

# CHAPTER 13

## CHOOSE A BRILLIANT TITLE

Imagine a lovely couple expecting their first baby. They prepare the nursery, buying a crib and rocking chair, stenciling zoo animals along the walls. They have a well-stocked diaper caddy, a slew of onesies, and a plush teddy bear as a finishing touch. They're ready! And then that special day arrives when baby makes his grand entrance into the world. He's beautiful, and the parents are quite proud. The nurse enters the room with a birth certificate form and pen and asks the name of the baby. The couple looks at each other.

"Name?" says the mother. "We hadn't thought about a name!"

"No big deal," says the father. "Let's just call him . . . uh . . . Boy 1."

That story is far-fetched. Why? Because we *know* that names are important. Parents start thinking about names from the day they learn they're expecting. Somehow we intuit that the name we choose will have a great impact on a child's life, will somehow capture the personality of the tiny person and send him or her into the world with exactly the right title.

And yet something of a disconnect happens when students try to name their thesis presentations. They have researched deeply and labored over the final draft. They have relentlessly practiced their delivery and prepared a strong presentation, complete with a compelling call to action. But when it comes time to choose a title, they say, "No big deal. Let's just call it . . . [blah]." Unfortunately, it is far too common for students to choose a boring title that offers no hint as to what makes their particular project distinct and interesting.

Don't let this be you! Your title is important; it is the name of this infant idea that you have brought to maturity. In fact, chances are that you will have a few people who listen to your talk and remember nothing *except* your title. So make it a good one.

The title is like a miniature *exordium*; its job is two-fold: introduce the issue, and arrest attention. First, the title should give a pretty good idea of what the talk is about—no surprises. You'd

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*"On the average, five times as many people read the headline as read the body copy. When you have written your headline, you have spent eighty cents out of your dollar."*

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*—David Ogilvy*

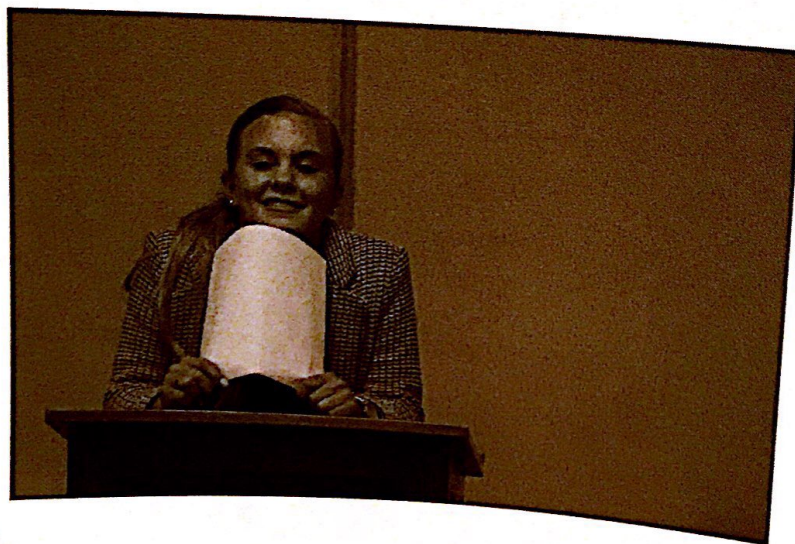
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hate for someone to miss your talk about mock combat, which you had titled “Better Uses of a Field,” because they thought from your title you’d be discussing farming methods, not arranged performance fighting.

Secondly, the title should pique a person’s interest, making someone say, “Wow! I really want to hear that!” Again, the title “The Purpose of Mock Combat” only fulfills half of the job of the title; it reveals the subject matter, but it fails to catch the eye of anyone but the most ardent war buff. A better title would be “Looking for a Fight? The Purpose of Mock Combat.”

Now it’s time to draft a few titles of your own. This next exercise will help you generate a bunch of titles, but you’ll need to follow the directions carefully. Set a timer for two or two and a half minutes, read the prompt and the example (for the topic of automation), and spend the remaining time coming up with a similar title for your own topic. Once again, cover up all of the other prompts with a sheet of paper so that you can concentrate on each one single-mindedly. Write a title for *every single title prompt*; no skipping is allowed.





**WORKSHOP:**

*Eighteen Title Prompts<sup>1</sup>*

1. Write a title that is a question. (Begin it with *Who, What, Why, When, Where, or How.*)

*Ex: "How Does Automation Hijack the Good Life?"*

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2. Write a title that begins with "How to . . ."

*Ex: "How to Survive the Next Industrial Revolution"*

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3. Start your title with "Why . . ." but do not write it as a question.

*Ex: "Why Your Job Isn't Safe, and Why You Should Care"*

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4. What is in your thesis that is concrete—something you can see, hear, feel, taste, or smell? Use that concrete image in your title.

*Ex: "Tireless Machines, Jobless Workers"*

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5. Begin a title with an *-ing* verb.

*Ex: "Working Away Our Humanity"*

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6. What is your thesis about? Sum it up in a one-word title.

*Ex: "Automation"*

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7. Write a two-word title.

*Ex: "Automation Revolution"*

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8. Write a three-word title.

*Ex: "Automation and Leisure"*

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9. Write a four-word title.

*Ex: "The End of Work"*

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1. This list (especially numbers 1–13) is based upon an exercise from Richard Leahy's "Twenty Titles for the Writer," *College Composition and Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1992): 516–519, [www.jstor.org/stable/358644](http://www.jstor.org/stable/358644). Used by permission.



10. Think of songs or idioms that relate to your thesis. List as many as you can here. (This is one of the most important prompts! Keep thinking of more over the next few days.)

Ex: "Working for peanuts"  
"Many hands make light work"  
"All in a day's work"  
"Working 9 to 5"  
"Keep up the good work"  
"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy"  
"Domo Arigato, Mr. Roboto"  
"On autopilot"

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11. Think of movies and books that relate to your thesis topic. List as many as you can here. (Again, playing off of a movie or book title can be one of your best options. Ask friends and family for more ideas.)

Ex: "Brave New World"  
"Great Expectations"  
"Office Space"

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12. Make a pun out of a title from the previous two, or change one word to play off it.  
Ex: "All Play and No Work Makes Jack a Dull Boy"; "Life on Autopilot"

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13. Create a "combo title": Join two titles you've already written with a colon.  
Ex: "Automation Revolution: Why Your Job Isn't Safe, and Why You Should Care"

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14. Write a title that exaggerates the claim of your thesis. (This is just to generate ideas; you probably shouldn't use this one!)

Ex: "Dystopia or Utopia: The Coming Automation Revolution;"; "The Automation Apocalypse"

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15. Write a title with a number in it.

Ex: *“Four Ways That Automation Will Change the World Forever”*; *“Three Strategies for Surviving Automation”*

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16. Write a title with an interesting adjective in it.

Ex: *“The Messianic Promises of Automation”*

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17. Write a title that uses a “zing!” word in it: *You, Reasons, Lessons, Ideas, Secrets, Tricks, Answers.*

Ex: *“The Secret to Surviving Automation”*; *“Reasons You Won’t Want a Robot to Replace You”*; *“Lessons from a Robot”*

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18. Ask three friends for a title for your thesis.

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Now write out some of the best ones below, combining and rearranging as needed.

Ex: *“Keep Up the Good Work: The Future of Automation and You”*

*“Automation Revolution: Why Your Job Isn’t Safe, and Why You Should Care”*

*“Life on Autopilot: How Automation Hijacks the Good Life”*

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## SAMPLE TITLES

Now that you've generated some ideas, let's look at some sample titles from other real students. Notice that the format is generally "*Attention Getter: Issue or Explanation.*" That's a handy formula because it covers the two jobs of the title: (1) arrest attention, and (2) introduce the topic.

"It Pays to Play: Focusing on Play-Based Learning in Preschools"<sup>2</sup>

"The Final Frontier: Exploring the Deep Impact of Mining in Space"

"You Snooze, You Don't Lose: The Importance for High Schools to Delay Their Start Times"

"Are You Siri-ous? A Critique of Our Dependence on Technology"

"A River Runs Through It: Why the Snake River Dams Should Be Removed"

"Tailor Your Jeans, Not Your Genes: Why the U.S. Should Maintain the Moratorium on Editing Human Embryos"

"Robbin' the Hood: How Gentrification Affects Our Neighborhoods"

"I Beg to Differ: The Assault on Free Speech and Academic Integrity"

"Sun's Out, Guns Out: Why Campus Carry Is Not Dangerous for Texas Universities and Colleges"

"Livin' La Vida Broka: Free Streaming's Negative Financial and Artistic Effects on the Music Industry"

"Rage Against the Machine: The Direction and Use of Domestic Robots"

"A Hard Pill to Swallow: A Case for the Implementation of Holistic Medicine in Our Medical Schools to Better Manage Chronic Pain"

"I Spy with My Little Eye: How Intelligence Is Key to Winning the War on Terrorism"

"Don't Try This at Home: The Advantages of Hospital Birth over Home Birth"

"Stayin' Alive, Stayin' Alive: An Argument against Physician-Assisted Suicide in the U.S."

"Mice and Men: The Necessity of Medicinal Animal Testing"

"All for One and One for All: Why America Should Enact a Single-Payer System of Healthcare"



### ASSIGNMENT:

*Choose a Title*

What titles are you considering for your thesis? Write your favorite one here:

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<sup>2</sup>. Most of these presentation titles are from thesis presentations at Regents School of Austin in 2016 and 2017. Used by permission.