

On Titles – An essay

Broadly, there are three ways a piece of writing comes to be named, and the differences say more about the writer's task than they do about the title itself.

The novelist or short story writer names something they've built. Plot, character, image, and theme were chosen, arranged, and revised long before a title was needed, which means the title can reach into material the writer designed and has lived with on purpose.

The essayist names something still in motion. An essay can explore almost anything without needing to resolve it, a passing thought, a mood, a question turned over without ever being fully answered. That freedom is also the problem. If the piece itself hasn't landed anywhere, there's no fixed point for a title to point to, and naming it can feel like trying to label a conversation that's still being had.

The memoirist names something found and then dug into. A memoir tends to focus on a real, often life-changing event, but the writing isn't finished when the event has been recounted, it's finished when the writer has interpreted it, curated it, and pushed past the surface to say what it meant. The title problem here is different from the essayist's. The memoirist usually knows where the piece landed. The difficulty is compressing an entire arc of meaning, built from months or years of lived material, into a phrase that can carry that whole weight on a single line.

Three species, three different reasons a title can be hard to find, and none of the three reasons is a lack of skill.

What a title is actually for

A title is a product name decision before it's anything else. It's the first promise made to a reader, and its job is not to summarize the work but to earn attention for it. Ask what work a title needs to do and the honest answer is almost always the same short list.

It should intrigue, meaning it generates curiosity rather than satisfying it early.

It should signal, meaning it hints at genre and tone before the first page is turned.

And it should stick, meaning a reader can recall it a week later without effort.

Generic, vague, or overly abstract titles fail all three jobs at once. They carry no information a reader can grab onto, so there's nothing to be curious about and nothing to remember. The fix is usually found in these context:

Having at least one load bearing word, a noun or verb specific enough that it couldn't belong to any other story.

Concrete words paired with emotional tends to outperform either alone.

Contrasting words catch the eye the way a wrong note catches the ear. An idiom bent slightly out of its familiar shape reads as fresh precisely because the reader expected the straight version.

Why fiction rarely stalls here

Fiction gives the writer a head start because the writer invented the frame. A location, a character's name, a controlling image, a thematic through-line, these were all chosen. Pulling a title from any of them

is a matter of noticing, not inventing. Genre does quiet work here too. A crime novel or a romance can lean on convention, an object, a role, a place, and still land as fresh, because the reader's genre expectations are doing half the job before the title says a word. If a phrase is lifted from the prose itself, it has to pass one test. Pulled out of context and set alone on a cover, does it still mean something. If it only makes sense to someone who has already read the paragraph it came from, it isn't a title yet, it's still a line.

Why the essayist struggles

The essayist's block is usually not creative, it's diagnostic. A title has to commit to a frame, and an essay that's still exploring hasn't committed to one yet. Reaching for a title too early can even do damage, since naming the piece forces a false resolution onto material that was supposed to stay open. The more useful move is often to keep a working title, something loose and disposable, and treat the real title as the last decision made rather than one of the first. When the essay finally reveals what it's actually circling, the title tends to arrive on its own, because by then there's finally a fixed point to name.

Why the memoirist struggles

The memoirist's difficulty runs the other direction. The meaning has been found, sometimes hard-won over long revision, and the problem is scale. A memoir usually carries multiple threads, a chronology, a relationship, a private reckoning, and a single title has to represent all of it without flattening any one thread into the whole. This is where the tendency to over-explain shows up, a title that tries to summarize the arc instead of gesturing at its center. The stronger move is usually to find the one image or phrase the whole book

keeps returning to, the detail that recurs enough times across the manuscript that it's already functioning as the spine, and let that carry the title instead of trying to build one from scratch.

The part titling advice usually skips

Most title advice treats a title as a single object judged on its own merits, but a title is also read in a specific setting, and that setting changes what it needs to do.

A novel's title has to work alone on a spine or a cover thumbnail, and compete for a browsing reader's attention.

An essay's title has to work sitting inside a table of contents, next to a dozen other titles from the same writer or the same collection, which means it also has to avoid sounding like all the others around it.

A memoir's title has to do the opposite job of an essay collection's, carrying the entire book's promise on one phrase with nothing else nearby to share the weight.

That context test is worth running before calling any title finished. Set it next to the other titles it will actually live beside, on a contents page, a bookshelf, a submissions queue, and ask whether it still stands out for the right reason, or whether it only worked in isolation. A title that survives that company has usually earned its place. One that quietly disappears into the list around it hasn't, no matter how clever it seemed alone on the page.