





# Key aspects of a title: Recommendations to facilitate its identification

## Aspectos clave de un título: Recomendaciones para facilitar su identificación

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### Abstract

**Introduction.** The title and abstract are the most important parts of an article because they are the most read parts, so all words in the title must be chosen very carefully and their association with the other parts of the article must be managed carefully.

**Methods.** A review of the available literature on the topic in question was conducted and the most relevant recommendations from the editors' point of view were presented.

**Results.** It is essential that the title and abstract contain all the important terms or keywords that potential readers would use when searching for relevant literature and related articles. An attention-grabbing title should be selected that will encourage interested readers to continue reading. The challenge is to find a title that is not too long but accurately describes the content of the manuscript.

**Conclusion.** The title should be as short as possible in terms that adequately describe the content of the article, in accordance with the instructions for the authors of the journal chosen for publication. A good title should be concise, convey the main themes of the research, and highlight the importance of the findings.

**Keywords:** journal article; medical writing; scientific communication and dissemination; open access publishing; general surgery.

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## Resumen

**Introducción.** El título y el resumen son las partes más importantes de un artículo porque son las partes más leídas, por eso, todas las palabras del título deben elegirse con mucho cuidado y su asociación con las otras partes del artículo debe gestionarse con cautela.

**Métodos.** Se hizo una revisión de la literatura disponible sobre el tema en cuestión y se expusieron las recomendaciones más relevantes desde el punto de vista de los editores.

**Resultados.** Es esencial que el título y el resumen contengan todos los términos importantes o palabras clave que los lectores potenciales llegarían a usar en la búsqueda de literatura relevante y artículos relacionados. Se debe seleccionar un título que capte la atención y que estimule a los interesados a seguir leyendo. El desafío es encontrar un título que no sea demasiado largo pero que describa con precisión el contenido del manuscrito.

**Conclusión.** El título debe tener la menor cantidad posible de palabras que describan adecuadamente el contenido del artículo, ajustado a las instrucciones para los autores de la revista escogida para la publicación. Un buen título debe ser conciso, transmitir los temas principales de la investigación y resaltar la importancia de los hallazgos.

**Palabras clave:** artículo de revista; escritura médica; comunicación y divulgación científica; publicación de acceso abierto; cirugía general.

## Introduction

When preparing an article title, it is important to remember that few people will actually read the entire article, but many people will read it, whether in the original journal, in one of the secondary (abstracting and indexing) databases, in a search engine result, or elsewhere. Therefore, all words in the title should be chosen very carefully, and their association with other parts of the article should be carefully managed. Perhaps the most common error in titles, and the most damaging in terms of comprehension, is faulty syntax or word order<sup>1</sup>.

### What is a good title?

It can be defined as the fewest possible words that adequately describe the article's content. It should be remembered that indexing and abstracting services depend heavily on the accuracy of the title, as do individual computerized bibliographic retrieval systems. An article with an inadequate title may be virtually lost and never reach its intended audience. Some authors sacrifice clarity in a misguided attempt to be clever. An article title need not, and generally should not, be clever. However, it should be clear<sup>2</sup>.

## Title length

Sometimes, titles are too short. For example, "Studies on Brucella." Obviously, such a title isn't very useful to the potential reader. Is the study taxonomic, genetic, biochemical, or medical? It would be important to know at least that much<sup>3</sup>.

Much more often, titles are too long. Ironically, long titles are often less meaningful than short ones. Over a century ago, when science was less specialized, titles tended to be long and nonspecific, such as, for example, "On the addition to the method of microscopic investigation by a new mode of producing color contrast between an object and its background or between definite parts of the object itself" (Rheinberg J, 1896; J R Microsc Soc. 373). That certainly sounds like a poor title; perhaps it would make a good abstract<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, most excessively long titles contain "wasted" words. Often, these words, such as "Studies on," "Research on," and "Observations on," appear early in the title and are not useful for indexing purposes<sup>3</sup>. It should be noted that the journal to which you are submitting your manuscript may have a limit on the length of the title (in terms of word or character count). Keeping it short is more difficult than coming up with a 4-line title.

## Importance of the title and abstract

The title and abstract are the most important parts of an article. They are important for editors, who will examine the title and abstract to decide whether to submit it for external peer review; for reviewers, who will get a first impression of the article; and for readers, since the title, abstract, and keywords are often the only parts of the article freely accessible online, including readers in developing countries<sup>4</sup>.

Electronic search databases use words in the title and abstract to generate search results. In PubMed, similarity between documents is measured by the words they have in common, with terms in the title carrying the most weight. Therefore, it is essential that the title and abstract contain all the important terms that potential readers would use when searching for relevant literature and related articles<sup>5</sup>.

The journal's instructions for authors provide information on title requirements. Some allow only simple titles, while others accept subtitles, possibly with a colon. Informative titles are those that present the results of the study (e.g., "Drug x is effective in lowering cholesterol"), while some journals prefer a descriptive title that indicates the topic and study design (such as, "Drug x for the treatment of hypercholesterolemia: a randomized placebo-controlled trial"). Journals may also require a "short title," which will appear at the top or bottom of each page to facilitate reader navigation through the journal<sup>6</sup>.

The title is the first window readers have into a work. Therefore, you should select one that captures their attention, accurately describes the content of your manuscript, and encourages interested parties to read further<sup>7</sup>. A good title should be concise, convey the main themes of your research, and highlight the importance of your findings (i.e., keywords). Your challenge is to find a title that is neither too long (which could be clumsy and distracting) nor too short (which could lack crucial points about your research). The best approach is to write down a few possible titles, think about how they describe the content of your manuscript, and select a shortlist to further

refine them. Asking colleagues for help or advice is highly recommended.

It should be kept in mind that those searching for publications on a topic will use PubMed/Medline or other online databases, and therefore, a title should contain the main terms or keywords so that they can be easily identified. If the title is poorly worded, the work will not be easily identifiable and will not appear in search results for interested parties. As a result, the article will never be cited by others because they simply did not find it or read it.

Once a reader has identified the title and listed it with other articles, the title should be distinguished from the others by specifying how it contributes to the literature or fills a gap in knowledge. This may seem like a difficult task for a simple title, but it is not as complex as it seems. Table 1 offers some tips for formulating a title<sup>5</sup>.

It is also recommended to look at the titles of articles published in reputable medical journals for inspiration, as examples of what constitutes an effective title.

## The title as a label

The title of an article is a label; it is usually not a sentence, with the usual subject-verb-object arrangement; it is simpler than that, where word order becomes even more important.

The meaning and word order in the title are important to the reader who sees the title in the journal's table of contents. But these considerations are equally important to all potential users of literature. Therefore, the title should be useful as a label accompanying the article itself and as already mentioned, it should also be in a format suitable for the automatic indexing systems used by Medline/Pubmed and other databases. That is, the terms in the title should be those that highlight the significant content of the article.

As an aid to readers, journals typically print titles or headings at the top of each page. Often, the journal name, the article title, and the authors' names alternate between the top right and top left ledges. Some journals require a shortened version of the title due to space limitations (the maximum

**Table 1.** The main features that should be included in the Title<sup>5</sup>.

Feature	Recommendation
Cite the main factors studied	Indicate the name of the intervention
Cite the population or clinical setting studied	Intermediate-risk pulmonary embolism / early-phase septic shock
Cite the design	Trial / registry / cohort study / case-control study / randomized, double-blind
Cite the main finding	Increases / reduces / prevents
Write the most important aspect first	If the focus is on the intervention, begin the title by mentioning it
Avoid vague wording that serves no specific purpose	Avoid terms such as “a report of...”
Subheadings should be used sparingly	Reserve subheadings for study group names

Source: Adapted from Ecarnot F, Seronde MF, Chopard R, Schiele F, Meneveau N. Writing a scientific article: A step-by-step guide for beginners. *Eur Ger Med.* 2015;6:573-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eurger.2015.08.005>

character count is likely indicated in the journal's instructions to authors). It may be helpful to suggest an appropriate shortened title on the title page, or so-called “front page,” when submitting your manuscript.

## Abbreviations and jargon

Titles should generally not contain abbreviations, jargon, or similar. When designing the title, the author should ask themselves, “How would I search for this type of information in an index?” The best rule for authors (and editors) is to avoid abbreviations in titles. The same rule should apply to trade names, jargon, and unusual or obsolete terminology<sup>8</sup>.

## More on title formatting

Many editors oppose the main-subtitle arrangement and dangling titles. The main-subtitle arrangement of a series (e.g., “Studies on Bacteria. IV. Cell Wall of *Staphylococcus aureus*”) was common decades ago. Today, editors believe it is important, especially for the reader, that each published article be self-sufficient. Therefore, series titles are now rare<sup>9</sup>.

The dangling title (similar to a series title, but with a colon instead of a Roman numeral) is considerably better. Some journals, especially in the social sciences<sup>10</sup>, seem to favor dangling titles,

perhaps to place the most important words of the title first. Dangling titles are intended to be helpful to the reader, but they may emphasize the general term rather than a more significant term, require punctuation, and clutter indexes. Opinions also vary as to whether it is appropriate to include questions in titles.

Evaluating the titles of the journal to which you will submit your article can help you determine which title formats are acceptable. However, using a simple title does not reduce the need for proper syntax or the correct form of each word in the title<sup>11</sup>.

## Conclusion

The author should take the time to write the title and abstract. Enjoy their uniqueness. It is advisable to reread your article calmly and note down the keywords for the different sections. Determine whether you need an informative or descriptive title. Use keywords and active verbs to formulate several potential titles (e.g., Variable x predicts the risk of infection). Try to write the most important keywords at the beginning of the title, as readers' attention is drawn to the beginning. It is best to avoid abbreviations in the title and abstract. It is important to define what makes your article unique and emphasize it in the title. The title should be made to stand out from other publications in the same field.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Informed consent:** This study is a literature review, and as such, there is no need for informed consent or Institutional Ethics Committee approval.

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- Conception and design of the study: Patrizio Petrone, Mónica Bejarano.
- Acquisition of data: Patrizio Petrone, Mónica Bejarano.
- Data analysis and interpretation: Patrizio Petrone, Mónica Bejarano.
- Drafting the manuscript: Patrizio Petrone, Mónica Bejarano.
- Critical review and final approval: Patrizio Petrone, Mónica Bejarano.

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