

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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CHAPTER 9

SELECTING A TITLE

*What You Decide Matters More
than You Might Realize*

*Like a hat on the head or the front door to a house . . .
(Sword 2012, 63)*

Because it is the first thing people will see, like a hat or a front door, the title of your written work has a big job to do. While it is small compared to what it introduces, its few words are immediately visible: they will appear in tables of contents, online news feeds, Google Scholar searches, reference lists, and your curriculum vitae (CV), and they affect how findable your work will be. Not only does a title offer “a powerful first impression,” as Helen Sword (2012, 63) continues, it is the set of words that will carry your argument or perspective across scholarly exchanges. We therefore encourage you to consider and reconsider your title as you compose, keeping in mind whom you are talking with (audience), the form of your title (structure), and what your title captures and communicates (content) (see also [chapter 27](#)).

The Title Has a Big Job to Do

The title is the primary filter potential readers use to decide whether to read any further or to pursue access to the publication. Most people will not read beyond the title. So, your title needs to encourage people interested in your topic to read further.

There can be tension among writing eye-catching titles, avoiding giving readers misleading information, and attracting the readers interested in your subject. Helen Sword (2012, 67) notes that, “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.” Most titles used by academics fall into the inform category: “It could even be said, in the case of titles in the age of online publication, that boring and factual is good” (Thomson and Kamler 2013, 86). However, being informative is only one function of the title; another is clarifying the argument. What is your take-home message (Thomson 2016a)? We struggled for some time in devising a title for this book, for instance, to try to capture the arguments that underpin the text. We experimented with several different titles, which we rejected as they did not encapsulate all the main themes of the book. Although we quickly decided on the gist of the main title, *Writing about Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, the subtitle went through many versions, such as:

Becoming a Scholar through Publishing

Publishing and Disseminating Your Work while Nurturing Your Faculty Identity

Publishing Your Pedagogical Scholarship and Nurturing Your Professional Identity

Joining Scholarly Conversations, Fostering Identities, and Deepening Understanding through Publishing across a Range of Genres

Joining Scholarly Conversations and Fostering Identities

Through discussion among ourselves and with feedback and suggestions from critical friends and our publishers, we came up with an overall title that we were happy with: *Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations across a Range of Genres*.

It is not particularly eye-catching, but it is informative. Patrick Dunleavy (2014) recommends that authors list a minimum of ten possible titles and then “see if recombining words from different titles might work better.” Eye-catching titles may be more important in social media posts because the audience is wider and the space for informative titles is generally less.

Consider, too, the relevance of title and keywords in terms of digital visibility and search engine optimization (Taylor & Francis, “[A Researcher’s Guide to Search Engine Optimization](#)”). Try putting your initial chosen title through Google Scholar to see if anybody has used that title before. This may also help you find other reference material that might be useful. Michael Townsend (1983) suggests that having a colon in the middle of your title makes it more publishable—the first part acts as the “hat on the head,” as Helen Sword suggests, and the second part unpacks it a little bit to make it easier for editors to select referees (if it is a peer-reviewed outlet) and for readers to get a sense of what to expect. An example of a title with an eye-catching “hat” and an informative post-colon description is: “‘Writing My First Academic Article Feels Like Dancing Around Naked’: Research Development for Higher Education Lecturers Working in Further Education Colleges” (Turner, Brown, and Edwards-Jones 2014, 87).

The Form of Your Title

James Hartley (2008, 23) argues that the title “needs to stand out in some way from the other thousands of titles that compete for the reader’s attention, but it also needs to tell the reader what the paper is about.” Madeline Haggan (2004) notes a trend toward increasing informativeness of titles and has referred to them as “texts in miniature,” but there can be a danger in being too specific. In the context of devising titles for conference participants, Alice Cassidy (2018a, 55) warns: “The more you narrow down your title, the fewer potential participants will see it being relevant to them.” One way to be both engaging and informative is to use the main title to stand out and the subtitle to inform. Nancy Chick provides a good example in her co-authored article, “Reconciling Apples & Oranges: A Constructivist

SoTL Writing Program” (Chick et al. 2014). Daniel Feldman (2004) coined the intriguing title for his editorial: “The Devil Is in the Details: Converting Good Research into Publishable Articles.” Not that you want to use a colon in every case. Often you can summarize the content of your contribution in one phrase (Cassidy, 2018a). For example, *How to Get Research Published in Journals* (Day 2016) and “Addressing Feedback from Reviewers and Editors” (Brookfield 2011) both state clearly what the author intends to cover. Our own approaches to deciding on titles are outlined in Our Perspectives 9.1.

Our Perspectives 9.1

How do you decide on a title?

Mick: I lack the imagination to come up with many catchy titles. Most of mine are informative and in roughly half I use a colon.

Kelly: I appreciate catchy and clever titles. But I am not a word-smith, so I struggle to come up with titles that grab attention while also communicating the essence of my work. I tend to stick to informative. Sometimes, I find a salient quote in qualitative data that captures a key point, and I include that in the title.

Alison: I enjoy unexpected juxtapositions of words and literary devices such as alliteration, but I can sometimes get carried away with what I consider to be the aesthetic appeal of the title and forget some of the points we make above (such as being direct in helping readers know what the piece is about!). I have received feedback from reviewers who sometimes ask for a more descriptive, less poetic, title, but I tend to persist in using titles that require some linguistic imagination.

Your perspective: How do you decide on a title?

Communicating with Your Audience

It is critical to consider your target audience when deciding on titles. For instance, if you are presenting at a higher education conference,

it is unnecessary to include the words “higher education” in the title, as the participants should assume that is the case. And if you are presenting to a general audience, it’s probably best not to include reference to a particular discipline. Mick learned this lesson the hard way when he presented a paper at the International Consortium for Educational Development conference in Austin, Texas, US, in 1998. Up to that point his research and development practice had primarily been within his discipline, and he submitted a paper entitled “Developing Good Educational Practices: Lessons from Geography.” But when it came time for the session, nobody showed up! On reflection, that is hardly surprising as none of the other delegates were geographers. He later used much of the material from the presentation in an article accepted for publication in *Higher Education Research and Development*, but he changed the title to “Developing the Scholarship of Teaching through the Disciplines” (Healey 2000). With over 450 citations, it is in his top five most cited papers. The change of the title cannot explain its impact, but it probably contributed.

Over to You

Choosing a suitable title can be an enjoyable intellectual exercise, but it has a serious purpose as it is critical in attracting potential readers and making your work visible. Striving to achieve a balance among capturing potential readers’ attention, being informative, ensuring that your publication will show up in digital searches, and being true to who you are as a scholar matter when selecting a title. These questions can support your efforts:

- What is the first impression your title gives?
- How have you balanced being catchy (maybe before the colon) with being informative (maybe after the colon)?
- Does it include terms readers will likely search for?
- How have critical friend responded to the title?