

How can I understand my title?

STEP

1

3

'The longer the title, the less important the job.'

George McGovern

A Reflection

Look at the following titles (1–4 below) taken from pieces of academic writing.

- Identify the general purpose of a title.
 - Decide which of these titles work best.
1. Evaluate the impact of different mother tongues on the acquisition of English as a second language at British universities in the early 21st century, paying particular attention to students from the Far East.
 2. The coursebook: future continuous or past?
 3. Skills all round.
 4. Why are essay titles important?

B Contextualization

Read the following essay titles.

- In each case, decide what the question is specifically asking you to do. In what ways would your approach be similar or different?

Title	What is it asking you to do?
1. Why are essay titles important?	
2. Assess the extent to which a good title can contribute to successful academic writing, focusing particularly on the humanities.	
3. Outline the different types of essay title which exist.	
4. 'Essay titles have hidden depths' (Andrew Northedge). Discuss.	
5. Academic essay titles: critically important or significantly overrated?	
6. Summarize the key aspects of a good essay title.	
7. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of setting your own essay title.	
8. Justify the importance of essay titles.	

c Analysis

What is the purpose of an essay title?

The purpose of a title in a piece of academic writing is threefold:

- to indicate the general direction of your essay
- to focus attention on a specific topic
- to get the reader interested in your essay

It is likely that most of the time (especially at the beginning of your course), you will be answering questions which have been set by your teachers. Therefore, you will need to understand *exactly* what they are asking you to do. Later in your course (especially if you have to write a dissertation), you will write your own title. At that time, it is important that you follow the same principles outlined below.

Titles should be written in a concise style, using powerful, meaningful words. They should contain enough information so that the reader can predict what the essay is going to focus on (unlike Title 3 in part A), but not so much that they are confused before they start (e.g., Title 1). Titles 2 and 4 are both written in appropriate language, though clearly for very different audiences – the former for a general audience, the latter for an expert audience.

Whatever the title you are given, the most important thing an essay can do is answer the question. No matter how good your answer, if the information is not relevant you will not score highly. Therefore, a detailed understanding of the title is crucial.

A note on subheadings

A subheading is a kind of 'mini-title' which you may find in the main body of a piece of academic writing. Opinion is divided as to whether you should use subheadings or not. They can be useful to inform the reader what the focus of a particular section may be. However, others would argue that this is what a topic sentence should do. Some subjects – particularly the sciences – use subheadings more frequently than others.

What different models of essay titles are there?

Very few essay titles are completely straightforward. Generally, they contain two or more components, each of which is critical. These components can be categorized as follows:

Topic – what is the question about?

Focus – what is the specific aspect you are examining?

Instruction – how should you look at the question?

Limitations – are there any restrictions to your investigations?

For example, in the context of some of the essay titles found in part B:

No.	Topic	Focus	Instruction	Limitation
2	A good title	How do they contribute to successful academic writing?	Assess	the humanities
3	Different types of essay title	N/A	Outline	N/A
5	Academic essay titles	Are they important or not important?	Discuss (by implication)	N/A

Titles in descriptive essays

Summarize the key aspects of a good essay title.

Certain courses may favour this kind of question, which asks you to demonstrate that you have understood a particular issue. There is an assumption that the information contained in the question is true. You are not expected to challenge this, but show what you know about the topic. This type of question may also be found in examinations, where you are being tested on your knowledge of the subject matter rather than on your ability to research it and develop an argument. Common instruction verbs of this type are found in the box below.

account for define describe explain outline summarize assess

Alternative descriptive type: *wh*-questions

Why are essay titles important?

Questions using the standard question words are common in day-to-day and academic English. 'What', 'how' and 'why' are common; 'Where' and 'when' are less common.

Titles in evaluative essays

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of setting your own essay title.

Evaluative essays look at two sides of a particular issue. As an author you must decide what your view is – do you agree with one side or the other, or do you have a balanced view? As well as the verbs in the box below, other phrases you might find in evaluative essays include: 'pros and cons' and 'strengths and weaknesses'.

compare and contrast evaluate discuss

Titles and formatting

Capitalization: often just the first word of the title, but some capitalize all the important words (i.e., the content words).

Formatting: you can embolden, italicize and underline the title if you wish, but do only one of these.

Full stops: titles should not have a full stop but should have a question mark (if appropriate).

Justification: should be centred.

Quotation marks: for quoted material only.

Alternative evaluative type: statement and colon

Academic essay titles: critically important or significantly overrated?

The information to the left of the colon indicates the topic, while the information to the right asks a specific question. This type of question is often the basis for presentations/lectures as well.

Titles in argumentative essays

Justify the importance of essay titles.

In an argumentative essay, you are generally expected to take a position, then defend this position. The verbs used are important for identifying exactly what you are being asked to do.

justify argue assess state

Alternative argumentative type: quotation and discuss

'Essay titles have hidden depths' (Andrew Northedge). Discuss.

A well-chosen quotation, often from a well-known scholar in your field, is presented. You are then asked to consider what this quotation means and whether you agree or disagree with it. The instruction word 'discuss' is commonly used. Note: you may need to reflect on the impact and meaning beyond the quotation – not just the literal words which are there.

D Activation

You have been asked to write an essay on 'The dominance of the English language in the 21st century'. Write a title according to each of the templates on page 57.

Template	Example
1. Descriptive (verb)	<i>Account for the dominance of the English language in the 21st century.</i>
2. Descriptive (wh~question)	
3. Evaluative (verb)	
4. Evaluative (statement and colon)	
5. Argumentative (verb)	
6. Argumentative (quotation and discuss)	

E Personalization

■ Read through previous essays which you have written and ask yourself:

- did I answer the question in the most appropriate way?
- what should I have included/not included in my response?
- was the focus of my essay correct?

■ If you are creating your own essay title:

- write out a number of examples and choose the one you prefer. It may take several drafts to get it exactly right.
- check with a friend that the title is clear and makes sense.

F Extension

■ Step 6 – a good understanding of a book or article's title can help you in **selecting your source material**.

■ UNIT J – **proofreading**. One of the key criteria (many would argue *the* most important) for a good academic essay is that you answer the question. Strategies for checking whether you have done this are presented in this section.

■ Appendix 3, Step 13 lists several genuine academic titles within four different academic fields.