat your brain like the muscle it isn't, so that it soon can become a clever organ that pipes forth terrifically tuneful titles.

Trust me, your professors (and any helpful readers along the way, too) will appreciate much more a mere working title like the fathoms-deep "Ahab's Misbegotten Quest" than they will the dry-creek of "Paper #3." Perfunctorily slapping down "Assignment 4" is a great opportunity missed; the pointed and clipped "Rikers 413: The Last Cell on Death Row" can viscerally prepare the reader for what follows, helping him to understand the content and to believe that its author displays a certain, well, *authority* right from the start.

Okay—roll up your sleeves, take out your pen, and let's go!

The way to sit down and write the perfect title one time, in one fell swoop, is— *futile*. STOP! Never try this doomed-to-failure tack of attempting to bring forth from the mess of words in your brain the *one perfect title*. Take the pressure off, step back, and approach this exercise in a broad manner.

Here’s a writing analogy: Say you have four ideas, or four simple phrases—there’s never just *one* way to write a sentence employing those, right? The truth is that you can come up with multiple sentence structures that can say basically the same thing but with different emphases. It’s never worth endlessly gazing, obsessing, or fixating upon one sentence as if it’s the only way to construct certain words and ideas. Well, the same thing applies to titles: NEVER try to write the one perfect title for your piece--because that “one” simply doesn’t exist. There are multiple great titles for your piece, and you’ve just got to write them all out of your head and then choose one that you think fits best for now.

Try this: Divide a blank page into two columns. Brainstorm a bit and list the important nouns that will or do appear in your piece, and then list the verbs. For example, I am currently working on a gardening/culinary essay about sweet basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) and basil pesto, so here are my lists of relevant nouns and verbs:

Nouns		Verbs	
Basil	Green	Planting	Scenting
Aroma	Olive Oil	Pouring	Cooking
Pasta	Pecorino	Serving	Harvesting
Garden	Gold	Collecting	Capturing
Gourmet	Soil	Pounding	Savor
Table	Pestle	Drizzling	Crushing
Pesto Puree		Processing	

Now let’s formulate a few titles, paying no attention at this stage to constructing the perfect one, nor to “good” ones or “poor” ones:

Harvesting Culinary Gold
 Green Gold, From Garden to Table
 The Pounding, the Pouring, and the Pecorino
 From Plant to Pestle to Pasta: Sweet Basil, Sweet Times

You’ll note that I used other words that popped into my head that were not on my original list. Whether or not any of these are any good, or if I’ve found the perfect title, is really irrelevant. I can like some, dislike others, and choose parts of one and combine it with a part of another:

The Culinary Gold at the Center of the Table
 Growing Green Gold: A Meal Fit for a Genoese Gourmand

There are a few other things you can try, also. Take a key phrase or famous quote from the text(s) you are writing about, or a quote spoken by one of the people you are writing about, and follow it with a colon. Then write a phrase about the

content and/or argument presented in your essay. Or think of a common proverb or popular phrase (“*That Feeling of Entitlement*”); or the title of a current movie, song, or book; or a line from a poem that you can couple with words of your own. I’m using Robert Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” and its first line, “Nature's first green is gold”:

“Nature’s First Green is Gold: How the Ligurians Transformed Green Basil into Culinary Gold”

You can also take that quote and adjust it, bend it, or snap it into a new phrase, a veiled version of the original that spins it into a reference to your argument:

“Gold Served from Nature’s Green: How Basil Becomes Pesto”

You may have a sentence that you omitted from the final draft that you can condense or alter. You can start sentences with question words (who, what, why, when, how, or where) and then write a few words to complete each one. Try plucking from the essay some concrete objects or sensory images and playing around with those words. Again, write several titles employing different strategies and phrases. Try to avoid using only one set of words and obsessively sticking to and rearranging them. Go back to your two columns until you have exhausted all the words.

As I’ve said earlier, there is no such thing as the perfect title. However, having *said* that, your job as a writer is to examine your corral of possibles and to choose what you consider *at this time* to be the “perfect” title. And realize that your title is not only about *what* you are writing: In 1651, Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* wrote this pithy and perceptive truism: “In titles of Books, the subject is marked, as often as the writer.” In other words, your title will not only inform the reader about your work, but it can also reveal things about *you*, the writer.

Beware: Unintentionally Poor Titles Ahead!

But how do you fine-tune your favorites and then choose the most appropriate title? This is where revision comes in. There are several things to keep in mind while whittling down your list until a winner emerges victorious.

In academic research terms, a title is often viewed as a collection of keywords that will be used in searches by researchers and computers. So if this is your main concern, be sure your title contains several words that identify the most important ideas, themes, or concepts that your essay covers. Also, consider your essay’s audience: Who are they? To what demographic do they belong? To what words and grammatical structures would they be drawn: Alliteration? Humor? A famous quote? Stark brevity?

But take heed—fine-tune your words with a keen eye and sharp ears.

Usually, you can tell if a paper is an academic one bound for a conference by shaking the page and counting the number of colons and PAW (Pompous Ass Words) that fall out: “hegemony,” “antediluvian,” “diaspora,” “percipience,” “hagiolatry,” “lacuna,” “inter-textuality,” “prelapsarian.” If you tend to be an overly precocious reader/writer/student, too fond of purple-prose, you may want to tread

carefully. You don't want your title to wind up the ultra-obnoxiously pedantic, highbrow, and unbearably academic sort ("The elusive bisexual: social categorization and lexico-semantic change"; "The Collapse of Intellectual Defenestration in the Age of Post-Antidisestablishmentarianism, and its Esoteric Roots"; or, "Burning Man: What is the True Mystic Fire? Postmodern Art, Multiculturalism, Expensive Tickets and Nudity in the Nevada Desert by Pretentious Bay Area People") unless you wish to be laughed at and mercilessly mocked by those outside of academia—namely the normal 99% of the population. Remember: If you don't spare the colon, you may spoil the title.

In addition, try to avoid inadvertently funny titles that will perplex and shock your readers with unintended double-entendres. The first group is composed of actual titles of books (or as I call it, *You Read Those Titles to Your Mother with That Mouth?*):

Pooh Gets Stuck
Games You Can Play with Your Pussy
Who Cares For Elderly People?

This next group contains my rewritten versions (or, *Titles A Mother and Grandmother Could Love*):

Winnie-the-Pooh, the Honey Jar, and the Tiny Doorway
1001 Games You and Your Cat Will Enjoy
Caring for the Elders in Your Family

The former titles are NOT the kind of "memorable" for which you should be aiming.

When you step back and admire your title, it should appear enticing and appropriate; being intentionally too clever and cute can very quickly turn your title into an unfunny pun. Note these groaners from a Williams College professor's philosophy class on Hume, Kant, and Descartes:

"U Kant Touch This – M.C. Humer"
"Cogito Eggo Sum: I Think I Am a Waffle"

A pretentiously affected title will only embarrass you and present your reader with an off-putting, hyper-inflated first impression, which may belie your good intentions and draw the wrong kind of attention to your essay.

Too Little, or Too Much? Striking the Perfect Balance

A title that is too brief (*It; Her*) may not convey enough to the prospective reader to get him interested; on the other hand, such a one (*Salt; Cod*) may intrigue the popular gourmand and entice him to peruse the work. A title that is too long (*The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*) may give away too much of the story for the reader seeking a Western whodunit; however, it may contain just the right words (*Don't Get Too Comfortable: The Indignities of Coach Class, The Torments of Low Thread Count, The Never-Ending Quest for Artisanal Olive Oil, and Other First World Problems*) to identify it as the perfect choice for the

precocious aficionado of pop-cultural sociology. Often, the Goldilocks approach might be the best example to follow (*Darkness at Noon*; *The Old Man and The Sea*; *The Talented Mr. Ripley*).

Wait! Stop! Should spoilers be avoided? What do you think of *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*? For some, that title removes suspense and leaves no question of the heroine's situation at the end of the book. On the other hand, it may give a pithy overview of the novel's plot, which might be a good thing for a reader wanting an uplifting, feel-good reading experience.

***C'est Fini: The End Subtitle, or,
Look Elsewhere, Dear Reader!***

Here are some other useful sources.

Most long-established, thumb-worn grammar and writing handbooks contain slim sections or pages that discuss methods of titling essays and articles. As for academic articles on titles, I can recommend Harry Crosby's very informative and packed-with-practicality short essay, "Titles, A Treatise On," from the December 1976 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. There are a few, but not many, online sources that may help you to craft memorable titles: Copyblogger.com's mini-lesson page "Magnetic Headlines," by Brian Clark, is worth a look for up-and-coming journalists. WriteOnTarget.hubpage.com's "How to Write Article Titles That Attract Readers" is both simple and functional.

Better yet, and way more enjoyable, just walk into a bookstore and *look*: Next time you are subwaying in New York City, stop by The Strand ("18 Miles of Books"); or when biking through Portland, OR, Powell's Books; or when walking through downtown Vancouver, BC, MacLeod's Books; or closer to home, perhaps, delve into the voluminous stacks of your local university library. The world and all its wondrous titles are contained there, so wander and wonder through the aisles and imagine what the titles are trying to tell you.

The End

PS: The above information concerning those strategically significant words that precede your writing has been the author's educated, informed opinion—and he's entitled to it.