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How to Win Papers and Influence Professors: Creating Positive First Impressions through Effective Titles

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How to Win Papers and Influence Professors: Creating Positive First Impressions through Effective Titles

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By the time you finish reading this first sentence, you've already started forming a first impression about this article. In fact, you really started forming it after reading the title. With the words, "How to Win Papers and Influence Professors," a spoof on the popular Dale Carnegie book, "How to Win Friends & Influence People," I already began establishing a tone and setting up expectations for you, the reader. Whether you realized it or not, you had a reaction to that title. This shouldn't come as a great shock. It's human nature to form quick first impressions; we've all been told early in our lives that first impressions are especially important because they tend to last a long time.

Research backs this up. There's a mountain of data about humans and first impressions—how long does it take to form one, what impacts our first impressions, what role do they play in relationships or interviews or buying habits, etc. For instance, according to one study, it takes only 100 milliseconds of seeing a new face before we start forming opinions about that person, and another study demonstrated that subsequent opinions tended to be biased toward that first impression, meaning that it takes a lot of contrary data to get us to believe something that's different from our initial impression (Willis and Todorov; Rabin and Schrag).

An astute student will recognize that the initial impression a paper gives to the reader will have a lasting effect, and when that reader is the teacher or professor, the lasting effect can influence the grade. However, many students fail to recognize that the very first opportunity they have to impact the reader and make a good first impression is through the title. Far too often students treat the title of their papers as placeholders separate from the actual essay, much like the name, course number, or date that they might place in the upper corner. But the title can and should serve a rhetorical purpose; not only can it grab the [audience's](#) attention and indicate how the paper should be read, but it also can influence the student as they write. For example, a humorous title frees the student from a certain amount of scholarly expectation, encouraging a more casual writing style. Not only does that influence a particular writing style, but it can often alleviate much of the pressure that leads to writer's block. Additionally, a title that indicates a rebuttal essay steers the writer toward a [back-and-forth argumentative structure between the source](#) the student is responding to and their own opinion. A common problem with student rebuttals is they often forget about grounding the

argument in the source material, but a good title will help keep the article they are responding to front and center.

Below, I briefly explain the rhetorical role that a title can have in creating both the reader and writer (for a more detailed explanation of this rhetorical role and how genre fits in, see "[The Mysterious Incident of the Missing Title: Why Did Titular Concern Vanish from Composition Studies?](#)") before offering some tips for creating titles for different kinds of assignments.

CRAFTING FIRST IMPRESSIONS

If you are walking down the street at night and spot a shadowy figure heading your way, you're likely to change directions or start looking for a safe place to hide. Alternatively, if you are introduced to someone new at a party—a well-groomed, stylish, attractive individual—you'll likely smile or blush or stand up straighter or turn around and walk away. Right or wrong, a first impression does more than just cause us to form an opinion; it causes us to *react* based on expectations, context and past experiences.

The first impression in a paper can cause the reader to do the same thing. It sets up expectations and indicates an "appropriate" way to react to (i.e., read) the text. For example, take the title of this article. It accomplishes several things. First, it plants this article in the [genre](#) of "How To" papers. Consequently, a reader will expect it to offer steps or advice on creating effective titles, and an audience reads a how-to article differently than an argumentative essay. With a How To, readers will attempt to apply the information to their own lives while with an argumentative essay they will weigh the validity of the claims and look for holes in the logic. Therefore, successful communicators can affect how the audience reads the paper based in part on how they title the essay.

Second, if the reader understands the reference to Carnegie's famous book, it establishes a playful tone, one that draws the reader in as a co-conspirator of the subtle joke. Humans react to situations based on context. For instance, when you go see a stand-up comic, you're expecting to laugh, so you tend to laugh more readily at the jokes. If the same joke is made in a different context, perhaps a professional setting, you would probably be less likely to laugh as quickly as you would when at a comedy club. With your papers, creating the proper [tone](#) is a good way to get your audience to react in a particular way to the content within the paper. Since this article is written for a student audience, I didn't want a title that would intimidate students or suggest that this article would be dry or overly "academic." If, however, I wanted my audience to focus on the theoretical argument and be more likely to accept my claims, I might have titled it something like, "Titular Dynamics and the Phenomenology of Genre." Imagine how you would have reacted differently to that title than the one I eventually chose. What would your first impression have been?

Finally, the title can help you establish credibility ([ethos](#)). With the title of this article, I'm drawing on Carnegie's ethos and my knowledge of his book to help create my own

credibility. However, even if your title doesn't make any particular literary or cultural reference, a clever or interesting title communicates positively to your professor. It says, "I've taken the time to think carefully about my title and come up with something that's clever and insightful," and that's a first impression that will stick with the teacher throughout the reading and color his/her evaluation of the paper.

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE TITLES

Essays:

1. Consider the type of essay– There's a big difference in titles depending on what type of paper you're writing.
 1. *Analytical/Persuasive/Informational*– Focus both on an attention-grabbing title (see Tip #2) and one that indicates in some way the broad topic (e.g., "They Might Be 'Super,' but *The Avengers* are also Sexist.")
 2. *Rebuttal*– It should indicate that you're responding to another argument (e.g., "How Could Fallon be So Wrong?")
 3. *Process/Proposal*– It should indicate that you're addressing actions to be taken. Beginning with a verb often works well (e.g., "Changing Your Oil without Making a Mess," "Fixing the Parking Problem on Campus.").
2. Grab the audience's attention– There are many possible ways to grab an audience's attention with a title. Using humor, a clever turn of phrase, or a literary/cultural reference often works well. You also could generate curiosity by making a shocking claim or juxtaposing words that don't ordinarily go together (e.g., "Has My Cat Become an Al Qaeda Operative?").
3. Match your title with the conversation you're entering– When discussing social media and its effects on people, I have my students read three articles: "Social Networking Makes Twits of Us All" by Maria Quinlan, "Smarter than You Think" by Clive Thompson, and "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" by Nicholas Carr. These three are entering the same conversation (in fact, Carr and Thompson reference each other), and you can tell from the similarities in the titles that they're hoping to achieve a parallel effect on the audience. If students wanted to respond to these articles, it's best to model the title after the others to indicate that they are aware of the conversation (e.g., "Tweets Make Me Cleverer.").

Research Projects:

1. Keep it scholarly.– When it comes to research projects such as analytical reports, quantitative/qualitative research, senior/masters' thesis, or dissertations, the goal is less about grabbing attention and more about establishing your project within a scholarly community. Titles should give the audience a sense of what the project is all about. For instance, if you're doing a feasibility analysis, the word "feasible" or "feasibility" should be in the title.
2. Parallel the research question. – A great strategy is to repeat an abbreviated version of your research question as the title (e.g., "Which UAV Platform Best Handles Locating

and Monitoring Feral Hogs in South Texas,” or “Electrifying NASCAR: Analysis of Potential Hybrid Technology in Auto Racing.”).

3. Consider longer, more descriptive titles– It’s ok to have a long title for this kind of report, and they often incorporate primary and secondary titles with a colon separating the two. This structure often allows you to start with an attention grabber and then follow it up with a subtitle that describes the project in more detail. However, keep in mind that different formatting systems, such as APA, can dictate maximum lengths for titles.