

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE TITLE, SUBTITLE, and EPIGRAPH

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 (“Core 1 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 and provides considerable reason(s) for reading.
- ✓ Second, it catches the reader's interest. A good title is able to astonish and intrigue the reader.
- ✓ 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.

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:

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 [:].

Some Additional Techniques for processing a title:

Technique/Process #1:

1. Read through your story and on a piece of paper jot down sentences and/or words that appealed to you as you read. Jot down as many as you come across - Don't worry about editing them for now. Just note down all that grabbed you.
2. Then look at your topic. Is there something special about it, a word you could use in a title that will grab readers' attention?
3. Now with the list you have gathered, think about the gist of your essay. Start crossing out the words and sentences that aren't directly relevant to it.
4. Select a few words and look through a thesaurus for a nicer sounding synonym.
5. Choose the most appropriate group of words for the title.
6. Remember... your title has to be one or a combination of the following qualities: intriguing, interesting, catchy, provocative, amusing

Technique/Process #2

1. Go to the web, read some articles and analyze their titles.
2. Go to Amazon.com and read some examples of book titles.
3. Think of your audience—place yourself in the shoes of the reader and try to imagine what will draw them to read your essay.
4. Recollect in your memory or browse for popular expressions and idioms with your keywords. You can change couple of words to relate to your topic, but still leaving the saying recognizable. e.g. *Eyes Wide Shut*.
5. Use words that seem incompatible, but will together form an interesting phrase. e.g. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera.
6. Find a metaphor that will express the main idea of the essay. Your title may not completely depict the main topic of your essay, but it definitely should be intriguingly and explained further in the paper. e.g. *Devil Wears Prada* (the movie).
7. Play around with alliterative phrases.
8. Experiment with proverbs and maxims – is it possible to slightly change one for the subject of your paper?

SUBTITLES:

Most of the time, the hook and the reel are two different pieces, split across the title and subtitle.

Take 3 examples:

- *The Cilantro Diaries*
- *The Patient as CEO*
- *Never Lose a Customer Again*

- The first title could be almost anything. A memoir. A novel. Even a cookbook.
- The second title tells you the book's probably about healthcare in some way, but it doesn't provide any context.
- The third title comes closest to standing on its own. It's a direct hook that tells you what you'll get out of reading the book.

But look at these:

- [The Cilantro Diaries: Business Lessons from the Most Unlikely Places](#)
- [The Patient as CEO: How Technology Empowers the Healthcare Customer](#)
- [Never Lose a Customer Again: Turn Any Sale into Lifelong Loyalty in 100 Days](#)

The title is what people will remember about your work.

The subtitle explains the work, telling them what they'll get out of reading it.

The best subtitles have 5 characteristics in common:

1. Contextual

A good subtitle provides context for the title. It's informative, letting you know who should read the book and how it will help them.

2. Attention-Holding

The title grabs people's attention. The subtitle needs to hold it to draw the reader in for more information. It does that by giving the title direction and telling the reader what to expect. **The right subtitle will make the right reader want to open the book, pick up the essay, or read that work.** The subtitle answers the question raised by the title, giving it direction and focus.

3. Searchable

If a great title is memorable, a great subtitle is searchable.

It should include **keywords** that your target audience might type into search engines like Google or even directly into Amazon. In college or in the future of your publishing life, this will be important in online magazine searches or in library catalogs.

Whatever your book is going to do for readers, those keywords need to be in the title to help them find it. And, most importantly, to help people looking for those topics find your work.

4. Easy to Read and Say

Even though most people won't remember your subtitle word-for-word, you don't want it to be too complicated. But you also don't want to lose readers by using words they aren't comfortable with or that don't fit your work.

5. Short and Specific: A great subtitle is extremely specific.

A narrow target reaches a wide audience. That's because people need to know exactly who your work is for.

So your subtitle needs to be short, but it needs to pack in a lot of information. That can be a tricky balance, not just for writers but even for **professional book editors**.

Look how much of a difference the right focus can make:

- *People-First Culture: Build a Lasting Company by Shifting Your Focus*
- *People-First Culture: Build a Lasting Company by Shifting Your Focus from Profits to People*

The first subtitle would have been too general. It doesn't say enough about the book's central idea. Shifting your focus from what to what?

In trying to keep your subtitle short, it's tempting to think, "People will put it together. The title is *People-First Culture*. Obviously, it's about putting people first."

Don't ask potential readers to do the work of putting your title and subtitle together. Spoon feed the connection to them. The last 4 words of the real subtitle knock it out of the park: from Profits to People. They tell the reader what the book is about, targeting **the right audience** by grabbing people who are interested in that idea.

EPIGRAPHS: (a short intro. For more see the epigraph writing handout)

The epigraph is simply a well-chosen quotation, set at the beginning of a text. Epigraphs can open essays, books, chapters of a book, or even each story in a book—any writing, really, which suggests its theme and tone. **They can, however, do so much more.**

Chosen well, an epigraph offers the writer a kind of "power" to grab the reader quickly, and efficiently. If editors give the writer just a few opening paragraphs to "sell" their work, it seems to me that the perfect epigraph—short, surgical, *brilliant, the very first thing seen in the work*—is a terrific first contact. Toby Lichtig, in *The Guardian*, put it this way: a good epigraph will make the reader want to "open the door" to the writing inside. It will act as a kind of "shadowy third figure," somewhere between the author and the reader, drawing the reader in by raising interest, expectations, even questions as to what lies ahead.

In her book, *The Art of the Epigraph: How Great Books Begin*, Rosemary Ahern finds that many authors seem to follow at least one fairly common strategy in deploying epigraphs, and often all three together: **be brief, be funny, be wise.**