

GIORGOS KALLIS

GETTING
THE TITLE
RIGHT



A guide to writing great titles

**You know
what your
article is going
to be about.**

**It's time to
baptise it!**

Step 1 - Write down the concept(s), variable(s) or phenomenon/a you are studying.

e.g.1: commons

e.g. 2: social capital

e.g. 3: frugality, imaginary, intentional communities

Step 2 - Write down the process or pattern you are researching or demonstrating with your research.

e.g. 1 The **tragedy** of the commons

e.g. 2 The **decline** of social capital

If you have more than one keyword variables you may look for one or more verbs or nouns that capture the relations between them and hint to your (hypo)thesis.

e.g. 3 Imaginaries of frugality and the origins of intentional communities

e.g. 4 How imaginaries of frugality help construct intentional communities

Note: The more specific the explanatory nouns or verbs the better.

'Tragedy' or 'decline' are specific. Words like 'effect' (say the 'effects of social capital'), 'impact', 'transformation' (say the 'transformation of the commons'), or even 'construction' that I used above, are quite generic.

They do not hint to a thesis or empirical finding. They simply postpone your claim – one has to read the article to see what type of transformation or effect you found. 'Origins' is also open-ended and generic, but much better since it suggests you are looking at fundamental causes, answering 'why' or 'how' questions – always a safe bet if you want to convince people you are a good scientist.

Step 3 (Optional, use with caution) – Risk a witty and catchy phrase that is visual or spoken.

e.g. 1. 'Bowling alone': America's declining social capital.

e.g. 2. 'Less is more': Imaginaries of frugality and the origins of intentional communities.

e.g. 3. 'I couldn't find parking, goddammit'. The tragedy of the commons.



An example in action

These days we are finishing research with colleagues on the effects of recessions on carbon emissions. We have used data on GDP and emissions since 1951 for all countries and have calculated how much more carbon would have been emitted if there hadn't been any recessions.

How do we come up with a good title for the paper?

Depends on our purpose, i.e. what is it we will argue.

Our range of keywords includes 'recessions', 'carbon emissions', 'carbon budget' or 'climate change'.

Our core finding (or thesis) is that a considerable amount of emissions has been avoided because of recessions.

One title we are flirting with is the very provocative "Recessions are good for the climate", with or without a subtitle like 'x years of carbon emissions avoided due to recessions since 1951'.

Alternatively, and less provocatively, we could go for "Recessions reduce carbon emissions", or "Recessions have increased the carbon budget" with or without a subtitle that specifies our quantitative finding.

(We are avoiding here the temptation of a boring subtitle that simply reports on the type of study we did - e.g. 'a panel data, counterfactual analysis of national carbon emissions, 1951-2014').

If along the way of writing the article we feel that our purpose or most intriguing findings have changed, we will revise the title. I always revise titles as I write, if I feel that the purpose or core message of the article has shifted - including after revisions for the journal.

It is never too early to have a title for your work. And it is never too late to change it.