

workshop #1 Choosing a title

Introduction

A good title can't hide a bad book, but a bad title may hide a good one.

The title of your book is the first thing anyone will read. If you get it wrong, it may be the last. But if you get it right, people will open your book with a sense of curiosity and anticipation.

A book's title is a piece of advertising copy. It's a slogan, that should tell everyone what kind of story is on offer. The title has three main functions:

- to act as a hook to grab the attention of jaded agents and editors wading through mountains of manuscripts
- as a hook, it will keep on working: from agent to editor to marketing department to bookseller and – finally – to a reader browsing in your local Waterstone's
- it's free publicity – every time it's mentioned in conversation, in your biog, it's working to promote your book

When should you choose your title? It's useful to have a working title before you start: it will make you feel grounded and give you an answer when people ask what you're working on. But, try not to get too wedded to your working title, because writers are notoriously bad at choosing titles for their own books – and there's a significant chance that yours will be changed by your publisher before the book goes to press.

We writers are bad at choosing titles because we know too much about our books. We know all their subplots; we know what they mean. As a result we tend towards titles that are abstract, grandiose and obscure.

Fortunately we have editors and marketing people to prevent our worst excesses. Here are a few famous books whose titles were changed by perspicacious publishers before they got into print:

- *All The President's Men* was originally entitled *At This Point In Time*
- *Valley Of The Dolls* was originally entitled *They Don't Build Statues To Businessmen*

- *Pride and Prejudice* was originally entitled *First Impressions*
- *Roots* was originally entitled *Before This Anger*

EXERCISE 1

Can you tell a book from its cover?

Below are the titles of six novels plucked at random from the many books sent for review at Mslexia. Look at each one in turn and try to guess what genre it is (thriller, chick lit, saga, etc.) and what the story is about. Give yourself a minute for each title and jot down your answers.

1. *All Summer*
2. *Eva's Cousin*
3. *Trespassing*
4. *The Pursuit Of Alice Thrift*
5. *Getting Mother's Body*
6. *Spoiler*

Did you notice how, in very few words, some of these titles gave an immediate impression of both genre and content? And how difficult some of the others were to pin down? Now compare your guesses to the blurbs on the books' covers at the end of this workshop. How did you do?

I hope you can already see how some titles succeed – or fail.

Of course, by the time a book reaches the bookshop, it will have a cover as well as a title to let the reader know what's inside. But your poor manuscript will be naked when it lands on the agent's desk, with only its title to set it apart from the rest.

What makes a good title?

The purpose of a title is to be intriguing and memorable. When people see it, they must want to pick the book up. If they hear about it from a friend, on the radio, in a review, it needs to stick in their minds until they log onto Amazon.

It also needs to tell people something about the contents of the book. Ideally it will convey something about the subject-matter, the genre and the style of the book. To do all these things, your title needs to be specific, concrete and unusual.

Specific

Vague, general titles are less memorable, less intriguing – and will not stand out from the heaps of other manuscripts in an agent’s in-tray. You need to choose something that applies to your book and no-one else’s. The more specific you can be, the better.

A publisher once conducted two experiments. She wrote two ads for the same book. In one, the book was entitled *The Art of Courtship*, and generated 17,500 orders; in the other, it was entitled *The Art of Kissing*. This more specific title generate 60,500 orders – more than three times as many. In the second experiment, a book called *Introduction to Einstein* generated 15,000 orders. The same book, entitled *Einstein’s Relativity Explained*, generated 42,000 orders. True, these were both non-fiction books, but the argument holds for fiction too.

Concrete

Psychology experiments show that concrete words are much more memorable than abstract words. This is because concrete words encourage us to form an image. In fact courses aimed at improving memory usually work by encouraging people to create images. (Concrete words are usually more specific too.)

Unusual

This is where the real skill comes in. You need to choose a title that both gives the reader a fair inkling of what the book is about, but which also makes it seem different to every other book in that genre.

To illustrate what I mean, compare these two titles by Julia Darling:

- *The Taxi Driver’s Daughter* (specific, concrete)
- *Crocodile Soup* (specific, concrete and unusual)

Which is more intriguing and memorable? Which sold the most copies? The second one, of course.

Later we’ll do an exercise to help you create a specific, concrete and unusual title for your book. Before that, though, we’re going to apply these principles to one of the titles from the first exercise.

EXERCISE 2

Replacing a bad title

I think you’ll agree that one of the weakest titles from the first exercise was *All Summer*. It’s vague and abstract and gives the impression the book will be a gentle romance – when in fact it is a psychological thriller. Here is the blurb from the cover:

All Summer

A young woman, bewildered and scared finds herself on an island off the coast of Ireland.

Her memory all but gone, except for the few threads that lead her back to an art robbery and a murder. What is her relationship with shadowy figure always two steps behind her? Who was the dead man? Was he her friend or her lover? Who was the kind and sympathetic man who rescued her from him? What did he want from her? In this uncertain world, all she does know is that she must keep running and hiding.

Read it carefully, then choose a fresh title for the book. Give yourself three minutes. Remember, it needs to be specific, concrete and unusual.

If you are doing this exercise in a group, read out your different titles and discuss which one works best. Can you analyse why? Is it because it’s specific, concrete and unusual? See what I mean?

If you’re on your own, try coming up with three or more alternative titles. Test-drive them on friends and colleagues to get feedback on which one works best.

Choosing a title for your book

There are around 150,000 new titles published every year in the UK. And an estimated one million unpublished manuscripts doing the rounds from author to agent to publisher and back again. This

next exercise is designed to help you identify some of the things that distinguish your book from all those other circulating manuscripts. It's really an exercise to help you to identify the unique selling points (USPs) of your book.

EXERCISE 3

Identifying your book's USPs

Think about your book and take a few minutes to list the following:

- the most unusual settings in your book (e.g. a ballet school, an Indian slum, the office of a provincial newspaper)
- the most interesting topics or people in the book (e.g. someone with arachnophobia, postnatal depression, animal rights)
- the most unusual activities (e.g. sexual stalking, cordon-bleu cookery, sky-diving)

Look at your lists. They should be specific, concrete and unusual. If anything vague or abstract has crept in, expunge it immediately. Now choose your favourite three: from any or all categories, but limit yourself to a total of just three.

Next try to identify your book's genre. Is it a thriller or historical fiction, chick-lit or a series of linked literary short stories? Perhaps it straddles genres, as a comedy-thriller, a science-fiction adventure for children? Take a minute to decide on the genre and write it down.

Your book's genre, combined with the three most interesting aspects of its subject matter, should constitute a (hopefully) unique combination that adds up to your book's USP. You need to try to embody your book's USP in the title you choose. And this next exercise will help you do this.

EXERCISE 4

Brainstorming session

You may have come this far on your own, but for this exercise you will need the help of two or three other people – preferably other writers who have done the first three exercises with you and are now

aware of the characteristics of a good title. Think of it as harnessing a small corner of the zeitgeist.

To brainstorm titles for your book, you need to announce your book's genre and your three favourite unusual things about it. That's all. Don't explain the plot. Don't talk about its meaning. Don't tell everyone how complex and layered it is. This will only distract them from what they need to focus on which is: the genre and the three interesting things...

Based on this information, give yourselves five minutes to think of as many titles as you can and scribble them all down. Be sure and write down every suggestion, however unsuitable, without judging it (unsuitable titles may end up suggesting suitable ones). If you're working with other writers, repeat this process with each person's book.

By the end of the brainstorming session you should each have a scribbled sheet full of useful (and not so useful) suggestions. Now take three minutes to reread them and choose your three favourites. Make sure that they are all specific, concrete and unusual.

EXERCISE 4 – an alternative for lone rangers

Poaching existing titles

If you are a retiring flower who shrinks from the rough and tumble of a brainstorm session, you could try this alternative. Visit the Amazon website, key in some words from your book's USP and press 'search'. There's no copyright on titles so you're free to adopt, or adapt, any of the titles that appear. Now jot down three of your favourites and proceed to EXERCISE 5.

EXERCISE 5

Judgement day

Because writers are so bad at choosing their own titles, you will have to ask other people to vote on which of your three favourites is the best title for your book. Tell people the genre of your book, then read out your three favourite titles, and ask them which they like best.

This exercise works best with a group, because every person can see immediately from a show of hands, which title works best for each book. Trust me, it's the most specific, concrete and unusual titles that win every time.

Of course you are not obliged to run with the title that emerges from this series of exercises, but I hope that this process will help you identify the kind of title you might end up with.

BOOK BLURBS

All Summer

A young woman, bewildered and scared finds herself on an island off the coast of Ireland. Her memory all but gone, except for the few threads that lead her back to an art robbery and a murder. What is her relationship with shadowy figure always two steps behind her? Who was the dead man? Was he her friend or her lover? Who was the kind and sympathetic man who rescued her from him? What did he want from her? In this uncertain world, all she does know is that she must keep running and hiding.

Eva's Cousin

In the summer of 1944 Eva Braun invited her younger cousin Gertraud to keep her company at Berchtesgaden, the Fuhrer's mountain retreat. Defying her anti-Nazi father, Gertraud went, and stayed until Eva left to share Hitler's fate in his Berlin bunker. Not until her seventies did she ever speak of this strange time in her life.

Trespassing

Dia is the daughter of a silk farmer, Riffat – an innovative, decisive businesswoman. Like her mother, Dia seems at first sight unrestricted, spirited and resourceful. But for a young woman in Pakistan, sometimes personal freedom has its own hidden borders, especially where love is concerned – and there are those who yearn to jump the fence...

The Pursuit of Alice Thrift

Poor Alice Thrift: book-smart but people-hopeless. Alice graduated second in her class at medical school, but hospital life is proving quite a challenge. Evaluations describe her performance as 'workmanlike' and her people skills as 'hypothermic'. Luckily her roommate Leo, the most popular nurse at the hospital, and her feisty neighbour Sylvie, take on the task of guiding Alice through the narrow straits of her own no-rapport zone.

Getting Mother's Body

Roosevelt Beede manages the petrol station in this dusty Texas town; his one dream is to buy his wife June the artificial leg she's always wanted. Billy, their teenage niece, longs to escape this narrow life. She's the only Beede without ambition – except for her mother, the fast-living Willa-Mae, who could croon her way out of any jail with a blues song. But Willa Mae is dead and buried and with her, the mythic Beede legacy: a cache of jewels. If Billy could get her hands on those diamonds and pearls, no dream would be too grand to realise...but first she has to beat the rest of the family there.

Spoiler

It was after his friend Adam died mysteriously that Ben started to hear whiffling noises in the night. The two novitiate priests had roomed side by side at their seminary in Rome, the cool, sardonic Adam becoming a mentor to the younger Ben. Did Adam jump from the parapet, Ben wonders, or was he pushed?