



The role of questions in journal article titles

Robin Lee Nagano

University of Miskolc, Language Teaching Centre

University of Debrecen, Doctoral School of Linguistics



“The title can be viewed as the shortest possible abstract.”

Review criteria, *Academic Medicine*

- The title is clear and informative.
- The title is representative of the content and breadth of the study (not misleading).
- The title captures the importance of the study and the attention of the reader”



“The title can be viewed as the shortest possible abstract.”

Review criteria, *Academic Medicine*

- The title is clear and **informative**.
- The title is **representative** of the content and breadth of the study (not misleading).
- The title **captures** the importance of the study and the **attention** of the reader”



Vital role of titles in academic world

- Readers scan titles to decide whether to read further
(Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995)
- Most academics find articles by either browsing or searching
(Tenopir et al., 2009)
- An average of 97 articles, 204 abstracts, and 1,142 titles are read by researchers in a year
(Mabe & Amin, 2002)
- The number of publications continues to increase: growing competition for readers



Previous observations on questions in academic writing & RA titles

- Webber, 1994: in 7 medical genres, main functions of Qs text organizing, distancing/hedging, pointing toward future possibilities, criticizing
- Hyland, 2002:
 - Qs much more common in soft sciences than in hard
 - various functions: organize text, frame a purpose, support claims, express evaluation...
 - a form of interaction with reader
 - represent writer as insider who understands real issues
- Anthony, 2001: rare in computer science RA titles, 2/600
- Soler, 2007: more frequent in review article titles than RAs
- Ball, 2009: becoming more frequent in hard sciences, esp. medicine

	1966	2005
medicine	1.0%	5.3%
life sciences	0.3%	2.3%
physics	0.4%	0.6%



A few samples

Is education a good thing?

Are secondary schools spending
enough on books?

Are cascading flows stable?



Why use questions in RA titles?

- Webber, 1994
to rouse interest and pinpoint main topic of paper;
to introduce note of doubt
- Haggan, 2004
“attention-grabbing aim”, set reader’s mind working
to find possible answers, to find answer must read
paper
- Hyland, 2002
grab the reader, demand attention, promote article
- Dietz, 2001
activate reader’s background knowledge, direct
attention to topic, “sell” the paper



Corpus

- 3,200 titles of research articles in English, from international journals
- For each discipline, 100 titles from 4 journals = 400 titles/discipline
- From 8 disciplines:
 - botany, fluid engineering, geology, medicine
 - economics, education, history, sociology
- Approx. 40,350 running words



Frequency: results & discussion

	question units	% of titles
Bot	6	1.5
Engg	1	0.25
Geo	8	2
Med	8	2
Econ	46	11.5
Edu	53	13.3
Hist	21	5.3
Soc	48	12

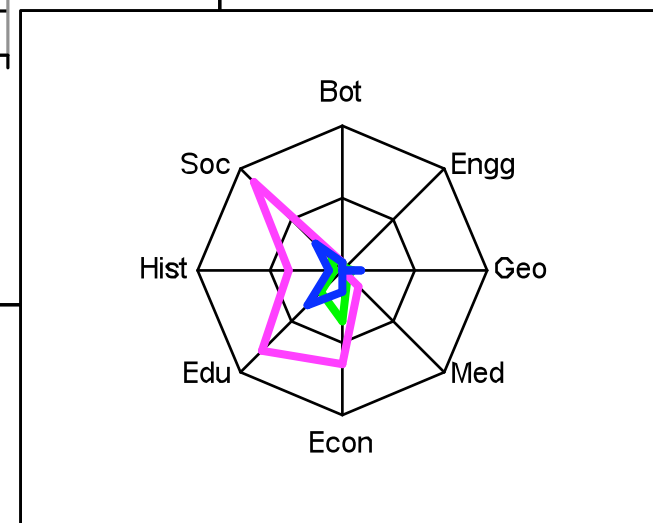
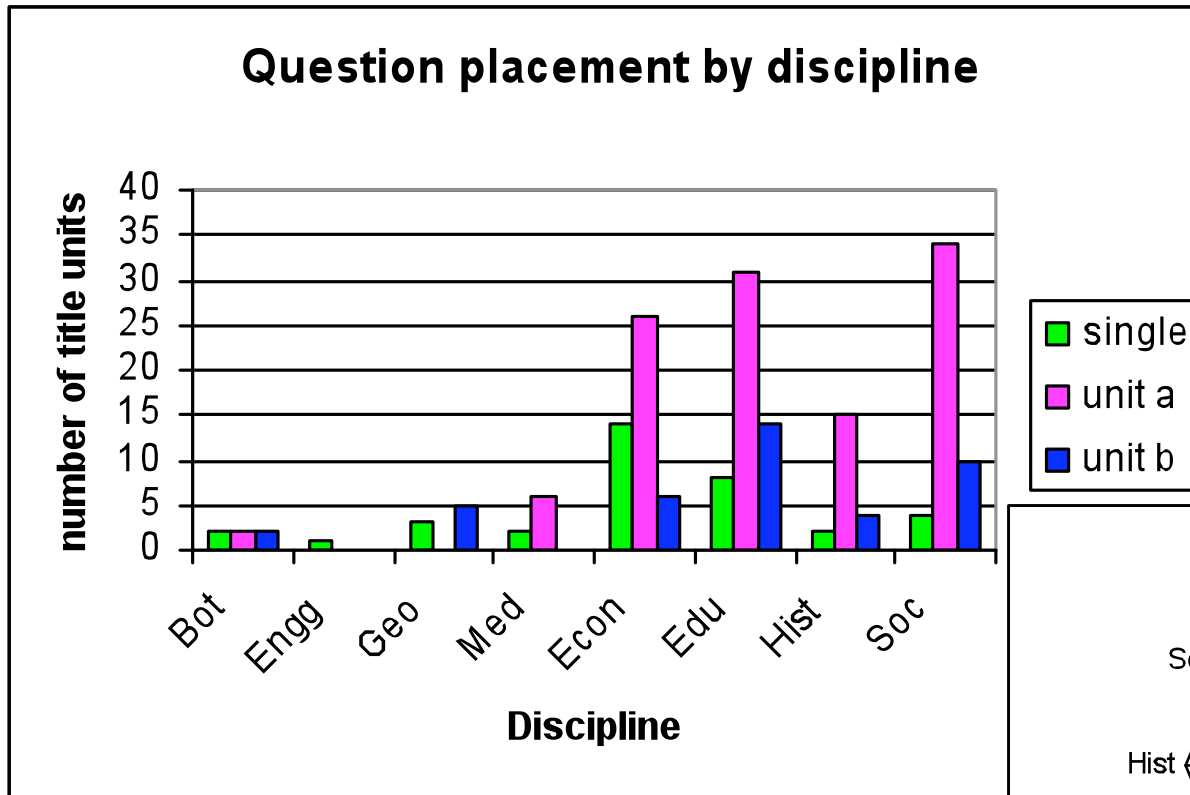
- Haggan, 2004
more frequent in literature and linguistics than in 'natural sciences'
- Soler, 2007
0-1% in 3 hard sciences, 1-5% in 3 soft sciences; more in review articles (0-20%)



Placement in title

- Questions can make up an entire title (single unit):
Are secondary schools spending enough on books?
[Edu]
- or appear as the first unit (a):
Do workers work more if wages are high? Evidence from a randomized field experiment [Econ]
- or as the second (b):
Readers and book characters: Does race matter?
[Edu]

Placement in title: results





Placement in title: discussion

- With a two-unit title, two main approaches:
 - The question focuses on the topic, the other unit gives context and/or method
How prepared is Europe for pandemic influenza? Analysis of national plans [Med]
 - The other unit gives the topic; the question is difficult to interpret without it
When does the watchdog bark? Conditions of aggressive questioning in presidential news conferences [Soc]



Question type: full questions

- Yes/No questions

*Are some people sensitive to mobile phone signals?
[Med]*

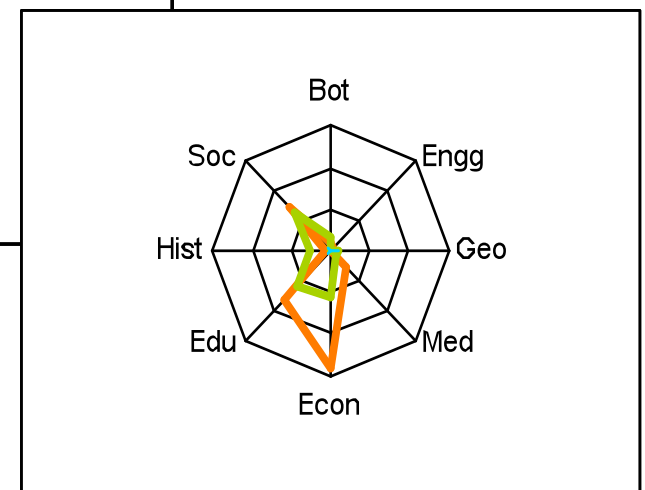
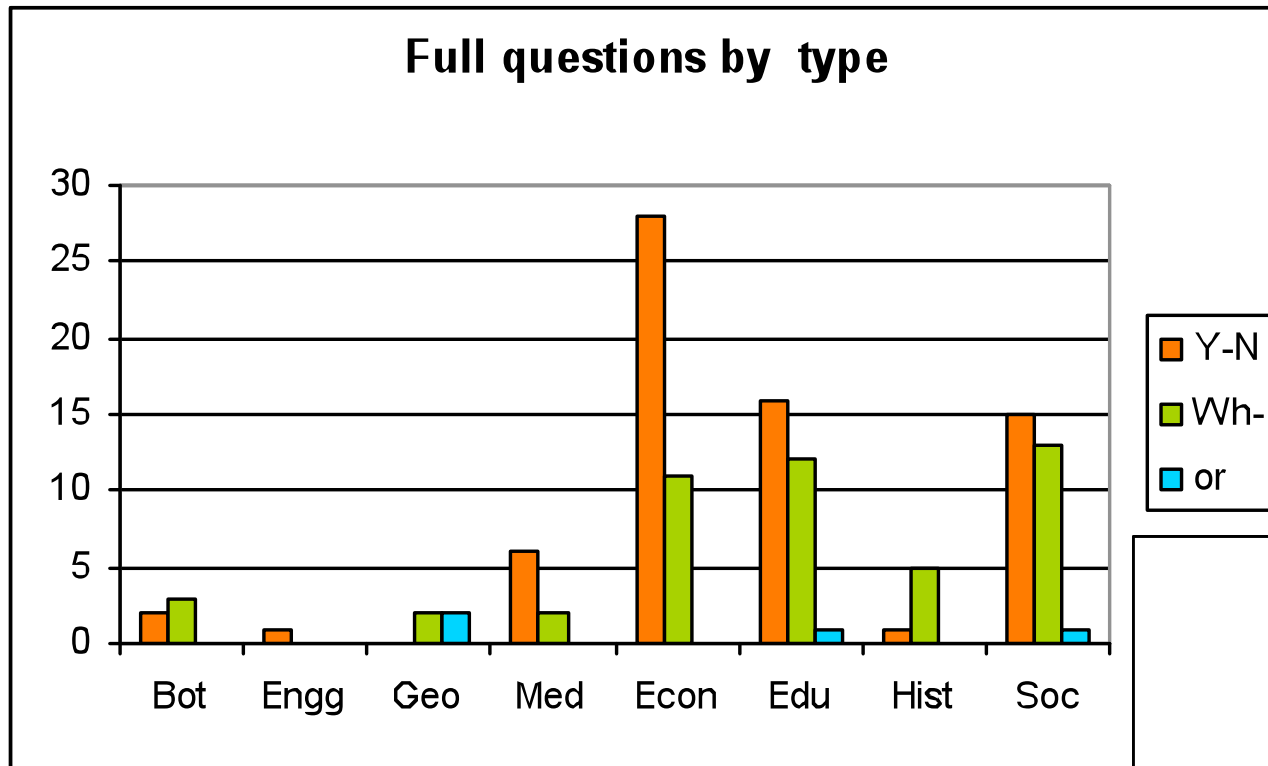
- Wh- questions

Who survives on death row? [Soc]

- 'or' questions

*Was Baltica right-way-up or upside-down in the
Neoproterozoic? [Geo]*

Question types: full Q results





Question type: fragments

...: A declining political institution?
Swept under the rug? ...
Learning or therapy? ...

Fragments can be expanded into full Qs (Biber, 1999):

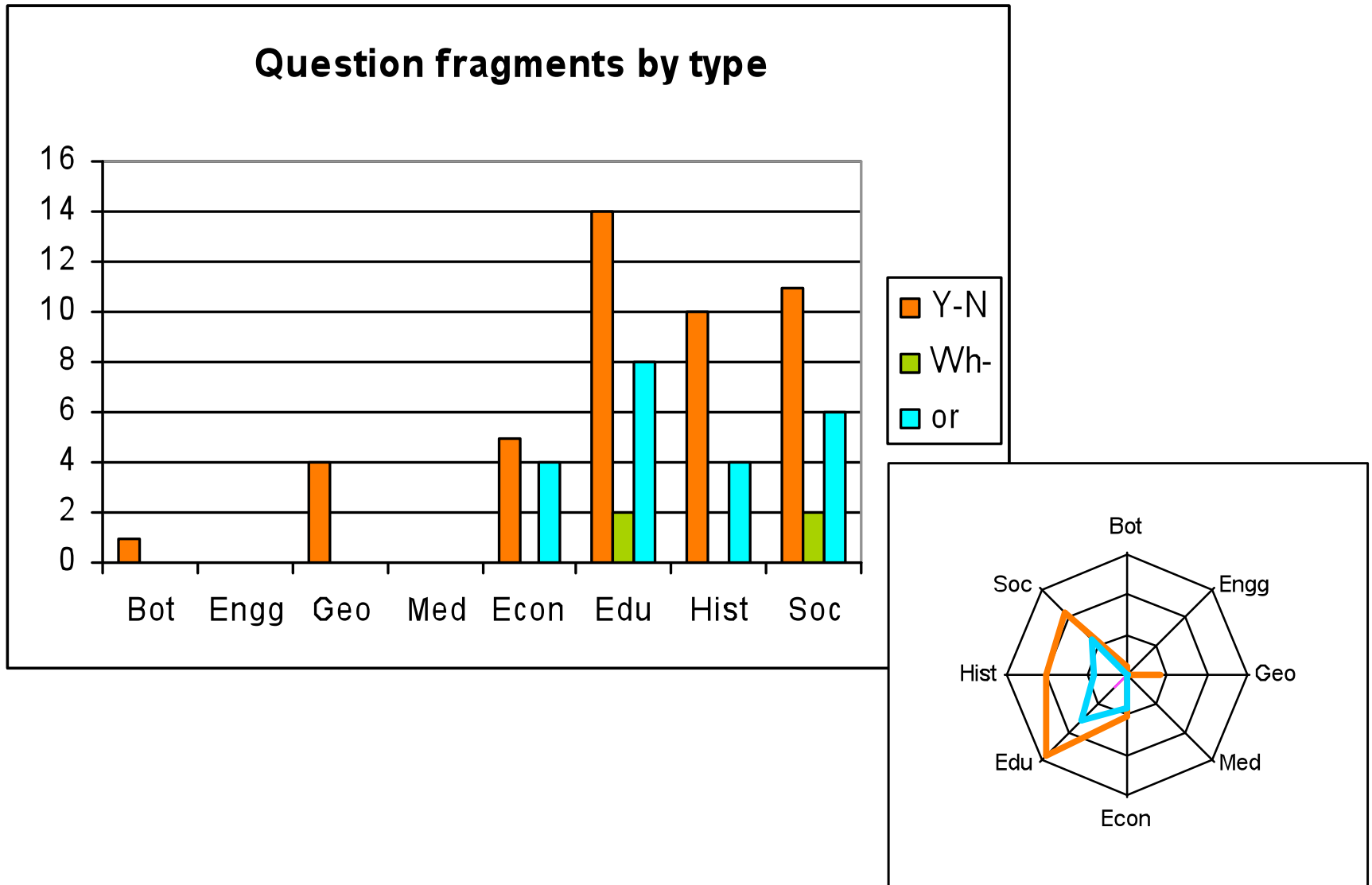
- Is this (a case of) a declining political institution?
- Has it been swept under the rug?
- Is it learning or therapy?

The mental effort involves the reader: more attention to title?

Fragments almost always appear with another unit.

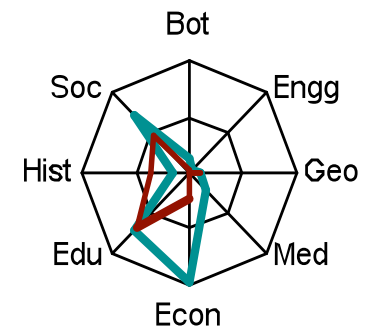
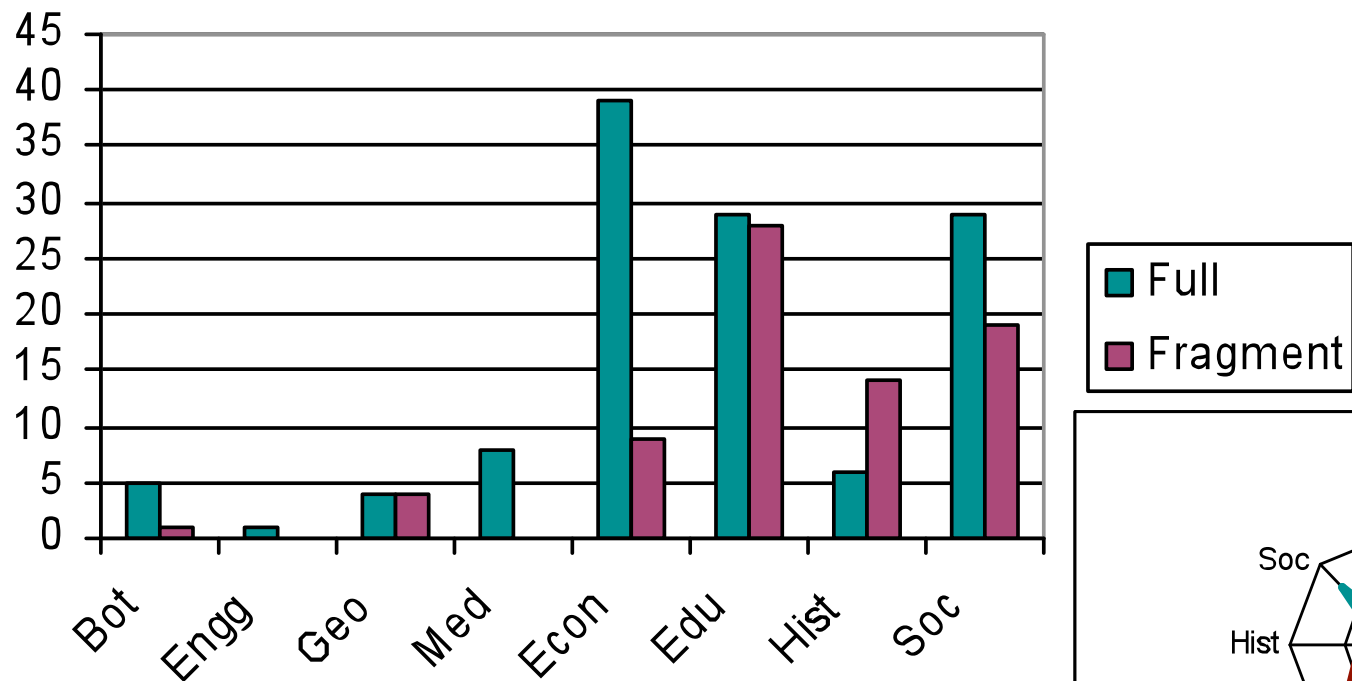
Exception: *Rebellion, resistance, and a Swiss Brutus?*
[Hist]

Question type: fragment results



Question type: full Q vs. fragments

Full questions vs. question fragments





Question type: discussion

- Yes/No questions
 - (Dietz, 2001): put a fact into question; questioning a hitherto accepted thesis
 - More typical of fragments – a challenge
 - many full Qs appear to be research questions; if a second unit exists, it often gives contextual information
- Wh- questions
 - (Dietz, 2001): focus on one aspect; discussing issues of interdisciplinary interest
 - Seems to be true
- 'or' questions
 - (Dietz, 2001) ask for decision; arouse interest in author's answer
 - Most common as fragments



Answers in abstracts

Tentative findings so far:

- Full Y/N Qs more often answered 'yes' (contradicts Dietz, 2001)
- Answers to Wh- Qs often start "We find...", "Results show...", "We conclude..." but are sometimes indirect.
- Fragments are rarely answered.
- Haven't yet checked whether the Q placement has an effect.
- The help of expert informants is needed.



Conclusions

- Qs are far more frequent in soft sciences than in hard sciences
- Qs tend to appear in the first unit of two-unit titles; probably most efficient for attention-drawing
- Preference for Q type varies by discipline; yes/no questions most common overall
- Preference for Q fragment or full Q varies among disciplines; since fragments are rarely answered, they are probably purely for 'advertising' purposes



Thank you for your attention

Feedback would be appreciated!

nyerobin@uni-miskolc.hu