



Writing Titles

by Amelia Keller

Titles are an often under utilized tool in student writing. But think about it...if introductions are important because they are the first part of the paper your reader will read, then titles are similarly important because they precede even the introduction.

Think about the times when, based primarily on an interesting title, you have decided to read a book, to skim an article, or to follow an online link. That is the power of titles. They let readers know *what* they will be reading before they have read a word of the actual text. Would you read an article if you had no idea what it was going to be about? Probably not.

What titles do... At minimum, titles should reflect paper content (i.e. what the paper's general topic will be, like an analysis on *The Scarlet Letter* or exploration of global warming). A strong title will prepare the reader for the paper, giving the reader some idea of what the paper's argument or slant will be (i.e. What will you be saying about *The Scarlet Letter*? What position are you taking on global warming?). At best, a title will also be creative and attention grabbing.

Titles should...

- 1) Give your reader a clear idea of what they are about to read.
- 2) Catch your reader's attention.

The first requirement is essential. The second is helpful, but not as important. It is always good to get a reader interested and invested in the essay early on. But that can't happen unless they know what the paper will be about. Hence clarity comes before creativity. But creativity does help. After all, many books are in fact judged, and sold, based on their covers. The title can give the reader a favorable impression of your paper right from the start. For published works, a title can encourage readers to look at your text rather than another one on the same topic.

EXAMPLES

Here are some samples of possible titles for papers that are using Judith Butler's essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" (which argues that gender is determined not by our biological sex but by the way we perform our idea of male or female on a daily basis), to consider the Disney animated film *Mulan* (a movie about the legendary young woman who dresses as a man in order to take her ailing father's place in the Chinese imperial army). In each example, the title starts out very weak and then get progressively stronger.

Example #1:

Mulan

- This title is not informative. We know that the paper is about the legendary figure, Mulan, but we do not even know what version of her story is being considered. After all, stories of her exploits have been told and retold for centuries.

Disney's *Mulan*

- Now we at least know that the paper is about the Disney version of Mulan’s story. The content is becoming clearer, but it is still pretty vague.

Gender in Disney’s *Mulan*

- Now the title is getting specific. We know the primary text that is being analyzed, and we also know what topic/issue the paper will focus on.

Performative Gender in Disney’s *Mulan*

- This is the strongest title yet. We know the text, the topic, and also have an idea of the perspective/slant that the writer will be bringing to the exploration of gender. Readers familiar with Butler will know that “performative gender” is her terminology. Even if they are not familiar with Butler, the phrase still gives an idea of how gender will be explored (as a performance, not simply as a biological fact).

Example #2:

Butler & *Mulan*

- When possible, it helps to give an idea of the main texts you will be working with in your title. This title, though vague, at least lets the reader know that the paper is looking at Butler and *Mulan* (though “Judith Butler and Disney’s *Mulan*” would be more specific if you are only going to list the paper’s key sources in your title).

Rereading *Mulan*’s Gender Politics as Butler’s Gender Performance

- This title is the most specific title so far, including the ones in the last example. It tells your reader that the paper is looking not just at gender broadly, but specifically at gender politics in *Mulan*. “Rereading” says you will be reconsidering these politics, interpreting them in a new and interesting way. The final three words say that you are rereading these politics through this specific lens, using Butler to understand something about the movie’s depiction of gender that many people might not initially see.

What Would Judith Butler Do?: Rereading *Mulan*’s Gender Politics as Gender Performance

- This title combines the informative nature of the last title with something a bit more catchy. It takes advantage of the colon technique where the title comes in two parts. The first part is usually the catchy part. Or it sometimes just gives the reader the broad topic (like the texts being considered). What follows the colon gives the reader a more specific idea of what the paper is going to be about.

A note on Length...

But wait! Shouldn’t titles be short and snazzy?

Sometimes, yes. In the case of creative works, like novels and TV shows, a short title is a benefit. But in academic papers, and most non-fiction texts, the title must also be informative. Clarifying content is almost always first priority. Brevity and creativity are secondary.

A rule of thumb for length: Don’t let your title grow too long though. With the exception of some scientific papers that need extremely descriptive titles, relative brevity is usually best. Try to keep your title from going onto a second line in your word processing document. The exception is if you are using the colon method. If a colon title gets to be more than a line long, break the line after the colon. What comes before the colon should usually be shorter than what follows the colon, and ideally neither should go onto a third line of the document.



Ideas for Titles

by Amelia Keller

Here are some sample techniques for titles for papers that are using Judith Butler's essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" (which argues that gender is determined not by our biological sex but by the way we perform our idea of male or female on a daily basis), to consider the Disney film *Mulan* (a movie about the legendary young woman who dresses as a man in order to take her ailing father's place in the Chinese imperial army).

1) Use a colon...

Colon titles, though unpopular with some, are an old standby of academic writing, and with good reason. They let you have the best of both worlds in your title: something short and catchy to start, followed by something more descriptive, and usually longer, that previews the content of your paper (see first example below). A variation on the colon title is to have the first half simply give the basic information, like the texts you will be analyzing or the general topic of your paper, and then have the part after the colon give the reader an idea of how you are approaching that general focus (see second example below).

- *Mulan's Two Performances: Questioning Naturalized Gender in Disney Movies*
- *Judith Butler and Disney's *Mulan*: Depictions of Performative Gender in Popular Culture*

2) Ask a question...

This simple move prepares readers for your paper by engaging them in the central question that guides your analysis/exploration/argument. To be more specific/informative, follow your question with a colon and a brief description of how you will go about exploring/considering the question.

- *What is *Mulan's* Gender?*
- *Did Disney Make a Man Out of *Mulan*?*
- *Who is Ping?: Questioning Naturalized Gender in *Mulan**
- *"When Will My Reflection Show?": Looking for Identity in *Mulan**

(Explanations: "I'll make a man out of you" is a line from the *Mulan* song "Be a Man." Ping is *Mulan's* male alter ego. "When will My Reflection Show?" is one of the most famous songs in the movie.)

3) Use an Interesting Image...

Usually something unique or startling from the text, the image should be something concrete that your reader can visualize. The two examples below describe specific scenes from the movie *Mulan* (one where she cuts her hair and puts on her father's armor; and one where, dressed in feminine kimono for the matchmaker ceremony, she wipes the heavy, white make-up from only one half of her face.)

- *Donning Her Father's Armor: Performing Gender Differently in *Mulan**
- *The Girl with Two Faces: Gender Performance in Disney's *Mulan**

4) Begin with On...

This move is a classic favorite of writers (i.e. Stephen King's book about writing, *On Writing*; or Aristotle's philosophical essay "On the Soul"). It simply tells the writer what your paper will be on, i.e. what it will be about.

- *On Gender Performance in Disney's *Mulan**
- *On Rewriting One's Gender in *Mulan**

5) *Begin with an -ing verb...*

An “-ing” verb gives your reader an idea of the action of your analysis or augment. It either tells the reader what you will be doing in your essay (i.e. you will be exploring, questioning, or rethinking something, etc.), or it gives an idea of what the text is doing in your analysis of it (Especially useful if you are suggesting the text is doing something unexpected. See the first two examples below.)

- Performing Gender in *Disney’s Mulan*
- Repeating Gendered History in *Disney’s Mulan*
- Exploring What it Means to “Be a Man” Today through *Disney’s Mulan*
(Explanation: “Be a Man” is a well-known song from the movie.)

6) *Use Alliteration...*

Poetic tricks like using alliteration (words that start with the same letter/sound) or internal rhymes (words that end with the same sound) can make an otherwise boring title a bit more catchy and attention grabbing.

- Matching the Maiden with the Man Inside: *Disney’s Mulan* and her Two Identities
- Conservative Constructions: The Traditional Gender of *Disney’s Mulan*
(Explanation: Butler’s essay talks a lot about the constructed nature of gender and identity.)

7) *Use Word Play...*

Try using a pun in your title. For example, take a line or title from a work and twist it to say something about what your paper is about.

- You’ll Bring Dishonor to Us All: Punishing Gender Transgression in *Mulan*
- When Will Their Reflections Show?: Pop Culture Messages to Transgendered Children
(Explanations: “You’ll Bring Honor to Us All” is a song in *Mulan* about how a woman should act. Butler talks about how performing gender wrong often leads to punishment. As noted previously, “When Will My Reflection Show” is a famous song from the movie.)

8) *Just Have Fun with It...*

Titles are one of the places in your paper where you can be the most creative. So if you like being creative, and especially if you often feel frustrated by the lack creative flourishes in much academic writing, titles might just be your place to shine and work out some of that pent up creative energy.

- Judith Butler and *Mulan* Walk into a Hooters: Expectations for Men Past and Present
- Watch Out Ladies, Judith Butler’ll “Make Man a Man Out of You”
(Explanations: The first one is a shocking image because it takes two feminist figures and places them in a very un-feminist setting, and it is also a pun on the old “...walk into a bar...” jokes. As mentioned previously “I’ll make a man out of you” is a line from the song “Be a man” in the movie *Mulan*. This second title also suggests an opposing feminist philosophy that takes exception to Butler’s insistence that there is no natural category of “woman.”)

Source: Ideas two through five were adapted from Richard Leahy's “Twenty Titles for the Writer” exercise.