

How to find the perfect title for your story or novel

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A title should not merely identify a story or novel, it should make readers eager to find out more. Sometimes writers have the title before they start — in fact, a perfect title can be the prompt for the story, like *The Door Into Summer* by Robert A. Heinlein. A few writers depend on agents, publishers, or critiquers to supply the title. This is how my novel *Interference* got its title. But most writers do it themselves, so here are some ways to create a good title.

1. Steal it

Take it from public-domain poetry, quotations, lullabies, songs, famous prose, clichés, jargon related to your story’s milieu, catch phrases, or slang (new or old). You may want to reverse or play with these phrases.

Examples: *All’s Well That Ends Well* by William Shakespeare, *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, *The Cradle will Fall* by Mary Higgins Clark, or “A Dog and His Boy” by Harlan Ellison.

But beware of “pushbutton” words that are too cliché. For example, “[The Shadow War of the Night Dragons: Book One: The Dead City: Prologue](#)” by John Scalzi.

2. Take it from inside the story itself

A phrase or concept used in the story might be catchy enough for a title.

For example: “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” by Ernest Hemingway, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” by Flannery O’Connor, or “But the One on the Right” by Dorothy Parker.

3. Use significant words from the story

Make a list of the important words from your work: names, settings, theme, times, action, characters, or information. Then start to play with them in different patterns.

- Noun and Noun: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen
- Noun for Noun: “Flowers for Algernon” by Daniel Keyes
- Noun of Noun: “The Iliad of Sandy Bar” by Bret Harte
- The Noun Who: *The Man Who Came to Dinner* by Kaufman and Hart
- Possessive Noun: “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin
- Prepositional Phrase: *In the Heat of the Night* by John Ball
- Adjective(s) Noun: “Too Early Spring” by Stephen Vincent Benét
- Noun + Prepositional Phrase: “A Novel in Nine Letters” by Fyodor Dostoyevsky
- Adverbial Phrase: “After the Procession” by Jorge Edwards
- Prominent Verbs: “May Angels Lead You Home” by Sharon Sheehee Stark
- Significant Word(s): “The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka

Beware of confusing titles, though, such as a name that might be mistaken for the author’s name, or an ambiguous title like *Scorpion Kisses* by Leon Arsenal, which is speculative fiction but has been repeatedly shelved in romance.

Exercises

- We all know *Hamlet*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Game of Thrones*, etc. Think of five possible alternative titles for a well-known work — and to help spark your imagination, make one of them the worst possible title.
- Think about a work of your own that needs a title, and write five possibilities. Share them with friends or fellow writers. What invokes the best reaction?