

# Writing Effective Titles

PHYSICAL REVIEW LETTERS

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The title is a key element of any form of scientific communication.

The quality and effectiveness of your title is critical in attracting a reader’s attention and in getting appropriate “hits” in electronic databases.

Here, we focus on how to write a title for maximum effect.

## **You'll need effective titles for all sorts of things, not just journal articles**

**Internal reports to bosses**

**Technical reports to customers**

**Proposals to customers and funding agencies**

**Talks**

**Websites and electronic media**

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Learning to write effective titles is important for more people than academic physicists who write journal articles.

## How do you decide which article to read, or which talk to go to?

The screenshot shows a web browser with a search engine results page. The left pane displays a list of document titles with checkboxes and links to view abstracts, full text, or related documents. The right pane shows the abstracts for the selected documents, including titles, authors, and brief descriptions of the research.

**You usually make a snap judgment based on the title...**

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Scientists scan down a list of titles in the table of contents in a journal, or the latest postings to one of the electronic archives, or to the results of an electronic lit search; you have  $\approx 1$  s to capture their attention.

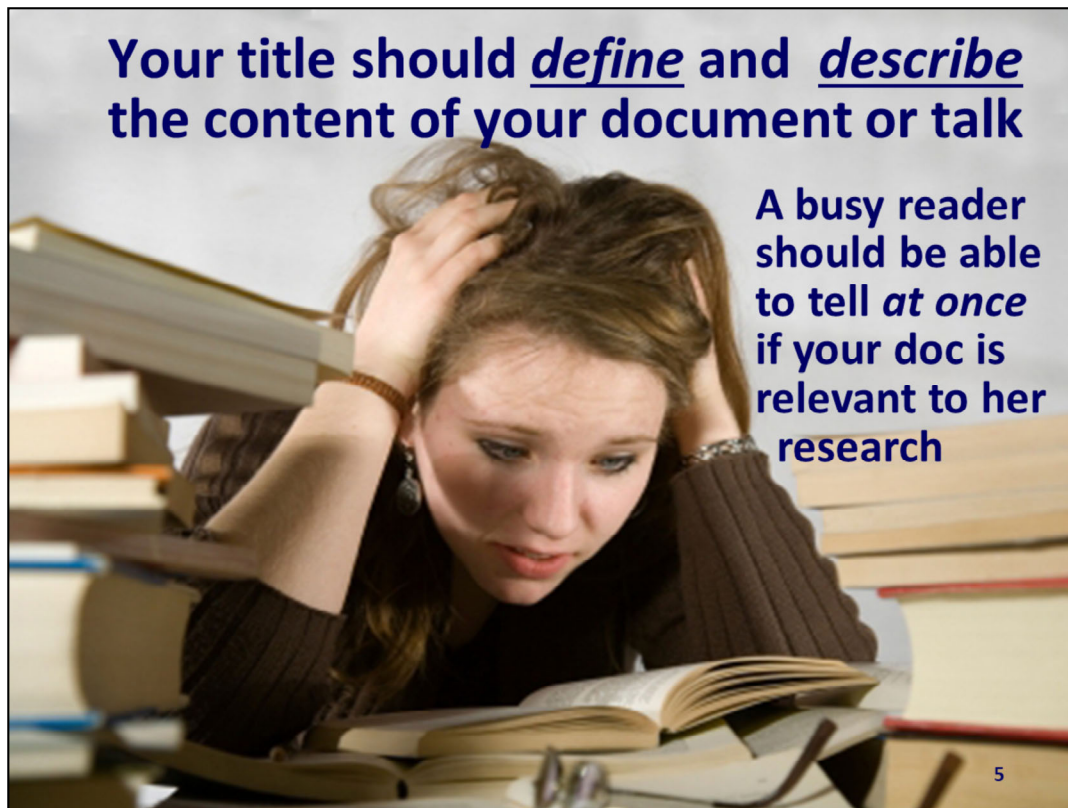
Try an experiment. Go to <http://arXiv.org/list/physics/recent>, and see how much time you spend looking at the titles of each article as you scan down the list before you decide whether a paper looks interesting and worth investigating further.



Busy scientists employ three criteria when deciding if they will invest their time in reading a paper or attending a talk:

1. The information conveyed in the title.
2. The reputation of the author—if you're a young scientist without a reputation yet, see #1 and #3.
3. The abstract (more about abstracts next week...)

The title must accurately and succinctly convey the content of the paper and allow a busy reader to immediately decide if the paper is applicable to his or her work.



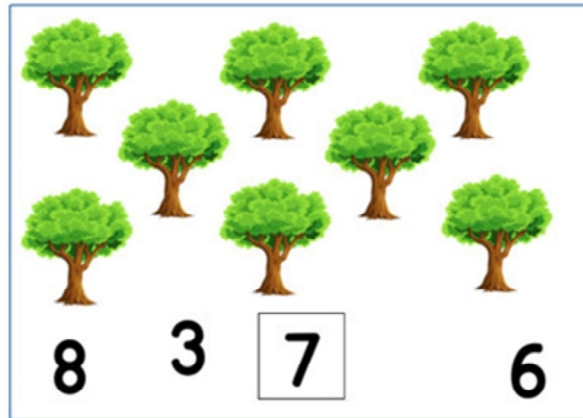
**Your title should define and describe the content of your document or talk**

**A busy reader should be able to tell *at once* if your doc is relevant to her research**

Write down key words that define and describe your paper. These are the words that belong in your title.

A title cannot capture every nuance of every detail of the paper, but it should accurately and specifically represent “the big picture.”

## Useless title: “How to count trees?”\*



\*I am not making this up—*Int J Mod Phys C*16, 1527–1534 (2005).

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This title is too vague to help a reader. Is the paper about elementary arithmetic, forestry, environmental science, computer science? Only the author knows.



The title must accurately and succinctly convey the content of the paper.

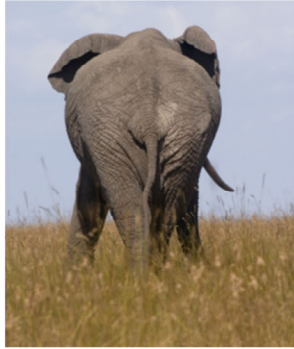
Play fair; don't "trick" people into reading your paper by a misleading title.

Wastes their time.

Ruins your reputation (see point #2 on Slide 4).

## **Make it interesting, but not *too interesting...***

**“Looking from the East at an Elephant Trotting  
West: Direct CP Violation in  $B^0$  Decays”**



**I am not making this up either—<http://arxiv.org/abs/hep-ph/0203157>**

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While a good title helps a reader visualize the likely content of the paper, be careful.

## Keep titles as short as possible



**<12 words;  
<10 is even better\***

**\*That's about the number of words a reader can take in and process as he or she is scanning down a list**

**Your prospective reader is not going to remember more than that many words anyway**

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Limit titles to <12 words; <10 is even better. That's about the span of words the human eye can recognize and process as it is scanning down a list.

Important papers don't have to have long, "impressive" titles:

"Theory of superconductivity," J. Bardeen, L. Cooper, and J.R. Schrieffer, *Phys. Rev.* **108**, 1175 (1957). Three words; cited 8 970 times (Scopus, 01/18/2025).

*Principles of Magnetic Resonance*, Charles P. Slichter, 3rd. ed. (New York, Springer, 1990). Four words; cited 120111 times (Google Scholar, 01/18/2025).

"Ground state of the electron gas by a stochastic method," D.M. Ceperley and B.J. Alder, *Phys. Rev. Lett.* **45**, 566 (1980). Ten words; cited 13 366 times (Scopus, 01/18/2025)

"Dynamics of the dissipative two-state system," A.J. Leggett et al., *Rev. Mod. Phys.* **59**, 1 (1987). Seven words; cited 4 438 times (Scopus, 01/18/2025)

"Spin echoes," E.L. Hahn, *Phys. Rev.* **80**, 580 (1950). Two words; cited 4 251 times (Scopus, 01/18/2025)

## Help your poor reader; put keywords first



Original Title: Application of the time-dependent local density approximation to conjugated molecules (11 words)

**My edit:** *Time-dependent local density approximation for conjugated molecules* (8 words)

Original Title: A novel approach to estimate the stability of one-dimensional quantum inverse scattering (13 words)

**My edit:** *New stability estimate for 1D quantum inverse scattering* (8 words)

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Have pity on your busy, overwhelmed readers. Make it easy for them to understand the subject of your paper immediately.

**Front load** the key words to attract a busy reader's attention.

Examples:

Original Title #1: 11 words, introductory fluff

Improvement #1: 8 words, keywords front loaded

Original Title #2: 13 words, introductory fluff, "a novel approach" will be discussed next...

Improvement #2: 8 words, keywords first

## No introductory fluff

~~On the nature of the~~ “hostless” short GRBs

~~Capabilities of~~ parallel analyses of the structure of materials by field ion and scanning probe microscopy

~~Unveiling the~~ impurity band induced ferromagnetism in the magnetic semiconductor (Ga,Mn)As



**“Frontload” key words; get them on the left side of the list to grab a reader’s attention**

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Good advice from AIP: “Words that do not carry information, such as “The...,” “A...,” “On...,” “Investigation of...,” “Study of...” should be omitted from titles.”

The *Phys. Rev.* journals also proscribe

**“More about...”, “...revisited”, and dangling participles (“...using...”)**

## No introductory fluff

~~On the nature of the~~ “hostless” short GRBs  
**“Hostless” short gamma ray bursts**

~~Capabilities of~~ parallel analyses of the  
 structure of materials by field ion and  
 scanning probe microscopy (14 words)  
**Field ion vs scanning probe microscopy  
 for materials characterization** (9 words)

~~Unveiling the~~ impurity band induced  
 ferromagnetism in the magnetic  
 semiconductor (Ga,Mn)As (11 words)  
**Impurity-band-induced ferromagnetism  
 in (Ga,Mn)As** (6 words)



Write out acronyms in all titles\*; not every potential reader may know what a GRB is.

*\*HOWEVER*, some acronyms are so widely recognized in physics that they need not be defined; see  
[https://courses.physics.illinois.edu/PHYS496/sp2025/Resources/AIP\\_Style\\_4thed.pdf](https://courses.physics.illinois.edu/PHYS496/sp2025/Resources/AIP_Style_4thed.pdf),  
 Appendix D, p. 44.

*\*Hey*, it's English. Exceptions are the norm.

## Do not use qualitative words



**“novel” “interesting” “important”**

**(that’s up to the reader to decide)**

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Do not use words in the title that make qualitative statements about the work being reported:

“precise,” “accurate”

“important,” “influential”

“innovative,” “unique,” “unprecedented,” “ground-breaking,” “brilliant”

“new”--maybe

**Quantitative** statements are okay, e.g., “Measurement of the negative muon anomalous magnetic moment to 0.7 ppm,” G.W. Bennett et al., *Phys. Rev. Lett.* **92**, 161802 (2004).

**Do not use the names of people\*,  
places\*, coined words, equations**



**\*unless it's standard nomenclature,  
e.g., Lorentz force, quantum Hall effect,  
de Broglie wavelength**

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The *Phys. Rev.* journals also proscribe the name of the accelerator or the type of detector used in paper titles (but the particle physicists seem to violate this rule constantly and with impunity—*cme*).

“people’s names”—unless they are a common adjective. “Fourier transform,” “Green’s function,” “Auger spectroscopy,” “Brillouin limit” are fine. “Amazing New Results from the Kwiat Laboratory at the University of Illinois” is not.

“coined words”—if the word isn’t used outside your own research group, don’t put it in the title; same thing goes for narrow, technical jargon. Exception: “Mottness,” P. Phillips, *Ann. Phys.* **321**, 1634-1650 (2006). **BUT**—he’d written about 10 papers on this topic before publishing “Mottness,” and the editor fought him on it anyway.

“equations”—don’t put anything in a title that cannot be rendered in straight ASCII text.



## No unfamiliar acronyms

**Original Title: One-dimensional SPH method**

**My edit: Smoothed-particle hydrodynamics 1D method  
for gas dynamics applications**

**Original Title: Application of CVS filtering to mixing in  
two-dimensional homogeneous turbulence**

**My edit: Coherent-vortex-simulation filtering for 2D  
homogeneous turbulence**

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“unfamiliar acronyms”—the AIP Style Guide provides a list of acronyms that are so common they don’t have to be defined at first use; anything else, leave out of the title or define it.

Examples of allowed acronyms: BCS, bcc, cw, EPR, ESR, fcc, ir, NMR, QCD, QED, rf, RNA, uv

**Original Title: One-dimensional SPH method**

**IMPROVED Title: *Smoothed-particle hydrodynamics 1D method for gas dynamics applications***

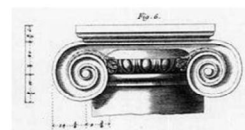
NOTE: Although this title is longer than the original, it avoids the unfamiliar acronym and provides specific information that may be needed by the reader; the original title is probably too generic to be useful.

**Original Title: Application of CVS filtering to mixing in two-dimensional homogeneous turbulence**

**IMPROVED Title\*: *Coherent-vortex-simulation filtering for 2D homogeneous turbulence***

\*This example may or may not be an “improved” title; it depends on what the author deems is most important and would be of most interest to readers.

## How do I decide what words to capitalize in a title?\*



Some journals use “title” capitalization and some use “sentence” capitalization

*Physical Review Letters*

“Complexity of Small Silicon Self-Interstitial Defects”

*Physical Review B*

“Electronic excitations on silver surfaces”

*Science*

“Evidence for 2D Ising superconductivity in gated  $\text{MoS}_2$ ”

Always capitalize the names of proper nouns, even when using sentence capitalization

“Classification of gapless  $\mathbb{Z}_2$  spin liquids in 3D Kitaev models”

**\*Just look it up...**

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There’s no consistency to the use of capitalization in paper titles—not even among journals published by the same organization. Just look it up. If you’re sure you know, look it up anyway; you will learn humility.

*Acta Crystallographica*

Crystallography of a new metastable phase in Zr-N alloy

*Nuclear Physics B*

Five-loop  $\epsilon$  expansion for  $O(n) \times O(m)$  spin models

*Physical Review Letters*

Extracting Information about the Initial State from Black Hole Radiation

*Physical Review B*

Emergence of integer quantum Hall effect from chaos

*Science*

Activation of Cu(111) surface by decomposition into nanoclusters driven by C) adsorption

In “title” capitalization, the first word and all words except prepositions and articles are capitalized.

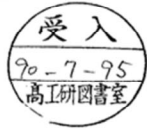
In “sentence” capitalization, only the first word, proper nouns, and some acronyms are capitalized.

More capitalization rules for science writing:

Celia Elliott’s Field Guide to Capitalization and Acronyms in Physics

<https://people.physics.illinois.edu/Celia/Caps&Acronyms.pdf>

## Hinchliffe's rule for titles:



IS HINCHLIFFE'S RULE TRUE? ·

Boris Peon

**We'll talk about  
abstracts next week**

Abstract

Hinchliffe has asserted that whenever the title of a paper is a question with a yes/no answer, the answer is always no. This paper demonstrates that Hinchliffe's assertion is false, but only if it is true.

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**To recap:**

**Keep it short**

**Frontload key words**

**Provide specific information**

**Make it interesting** (but not too interesting)



*cmelliot@illinois.edu*  
*<http://physics.illinois.edu/people/Celia/>*