Writing an engaging title

Helen Sword

Question:

How do I write an engaging title for my academic article or thesis?

Answer:

An effective academic title is like a carefully arranged shop window: it entices your reader inside. Keep in mind, however, that different kinds of readers are attracted by different displays. Some respond to creativity and colour; others just want to know what you are selling, and at what price. Deciding which kind of customer, or reader, you aim to please is your first step in writing an engaging title.

Before you choose your title, consider the subtextual (unspoken) messages you want to convey. For example, a straightforward, technical title suggests that your main goal is to transmit research data as efficiently as possible: 'I am a serious researcher, no stylistic frivolities for me'. A title crammed with disciplinary jargon hints that you wish to impress your reader: 'I want you to know how clever and well-educated I am'. A deliberately catchy or provocative title – 'My scholarship aims to amuse, entertain, make you think' – will draw in some readers but send others scurrying away. Similarly, any title that contains Māori words (beyond those that have entered mainstream New Zealand culture, such as 'whanau' or 'whakapapa') communicates a powerful message of inclusion or exclusion, depending on the reader's own cultural orientation and language skills.

Once you have defined your target audience and subtext(s), your next step is to decide whether or not you want your title to stand out from the crowd. To blend in safely, your best bet is to study other titles in your discipline and then write one that sounds as much like them as possible. It's not at all hard to do: simply copy the syntax of an existing article while substituting your own terminology. For example, can you tell the real titles from the fake ones in the following examples?

From education:
- A) Enhancing university degree courses in higher education: a conceptual framework
- B) Managing criticism in Ph.D. supervision: a qualitative case study

From cultural studies:
- A) Between Auschwitz and Algeria: Multidirectional memory and the counterpublic witness
- B) Between Lewis Carroll and the New Lacanians: Obsessional modernity and the objective correlative

From computer science:
- A) Improving hash join performance through prefetching
- B) Harnessing operating systems using embedded archetypes

(The real titles are B, A, A; the fake titles are A, B, B.)

Writing a standout title is much more challenging than writing a derivative one, but also a lot more fun. One useful method is to start by finding a title you like – preferably one from a book or article *outside* your own discipline – and copying its grammatical structure. Next, ensure that

your title contains at least one or two words (concrete nouns, active verbs, vivid adjectives) that you would not normally expect to find amongst a sampling of, say, twenty other titles from your discipline. For example, psychology articles typically contain title nouns such as 'research' and 'symptom', verbs such as 'test' and 'prevent' and adjectives such as 'behavioural' and 'emotional'. Much more unusual – and therefore more likely to draw a reader's attention – are nouns such as 'ghost' or 'porcupine', verbs such as 'draw' or 'fish' and adjectives such as 'tip-of-the-tongue' or 'oddball'. (All of these examples, both predictable and unpredictable, come from a sampling of 100 recently published articles in top peer-reviewed psychology journals).

A survey of the 109 articles, research notes, peer commentaries and intern reports published in the *MAI Review* from 2006 to early 2009 reveals a wide range of titling practices, reflecting the broad disciplinary sweep of the journal. The two most common types of title can be classified as 'informative but not engaging' and 'engaging colon informative'. (By 'engaging' I mean the title shows evidence that the author is consciously attempting to amuse, entertain or capture the attention of the audience). For example:

- Modes of representation in Māori documentary (*informative but not engaging*)
- The Howard Government's approach to the policy of Indigenous self-determination (*informative but not engaging*)
- Fulla, the veiled Barbie: An analysis of cultural imperialism and agency (*engaging colon informative*)
- Developing indigenous infrastructure in the university: Another era or another error? (*informative colon engaging*)

Of course, not all 'engaging and informative' titles contain a colon, and not all colonised titles are both engaging and informative:

- Rugby culture, ethnicity and concussion (*engaging and informative; no colon*)
- Indigenous space in institutions: Frameworks around Māori legal academics at Waikato (*informative, not engaging; contains colon*)

Overall, however, there is a high correspondence in the *MAI Review* between the number of titles classified as 'both engaging and informative' (44%) and the number containing a colon (49%). Indeed, the ratio of these percentages compares favourably with cross-disciplinary averages, which tend to be much more skewed. In a survey of 1,000 articles from 10 academic disciplines, I found that the average colon usage was 47.5% overall (ranging from 26% by computer scientists to 70% by literary scholars); by contrast, the percentage of 'engaging *and* informative' titles was just 22% (ranging from just 1% in medical research to 56% in literary studies). These statistics suggest that, particularly in the sciences and social sciences, academics often use colons to produce double-barrelled titles that are long but not necessarily engaging (see Figure 1).

The easiest way to generate an 'engaging *and* informative' title is to join two disparate phrases (one catchy, the other descriptive) using a colon or question mark. As an added benefit, this technique offers a graceful means of introducing Māori words into titles without alienating non-Māori speakers, as the following examples from previous *MAI Review* articles illustrate:

- Tikanga in the laboratory: Engaging safe practice
- Tikapa: archaeological and ancestral landscape
- Nā Rangi tāua, nā Tūānuku e takoto nei: Research methodology framed by whakapapa
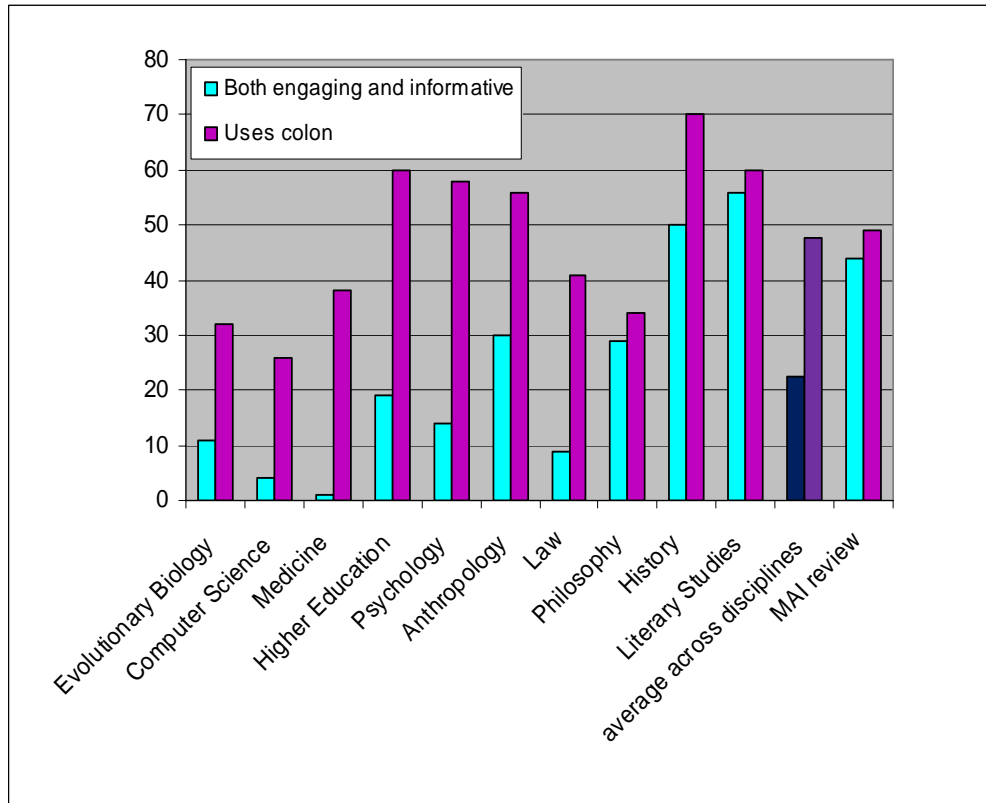- Whakapapa: A framework for understanding identity

Figure 1. Percentages of 'engaging/informative' titles and colon usage in academic articles from across the disciplines (based on a sample of 100 articles per discipline).

A greater challenge is to combine engaging and informative elements within a single colon-free phrase. There are, however, many ways to accomplish such a splicing. For example, the title might ask a question:

- Does the domestic violence act discriminate against Māori?
- Does the New Zealand Government owe Māori an apology?

Or set a scene:
- The 'native informant' anthropologist as kaupapa Māori research
- The political apology as a millennial phenomenon

Or offer a challenging statement of fact or opinion:
- Kaupapa Māori theory is critical and anti-colonial
- How the use of rāhui for protecting taonga has evolved over time

Or invoke an illustrative metaphor:
- The road to reconciliation begins with an apology
- Reflections on my path to academia

(All of these examples come from actual *MAI Review* articles).

Overall, the *MAI Review* contains a refreshingly high percentage of engaging titles. Of the 109 titles I analysed, my personal favourite was 'Pīpīwharauroa' by Rutene Gabel – a moniker of daring simplicity, firstly because the author confidently assumes that the reader will recognise the Māori bird name, and secondly because there is no subtitle to explain what the article is actually about. Like a shop window filled with coloured balloons or naked mannequins, the title intrigues and invites but does not inform. In many academic venues, such opacity carries an unacceptable risk. But in *MAI Review*, playfulness and risk-taking have a place. By ensuring that their work will be read within an indigenous research context, *MAI Review* offers Māori academics a safe space for intellectual adventurousness.

'Pīpīwharauroa' is a fresh, unusual title because it contains a fresh, unusual *concrete noun*. (The same title in English – 'Shining cuckoo' – would be almost as striking.) Many academic titles, by contrast, are filled with predictable *abstract nouns* such as 'representation', 'identity' and 'difference', which all tend to run together in readers' minds. The most memorable titles often contain at least one concrete noun, active verb or vivid adjective that appeals to the human senses. For example:

- A heap of metal? A narrative of medals awarded to soldiers in 'A' Company, 28 Battalion
- We are what we eat: The colonial history of the banana

33% of all *MAI Review* titles contain Māori words or place names (not counting the word 'Māori'). These words, too, generally qualify as 'fresh and unusual', helping to distinguish an article from others around it (though authors need to keep in mind that untranslated Māori words will inevitably turn some readers away). Some Māori concepts, however, are so frequently used in *MAI Review* titles (e.g. 'kaupapa' and 'tikanga') that they risk losing their intellectual potency.

Surprisingly, only 6 of the 109 *MAI Review* titles I analysed contained metaphors of any kind (excluding academic commonplaces such as 'catalyst' and 'framework', which have long since lost their figurative impact). Moreover, the few metaphors that I did find were fairly well-worn ones: *road*, *path*, *baptism by fire*, *between worlds*, *unmasking*, *unequal playing field*. Māori is a deeply metaphorical language, offering a rich store of multi-layered concepts upon which academic writers can fruitfully build their research. In future issues of this journal, I hope to see a growing number of articles that use metaphorical vocabulary to attract readers' attention, render abstract ideas concrete and enrich the kaupapa of Māori and Pākeha academics alike.

Author Notes

Dr Helen Sword is Head of the Academic Practice Group, Centre for Academic Development, University of Auckland.

E-mail:h.sword@auckland.ac.nz