

REVIEW ARTICLE SERIES: COMMUNICATION SKILLS

It's All In The Title: Writing a Proper Title to the Paper

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Abstract

The title of a paper gives its first impression and hence should be given enough emphasis. The title of the paper defines the content of the manuscript in few words. An effective title 'sells' the manuscript to the reader. An effective title influences whether or not a reader will read the paper. The title of the paper must be clear, concise, relevant and informative. It is necessary to follow the instructions given by the journal to avoid rejection of the paper. In this paper, the art of developing a good title has been described along with few dos and don'ts.

INTRODUCTION

In a scientific communication, title is the first thing the readers see. Yet, it is the last part of the manuscript to be written and are given least attention by the authors. By rule, title should be written at the end of manuscript writing as it is supposed to give the whole essence of the paper. In this age of information technology, where by the click of a mouse, an ocean of information opens in seconds, a proper and catchy title is the key to attract the reader.^{1,2}

The title defines the content of the manuscript in a few words. It should attract the attention of the reader and should influence the reader to read the manuscript.³ A properly written title should include all the essential words in proper order so that the essence of the manuscript is fully and accurately conveyed to the reader. An excellent title is the key to ensure that the paper will be found. The papers with improper titles may never reach the intended readers and may be lost.

The number of readers reading the title of the paper are always more than those who read the whole paper. The title of the paper is included in the references by authors who cite the paper, which, in turn, will be read by thousands of readers. Indexing services also use the title to categorize the paper.^{4,6}

Be Concise

A title should have fewest possible words that accurately describe the content of the paper. Consider the following title:

"In vitro cytotoxicity and *in vivo* acute toxicity of selected natural polysaccharide hydrogels as pharmaceutical excipients"

In this case, the title is lengthy. A properly written title should be as short as possible, since lengthy titles fail to attract the readers.^{2,4,6} Around 10-12 words are sufficient in a good title. To make a title concise, all the waste words such as "A study of ...", "Investigations of ...", "Observations on ..." should be avoided. The title should not be too lengthy or too short. The length of the title should be just right. Few journals are strict about the number of words or characters in the title of the paper. Titles are found to become better if words are removed rather than added. It always helps to look for the words that can be removed from the title without affecting the clarity.

Be Clear

The title of the paper should be clear and should not confuse the readers. There should not be any ambiguity.³ It is likely that the readers will figure out the true meaning of an unclear title, or may get the true essence after completely reading the paper, but the mindset of the readers will be negatively affected due to unclear title. Also, the readers may quit reading the paper after going through an unclear or confusing title.

Consider the variations of titles given in Table 1. In the first example, among the given titles, the third one is most clear in the information.

Table 1. Varying effectiveness and clarity of titles

Titles with varying clarity / effectiveness
Toxicity of pharmaceutical excipient
<i>In vitro</i> cytotoxicity and <i>in vitro</i> acute toxicity of pharmaceutical excipient
<i>In vitro</i> cytotoxicity and <i>in vivo</i> acute toxicity of selected natural polysaccharide hydrogels as pharmaceutical excipients

Be Informative

Although it is better to write a concise and short title, sometimes shortening of the title may fail to convey the complete essence of the paper to the reader. The example given in Table 2 illustrates the same.

Table 2. Examples of informative titles

Titles with variable information
Analysis of diclofenac sodium by HPLC
Analysis of stability of diclofenac sodium by HPLC
A stability indicating HPLC method for analysis of diclofenac sodium

In the above example, the first title is concise, but does not tell clearly about the topic of the paper. The second one gives little hint about the content of the paper, but the information is incomplete. The third title describes the objective and complete essence of the paper in just 10 words, and hence may be considered as most informative title.

In case if the paper deals with animal, cell line or microbial studies, the species should be clearly mentioned. The binomial nomenclature should be completely written, for example, *Escherichia coli* rather than *E. coli*.

Avoid Abbreviations

Abbreviations should not be used in the title.³⁻⁵ Abbreviations can cause several problems and should hence, should be avoided in title. The abbreviations confuse the readers, unless they are experts in the subject of the paper. Also, the paper may get indexing problems if abbreviations are used in the title. If an abbreviation is universally accepted standard abbreviation, it may be used in title. For example, some abbreviations of nouns such as DNA, RNA, AIDS, etc, are widely used than the actual spelled out words and are acceptable.

Proper Use of Key Words

Key words play an important role in the title and hence, should be selected carefully. Proper selection of key words ensures that the attention of the reader is captured, while glancing the Table of Contents. The key words selected should highlight the content or message of the paper.

Selection of proper key words is important because the indexing services and online search engines use the same for searching the particular paper.² Hence, use of very common words such as tablets, analysis, animals, bacteria, cell line, should be avoided. Also, the words that carry several meanings may be avoided. A person searching for specific cell line such as Vero, will use this as key word and in such case, the paper will be lost in the ocean of online information.

Unnecessary phrases such as “Development and validation of ...”, “Formulation and Evaluation of...”, “Pharmacognostic, Phytochemical and Pharmacological Investigations of...” Should be avoided. Because, the online search engines such as Google show typically the first 5-6 words of the title. If important key words are not included in the beginning of the title, the paper may go unnoticed.

Target Journal and Readers

Before finalizing the title, it is better to through the format of the target journal, as many journals specify the formatting, word limits and style. Many authors submit papers with titles that do not meet the requirements of the journal, leading to rejection of the paper. Some journals have word limitation and some journals specify number of characters in the title. It is necessary to follow the journal's instructions strictly.^{2,6}

The syntax of the title (order in which the words and terms are used) influences readers' interest. Hence, emphasis should be given on the primary subject matter. In the example given below, the effect of syntax on the meaning of the title is illustrated. Consider the following variants:

Treatment of lung cancer using microspheres
Microspheres for therapy of lung cancer

The second variant conveys the exact meaning and emphasis that the author intends.

CONCLUSION

The title of a paper gives its 'first impression' and hence should be given enough emphasis. The selected words must be clear, concise, relevant and informative. It is necessary to follow the instructions given by the journal to avoid rejection of the paper.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

It is hereby declared that this paper does not have any conflict of interest.

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