Academic clickbait

The arcane art of research article titling

Tim Moore
Swinburne University of Technology

The research is complete, the article written, there's just one last job – think of a great title, one that not only elegantly summarises your research, but that is also going to grab the attention of a fickle and perpetually time-poor readership.

Article titling is a challenge for experienced researchers, and even more so for young academics seeking to get a toehold in the tough and unforgiving world of academic publishing. In my work as a writing and communications lecturer in the arts faculty of an Australian university, I spend some time in classes talking about research article titles, and which assemblages of words might help students get the right exposure for their work.

Some answers are to be found in advice provided by the journals. Springer, for example, recommends titles that convey the main topics of the study; that highlight the importance of the research; and importantly – attract readers. According to the *APA Manual* (2010), that all-powerful arbiter of academic standards, 'a title should be fully explanatory when standing alone. It should summarise the main ideas of the manuscript, and if possible, with style'.

All this however, is guidance of a minimal kind. Alas, there are few insights here about which types of words should be chosen, and how this elusive sense of 'style' might be created. In the spirit of good academic research, I thought it would be a useful endeavour to put together a corpus of article titles (about 1,000 from a range of social science and humanities journals) and see what patterns might emerge.

The ubiquitous colon

Undoubtedly, the first feature to stand out in my collection was that minor item of punctuation – the colon. It is an intriguing thing that the colon has become so central nowadays in the way that titles are put together. In my corpus, a clear majority of titles (62%) were of the 'colonic' type, as in the following:

Academic integrity: a review of the literature

Critical thinking: seven definitions in search of a concept

Perfectionism: A contributor to social anxiety and its cognitive processes

The following research (Dillon, 1982), whose subject just happens to be the rise of the colon in article titles, is appropriately colonic in its construction:

In pursuit of the colon: A century of scholarly progress.

Around this broad two-part structure, a range of patterns could be discerned. A common technique is to first indicate the general SUBJECT of the research, followed by reference to the TYPE OF RESEARCH CONDUCTED (e.g. a narrative approach, a case study, an empirical study etc.), as in the following:

Redefining 'early career' in academia: a collective narrative approach

Psychosocial influences on children's identification with sports teams: A case study of Australian Rules football supporters

Australian Muslims' orientations to secular society: An empirical exploration of theoretical classifications

An interesting variant on this theme is for the second component (to the right of the colon) to be used not to summarise the type of research, but rather to indicate the broad CONCLUSIONS drawn from it. In the corpus, sometimes these were presented in clear and bold terms, like the following:

Public intellectuals vs. new public management: The defeat of public engagement in higher education

Moral psychology and moral intuition: A pox on all your houses

Other times, such conclusions were presented in a tentative – even teasing – way, using a question form:

The pragmatic university: a feasible utopia?

Electronic contracts: A law unto themselves?

Question forms were also to be found in initial position in these two-part titles. Here they were used as an alternative – and perhaps more compelling – way of signalling the subject of the research, as in the following:

Why do academics blog? An analysis of audiences, purposes and challenges

Who cheats at university? A self-report study of dishonest academic behaviours in a sample of Australian university students

Too much? Too young? The sexualisation of children debate in Australia

In the latter title, one can't help admiring the neat reference to lyrics in 'Boys in Town', that signature song of the late Chrissie Amphlett.

Finally, a tried and true method, used especially for interview and text-based research, is to begin with a SIGNIFICANT QUOTE from the research, followed by information about the SUBJECT/TYPE of research:

"I'm not allowed wrestling stuff": Hegemonic masculinity and primary school boys

"I am more Chinese than you": Online narratives of locals and migrants in Singapore

While the colonic style is clearly favoured by many, there are times when it can be overdone. In the following – which refers to undoubtedly important and needed research – it's not quite clear how the information in part two of the title is much of an advance on what's provided in part one:

Bullying at university: students' experiences of bullying

Titles, nominally speaking

An additional part of my linguistic investigations was to consider the nature of noun phrases (or nominals), as the principle grammatical building blocks of titles – in both colonic and non-colonic structures. A range of patterns were noted here. One common form is what can be characterised as the VERB + *ing* (or gerund) + NOUN structure.

Conceptualising democracy (without colon)

Restructuring reproduction: International and national pressures (with colon)

It's hard not to think that this style hasn't been influenced by a similar titling trend in cinema. Films drawing on this pattern are innumerable, to the point now even of being cliché: *Breaking the Waves; Saving Private Ryan; Leaving Las Vegas; Killing Eve.* The appeal of this type of construction lies in the ambiguity the gerund is sometimes able to create – giving such titles a special arcane quality.

Driving cultures: Cars, young people and cultural research

Another grammar-related category, one that is shown to the right of the colon in the last example, is what can be described as the THREE-BIG-NOUN genre. Other examples in my corpus – of the non-colonic type were:

Individualisation, risk and the body

Migrants, media and the cultural politics of China

There are resonances here again with cinema, with examples in this category evoking memorable film titles like: *Sex, Lies and Videotapes* or L*ock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels.* Alas though, some article titles in this category don't always manage to achieve the same arresting quality as their film counterparts, as in the following less-than-sonorous constructions:

Framing, motivated reasoning, and opinions about emergent technologies

Neoliberalism, massification and teaching transformative politics and international relations

A sub-category of this pattern, one that requires additional creative flair on the part of the title, is what might be called the ALLITERATIVE-THREE-BIG-NOUN genre, as in the following:

Bourdieu, the boom and cashed-up Bogans

Pussy Riot, Putin and the Politics of Embodiment

And for the most thoroughly alliterative creation I could find in the corpus, the gong goes to (count the s's):

Sexting, selfies and self-harm: Young people, social media and the performance of self-development

A final category that stood out were titles that went deliberately for some humorous effect, through the use of wordplay, parody, punning and the like. Thus:

Vocation, vocation: A study of prisoner education for women

Generation X-pendable: The social exclusion of rural and remote young people

Getting it on(line): Sociological perspectives on e-dating

As further evidence of the cinema's intertextual influences, many titles in the 'for-humorous-effect' genre make explicit reference to films or to other popular media.

Apocalypse probably: Agency and environmental risk in the Hunter region

Always look on the bright side of life: Cancer and positive thinking

Home and away: Family matters in the lives of young transnational couples

Dos and don'ts of article titling: Lessons from research

So, these are some of the linguistic possibilities. The question is which type of title should one opt for? Are there any structures that are more likely to attract the attention of readers, and thus act as a compelling lure to one's work? Research studies point to some broad principles. One of these is brevity. In a study of titles in the sciences (Paiva *et al.* 2012), articles with longer titles were found to be downloaded less often and were less cited. The explanation offered in the study is that longer titles – usually taking the form of hyper-extended noun phrases – are more difficult for readers to process. The suggestion is that if there is any momentary confusion about what a title means, an impatient reader will skip over it.

This tendency was noted in my corpus, with hit rates and citations for the following extended constructions being appreciably lower than for shorter titles.

Ambivalent globalisation, amorphous vulnerable nationalism: Considering debates about nation and national positioning within the global from the point of view of young Australians

Professor age and research assistant ratings of passive-avoidant and proactive leadership: the role of age-related work concerns and age stereotypes

While these are both long – coming in at 20 words plus – they do fall short of the following from a biomedical journal. At a mind-stretching 48 words, this title is believed to be the longest to have made it into an academic journal:

The nucleotide sequence of a 3.2 kb segment of mitochondrial maxicircle DNA from Crithidia fasciculata containing the gene for cytochrome oxidase subunit III, the N-terminal part of the apocytochrome b gene and a possible frameshift gene: Further evidence for the use of unusual initiator triplets in trypanosome mitochondria

Another finding is that titles that refer to a specific country or location tend to attract fewer readers – aside from those who have a clear interest in the locale under discussion. This was confirmed in my collection, with the following articles registering a proportionally lower number of hits than generic, non-country-specific equivalents.

Technological innovation of higher education in New Zealand: a wicked problem?

Perth cultural studies: A brief and partial history

Finally, an unexpected finding – and one that is also a little disappointing – is that quirky and amusing titles, of the type discussed above, tend to have less impact. Thus, in a study by Sagi and Yechiam (2008), a selection of articles with titles evaluated as 'amusing' attracted fewer citations than those whose titles were neutrally informative. Several explanations are offered by the study. One is that by going for humour, an author forgoes the opportunity to load their title up with discipline-relevant keywords, crucial nowadays in electronic search and retrieval processes. Another explanation is that attempts at humour can have the effect, sadly, of appearing to trivialise the research and its significance. The no-nonsense title of Sagi and Yechiam's study – Amusing articles in scientific journals and article citation – commendably practices what it preaches.

The best advice?

So, drawing on the above, what is the best advice to pass on to students? Nothing earth-shattering, I'm afraid: keep it short, keep it simple, play it pretty straight ... oh, and think about using a colon, or indeed, think about not using a colon.

All things considered though, we all shouldn't get too carried away with the significance of an article's title – and to be lured into putting more effort into the product's branding than the product itself. In this regard, the best advice a responsible teacher of academic writing can give a young researcher is that irrespective of the title, if the research is sound and the writing good, the work will find its way regardless.

Tim Moore is an Associate Professor in Academic Literacy and Linguistics at Swinburne University. He is also Secretary, Swinburne Branch of NTEU.

References

APA (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Dillon, J. T. (1982). In pursuit of the colon: A century of scholarly progress: 1880–1980. *The Journal of Higher Education, 53*(1), 93-99.

Paiva, C. E., Lima, J. P. D. S. N., & Paiva, B. S. R. (2012). Articles with short titles describing the results are cited more often. *Clinics, 67*(5), 509-513.

Sagi, I., & Yechiam, E. (2008). Amusing titles in scientific journals and article citation. *Journal of Information Science, 34*(5), 680-687.