Choosing the Right Name for Your Story

by John Floyd

So what's in a title? Is it really that important?

You bet it is. Would you rather your job resume say "salesperson" or "marketing representative"? "Clerk" or "service specialist"? "Repairman" or "technician"? One sounds commonplace; the other sounds impressive.

Let's go a step further. Imagine *Boys' Life* billed as *Youth Experiences.* Or *Nightline* as *Ted's Late News Roundup.* Loses a little something, right? And it's hard to picture 007 introducing himself as "Dinkins. Arnold Dinkins."

The same thing applies to story titles. An enjoyable short story or novel might never get read by the public (or, more to the point, by an editor or agent) if the title doesn’t do its job. In the publishing world, a good title is like a good opening paragraph: it should be interesting. It should attract the reader's attention. At the very least, it should be appropriate to the rest of the piece.

And remember this, too: the title will be what represents your work to the rest of the world, now and forever. When people see your story in bookstores or in an anthology, take it the beach with them, and talk about it to their friends the next day, the first thing they'll read or speak will be the words in your title. Choose it wisely.

But that's pretty vague advice. The question is, how do you do it? What makes a good title?

A Few Rules of Thumb:

Titles should not be dull. When you browse a shelf full of novels, or a collection of short stories, aren't you drawn first to the more unusual titles? So are editors, when they look over a stack of submissions. Not that "The House" or "The Tree" won't be a good story; but titles with a bit more originality stand a better chance. Examples: *Gone with the Wind, The High and the Mighty,* "The Tin Star," *The Silence of the Lambs, The Maltese Falcon, Watership Down,* "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," *Fahrenheit 451, The Color Purple, Atlas Shrugged.*

Titles should be easy to remember. It's hard to tell a neighbor or a colleague about a story if the title's too long and complicated, or hard to pronounce. It's a good idea to keep things clear and simple. You might consider *Murder on the Wzcyiubjekistan Express* the best writing you've ever done, or *The Tallahatchie Backroad Honky-Tonk Boogie* your literary masterpiece, but I doubt either of them would sell. They probably wouldn't ever make it out of the editor's slush pile.

Titles should be appropriate. Don't name your science fiction story "Trouble at Dodge City" just because that's what the starfleet crew calls your space station. Editors will think you've written a Western. Similarly, Lawrence Block mentions, in one of his books on writing, a Charles McGarry espionage novel called *The Secret Lovers.* Block says its title (which refers to spies, who love secrets) led some readers to believe it would be a romance instead. Examples of

titles that "fit" their subjects: *Raise the Titanic, The Firm,* "A Rose for Emily," *The Caine Mutiny, Presumed Innocent, Love Story, In Cold Blood, Riders of the Purple Sage, The Amityville Horror.*

That should help you narrow the field a bit as you try to decide on the right title for your story. But the question remains: How exactly do you *find* a good title? Where do you begin your search?

A Few Sources to Jog the Imagination:

1. **A title can be a popular expression.** *Gone for Good, Something's Gotta Give, The Horse's Mouth, The Usual Suspects, Good As Gold, The Whole Nine Yards.*

2. **A title can be a play on words.** (Sometimes a "twist" of an existing expression.) *Burglars Can Be Choosers, The Cancelled Czech, You Only Live Twice, Live and Let Die, The War Between the Tates, A Hearse of a Different Color.*

3. **A title can have a hidden meaning,** later revealed in the story. *The Green Mile, Rain Man, Dances with Wolves, Catch-22, Hearts in Atlantis, Cool Hand Luke, The Shipping News.*

4. **A title can come from an existing work.** (The Bible, Shakespeare, etc.) *The Grapes of Wrath, The Sound and the Fury, The Sun Also Rises, Absalom, Absalom, All That Glitters, Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

5. **A title can be a person's name.** *Hannibal, Goldfinger, Carrie, Hondo, Rebecca, Doctor Zhivago, Shane, Forrest Gump.*

6. **A title can be a place name.** *Cold Mountain, Cimarron, Peyton Place, Jurassic Park, Lonesome Dove, Mystic River.*

7. **A title can be a possessive.** *Portnoy's Complaint, Angela's Ashes, The Optimist's Daughter, Charlotte's Web.*

8. **A title can be an association of ideas.** Often these are words that have a "double meaning," and refer to more than one thing in a story. *The Eye of the Needle, The Dead Zone, Misery, Silver Bullet, Lie Down with Lions.*

9. **A title can be an "event" or "activity."** (Use "ing" in the first word.) *Pleading Guilty, Romancing the Stone, Waiting to Exhale,* "Riding the Bullet," *Raising Helen, Finding Nemo.*

10. **A title can be a memorable line from the story itself.** *To Kill a Mockingbird, Tell No One, Sleepless in Seattle, The Eagle Has Landed, They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*

11. **A title (if long) can have a "rhythm."** Another kind of "play on words," this makes a longer title more pleasing to the ear--and easier to remember. *The Spy Who Came In from*

the Cold, The Sins of Rachel Cade, At Play in the Fields of the Lord, Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia.

12. **A title (if it fits the story) can be simple.** *Jaws, Shogun, Cathedral, The Exorcist, Ragtime, Lolita, Deliverance, Airport,* "The Swimmer," *Roots, Centennial, It, The Godfather.*

In fact, it has been said that most titles on bestseller lists are no more than three words long. (But they have to be the right words.)

"Trademark" Titles

A number of famous writers have come up with a way to make their titles do extra work for them. How? They create titles that follow a pattern unique to their particular "series" of stories.

- Janet Evanovich uses numbers: *One for the Money, Two for the Dough, Three to Get Deadly, Four to Score.*
- Sue Grafton uses letters of the alphabet: *A is for Alibi, B is for Burglar, C is for Corpse, D is for Deadbeat.*
- For James Michener, it was one-word titles: *Chesapeake, Space, Hawaii, Caribbean, Alaska.*
- John D. MacDonald chose colors: *The Lonely Silver Rain, The Dreadful Lemon Sky, The Long Lavender Look.*
- John Sandford's trademark is the word "prey": *Silent Prey, Mind Prey, Mortal Prey, Sudden Prey.*
- Martha Grimes used names of English pubs: *The Old Silent, The Dirty Duck, The Old Contemptibles, The Anodyne Necklace.*
- Robert Ludlum's thrillers had three-word titles: *The Bourne Identity, The Matarese Circle, The Rhinemann Exchange.*
- James Patterson chooses nursery rhymes: *Roses are Red, Jack and Jill, Three Blind Mice, Along Came a Spider.*

This kind of approach is of course not required to sell or publish your books and stories. But, especially if you've considered writing a series, it never hurts to have a recognizable "signature" of some kind, a bright flag that your fans can look for in the bookstore. Titles can provide that.

And don't worry too much about giving your stories titles that have already been used. At least on that piece of literary ground, you're on firm footing.

Originality

Titles are not copyrightable. If your title is fairly common, and doesn't deal with the same subject matter as another story with the same name, you shouldn't run into any legal problems. I once wrote and submitted a short mystery called "Nothing but the Truth," and didn't realize until after it was accepted and published that that same title had been used before, by at least one other author.

But that should not be done intentionally. Why run the risk of confusing a reader into thinking your story is someone else's? Besides, you don't want the reading public (or your potential editors) to think you're unoriginal. It's just as easy to come up with a new title as to re-use an existing one--and a lot more satisfying.

Whatever the source for your inspiration and whatever title you choose, remember that it needs to be a perfect fit for your story. If it isn't (and even, sometimes, if it is), it can get changed.

Alternate Titles

Unless you're a well-known author, the title of your accepted novel is likely to be changed prior to publication, and editors sometimes change the titles of short stories as well. Most of my published stories have retained their original titles, but seven of my nineteen short stories in *Woman's World* were renamed by the editors before the issues containing those stories appeared on the stands. Were the new titles better? Who knows. But *Woman's World's* editorial staff are probably familiar with what their readers like, and want. And history will show that changed titles are sometimes a good thing. Case in point: the original title for *The Great Gatsby* was *Trimalchio in West Egg.* Yuk.

Since changes are known to occur, should you submit several alternate titles along with your novel or story? No. Select the best title you can, and leave it at that. Sending in a list of second-string choices makes you appear indecisive, and less confident.

But does the fact that the editor may change your title mean you shouldn't spend a lot of time creating a good one of your own? Absolutely not. According to Pat Kubis and Bob Howland in *The Complete Guide to Writing Fiction and Nonfiction*, "You need a good title to attract an editor's eye. Remember, it's the first thing he or she sees of your work--and the editor who likes your title will begin reading your manuscript in an optimistic frame of mind."