Content and phrasing in titles of original articles, reviews and case reports: range of practice in 8 clinical medicine journals in 2014–2015

Mary Ellen KERANS
Freelance authors' editor and translator
Barcelona, Spain
mekerans@gmail.com

Anne MURRAY
Freelance authors' editor and translator
Barbarà de la Conca, Spain
annetrans@gmail.com

Sergi SABATÉ, M.D., PhD
Department of Anaesthesiology
Fundació Puigvert
Barcelona, Spain
sergisabate@gmail.com

Authors and English language supporters need a method for quickly surveying titling practices in journals. This pilot study aims to describe title information-giving and phrasing patterns in 3 types of articles in highly respected general medicine journals, 2 top-ranked specialty journals, and 2 lower-ranked ones in 2014–2015. We chose a single subspecialty, anesthesiology, through which to develop the method and test the following hypothesis: although patterns in high-ranked general medical journals reflect a gold standard that can be safely followed, patterns can differ in the subspecialty journals most researchers target. Original articles were chosen because they are highly prized and are usually the first type novice authors in non-Anglophone settings publish in English; reviews because emerging senior authors prize opportunities to write them, gaining influence among both researchers and clinicians; and case reports because they remain common in non-Anglophone journals, presenting English phrasing problems to be dealt with (e.g. for indexing). The years 2014 and 2015 (6 months each) were chosen because we think patterns have stabilized since the first consensus-driven reporting guideline appeared 15 years ago. We chose to analyze the following features based on a reading of previous studies of title patterns and our experience of difficulties in writing titles: 1) length (words, letters); 2) full-sentence structure (or not); 3) in descriptive (noun-phrase) titles, number of "heads" (content focus points); 4) function words (e.g., articles, prepositions linking "heads"); 5) focus-point content (e.g., topic, design, or other [e.g., setting, group name]); and 6) in multi-part titles, number of parts and punctuation. We will report inter-rater reliability (indicating feasibility; percent agreement and Cohen's κ) and descriptive statistics (for writing or translating guidance), comparing frequencies (χ^2 test). We will also develop a short checklist of features that can be used to quickly grasp practices in different fields or unfamiliar journals.

Biodata

Mary Ellen KERANS, in Barcelona, edits manuscripts for authors and translates for authors and journals. She particularly enjoys working with writers through their many drafts before and after peer review. Her background is in English language teaching, especially ESP and writing in various settings from factory floors to university programs in the health sciences and engineering. She has

an MA in TESOL from Columbia University Teachers College. From 2006 to 2014 she served on the Council of the association Mediterranean Editors and Translators.

Anne MURRAY is a freelance medical translator and author's editor based in Tarragona, Spain. She has a degree in translation from Dublin City University and a foundation certificate in medical writing from the European Medical Writers Association. She has been a Council member of the association Mediterranean Editors and Translators since it was founded in 2006 and is currently its treasurer.

Sergi SABATÉ is an anesthesiologist, researcher, and statistician. He has been involved in several European multicenter studies as a steering committee member and statistician. His PhD is from the Universitat de Barcelona.