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Stylish Academic Writing

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- If your WritersDiet test results reveal a weakness for adjectives and adverbs, ask yourself whether you really need them all. Can you supply the same descriptive energy using concrete nouns and lively verbs?
- Is your prose overly dependent on *it*, *this*, *that*, and *there*? If so, try adhering to the following principles next time you write something new:
 - Use *this* only when accompanied by a modifying noun (“*This argument* shows” rather than merely “*This* shows”). Writers often slip *this* into their sentences to avoid stating their ideas clearly (“Some have seen *this* as conclusive evidence that . . .”).
 - Use *it* only when its referent—that is, the noun *it* refers to—is crystal clear. For example, in the sentence “The woman threw the lamp through the window and broke *it*,” what did the woman break, the lamp or the window?
 - Avoid using *that* more than once in a single sentence or about three times per paragraph, except in a parallel construction or for stylistic effect. Sentences that rely on subordinate clauses that in turn contain other clauses that introduce new ideas that distract from the main argument that the author is trying to make . . . well, you get the idea.
 - Use *there* sparingly. There is no reason why you should not employ *there* every now and then. But wherever *there* is, weak words such as *this*, *that*, *it*, and *is* tend to congregate nearby. Example: “*There are* a number of studies *that* show *that this* is a bad idea because *it* . . .”

Do you find all of this editorial polishing and tweaking laborious and slow? Remember, stylish academic writers spend time and energy on their sentences so their readers won't have to!

CHAPTER 6

TEMPTING TITLES

Like a hat on a head or the front door to a house, the title of an academic article offers a powerful first impression. Is the title dry, technical, straightforward? Most likely, the author's main goal is to transmit research data as efficiently as possible. Does the title contain opaque disciplinary jargon? Perhaps the author unconsciously hopes to impress us, whether by appealing to a shared expertise (“You and I are members of an exclusive club”) or by reminding us of our ignorance (“If you can't even understand my title, don't bother reading any further”). Is the title amusing, intriguing, provocative? Here is an author who is working hard to catch our gaze, engage our interest, and draw us in. In many disciplines, however, such a move goes against the academic grain and even contains a significant element of risk: a “catchy” title might well be regarded by colleagues as frivolous and unscholarly.

Several years ago, I attended a higher education research conference at which a presentation titled “Evaluating the E-learning Guidelines Implementation Project: Formative and Process Evaluations” was offered at the same time as one called “‘Throwing a Sheep’ at Marshall McLuhan.” Guess which session drew the bigger audience? “Throwing a sheep” is a method of getting someone's attention on the popular social-networking Web site Facebook; Marshall McLuhan is the educator and media theorist who

famously coined the phrases “global village” and “the medium is the message.” A delegate at a conference on higher education research could thus reasonably surmise that a presentation containing the phrases “throwing a sheep” and “Marshall McLuhan” would explore the role of social-networking Web sites in university teaching and learning. That expectation was confirmed in the conference program, in which a lively abstract spelled out the main argument of the presentation, gave further hints of the author’s penchant for quoting colorful student argot (“pinch, moon, drop kick, spank, poke, b#%*! slap, drunk dial”), and asked a series of questions aimed at the expected audience of educators and educational theorists.¹

The “throwing a sheep” example illustrates the crucial function of the *paratext* in academic titling. Described by literary theorist Gérard Genette as a zone of transition and transaction between “text and non-text,” a paratext consists of all the extratextual matter that accompanies and packages a text: for example, the cover of a book, the publisher’s blurb, the author’s name, the preface, the dedication, the typography, and the illustrations.² Titles belong both to text and paratext; they shape our reading of the text yet are also inflected by other paratextual elements. In the case of the “throwing a sheep” talk, the inclusion of a detailed abstract in the conference program freed up the presenter to concoct a playful but enigmatic title, secure in the knowledge that further information about the session could easily be accessed elsewhere. Moreover, the title of the conference—“Tertiary Education Research”—supplied the attendees with additional paratextual clues. Delegates at a higher education research conference would naturally expect all the presentations to address aspects of higher education research; thus, there was no need for the presenter to add a ponderous explanatory subtitle containing the words “higher education research.”

Supplementing the role of the paratext is a title’s *subtext*, which consists of messages from the author that are not stated directly in words but can be inferred by an attentive reader. The

subtext of “‘Throwing a Sheep’ at Marshall McLuhan” might read something like this: “I am the kind of academic who likes to entertain and engage an audience. This session will be playful, not plodding. You can expect me to use lots of concrete examples and visual illustrations.” Whether the presentation will live up to these expectations is, of course, another matter—and one that stylish authors need to take into consideration as part of the titling process. If you run a spartan hotel, you probably should not advertise it with an ornate front door.

Attention to paratext and subtext can help academic writers make more thoughtful—and in some cases more daring—decisions about their titles. A scientist presenting new research findings to specialist colleagues might choose a serious, functional title studied with specialist terminology (subtext: “You can trust my results because my research has been conducted according to the highest scientific standards”). However, when invited to participate in a university lecture series aimed at members of the general public, the same scientist faces a wider range of choices—and a correspondingly greater variety of possible subtexts. The title could be purely informational, describing the topic of the lecture in clear and simple terms (subtext: “My lecture will be informative and lucid, but possibly rather dull”). It could be stuffed full of scientific jargon (subtext: “You will have to work very hard to understand me”). It could be playful (“I want to entertain you”), alliterative (“My talk, like my title, will be carefully crafted”), and/or provocative (“I want to make you think”). Every one of these choices carries both benefits and risks; the same subtext that attracts one reader could easily turn another off. Most undergraduates learn to negotiate this stylistic dilemma fairly quickly: the safest title is the one their teacher will approve of. Similarly, graduate students writing a thesis or dissertation know they need to satisfy only a few readers (subtext: “I am one of you now. I know the rules of the game; please admit me to your disciplinary fraternity”). As an academic writer’s potential audience expands, however, so does the range of choices.

OLIVER SACKS

For one of my deeply parkinsonian post-encephalitic patients, Frances D., music was as powerful as any drug. One minute I would see her compressed, clenched and blocked, or else jerking, ticking and jabbering—like a sort of human time bomb. The next minute, if we played music for her, all of these explosive-obstructive phenomena would disappear, replaced by a blissful ease and flow of movement, as Mrs. D., suddenly freed of her automatisms, would smilingly “conduct” the music, or rise and dance to it. But it was necessary—for her—that the music be legato; for staccato, percussive music might have a bizarre countereffect, causing her to jump and jerk helplessly with the beat, like a mechanical doll or marionette.

Writing in the journal *Brain* about the druglike power of music to calm or agitate the brain, neurologist Oliver Sacks conveys a clinician’s verbal precision (“deeply parkinsonian post-encephalitic,” “explosive-obstructive”), a storyteller’s attention to character (“Mrs. D. . . . would smilingly ‘conduct’ the music”), a poet’s love of metaphor (“human time bomb,” “like a mechanical doll or marionette”), and a musician’s sensitivity to rhythm and sound (“jerking, ticking and jabbering,” “a blissful ease and flow”). Lauded by the *New York Times* as “a kind of poet laureate of contemporary medicine,” Sacks has published numerous cleverly titled books about his clinical work with patients:

- *Awakenings*
- *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*
- *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales*
- *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*
- *The Island of the Colorblind*
- *A Leg to Stand On*
- *Uncle Tungsten: Memories of a Chemical Boyhood*

Richly varied rather than formulaic, each of these titles incorporates at least one of the following elements associated with engaging writing: a concrete image (*hat, colorblind, leg*); a surprising juxtaposition (*wife/hat, anthropologist/Mars, chemical boyhood*); a pun or wordplay (*awakenings, musicophilia*); and a reference to storytelling (*tales, memories*).

Among the many decisions faced by authors composing an academic title, the most basic choice is whether to *engage* the reader, *inform* the reader, or do both at once. Deliberately engaging titles are standard fare in the world of book publishing, particularly on that slippery slope where academic discourse meets the educated reading public. For example, the best-selling popular science books by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins typically sport titles that contain just a few carefully chosen words:

- *The Selfish Gene* (1976)
- *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986)
- *Climbing Mount Improbable* (1996)³

But lest we be tempted to assume that catchy titles are a luxury afforded only to the famous few—those rare academics who have descended from the ivory tower into the lucrative world of trade publishing—it is instructive to note that Dawkins already favored them long before he started writing for the general public. An early research letter, published in 1969 in *Science*, bore the beautifully catchy *and* descriptive title “Bees Are Easily Distracted.”⁴ It seems that Dawkins already understood early in his career what many academics never learn: it is possible to write compelling titles and to be a respected researcher at the same time.

Another striking example of an engaging *and* informative academic title comes from a major medical study published in the United Kingdom in 2006: “Why Children Die: A Pilot Study.”⁵ Significantly, the authors of this study were not writing only for other medical researchers like themselves; they intended their report to be accessible to a far wider range of readers, including health practitioners, social workers, politicians, and the general public. In fact, two different versions of the report were made available: a 124-page version aimed at adults and a 14-page summary for children and young people. The title, which is the same for both versions, raises some provocative questions. Why *do* children die, how many, and under what circumstances? What steps can be taken to

improve the child mortality rate in the United Kingdom? What work is already being done, and what future research is planned as a result of the pilot study? Imagine the same report in the hands of a medical academic: "Methodological and Practical Considerations in the Conduct of a Confidential National Enquiry on Child Mortality: A Feasibility Study." Rather than bludgeoning us with lots of technical language or anesthetizing us with abstract jargon, the title "Why Children Die" invites us to turn the page and start reading.

As James Hartley and other scholars have noted, the simplest way to generate an "engaging *and* informative" title is to join together two disparate phrases (one catchy, the other descriptive) using a colon, semicolon, or question mark.⁶ Literary scholars are particularly fond of the "engaging: informative" technique:

- "The First Strawberries in India: Cultural Portability in Victorian Greater Britain"
- "#\$%^&*!?: Modernism and Dirty Words"
- "The Coachman's Bare Rump: An Eighteenth-Century French Cover-Up"

This method is also popular with historians:

- "'Every Boy and Girl a Scientist': Instruments for Children in Interwar Britain"
- "Women on Top: The Love Magic of the Indian Witches of New Mexico"

Variations on the "engaging: informative" structure can be found in nearly every academic discipline. Only in the humanities, however, is there a strong correlation between the percentage of "engaging and informative" titles and the overall rate of colon usage. When I rated the titles of the one thousand academic articles in my data sample as "engaging," "informative," or both, I found that only 22 percent, mostly from the humanities, could be classified as "both engaging and informative," yet 48 percent overall contain colons.⁷

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

BOB ALTEMEYER

The world's a stage for billions of wonderfully unique people. But what would it be like if everyone had similar levels of some personality trait? If all the actors scored relatively high in right-wing authoritarianism, what kind of future would unfold?

In the opening paragraph of an article with the catchy *and* descriptive title "What Happens When Authoritarians Inherit the Earth? A Simulation," psychologist Bob Altemeyer invites us to imagine an alternative universe in which the world is populated entirely by people attracted to right-wing authoritarianism ("high RWAs"). Such people, he explains, have proven

relatively submissive to government injustices, unsupportive of civil liberties and the Bill of Rights, . . . mean-spirited, ready to join government "posses" to run down almost everyone (including themselves), happy with traditional sex roles, strongly influenced by group norms, highly religious (especially in a fundamentalist way), and politically conservative (from the grass roots up to the pros, say studies of over 1,500 elected lawmakers).

In the next section, titled "The Plot Thickens: High SDOs," Altemeyer explains how people with a high "Social Dominance Orientation"—that is, authoritarian leadership traits—complicate the picture:

Remember a few lines ago when I said high RWAs seemed to be the most prejudiced group ever found? Well, they lost the title when Felicia Pratto and Jim Sidanius began studying social dominators.

Elsewhere, in articles with titles such as "Why Do Religious Fundamentalists Tend to Be Prejudiced?" and "A Revised Religious Fundamentalism Scale: The Short and Sweet of It," Altemeyer uses a mixture of provocation, clarity, and humor to get his readers interested in sociological and psychological issues that are controversial, complex, and deeply serious.

In some science journals, and particularly in medical research, the colon may introduce a “type of study” subtitle that usefully supplements the main title:

- “Geriatric Care Management for Low-Income Seniors: A Randomised Controlled Trial” [Medicine]
- “Safety of the RTS,S/AS02D Candidate Malaria Vaccine in Infants Living in a Highly Endemic Area of Mozambique: A Double Blind Randomised Controlled Phase I/IIb Trial” [Medicine]

All too often, however, titular colons perform no obviously useful function aside from allowing an author, in effect, to cram two titles into one:

- “Integration of the Research Library Service into the Editorial Process: ‘Embedding’ the Librarian into the Media” [Computer Science]
- “Multistate Characters and Diet Shifts: Evolution of Erotylidae (Coleoptera)” [Evolutionary Biology]
- “Scaffolding through the Network: Analysing the Promotion of Improved Online Scaffolds among University Students” [Higher Education]

The advantage of these double-barreled “informative: informative” titles is that they pack a lot of content into a small space. A major disadvantage is that they often end up being twice as long-winded, jargon-laden, and abstract as a single-barreled title: that is, twice as “academic” rather than twice as inviting.

For academic authors who aspire to write engaging *and* informative titles, the colon is an undeniably useful device. A much trickier challenge is to combine—like Dawkins with his distracted bees—catchy and descriptive elements within a single, colon-free phrase. There are many ways to accomplish such a splicing. For example, the title might ask a question:

- “What Color Is the Sacred?” [Cultural Studies]
- “What Do Faculty and Students Really Think about E-books?” [Computer Science]

Or set a scene:

- “When Parents Want Children to Stay Home for College” [Higher Education]
- “The Riddle of Hiram Revels” [Law]

Or offer a challenging statement of fact or opinion:

- “Queen Promiscuity Lowers Disease within Honeybee Colonies” [Evolutionary Biology]
- “Why Killing Some People Is More Seriously Wrong than Killing Others” [Philosophy]

Or invoke a metaphor:

- “Rooting the Tree of Life Using Nonubiquitous Genes” [Evolutionary Biology]
- “The Specter of Hegel in Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*” [History]

Or create an unexpected juxtaposition:

- “The Foreign Policy of the Calorie” [History]

Or make a claim so grand and compelling that we cannot help but want to read further:

- “Against Darwinism” [Philosophy]
- “Comprehending Envy” [Psychology]

In all of the above examples, the authors have found graceful and compact ways to frame their research subjects without resorting to a colon.

Some academics will argue, however, that the brevity and breeziness of such titles come at an unacceptable cost. How, they

ask, will fellow researchers know what an article is *about* if its title lacks relevant subject keywords? This is where the paratext comes into play. An article cryptically titled “Hors d’oeuvre,” for example, becomes considerably less opaque when we learn that it appeared in a journal called *Eighteenth-Century Studies* as part of a special issue on “Derrida and the Eighteenth Century”; pun-loving devotees of the French literary theorist Jacques Derrida will immediately deduce that the article offers an intellectual tasting platter (hors d’oeuvre = appetizer) to readers interested in non-canonical aspects of Derrida’s writing (hors d’oeuvre = “outside the work”). Thanks to recent advances in electronic search technologies, titles no longer provide the only or even the principal means by which researchers in many disciplines locate relevant articles. Yet academics remain shackled to the notion that titles must always include major keywords. Roughly 80 percent of the articles in the journal *Social Networks*, for instance, contain the word “network” or “networking” in their titles.

Cultural theorist Marjorie Garber notes that “for a journalist to describe a scholarly book as ‘academic’ is to say that it is abstruse, dull, hard to read, and probably not worth the trouble of getting through”; conversely, for an academic to describe a scholarly book as “journalistic” is to say that it lacks “hard analysis, complexity, or deep thought.”⁸ The same tension applies, on a microcosmic scale, to scholarly titles. A “journalistic” title—one deliberately designed to attract the reader’s attention, in the manner of a newspaper headline or magazine feature—operates for many academics as a marker of intellectual shallowness, whether or not the content of the work bears out that prejudice. Yet a worthy, pedestrian title offers no compensatory guarantee of research quality. Indeed, a formulaic title carries a potentially crippling subtext: “I am a formulaic thinker.” And formulaic thinkers, by and large, are not the ones who set the world on fire with their research innovations.

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

PHILIP WADLER

Scientists often insist that serious science demands serious titles. Yet computer scientist Philip Wadler and his colleagues in the functional programming community (R. B. Findler, S. P. Jones, R. Lämmel, S. Lindley, S. Marlow, M. Odersky, E. Runne, and J. Yallop, among others) clearly believe otherwise. Their titles range from the humorous to the whimsical:

- “Well-Typed Programs Can’t Be Blamed”
- “Making a Fast Curry: Push/Enter vs. Eval/Apply for Higher-Order Languages”
- “Scrap Your Boilerplate: A Practical Design Pattern for Generic Programming”
- “Et tu, XML? The Downfall of the Relational Empire”
- “Two Ways to Bake Your Pizza—Translating Parameterised Types into Java”
- “Idioms Are Oblivious, Arrows Are Meticulous, Monads Are Promiscuous”

These punning titles are not merely empty window dressing; rather, they reflect a deep-seated belief in the power of language to advance innovative thinking. Evocative title words such as *blame*, *deforestation*, and *pizza* are part of Wadler’s everyday programming lexicon: the notion of *blame*, for example, allows programmers to show that “when more-typed and less-typed portions of a program interact . . . any type failures are due to the less-typed portion”; *deforestation* is “an algorithm that transforms programs to eliminate intermediate trees”; and *Pizza* is a functional language that incorporates Java (see <http://homepages.inf.ed.ac.uk/wadler/>).

Like Murray Gell-Mann, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist who coined the word “quark” based on a line from James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, Wadler and his colleagues are scientists with a sense of humor. Far from undercutting the seriousness of their research, their playful titles offer evidence of highly creative minds at work.

THINGS TO TRY

- What first impression do you want to make on your chosen audience? Remember, your title announces your intention to be serious, humorous, detailed, expansive, technical, or accessible—possibly several of those things at once. Double-check that your title matches your intention.
- Take a look at the publication list on your curriculum vitae. How many of your past titles contain colons? In each case, can you clearly articulate your reason for needing both a title and a subtitle?
- If you use colons frequently, try crafting a colon-free title. As an extra challenge, see if you can come up with a colon-free title that is both engaging and informative.
- If you seldom or never use colons, or if your titles are informative but not engaging, try out the “catchy: descriptive” trick. First, formulate a snappy but appropriate title (for example, “Snakes on a Plane”) to go with your not-so-snappy descriptive subtitle (“Aggressive Serpentine Behavior in a Restrictive Aeronautical Environment”). Next, ask yourself whether your title would still make sense without the subtitle. In some situations—for instance, a disciplinary conference or a special issue of a journal, where the context may supply all the extra information that is needed—you might find you can get away with just “Snakes on a Plane” after all.
- Identify some typical titles in your discipline and analyze their grammatical structure: for example, “The Development of Efficacy in Teams: A Multilevel and Longitudinal Perspective” becomes “*The Abstract Noun of Abstract Noun in Plural Collective Noun: An Adjective and Adjective Abstract Noun.*” Now see if you can come up with a title that does *not* use those predictable structures.
- For inspiration, find an engaging title from a discipline other than your own and mimic its structure. No one in your discipline need ever know.

- A few more tricks for constructing an engaging (or at least better-than-boring) title:
 - Make sure your title contains no more than one or two abstract or collective nouns. (Many academic titles contain seven, eight, or more!) Abstract nouns (*analysis, structure, development, education*) and collective nouns (*students, teachers, patients, subjects*) have a generic, lulling quality, particularly when they occur in journals where the same noun is used frequently, as in a criminology journal where most of the titles contain the nouns *crime* and *criminology*.
 - Avoid predictable “academic verbs,” especially in participle form: for example, *preparing, promoting, enforcing* (law); *engaging, applying, improving* (higher education); *rethinking, reopening, overcoming* (history); *predicting, relating, linking* (evolutionary biology).
 - Include one or two words that you would not expect to find in any other title in the same journal. Concrete nouns (*piano, guppy, path*) and vivid verbs (*ban, mutilate, gestate*) are particularly effective. Proper nouns (*Wagner, London, Phasianus colchicus*) can also help individualize your title and ground your research in a specific time and place.