

Thinking About Titles

What's the story with titles, anyway?

An effective title can catch readers' attention and provoke their interest while orienting them to the key question or issue that will be discussed in your essay. Accomplishing all that in one pithy phrase can be a challenge for any writer, no matter how experienced. However, taking some time to create and rework a title can help direct favorable attention to your essay and may also help you revise the essay itself.

Make an impression on your reader

One way to think about titles is to think about your readers. If your title isn't distinctive, your essay will probably make little positive first impression on the reader. For example, if the assignment is to develop some ideas linking the essay by Stuart Ewen, in which he describes middle class values in North American society, to the short story by Alistair MacLeod, the teacher will probably see some titles like these:

- Ewen and MacLeod
- MacLeod and Ewen
- Links Between Ewen and MacLeod
- Middle Class Values in Ewen and MacLeod
- and so forth...

Fairly or unfairly, these titles imply that the essay won't show original thinking, but rather will just echo the main ideas of the readings in a passive way. They give the impression to a reader (or a teacher who is reading a big stack of essays!) that the essay will probably be a lot like many of the other ones. Even though everybody might try not to judge a book—or essay—by its cover, that's hard to do. A bland or unexpressive title, or one that merely echoes the assignment sheet, probably invites a prejudiced reaction from a reader, and it's a shame to do that after you've put in all the work on the essay itself. Instead, spend some time and come up with a distinctive title that indicates something about what you actually say in your essay. Give your reader a reason to sit up and take notice of the work you do with ideas, starting with the title.

What a title can tell you about your own essay

A good title indicates something about the best original idea the writer will be advancing in the essay. When a writer is still struggling in a draft to get beyond summary of the readings or class discussion or beyond the most obvious response to the readings, he or she will probably have trouble getting beyond the most obvious title, such as “Ewen and

MacLeod.” You can use that knowledge to your own advantage. Get in the habit of writing a title for each of your drafts, and along the way, as you revise your essay, look at the title and consider whether it shows that you have found a distinctive focus for your essay. If the title is bland or generic or obvious, then ask yourself whether the essay has gone far enough yet. Does the essay really have something of its own to contribute, or does it mainly restate the source materials? Use the working title to give yourself one strong clue about how far your essay has developed and whether it needs more time and effort. If you do that, you make a title work for you as an aid to revision.

Learning from models provided by other writers

Although your title is designed to point your reader toward your most original idea, the way you construct a title can be based on effective examples from other writers. Try looking through the titles included in the anthology or readings assigned in your class. Notice which titles seem most effective in piquing your interest while giving you an accurate idea of the main subject matter of the essay. Although you will find many different kinds of titles, some less effective than others, you may notice that many academic writers use some combination of the following strategies:

- **Short and catchy** (these can risk not revealing enough about the content of the essay: “Blue Jeans” (Fred Davis, *Signs of Life*); “The Loss of the Creature” (Walker Percy, *Mind Readings*); “Social Memories” (Eviatar Zerubavel, *Mind Readings*); “Proletarian Dreams” (Student Example); “Fragile Identities” (Student Example).
- **The intriguing question**: “What’s So Bad about Hate?” (Andrew Sullivan, *Mind Readings*); “What’s in a Package?” (Thomas Hine, *Signs of Life*); “Whose Self Is it, Anyway?” (Philip Kitcher, *Mind Readings*); “Why Look at Animals?” (John Berger, *Mind Readings*); “The Social Escalator: Going Up?” (Student Example); “What’s Wealth Got to Do with It?” (Student Example).
- **The internal contradiction or identified debate**: “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying” (Adrienne Rich, *Literacies*); “Listening for Silence” (Mark Slouka, *Mind Readings*); “The Artifice of the Natural” (Charles Siebert, *Mind Readings*); “Columbus: Gone But Not Forgotten” (bell hooks, *Mind Readings*); “From Outside, In” (Barbara Mellix, *Literacies*); “Finding the Truth in Myth” (Student Example).
- **Key term combos**: “Observing and Intervening” (Steven Rose, *Literacies*); “Class and Virtue” (Michael Parenti, *Signs of Life*); “Rights and Kindness: A Can of Worms” (Paul Shepard, *Mind Readings*); “Language and Masculinity” (Victor Seidler, *Literacies*); “Jazz, Hope, and Democracy” (Cornel West and Wynton

Marsalis, *Literacies*); “The ‘Assumptive World’ of Cross-Cultural Communication” (Student Example).

- **Attention grabber combined with a subtitle using a colon:** “Heart to Heart: Sex Differences in Emotion” (Deborah Blum, *Mind Readings*); “‘Careful, You May Run Out of Planet’: SUVs and the Exploitation of the American Myth (David Goewey, *Signs of Life*); Political and Cultural Cross-Dressing: Negotiating a Second Generation Cuban-American Identity” (Flavio Risech, *Literacies*); Taste: the Social Sense” (Diane Ackerman, *Mind Readings*); “Building Memories: Encoding and Retrieving the Present and the Past” (Daniel L. Schacter, *Mind Readings*); “Masters of Desire: The Culture of American Advertising” (Jack Solomon, *Signs of Life*); “Goin’ Mobile: The Impact of Technology on Identity” (Student Example); “The Lure of Individuality: The Illusion of Freedom and the Message of Conformity” (Student Example).