Tip Sheet: Writing Good Titles

Titles are important to the success of an essay. An essay’s title is the first thing readers see, and therefore provides both an initial impression of an essay’s topic and its attitude, or point of view. In other words, an essay’s title gives readers a feel for what is to come. Unfortunately, student writers too often don’t give titles the attention they deserve and therefore miss a golden opportunity to connect immediately with readers.

For example, note the following title, for an essay about the death penalty:

The Death Penalty

This is a poor title. In fact, it’s not really a title—it’s really just the topic of a paper. It therefore fails as a title because it provides no clue as to what the writer’s direction will be. This kind of title—one that merely states a paper’s topic—is a common problem. It adds nothing to the essay.

Now, look at the following revised title:

The Death Penalty: An Immoral Alternative

This title is far more effective than the first, because it not only directs readers to the topic of the essay but also allows them to go inside the writer’s head. In fact, this model follows a specific formula, one often used in formal essays:

Topic (The Death Penalty) + : (colon) + comment (An Immoral Alternative)

This is a logical formula to follow, one that works for any number of essays you might find yourself writing as a college student. And using this model can really help you, especially when you’re having a difficult time coming up with an effective title for your essay.

Of course, not all titles must use this formula. If you give your title some time and thought, you can invent a title that suits your needs, and use any number of approaches. Note the following examples:

Rethinking the Death Penalty
The Death Penalty as a Moral Imperative
These titles, like the one above it, fulfill the basic requirements of a title. They introduce the reader to the topic, they allow the reader a look at the writer’s thinking, and they set a tone for the essay. It’s safe to say that each of these titles leads into an essay that will take a serious, somber look at this thing we casually call “the death penalty.”

Here are a few additional tips for writing good titles, tips that might prevent you from fretting too much:

- Don’t try to write a final title until after you’ve written your essay.
- Reread your entire essay before you attempt to write your title.
- Write your title with your audience in mind, focusing on what you want them to think or understand after reading only the title.
- Keep your title relatively short.