

## Question forms in journal article titles

This study looks at different aspects of questions in titles of academic journal articles. The object of this study is to identify the types of questions used in titles, to look at disciplinary differences in use, and to explore the function of questions in titles. The corpus consists of 3,200 titles of research articles published in international journals in English. Four hard sciences (botany, fluid engineering, geology, and medicine) and four soft sciences (economics, education, history, and sociology) are represented, each by four journals.

The title of an academic paper is designed to attract readers, and strategies tend to differ among disciplines. Hard sciences generally prefer a title that states the exact topic of the paper, often specifying certain aspects by adding more information or context. Soft sciences typically favor a broader range of strategies and attempt to engage readers by rhetorical means (Haggan, 2004). In general, question forms in academic writing are much more common in the soft sciences than in the hard sciences (Hyland, 2002).

Titles all or partly in question form are predictably much more common in the soft sciences, at 5%-12% of the titles in my corpus, as compared with 0.025%-2% for the hard sciences. These proportions are similar to those reported in Haggan (2004), Hyland (2002), and Ball (2009). I will refer to discussions of disciplinary culture and discourse (e.g., Hyland, 2000) to try to account for the (dis)preference of disciplines for using questions in titles.

Titles most often contain complete questions, with yes/no questions most frequent, as also reported in Dietz (2001). Full questions stand alone or are combined with another title unit:

*Was development assistance a mistake?* (economics)

*Paragonite: Why is it so rare in medium-temperature high-pressure rocks?* (geology)

However, a large proportion of questions found in titles – especially in the soft sciences – are in the form of incomplete questions, or question fragments, and do not appear alone:

*Adding a stick to the carrot? The interaction of bonuses and fines* (economics)

*Swept under the rug? A historiography of gender and black colleges* (education)

Question fragments appear to have a different function than that of full questions. This observation is supported by a follow-up study of titles and abstracts. Question form appears to have an impact on whether an answer is given in the abstract, and title questions in the form of fragments are less often answered.

Besides being of potential use to linguistic researchers and teachers of academic writing or of language for specific purposes, this study could be of interest to any writer who puzzles over his/her options when creating a title.

### References

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