

Creating Strong Titles

Many students underestimate the impact of their assignment's title. Personal narratives, argumentative essays, research papers, and the like all benefit from a well-crafted title. Compelling titles captivate your reader, indicate the content and perspective of the paper, and boost your credibility as an authoritative voice.

Elements of a strong title

Engaging: Think of a strong title as a hook that piques a reader's curiosity. "History Essay" and "Political Science Research Paper" are generic names for an assignment that will fail to make a good impression. The reader may overlook your work entirely, assuming it lacks substance or relevance. Two-part titles separated with a colon are often used to engage readers. The first part of the title grabs the reader's attention, while the second part usually provides more detail on the focus of the work.

1	Equality vs. Equity: Bridging the Gap in Modern Society ¹ → Introduces key terms to be compared and contrasted
2	The Rise of Smart Technology: Trading Wisdom for Convenience → Combines the topic with a focus on its worrisome implications

Descriptive: A title should speak to the content of your paper and, where appropriate, indicate the perspective you take. It serves as a roadmap, guiding the reader as to the themes, arguments, or topics explored within the text. For example, instead of a vague title like "Wind Energy," a clear, descriptive title like "The Impact of Wind Farms on Wildlife" announces the paper's principal argument—that wind farms do indeed impact wildlife. If your paper is about one or more works of literature, your title should name the author and texts in question along with the focus of your essay, such as an analysis of specific literary devices or elements.

3	Emma's Perpetual Dissatisfaction in Flaubert's <i>Madame Bovary</i>
4	Darkness and Light in Anne Caston's Narrative Poem "Anatomy" ²

Concise: In academic writing, a well-crafted title can impress professors and peers by demonstrating your ability to distill complex ideas into a concise phrase. Aim for a title that is concise yet informative (between 6 and 12 words). Compare the following examples:

5	The Role of Social Media in Shaping Public Opinion → direct and concise
6	A Discussion About How Social Media Influences the Way People Think → too wordy

In more scientific or research-oriented disciplines, the following guidelines from the American Psychological Association³ describe an effective title that conveys an academic tone:

- The title should “be a concise statement of the main topic of the research and should identify the variables or theoretical issues under investigation and the relationship between them” (p. 31).
- “Include essential terms in the title to enhance readers' ability to find your work during a search and to aid abstracting and indexing in databases” (p. 32).
- Avoid unnecessary words and abbreviations (p. 32).

Original: Depending on your area of study and nature of the paper, consider using literary devices like puns, metaphors, alliteration, or rhetorical questions to engage the reader’s imagination. Avoid clichés. When in doubt, ask your professor to identify some past works with strong titles and why he or she liked the titles. Some professors have no issue with a paper that poses a question in its title, such as “Can AI Replace Classroom Teachers?” Conversely, other professors may prefer a more definitive tone, such as “The Case for AI as a Replacement for Classroom Teachers.”

The process of creating an effective title

This multi-step process involves brainstorming, drafting, and revising. Start by jotting down keywords and phrases that relate to your essay's main themes and arguments. Next, experiment with different combinations and structures before seeking feedback from peers or mentors. The best titles often emerge after several iterations, a process that not only enhances the quality of your title but also deepens your understanding of your own work.

Formatting titles

Capitalize the first word and all principal nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, including the second part of hyphenated terms, e.g., “Self-Report.” Articles (a, an, the), prepositions (of, in, to, for, etc.), and conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet) are lowercase unless they begin the title. Prepositions with four letters or more should be capitalized, e.g., “With,” “Between,” and “From.”

Do not underline, italicize, or put quotation marks around your own title. However, italicize the title of a book or play that appears in your title and place double quotation marks around the title of an essay, poem, or short story that appears in your title (see examples 3 and 4).

Material cited from:

¹<https://nerdpapers.com/blog/how-to-title-an-essay>

²<https://www.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/writing/wp-content/uploads/sites/196/Some-Tips-on-Titling-Your-Critical-Analysis-Essay-Elmslie.pdf>

³American Psychological Association. (2020). Publication manual of the American Psychological Association (7th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000165-000>

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<https://essaygenius.ai/article/crafting-the-perfect-title-unlocking-the-secrets-to-captivating-essay-headlines->

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