

The Power of Titles

**Strategies for Choosing
the Right Title for your
Stories and Poems**



Titles are more often than not the first impression a potential reader has of your work.

But they are often underutilized.

The most common type of title is what I think of as the “clear title” or the “placeholder”.

This is a title that conveys the core idea or themes of the piece when it comes to non-fiction. When it comes to fiction or poetry it tends to just cover one aspect of the book. For example *The Woods* or *Evening*.

I often think of a placeholder title as the most obvious choice. One of the first two or three titles anyone would think of while trying to title the work.

Just because the placeholder title is the obvious choice that doesn't make it the wrong one. It is especially common for work on the Bestseller list to have a placeholder title.

The title of this lecture, very much falls into the placeholder category.

This type of title very much serves a purpose. I'm not knocking it. Often it is the right choice.

This type of title clearly and efficiently communicates what the book (or poem or movie or song) is about especially in the context of the genre* it belongs in.

When you see a book called *Breathe: The New Science of a Lost Art*, you have a pretty good idea right from the title what it is about and if you want to read it or not.

*we'll talk more about genre in the next section

One of the downsides of the placeholder title is that it is often generic, and it actually doesn't tell the reader much about the specifics of your book.

For example, the title *Crossroads* could fit a lot of books and is a common title in many different genres but it's hard to remember and connect with in terms of specifics.

Besides there has already been more than one bestselling book with this title already.*

*titles can't be copyrighted, they can be trademarked, but that's very rare.

There are titles that are placeholders that are distinct and specific. For example *The Hunger Games* belongs in the placeholder title category but is still specific and intriguing.

Genre can play a role in making what seems like a placeholder title work. *You Sexy Thing* is the title of many Romance novels and also one Science Fiction novel. When you search for that title on Goodreads, the Science Fiction novel is clearly the most successful book with that title. In part I think because it subverts expectations and surprises people.

This lecture isn't going to cover how to come up with a placeholder title for your book/poem/song/movie.

(You can figure that out without me).

This lecture is going to focus on titles that don't fit in the placeholder category.

This lecture is going to be broken down into two parts:

1. The title's role in prose
2. The title's role in poetry

The Title's Role in Prose

Title and genre are for the most part intrinsically linked.

There are some genres, like Romance or Nonfiction where going with a non-placeholder title is the exception to the norm and confusing.

(In the introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of the Nonfiction book, *The Spell of The Sensuous*, the author spent a lot of time talking about how the title has caused issues for the book over the years.)

You can probably correctly guess the genres of most of these books without knowing anything more but the titles:

The Kaiju Preservation Society

The Book of Form and Emptiness

I Kissed Shara Wheeler

Witch King

Love Real Food

The Man Who Died Twice

The Martian

Shiny Misfits

Answers:

The Kaiju Preservation Society (Science Fiction)
The Book of Form and Emptiness (Literary Fiction)
I Kissed Shara Wheeler (Young adult & Romance)
Witch King (Fantasy)
Love Real Food (Cookbook)
The Man Who Died Twice (Mystery)
The Martian (Science Fiction)
Shiny Misfits (Middle Grade Fiction)

Not all titles have that clear connection to the genre they are part of, but many do, even if they aren't placeholders.

It can be helpful to spend time thinking about other titles in your genre and how your prospective title works (or doesn't) within the larger context of that genre.

Titles of book length fiction generally have to do one or more of the following things:

Convey a unique aspect of your book

The Hunger Games; A Magic Steeped in Tea

Convey the genre

The Quantum Magician; The Rosie Project

Communicate an idea you want the readers thinking about

The Best of It; Free Piano (Not Haunted)

A lot of the titles I'm drawn to are ones that are intriguing, including *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Parable of the Sower*, and *East of Eden*.

Sometimes even one word titles can be made intriguing, like *Martyr*!*

I like that these titles have a question attached to them. Like what could *The Parable of the Sower* be?

*The exclamation point is part of the title.

Titles aren't immune to trends, especially in mainstream publishing.

The trend that really stands out to me is the use of numbers in titles. I've actually bought a few of these because of how intriguing the titles are, but now I'm a little wary of the number use.

Examples include *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo**, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*.

*full names are often in mainstream titles as well like *The Invisible life of Addie LaRue*.

With prose (and poetry) one of the most important things to think about when coming up with a title is how deeply it connects with the book itself.

This is trickier to do with non-placeholder titles because they aren't the first option that comes to mind.

But it's still important as it helps the reader remember the title even after they've finished the story, and that makes them more likely to recommend it to others.*

* I have noticed that if I read a book on my Kobo it's much harder for me to remember the name of it, and I'm less likely to recommend books I have read in this format to others.

Questions I ask myself when I'm coming up with titles for a book length work of prose:

1. What makes my book unique?
2. What language in the title would help prepare the readers for the story I tell?
3. What title would look good on a cover?*
4. What would help make the genre clear or establish the tone of the novel?

*Not too long a title, IMO.

Of course with book length prose, especially of the mainstream variety, the author doesn't always have the final say in terms of what the title will be. Like the cover and the blurb and even the back cover text, final approval for the title does not always go to the author. There's a good article on this [here](#). It includes great examples of books where the publisher chose the title.

For example George Orwell wanted to call *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,
The Last Man in Europe.

Toni Morrison preferred the title *The Wrath of Children* over *God Help the Child*.

Still, most of the time the title authors use for querying is the same title that ends up being on the cover of their book.

Even if it is eventually changed by the publisher, the title you query with still is very important, as it helps make the first impression on agents and editors.

For short stories, a lot of the general advice given in the poetry section is also relevant, more than the advice shared in this section.

That's because many short stories are published in literary journals first (just like poems are), before being published as part of a larger collection.

Submitting work to literary journals is a very different and separate process than submitting manuscripts.

The Title's Role in Poetry

My (hopefully slight) bias against placeholder titles comes from teaching poetry. Not that the wrong title can't really hurt a book or a short story (it can), but in prose you have a lot more words to win the reader over with.

Most poems are between 50 and 300 words. Which means every word counts.

Yet many poets choose to give their poems a title that is then repeated in the poem itself. Or they choose a really broad, over used word in poetry to be the title like *Love* or *Hope**.

*Yes, it's possible to title a good poem *Hope* or *Love*, but it's not easy.

As a poet, I haven't always put as much emphasis on titles, but working as a reader and then an editor for a literary journal really changed that for me. When I was in that role I had to read about a thousand poems over the period of two months. This is not an uncommon experience for editors or readers.

I had to pick around ten poems out of all these poems to share with others. But after reading so many they all started to merge together in my mind. It didn't help that a number of them had the same title.

Sometimes I'd try and remember a poem I liked, but then ended up not finding it because while I remembered part of the poem I didn't remember the title.

Often times the poets I talk to don't think of the title as very important. The title just isn't a priority or something they really think about, so why shouldn't it be a placeholder?

I would say over 70% of the poems I read have placeholder titles.

Yet a memorable title really helps set a poem apart for readers as well as editors.

Just to be clear, there is the right time and place for a placeholder title in poetry as well as fiction but I would say the majority of poems benefit from having a non placeholder title.

Now before I go any further I have to give credit to the poet Matthea Harvey, who also helped me think a lot more clearly about titling. She gave a great lecture while I was in graduate school called “If You Agree, Won’t You Change the Title for Me?”

You can read her essay that covers some of the same information, [here](#), with a free account from JSTOR.

What I call placeholder titles, Harvey calls licence plate titles.

She also has a separate category and distinct phrase for describing poems that contain the words or phrases from the title in the poem itself. She calls these spotlight titles.

I love a lot of poems with spotlight titles including From the Desire Field by Natalie Diaz and what I mean when I say I'm sharpening my oyster knife by Eve Ewing and The More Loving One by W.H. Auden.

If the phrase that is repeated is strong and distinct, or intriguing it can really bear (and even benefit from) the weight of a lot of attention being on it. It can help strengthen a poem as a whole and make it feel more cohesive.

For me there are two potential traps that exist with the spotlight title strategy.

The first is that a poet can overuse this strategy. If the majority of one's poems rely on the spotlight strategy to work, the poems become too predictable.

The second is that the phrase that is used in the title and later in the poem isn't powerful enough to hold up to the stress of being so emphasized and just ends up feeling dull or redundant.

I have also noticed that some poets over rely on ending on the title phrase, so that the first and last thing you read are the same words.

This can work occasionally but if you do it too often it becomes predictable, and a little frustrating for readers.

Another common strategy when titling a poem is to actually have the title act as the first line of the poem. I Ask that I do not Die by Ilya Kaminsky is a good example of a poem that relies on this strategy. It can be a helpful strategy, but it isn't effective if it's overused.

Some titles add another layer to the poem once you have read the entirety of the poem. Harvey calls this titling strategy “helium”, because it’s like adding helium to a balloon to make it something more than it otherwise would be.

I often strive for helium titles but it isn’t possible to always have them.

The example Harvey uses of this type of title is Thinking of a Relation to the Images of Metaphor by Wallace Stevens. I think Real Estate by Richard Siken is a good example of this strategy.

You might notice that I'm not giving any examples in this section without linking to the work. This is because in my opinion, you can only really understand the greatness of most poem titles after reading the poem.

One of my favorite poems, [Theology](#) by Ocean Vuong, might seem like it has a placeholder title, but reading it reveals that it is in fact a helium title.

Most of the time you have to read the poem and the title together to understand the strength of their relationship, and the nuance of it.

A few more poems to read after the lecture to understand how the title and poem relationship can work.

Dorothy Wordsworth by Jennifer Chang

The Conditional by Ada Limón

The Evidence of Things Not Seen by Jay Curlin

Coniferous Fathers by Michael Kleber-Diggs

When I title a poem I don't think of the category its title might belong in till the revision process.

I have a lot of different strategies for titling poems and some of them I'm sharing here.

Titling the poem first

For my students I often give the title as a prompt and they have to write the rest of the poem from it.

I do this for myself too, often by picking a prose book off the shelf and forcing myself to write a poem using the book title as my title (say, *The Three Body Problem* or *Shadow Country*).

When I do this I haven't actually read the book, and the content of my poem never has anything to do with the content of the book.

When I'm stuck sometimes, I'll write down a dozen possible titles and then later (sometimes weeks, sometimes months) I'll use those titles.

Writing titles with a timer

Sometimes if I've written a poem I can't figure out the title to, I'll set a timer and force myself to write down as many potential titles to that poem as I can before the timer runs out.

The timer forces me to write down some truly awful, embarrassing, and sometimes hilarious titles, and by writing those down I can get to new ideas and often better titles.

“Stealing” from my own poems

I will re-read old poems that I have written that either didn't work or are too personal to publish.

I will then use a line I like in a new poem, often but not always as the title.

Asking a friend

Sometimes I'll exchange poems with friends and we will come up with titles, or potential titles for each other.

It can help to have a perspective beyond your own when titling.

As far as titling a poetry collection, most authors seem to have the same strategy.

The collection as a whole and a singular poem in it often share the same name. This “titular” poem is the one most closely linked to the themes of the broader book, generally.

There are other approaches too, like focusing on distilling the primary themes of the collection in the title.

In Conclusion

In the forward to one of her short stories in the collection *Buried Deep*, author Naomi Novik shares the following words:

“It was inconsiderate of me to write a story called “Seven Years from Home” and also a story called “Seven”. I apologize.

I can't even claim that it was an accident. This was the second story of the two and I recognized what I was doing at the time but there wasn't any help for it. Sometimes you know a title from the beginning and sometimes you never know it and have to resentfully slap something on at the end, and in this case I knew from the very first line.”

I'm sharing this because I think it's a good quote and it also gets to two truths in my experience.

Sometimes the title just presents itself, and nothing else will work with the text in your mind.

Sometimes you just need to pick a title and stick with it, even if you don't like it, because having no title is not an option.

Hopefully this lecture has given you a new perspective on titles and hopefully you have some questions that I'm happy to answer in a few minutes. Before I answer the questions, I want to share a few additional resources for further reading.

Additional resources*

[Making it Work: Five Jobs for Poem Titles](#)

[The Title of the Poem](#)

[Finding the Perfect Title for your Work](#)

[How to Title Your Novel](#)

[A Title is Born](#)

*because I have limited time to talk about all this.

Thank you!