

Title Race

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In the ever-expanding universe of scientific publication, journals and other media are constantly vying for clicks and eyeballs in the competition for reader attention. While a variety of tools and strategies can be used to lure the reader in, one of the first and most important is the title. It's often what someone first sees, and possibly it's the only thing they see.

That begs the question then: What kind of titles get those prized clicks and downloads?

Try this title on for size: "2013 Update of the 2008 American College of Cardiology Recommendations for the Use of Disease Modifying Angiotensin Receptor Blockers in the Treatment of Post Cardiac Myocardial Infarction and the Effects of Biological Markers Such as TERM and GAS with the Congruent Treatment of Atorvastatin and Carvedilol at Nighttime but Not in the Morning." (A whopping 344 characters including spaces.)

Conversely, what does this title tell you? "DNA."

Clearly there needs to be a balance between the clickbait terseness of a single word and a title of excruciating granular detail.

Wanting to determine what the ideal title length might be, I looked around for some research on the topic, which turned out to be a bit sparse.

A study¹ published in 2015 analyzed the 20,000 most cited scientific papers per year from Scopus between 2007 and 2013 (N = 140,000). The authors concluded that papers with shorter titles receive greater numbers of citations. When citations were adjusted for the journal in which the paper was published, evidence for the relationship between title length and citations was reduced. The authors also noted that journals that publish papers with shorter titles tend to receive more citations per paper.

A commentary² on the 2015 paper noted: "My working theory is that perhaps shorter paper titles are easier to read and easier to understand," thus attracting wider audiences and increasing the likelihood of a citation, according to lead

author Adrian Letchford, a data scientist at the University of Warwick in Coventry, UK.

An older study³ analyzed 6 PLOS journals in 2007 (2172 articles). The authors found that articles with interrogative titles were downloaded more but cited less, longer titles were downloaded less than shorter titles, and downloads and citations were correlated. The authors also concluded: "Most titles appear to be attractive but not informative, or informative but not attractive."

One scientific editor noted⁴ that "the traditional recommendation from manuals on scientific writing and from academic publishers is that 10-12 words is about right" and "an efficient title is one that maximizes the ratio of the information communicated to its length."

However, not all research pointed to brevity as the best strategy. In a study of 22 arbitrarily chosen English-language journals, 9031 articles published in 2005 were retrieved from the citation database Scopus. The 2008 journal impact factors of these 22 journals were also retrieved. The study authors analyzed the titles and citations, concluding that longer titles were associated with higher citation rates. This association was more pronounced for journals with high impact factors.⁵

Looking for more guidance on the topic, I turned to the instructions for authors of some leading medical journals. The results were not uniform, although the trend, as in the research I found, was for brevity:

- *New England Journal of Medicine*: A ballpark character count of 75–80 characters and spaces
- *Annals of Internal Medicine*: Title should be concise (15 words or fewer)
- *Journal of Clinical Oncology*: A succinct title, no longer than 175 characters (including spaces)
- *Circulation Research*: No more than 80 characters in length, including spaces; consider including a key phrase within the first 65 characters

At JAMA and the JAMA Network, we settled on recommending 100 characters (with spaces) for research and long reviews, and 60 characters for shorter pieces.⁶

Ultimately, for the title to do its job of inviting readers in, it's important for it to be concise, specific, and informative and contain the key points of the work. This will also help the title be discoverable by search engines and understandable to those scanning reference lists.

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