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Heading for success: or how not to title your paper

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Section 3: The Value of Bibliometrics

Heading for success:
or how not to title your paper

Sarah Huggett

The title of a paper acts as a gateway to its content. It's the first thing potential readers of the paper see, before deciding to move on to the abstract or full text. As academic authors want to maximize the readership of their papers it is unsurprising that they usually take a lot of care in choosing an appropriate title. But what makes a title draw in citations?

Is longer better?

Bibliometric analyses can be used to illuminate the influence of titles on citations. Jamali and Nikzad, for example, found differences between the citation rates of articles with different types of titles. In particular, they found that articles with a question mark or colon in their title tend to be cited less¹. The authors noted that "no significant correlation was found between title length and citations", a result conflicting with another study by Habibzadeh and Yadollahie finding that "longer titles seem to be associated with higher citation rates"².

The authors explain

Research Trends contacted authors from highly cited papers in its corpus for their take on the influence of titles on citations. For some authors, such as Professor Deepak Srivastava — who published a paper in *Cell* with a title that included three commas³ — the main emphasis when choosing a title is semantics: "We chose a title that would reflect the major findings of the paper and the conclusion we would like the field to derive from the contribution. I don't pay too much attention to the title's effect on citations." Interestingly, different criteria are used for title assignment depending on the type of paper, as explained by Professor Ben Blencowe: "For research articles, I try to use titles that are concise while conveying the most interesting and surprising new results from the study. For review titles, I generally start with the main overall subject followed by a colon and then one or more subtopics that best describe the contents of the review. My 2006 *Cell* review on alternative splicing⁴ followed this format. It is not clear to me that this format increases citation impact

- I would hope that the overall information content, timeliness and quality of writing in a review are directly related to citation impact!
- but using punctuation in this way helps to convey at a glance what the review is about."

Research Trends investigates

Faced with inconsistent evidence, **Research Trends** decided to conduct its own case study of scholarly papers published in *Cell* between 2006 and 2010, and their citations within the same window. Overall, there was no direct correlation between title length (measured in number of characters) and total citations. However, comparing the citation rates of articles of different lengths revealed that papers with titles between 31 and 40 characters were cited the most (see [Figure 1](#)). There were also differences in average number of citations per paper depending on the punctuation used in the titles: for instance, the few papers with question marks in their titles were clearly cited less, but titles containing a comma or colon were cited more (see [Figure 2](#)). There were no papers with a semicolon in their title, and only one (uncited) paper with an exclamation mark in its title. It is interesting to note that the ten most cited papers in **Research Trends'** case study did not contain any punctuation at all in their titles.



Professor Deepak Srivastava



Professor Ben Blencowe

Are you having a laugh?

Given that straightforwardly descriptive paper titles run the risk of being dull, some authors are tempted to spice them up with a touch of humour, which may be a pun, a play on words, or an amusing metaphor. This, however, is a risky strategy. An analysis⁵ of papers published in two psychology journals, carried out by Sagi and Yechiam, found that “articles with highly amusing titles [...] received fewer citations”, suggesting that academic authors should leave being funny to comedians.

In sum, the citation analysis of papers according to title characteristics is better at telling authors what to avoid than what to include. Our results, combined with others, suggest that a high-impact paper should be neither too short nor too long (somewhere between 30 and 40 characters appears to be the sweet spot for papers published in Cell). It may also be advisable to avoid question marks and exclamation marks (though colons and commas do not seem to have a negative impact on subsequent citation). And even when you think you have a clever joke to work in to a title, it probably won't help you gain citations. Finally, while a catchy title can help get readers to look at your paper, it's not going to turn a bad paper into a good one.

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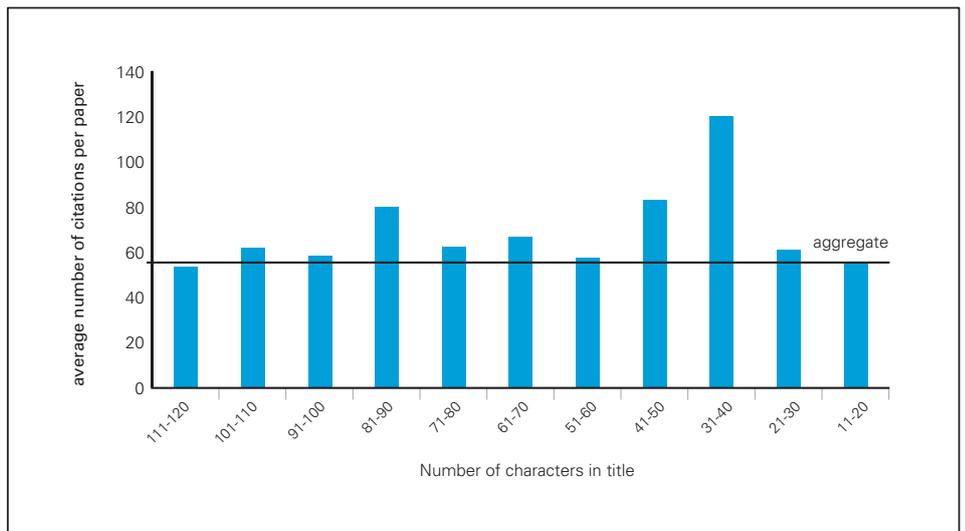


Figure 1 - Average number of citations per paper by title length for papers published in Cell 2006–2010, and their citations within the same window. Data labels show number of papers. Source: Scopus.

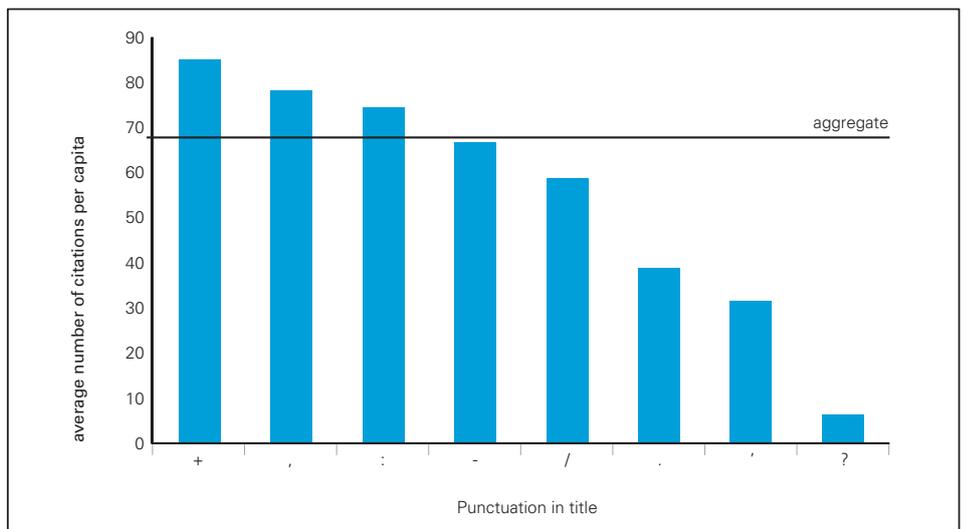


Figure 2 - Average number of citations per paper by punctuation mark for papers published in Cell 2006-2010, and their citations within the same window. Data labels show number of papers. Source: Scopus.