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Hooked or Overlooked: Writing Effective Titles for Academic Papers

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Overview



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During this presentation, we will...

- discuss less successful titles and why they do not work as well
- identify features of effective titles (including formatting)
- consider the role of humor and audience expectations within various disciplines
- remind ourselves why spending time and effort on writing titles can be vital for academic success

After this workshop, you will be able to:

- distinguish less effective from more successful titles
- help your peers write stronger titles
- consider your audience and its importance for your own writing
- write effective titles within your discipline

What Is wrong with the following titles?



1) “Final Paper” / “Lab Report”	5) “The Legal Drinking Age Should Not Be Lowered”
2) “Insomnia and Menopause”	6) “Do red hens undergo spontaneous chromosome rearrangement when exposed to ultraviolet light?”
3) “How Television Has Changed Society”	7) “The EU without Britain: Opportunity or Chaos?”
4) “An Examination of Medieval Maps of the World”	8) “Women as Losers of the Pandemic? An Investigative Study”

How to Write an Effective Title



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- A great academic title should tell your readers as much as possible about your paper's central claim and its significance
- In this vein, good titles often include:
 - a hook
 - a set of key terms
 - a source
- In addition, consider your audience and their expectations to determine the appropriate tone

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Examples



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1. Good-Bye Lenin!: Free Market Nostalgia for Socialist Consumerism
2. The Effects of Light and Temperature on the Growth of Populations of the Bacterium *Escherichia coli*
3. “The Machine-Language of the Muscles”: Reading, Sport and the Self in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*

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Building an Effective Title From the Ground Up



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Imagine you have completed a round of fieldwork (or done a lot of reading) on social behavior in monkeys and want to present your results in a scientific paper.



Building an Effective Title From the Ground Up



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1. “Monkey Behavior“



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1. “Monkey Behavior“



2. “The Effects of Sugar on Monkey Behavior“



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Imagine you have completed a round of fieldwork (or done a lot of reading) on social behavior in monkeys and want to present your results in a scientific paper.

1. “Monkey Behavior“



2. “The Effects of Sugar on Monkey Behavior”



3. “Sugar Stimulates Intensity of Tail-Twitch Social Behavior in Panamanian Monkeys”

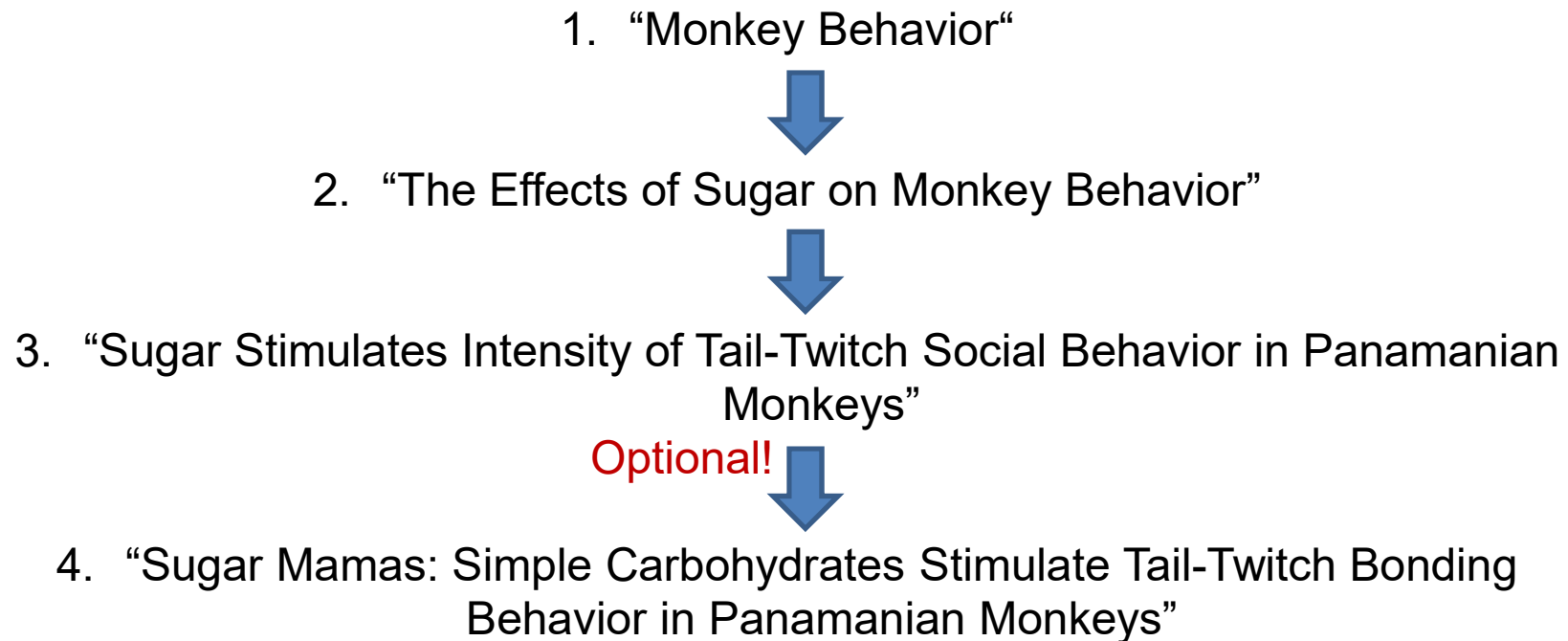


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What About Humor?



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- Consider your audience / the conventions of your field
- Check the journal's guidelines
- No humor for humor's sake!

Real-life examples from published papers:

- Carlson EN, et al., “You probably think this paper’s about you: narcissists’ perceptions of their personality and reputation” (Psychology)
- A.G. Burrell et al., “Snakes on a Spaceship – An Overview of Python in Heliophysics” (Geophysics / Space Physics)
- Valerie Tweedle et al., “A mathematical model of Bieber Fever: The most infectious disease of our time?” (Math/Medicine)
- Andreas Hejnol et al., “The mouth, the anus, and the blastopore – open questions about questionable openings” (Evolutionary Biology)
- Donald E. Weller, “Will the real self-thinning rule please stand up? – A reply to Osawa and Sugita” (Ecology)
- Peter T. Leeson, “An-*arrgh*-chy: The Law and Economics of Pirate Organization” (Economics)

Why Spend So Much Effort on a Title?



Two challenges to any paper's success:

- Potential readers have to find the paper
- Potential readers have to keep reading

Effective titles thus:

- are highly searchable and define the content of the paper
- provide a first impression of the author as a writer who cares
- engage their readers (“hook”) and “sell” the paper to them
- ideally contain between ~5 and ~15 words





And finally, a note on formatting:

In all academic disciplines, the title should be:

- centered at the top of the first page
- formatted in plain text (not bold, italic, or underlined)

Capitalization varies by discipline, but tends to follow the following pattern:

1. Humanities

- first and last word of each title should be capitalized
- all other principal words also capitalized (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and subordinating conjunctions)

2. Social sciences

- most papers capitalize these same words in the main title at the beginning of a paper, but only the first letter of titles in the reference list at the end

3. Natural sciences

- tend to capitalize only the first word and proper nouns

Let's take another look at our initial titles...



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1. „Final Paper / Lab Report”
2. “Insomnia and Menopause”
3. “How Television Has Changed Society”
4. “An Examination of Medieval Maps of the World”
5. “The Legal Drinking Age Should Not Be Lowered”

Let's take another look at our initial titles...



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1. „Final Paper / Lab Report” → ?? (could be anything)
2. “Insomnia and Menopause”
→ “Using a sleep app lessened insomnia in post-menopausal women in southwest United States: A randomized controlled clinical trial”
3. “How Television Has Changed Society”
→ The Electronic Babysitter: A Social History of the Uses of the Television
4. “An Examination of Medieval Maps of the World”
→ “Reality, Symbolism, Time, and Space in Medieval World Maps” OR
→ “World Maps and Easter Tables: Medieval Maps in Context”
5. “The Legal Drinking Age Should Not Be Lowered”
→ “The Effects of Minimal Legal Drinking Ages on Teen Childbearing” OR
→ “Long-Term Effects of Minimum Legal Drinking Age Laws on Adult Alcohol Use and Driving Fatalities”



5. Do red hens undergo spontaneous chromosome rearrangement when exposed to ultraviolet light?

6. The EU without Britain: Opportunity or Chaos?

7. “Women as Losers of the Pandemic? An Investigative Study”



5. Do red hens undergo spontaneous chromosome rearrangement when exposed to ultraviolet light?
→ “Ultraviolet light-induced chromosome rearrangement in red hens“

6. The EU without Britain: Opportunity or Chaos?
→ “Goodbye Britannia? The International Implications of Britain’s Vote to Leave the EU” OR
→ “Brexit and the External Trade Policy of the EU”

7. “Women as Losers of the Pandemic? An Investigative Study”
→ “The ‘Shadow Pandemic’: Addressing Gender-based Violence (GBV) During COVID-19” OR
→ “COVID-19 Healthcare Workers: 70% are Women” OR
→ “Employment Recovery in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic”



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ANY QUESTIONS?



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Thank you for your attention!

(Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have further questions 😊)