

Good Writing Practice

SECTION EDITORS



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Syntactic alternatives and distractions

Title to a journal article

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Introduction

The title is the most circulated section of a journal article. Its syntactic pattern ranges from the traditional descriptive type:

1. noun + post-noun modifiers as prepositional phrases,
2. pre-noun modifiers + noun,
3. coordinated nouns; to the assertive type,
4. question,
5. suspended title, and
6. declarative sentence.

(1) Descriptive: Post-noun Modifiers

A noun phrase followed by one or more prepositional phrases

Example

Intergenerational linkages for timing of family life course events (n=9)

Notes

Although traditional, this format impedes immediate comprehension because of the excessive constituent number in the form of consecutive prepositional phrases. Descriptive titles are often preceded by superfluous descriptive words such as: “studies on”, “observations on”, “the effect on”, etc.

(2) Descriptive: Pre-noun Modifiers

A noun preceded by one or more adjectival nouns

Example

Family life course intergenerational linkage timing (n=6)

Notes

This traditional format also impedes immediate comprehension because of excessive constituents in the form of stacked pre-nouns, the opposite to “Descriptive Post-Noun Modifiers”.

(3) Descriptive: Coordinated nouns

Example

Family life course intergenerational linkage and timing (n=7)

Notes

In this example format, the inexplicit relation between coordinated nouns is distracting.

(4) Semi-assertive: Question

Example

How are family life course intergenerational linkages coordinated with timing? (n=10)

Notes

This is a thought-provoking and interesting style that could be useful for a poster or presentation at a meeting. However, it is wordy, which is a distraction, and is non-traditional as a title for a journal article.

(5) Assertive: Suspended Title: Title: Subtitle. General topic: specific accomplishment

Example

Family life course intergenerational linkages; Coordinated with timing (n=8)

Notes

In this non-traditional example, key content words as to topic are followed by the assertive message. A colon replaces an interrelation marker such as a preposition. However, the colon between the title and subtitle could lack clarity.

(6) Assertive: Declarative Sentence

Example

Family life course intergenerational linkages can be coordinated with timing (n=10)

Notes

This assertive style is immediately comprehensible. It is like a mini-abstract but is wordy, and the style can be overly assertive for a controversial topic.

Conclusions

The presence of possible distractions in examples (1) to (5) and the lack of assertiveness in examples (1) to (4) may be the reason that there is a current tendency to use the declarative sentence (6), despite its wordiness.

