

Titles for Talks

When you give your presentation, the title you have chosen will be on your first slide. This is what the audience will focus on: it is the first indication they will be given about the topic you have chosen. As the speaker, therefore, you want your title to create a strong impact. The same is true for written work such as a research paper. In both circumstances, a successful title should fulfil three objectives: help the audience focus on the topic, indicate content and arouse the audience's curiosity by capturing their attention. To this regard, bear in mind that overly long titles are less memorable. The APA Style Guide, in fact, advises no more than twelve words.

Certain decisions you take will be influenced by your knowledge of the audience. A title such as *Veganism: Food or Fad?* which albeit is short and also uses alliteration which helps to make talks memorable, relies on your audience knowing the low-frequency word *fad*, meaning something which is popular for a very short time but then becomes unfashionable. Native English speakers will have no difficulty with such a word, but if all or the majority of your audience are not native English speakers they may fail to understand your title. This will have an effect on their ability to process the information they then receive as your talk progresses. In other words, a considerate speaker should be sensitive towards the audience and reflect on the extent to which a key word in the title will be understood, and likewise whether plays on words are appropriate. This is also true for acronyms or abbreviations. They should only be used if you are confident that your audience will understand them, otherwise they should be written out in full.

One useful approach is to brainstorm key words from all the information you have gathered. Examine the words you intend to use in your introduction and conclusion. These parts of your talk should have a strong impact on the audience and to do so should contain key lexical items that will be appropriate in the title. Select words that will help the audience focus and also predict content. Key words are also what search engines pick up if someone is researching for information on a specific topic.

Titles, both for talks and papers, reflect three basic styles. What are known as declarative titles do as the adjective suggests: they declare or state the main findings or conclusions in a piece of work.

e.g. *A Six-month Vegan Diet is Shown to Combat High Blood Pressure*

This informative style of title is common in written research articles, where often the main findings or conclusions are stated but is less common in a talk.

A second option is to use a direct question. These, however, are rarely appropriate as they can lack focus, like the example below, and also make the audience feel under pressure to find an answer.

e.g. *Should We all be Vegans?*

The third possibility involves a more descriptive style and is common in both academic journals and presentations.

e.g. *Vegan Diets: Effects on Health, Society and the Environment*

This title is much more effective compared to the previous examples as the subject is immediately obvious to the audience and the speaker has also clarified which aspects will be explored in the talk itself. In other words, the audience will expect an analysis of the three themes of health, society and the environment in relation to veganism.

In conclusion, for a talk to be memorable you need to come across as a confident and knowledgeable speaker but do not underestimate the importance of your title. It holds the core of your talk and is key to facilitating the audience's understanding of your message and channelling their expectations.

Formatting titles

Titles can be formatted in many ways. For your presentation, you are advised to use both upper and lower case letters. The first word always begins with a capital letter as do subsequent key words. If the title includes a colon, the word following it should also have an upper case letter (see the third example above). Titles should not be in bold or underlined and contracted forms should be avoided. It is unlikely that your title will fit on one line so ensure that you split it up at a logical point to facilitate understanding.