

Choosing Non-Boring Titles for Your Stories

an article by Hazel Edwards
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What do John Marsden's *'The Day the War Began'*, Suzanne Gervay's *'That's Why I wrote This Song'*, and 'Anita Bell's *'Tagged by Dead Dogs'* have in common?

Great titles, so you want to read the stories.

What is the most boring book you can remember reading? Can't remember the story? Probably you didn't read it because the title put you off!

I tend to be known as 'The Hippo Author' because my first picture book 'There's a Hippopotamus on our Roof Eating Cake' has such a weird title. Most people can't remember the exact wording, but they like the quirky combination of three ideas: 'hippo', 'roof' and 'cake' and are curious to read on. My son thought of the title. Frankly, even after 30 years, (The Hippo character is 30 this year) I have trouble remembering whether it's 'my' or 'our' roof in the title. As there are five books in the series, each title has to start with a different word, or librarians would mistake them for the one book in the catalogue. Thinking of five cake-eating hippo titles has been a challenge. And now there's to be a new birthday hippo story who also needs a book title.

Have I had any bad titles? Yes. 'Discussing Literature' had readers who jokingly called it 'Disgusting Literature'

Some of the BEST titles around for grabbing attention are: 'Who Cares?' and 'The Day My Bum Went Psycho'.

Apart from a 'pick-me-up' cover or a friend saying 'Hey, this is worth reading!' a non-boring title attracts readers to think about that writer's ideas.

Parents choose your name, but often a book title is a joint decision of the author, editor, publisher and especially their marketing department. Manuscripts go through many working titles. That's okay. It's part of the getting- the-words- right process. One of mine had 39 discarded titles.

Think about titles for YOUR stories. How can you get people to read what you write?

- Re-write the opening, last.
- Read it aloud to check.
- Choose the simplest but best words.
- Spend time thinking of a non-boring title.

Ever wished you could change your name? Occasionally authors feel like that about their book titles. What if they'd called their book by a different title?

Antarctica's Frozen Chosen

W.I.P. means work-in-progress. 'Frozen Chosen' was the working title for my W.I.P. eco-thriller set in Antarctica where I went on an expedition in 2001. A later possible title was 'Antarctica's Frozen Chosen and the Terrorist?' because the Antarctic setting needed to be a clue in the title. The question mark was deliberate, because my Nic character is an unusual eco-terrorist who wants to preserve pristine Antarctica. If I'd just called the book 'Frozen Chosen', which means those chosen to work in Antarctica, some might think I meant a brand of an icy pole. Then my publishers convinced me to drop 'and the Terrorist?' for reasons of length and they felt it also linked to recent terrorist news. On my computer I call it, AFC. Authors often have nic-names for books.

Hints When Choosing Titles for Your Stories and Articles.

- Does the title point to the major idea in your story? Play around with the word order. Strongest first, weakest in the middle.
- Be imaginative. Could you use a number or a symbol in the title e.g. '6788' or 'Q' ? Just check you can say it. \$ or * might be a problem.
- Clue the reader about the content. Mysterious? Serious? Funny?
- Say it aloud. Is the meaning clear or do the words run into each other?
- Often three words work where the third is unexpected. E.g. Dates, Data and Dead-Ends.
- Can the reader 'picture' the title or is it just a bland saying which is easy to forget like 'It's all right.'
- A single word title rather than an ultra long title is easier to design on the page or cover.
- Ambiguous titles like 'Fake I.D.' where all meanings apply are good value. Use a dictionary or thesaurus to check if you're unsure.
- Change the word order, make it a question or add a sub-title.
- Don't copy an existing title by another writer. Confusing but not illegal.
- Unless the major character has an unusual name, don't use that for the title. 'Sam' doesn't tell you much about the story but Serendipity Q. a.k.a. Smith, might.
- Suggest an underlying conflict, drama or the unexpected. e.g. 'My Most Embarrassing Moment.'
- Focus on the theme or major idea thread in the story. For non-fiction 'Weevils in the Flour' is a squirmy title which you remember.
- Use a sub-title to give extra information in factual writing. Facts matter.
- Have a positive title. Generally a title with NO in it, doesn't work, but I've found that 'Writing a Non- Boring Family History' works because it is unexpected.

Serendipity: Don't panic if you haven't got a title by the final draft. Often inspiration will come while you're doing something else. I never intend to write my autobiography but I have a title ready. The Serendipity Map. This is a contradiction in terms. A map is plotted. Serendipity is a fortunate happening, almost by coincidence.

And that's how some titles arrive.

P.S. So, choose YOUR title for this article.

- Entitled
- Non Boring Titles
- Choosing a Good Title
- Choosing Apt Titles for Your Story
- The Article with No Title.

Hazel Edwards has published 180 books not all with memorable titles and her website(www.hazeledwards.com) has downloadable notes about some of them.