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The title of a scientific paper is good when it describes the contents of the paper adequately and makes you want to read on

This is a good title

In the advertising business it is often said that an advertisement must capture the reader's attention in less than a second. Does this have any relevance for publication of research? More than you might think, and more than many researchers would like to think.

Research has little value if the results fail to reach others. The treatment of patients and the understanding of biological and social phenomena are influenced by new research only if the results and the analyses are noticed. A research project is not completed until the research article has been published and read, understood and believed by others. Good writing, illustrative graphics and readable tables help the author's message reach his or her readership (1, 2). As importantly, the article's headline – the title – must be formulated to attract readers, just as an advertisement attracts consumers.

So what makes a good title of a scientific article? A veteran writer and editor put it like this: A good title is what the editor of the journal thinks is a good title (3). This statement has a lot going for it. Assessment of the quality of a title is largely a subjective matter, and different journals have different rules and practices with regard to titles. Many journals, such as the *New England Journal of Medicine*, do not accept declarative titles, i.e. titles that reveal the results or conclusion of the study, a practice which – unfortunately – appears to be on the rise within some research disciplines (4). Such titles may leave an impression that the findings have a general validity, a claim which rarely is the case (5). In the *Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association* we do not require the study design to be reflected in the title, unlike many other journals. Neither do we use subtitles, as many other journals do. The online instructions to authors do not provide any advice concerning titles (6).

The best definition of a good title that I have found is the following: A title that with the fewest possible words adequately describes the article's content (7). Short titles, although not too short, are often preferable to longer ones. The title must evoke interest and be sufficiently precise to be identified by a literature search in electronic publication databases. An editor affiliated with the *BMJ*, one of the world's leading medical journals, once listed her requirements for a good title: concise and precise, informative and descriptive, not misleading or unrepresentative, specific – for example type of study and numbers (if large), words appropriate for classification, and interesting, not dull (8).

The title is thus important, and authors ought to devote considerable effort to writing a good title. A common error is to squeeze too much information and too many long words into the title – this applies especially to authors of original articles. Short words should replace long ones wherever possible, and the most important words should preferably figure prominently at the start A good rule of thumb is that the title must be truthful, but not necessarily totally precise.

If the first draft title is too long, it may be a good idea to draw up a prioritised list of the words in the title and then write a new one containing only (or almost only) the words that have the highest priority. Such titles will often be less precise, but better – without being misleading. A title such as *Life expectancy and causes of death according to some results from health check-ups by industrial medical officers: Forty-year follow-up of men in their fifties participating in the Oil Trial 1964–65* (199 characters) can thus be reduced to *Life expectancy and causes of death in men examined at health check-ups in 1964* (79 characters) for an article that deserves to be read (9).

Titles for review articles are often easier to write. Here too, conclusive statements should be avoided. For both types of articles, it is essential that the title communicates credibility and seriousness – fashionable terms, flowery rhetoric and tabloid expressions should therefore be shunned (5, 10). Abbreviations are usually not accepted, including in this journal. Most of our authors express their gratitude to the editors for help in writing a better title.

The criteria for a good title are different for commentaries and editorials than for original and review articles. In commentaries and editorials, the title *must* be short. Long and complex words should be avoided. The title may well be the author's core message in a compressed form. As such, the title may be conclusive, tabloid, imprecise or cryptic (within certain limits) in order to inspire people to keep reading. If you have kept reading until this point, my goal for this editorial has been accomplished.

I wish to thank the authors for their permission to refer to their article (9).

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