Does Your Article Title Matter?

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You probably spend a fair amount of time searching for relevant journal articles to read and may be seeking to find out what the latest academic research in your area has uncovered. Alternatively, you may be reading in order to help you complete your latest article for academic publishing. Either way, you will likely uncover significantly more papers than you have time to read. This is not surprising as an estimated two million articles will be published in a year.

One economist decided to examine how much influence the title of a journal article has on how often it is cited. After all, the title is often your first interaction with a paper. What factors might affect whether or not you choose to move from reading the title to citing that particular paper? The data being used to answer this question was obtained from the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework over a four year period. More than 155,500 articles were submitted from 36 disciplines, which means that the trends extracted should pertain to research as a whole, as opposed to just one or a handful of disciplines.

Shorter Titles are More Effective

The title of a paper serves to attract attention. In order to do this well, the title must be both distinctive and informative. A longer title has the opportunity to supply more information but if the title is too long then the reader may lose interest. The key is then to strike a balance between giving your potential reader enough information to help him or her decide if your article is worth reading without becoming overwhelming or boring.

Article title length tends to increase as more co-authors are added to the paper. This may reflect as a result of trying to arrive at a compromise with which all authors are comfortable. This trend is particularly evident in health and science research, but is also seen in the social sciences. The number of authors does not seem to impact the length of article titles for papers published in the arts and humanities. The number of times an article is cited tends to decline as the length of the article title increases. In one example, doubling the title length reduces the number of citations by 15.9 in the clinical medicine field.

The longer title lengths in the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework data set tended to be medical or scientific in nature. The longest titles tended to be in public

health with a mean of 117.1 characters in the title, followed closely by clinical medicine with 113 characters. The social sciences tended to have shorter titles, as is the case with economics whose average article title length was 66 characters. Publications in the field of philosophy had the shortest titles on average with only 51.1 characters.

Two Part Titles

Some authors use titles with colons in them that essentially breaks the title into two parts. It is possible to have one part of the title be witty or a play on a well-known phrase. This is typically done to pique the interest of the reader. The section of the title after the colon can be used to supply information. In this way, these two part titles can both spark the interest of readers and supply information to help them decide if they should read the entire journal article. While this is good, it also tends to make the title longer.

Based on the analysis of the data set, titles with colons tend to be more highly cited. However, the use of colon tends to vary widely by discipline. As an example, colons tend to be used in about 50% of psychology papers but only in about 7% of computer science journal articles. Colons are also more likely to be found in journal article titles when they are the work of a single author. This may be because, when there are many co-authors, a consensus is required for the use of a whimsical title including a colon which may not be the preference of the majority of authors of the paper leading to it being removed.

The results of the analysis of the impact of colons on the number of citations is not straightforward. In papers published in health and science the inclusion of colons seems to negatively affect the number of citations. However, publications in computing, mathematics and aeronautical engineering seem to have significantly more citations when their titles included colons.

Questions in a Title

Unlike a succinct article title, or a two part title that manages to be interesting and informative, posing questions in the article title does not seem to help with citations. The use of a question in the article title may make it longer, although it can also arouse interest. Papers published in law and economics favor the use of question marks but they are almost completely absent from math and engineering papers. These differences may be due to the culture associated with each field. Since authors of journal articles also read in their field, it is possible that they are being influenced by the styles they tend to see published. From the analysis of the publication data, posing questions in the article title is only helpful when writing economics and philosophy papers. In fact, using a question mark significantly reduce citations. Posing a question in the title of a clinical medicine article for example is likely to decrease citations by 19.

What Does This Mean?

The statistical analysis of the data from the United Kingdom Research Excellence Framework is useful because it analyses the impact of titles on the number of citations for many disciplines. It suggests that, in order to get cited more, your title should be interesting, succinct and avoid posing a question. Of course, the quality of your research must also be good. Once the process of conducting meaningful research has been completed, you may want to spend some time making sure your title encourages your audience to keep reading.

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