



quicktips

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE TITLE

Problem

Writers often omit or underuse the helpful tool that is an essay title. Feeling stuck, writers may give up on generating a title, or merely label their essays by assignment sequence (“Paper #2”) or task (“Rogerian Argument”). An absent or non-specific title is a missed opportunity: titles help writers prepare readers to understand and believe the paper that is to follow.

Solutions

REMEMBER THE FUNCTIONS OF A TITLE

As composition and rhetoric scholars Maxine Hairston and Michael Keene explain,

a good title does several things:

First, it predicts content.

Second, it catches the reader's interest.

Third, it reflects the tone or slant of the piece of writing.

Fourth, it contains keywords that will make it easy to access by a computer search. (73)

Keeping these functions in mind will help a writer choose a specific and meaningful title, not a mere label.

THINK OF TITLE-WRITING AS A PROCESS, AND ALLOW YOURSELF TO STRETCH YOUR THINKING DURING THAT PROCESS.

Like any piece of writing, an effective title does not appear in one magic moment; it takes brainstorming and revising. Richard Leahy's “Twenty Titles for the Writer” exercise helps writers slow down and engage in the process of title-writing.

Although it can feel painstaking and a little silly, actually doing all the steps of Leahy's exercise takes your thinking in new directions, and almost always guarantees an interesting and effective title. (Of course, how you use the exercise is up to you.) “Twenty Titles for the Writer” is on the back of this sheet.

Twenty Titles for the Writer

1. Copy out of your draft a sentence that could serve as a title.
2. Write a sentence that's not in the draft to use as a title.
3. Write a title that is a question beginning with *What*, *Who*, *When*, or *Where*.
4. Write a title that is a question beginning with *How* or *Why*.
5. Write a title that is a question beginning with *Is/Are*, *Do/Does*, or *Will*.
6. Pick out of the essay some concrete image—something the reader can hear, see, taste, smell, or feel—to use as a title.
7. Pick another concrete image out of the essay. Look for an image that is a bit unusual or surprising.
8. Write a title beginning with an *-ing* verb (like “Creating a Good Title”).
9. Write a title beginning with *On* (like “On the Titles of Essays”).
10. Write a title that is a lie about the essay. (You probably won't use this one, but it might stimulate your thinking.)
11. Write a one-word title—the most obvious one possible.
12. Write a less obvious one-word title.
13. Write a two-word title.
14. Write a three-word title.
15. Write a four-word title.
16. Write a five-word title.
17. Think of a familiar saying, or the title of a book, song, or movie, that might fit your essay.
18. Take the title you just wrote and twist it by changing a word or creating a pun on it.
19. Do the same with another saying or title of a book, song, or movie.
20. Find two titles you've written so far that you might use together in a double title. Join them together with a colon [:].

Hairston, Maxine, and Michael Keene. *Successful Writing*. 5th ed. New York: Norton, 2003.

Title exercise adapted from Richard Leahy's “Twenty Titles for the Writer.” *College Composition and Communication* 43.4 (1992): 516–519. JSTOR. University Libraries, U of Minnesota. 19 July 2007 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.