Effective Titles

The most overlooked element of academic writing is that it should engage the reader's interest (especially in the term paper context)—you must go beyond simply transmitting information, an analysis, or an argument to your academic audience—you must achieve your writing objective in an interesting way.

How will your essay on Hamlet stand out from 40 other essays on Shakespeare's play? How will your essay on Canada's role in the Second World War stand out from the essays written by your classmates?

How do you grab the reader's attention early?

Ask yourself what the first point of contact is with the reader? The answer is your title.

In order for your title to be effective, it should satisfy one or more of the following:

1. Is your title original?
2. Is your title informative?
3. Is your title engaging?
4. Does your title reveal your attitude towards the subject?

Try to go beyond simply rewording or over-simplifying the topic question when trying to be engaging and original.

Some suggestions:

1. Excerpt a particularly memorable word, phrase, or sentence from your text.
2. Employ a controversial or thought-provoking question.
3. Use hyperbole (exaggeration) or understatement to grab the reader's attention.
4. Use a famous or infamous quote.
Sample Assignment 1:

Several fields of science have been embroiled in controversy in the 20th Century (e.g. organ transplants, DNA blueprinting, genetic engineering, nuclear energy etc.). Focusing on one area of scientific research, argue whether or not scientists should continue exploring this field into the 21st Century. Assume that you are writing this essay for Maclean's magazine.

Student Sample #1: "The Hazards of Nuclear Power"

Student Sample #2: "Human Cloning"

Student Sample #3: "The Impact of Genetic Screening on Human Rights and the Balance of Gender Equality on Our Planet"

Student Sample #4: "Organ Transplants are something we should not do"

Student Sample #5: "Double Trouble: How Cloning Multiplies our Problems"

Student Sample #6: "Nuclear Winter: Can Spring, Summer, and Fall be far behind?"

Student Sample #7: "The Dangerous Implications of Genetic Screening"

Sample Assignment 2:

In recent years, there has been controversy surrounding the advertisement of products which are deemed to promote unhealthy or even reckless behaviour, especially in young adults. Imagine that you are a marketing manager at Molson Canada, a major beer manufacturing company, and that your summer advertising campaign is just around the corner. Write a letter to the editorial page of the Vancouver Sun newspaper in which you defend the right to advertise your product.

Student Sample #1: "Beer Advertising is Good"

Student Sample #2: "Attacking Beer ads: Don't shoot the messenger!"

Student Sample #3: "Free Speech"

References: http://www.writingcentre.ubc.ca/workshop/tools/titles.htm
Sample Assignment 1

Instructor's Analysis for Student Sample 1:

- The title is informative in terms of the general subject, but it's still rather generalized because "Nuclear Power" has far-reaching applications. Will the paper deal with the hazards of nuclear power as an energy source? Will it deal with the dangers of nuclear weaponry? Will it deal with the political hazards of a nation declaring "nuclear power" status as India and Pakistan did in 1998.

Instructor's Analysis for Student Sample 2:

- The title is simply too vague. "Human Cloning" is a general subject. What particular aspect of the topic will the paper address? What is the writer's attitude toward her/his subject? What position will the writer take on the subject?

Instructor's Analysis for Student Sample 3:

- The title is too broad and unfocused: it seems to outline two different papers. What is the connection between genetic screening, human rights, and gender equality? Again, what is the writer's position on the topic?

Instructor's Analysis for Student Sample 4:

- The title informs the reader about the general subject (organ transplants) and provides the writer's position (we shouldn't perform transplants); however, the title is too straightforward. It doesn't engage the reader's interest. It is rather mechanical.

Instructor's Analysis for Student Sample 5:

- This title is very engaging. Its contains a humorous play on words that makes the audience think about the topic. It is informative about the general subject and it reveals the writer's attitude toward her/his subject.

Instructor's Analysis for Student Sample 6:

- This title is engaging because it subtly reveals the writer's topic (the nuclear fallout after an atomic war) while simultaneously revealing her/his attitude toward the subject (that the effects will be far-reaching—more than the understated term "Nuclear Winter" implies).

Instructor's Analysis for Student Sample 7:

- This title is informative and it clearly implies the writer's position. The title could, however, be a bit more specific in terms of indicating the nature of the implications.
Sample Assignment 2

Instructor's Analysis for Student Sample 1:

- The title is too general and simplistic. It's also rather ambiguous. It could mean that the advertising of beer is a good thing for society. However, it could also mean that advertising campaigns for beer are of high quality.

Instructor's Analysis for Student Sample 2:

- The title is informative and engaging. The writer reveals his/her attitude toward the subject without becoming confrontational or overly defensive (achieved through the humour of "Don't Shoot the Messenger").

Instructor's Analysis for Student Sample 3:

- The title is overly vague. While free speech is a relevant issue, the title doesn't provide any context. It also doesn't imply a position.