

Now that we have your attention: Optimising educational technology article titles for impact

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The titles of academic research articles are an increasingly important part of academic publishing, as they have an influence on findability and potential citations, which in turn are the currency of academic impact. However, crafting a strong impactful title for your article is not easy and involves considerable skill and effort. In this editorial, we explore what the research tells us about different key characteristics of article titles and their impact on citations and discoverability. Although the findings are not conclusive, and there are discipline-specific factors involved, we identify key elements that contribute to a potentially impactful title for educational technology-focused papers, including clarity over cleverness, that keywords matter, and the importance of balancing specificity with readability. The concepts and recommendations discussed in this editorial may help you craft a strong title for your next research publication. Your title should not be a laughing matter, nor a rushed afterthought, as it can significantly contribute to making your research visible and engaging to your peers.

Keywords: article titles, academic publishing, educational technology, impact, AJET, editorial

Introduction

What's in a name? William Shakespeare's Juliet suggests, "That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet" (Shakespeare, 1597/2014, 2.2.43–44). Like roses, educational technology research articles come in many varieties. However, it can be argued that the allure of a rose is more likely to be attributed to its physical beauty and scent long before its name may be known. By contrast, the name of a research publication is often the first thing a reader encounters before the quality and relevance of the article are apparent. In the current highly competitive academic publication environment, authors, journals, and institutions strive to increase the impact of research output. This impact is most commonly measured in citations to the work. Therefore, attracting readers to read, engage with, and cite research is a major goal for all stakeholder groups. A key element in attracting attention to a research publication is its title, which makes it vital to get the wording of the title right to ensure that the article is as discoverable and impactful as possible.

The goal of this editorial is to examine what makes an appealing and impactful title for educational technology research publications. To do this, we examine what has been reported in the literature relating to the do's and don'ts for journal article title formulation. We then analyse trends in article titles published

in the Australasian Journal of Educational Technology (AJET) over time and consider how the evolving ways readers now find and interact with academic publications (e.g., via online searches, using artificial intelligence (AI), etc.) may influence the design of article titles into the future. This editorial is part of our ongoing series focusing on educational technology publishing, which has included guidance on choosing the right keywords (Corrin et al., 2022), crafting an impactful abstract (Corrin et al., 2024), and how NOT to get published in educational technology journals (Lodge et al., 2024).

The role of an article title

The title of an academic article is the hook that signals to the reader that the paper is worth reading. It is the first impression that readers encounter when discovering the article and it is a key element referenced by search engines and scholarly databases. In other words, it is what makes an article discoverable and attracts readers to engage further with the work. For journal editors, the clarity of a title is important in guiding decision-making during the first stage of editorial review, especially in relation to whether the focus of the article fits within the scope of the journal.

In educational technology research, a title should signal not only the technology that is the focus of a study, but also the pedagogical and/or methodological frame with which the technology is explored. Very little has been written about how to write a good title specifically targeted at the field of educational technology. With the number of researchers, publications, and submissions rapidly increasing in this field (Feng et al., 2025; To & Yu, 2020), it is as important as ever to ensure that readers can find relevant and significant research in such a crowded space. To date, no specific guidance has been given in the AJET submission guidelines as to the recommended content or structure of a good title for articles published in the journal. This editorial is therefore designed to fill that gap by drawing on an exploration of the academic publishing literature and requirements of other journals in the educational technology field to determine what makes a good title that maximises both discoverability and impact.

There are several academic article title types that are recognised in the literature, including:

- **Informative/Descriptive:** This is one of the most common forms of title for research papers and captures the core focus, sample, and intervention of the study without revealing the main conclusions (Rossi & Brand, 2020).
- **Declarative:** A declarative title boldly states the primary conclusion in the headline. Titles that present results or conclusions have been shown to be associated with higher citations (Rossi & Brand, 2020). In the field of biomedicine, articles with declarative titles have been shown to be cited more often than articles with titles that included method description (Paiva et al., 2012).
- **Interrogative:** An interrogative title poses a question to spark curiosity. In some cases, it may also reveal the hypothesis of a study (Rossi & Brand, 2020). While the use of interrogative titles has increased over time, they still only make up a small proportion of title types (Milojevic, 2017).
- **Compound:** A compound title is made up of more than one of the above categories and is most commonly linked with a colon or dash. For example, the title could start with a catchy overarching phrase followed by a description of the structural context, such as, ""But they won't come to lectures ..." The impact of audio recorded lectures on student experience and attendance" (Larkin, 2010). Alternatively, the title could be split between the context and the methodology, such as "The use of virtual patient simulations in psychology: A scoping review" (Imam Hossain et al., 2024).

What does the evidence say?

A challenge in bringing together evidence on what makes a good title from across the literature is that there is no universal agreement on what the key elements of an ideal title should be. In fact, there are often contradictory findings around the relationship between title elements and impact, which can vary across disciplines and publications (Donovan, 2026). The direct relationship of title design to discovery and impact is also difficult to determine due to confounding factors such as the field, journal impact factor,

content, and authors of the work (Long et al., 2024). In the absence of an ideal title formula, especially one directly related to the field of educational technology research, we have compiled findings from across the literature, bringing together observations from a variety of disciplines and publications. We also examined guidance for authors available on the websites of the Google Scholar ranked top 10 educational technology journals to see what directions they provide for title design and identified seven common elements of research article titles.

Length

The length of a title is one of the most commonly examined features in relation to predictive association with impact in the form of citation rates. Several studies have shown that articles with shorter titles have been downloaded and cited more often than those with longer titles (e.g., Paiva et al., 2012; Subotic & Mukherjee, 2014). However, other studies have shown the opposite effect, particularly in the field of medicine (e.g., Jacques & Sebire, 2010). In their guidance to authors, none of the top 10 educational technology journals specified a minimum or maximum length for the title of articles, other than to say that article titles should be “concise” or “short” (stated in 5 out of 10 journals). The instructions for authors for the journal *Interactive Learning Environments* include advice to avoid using phrases such as “investigation of” or “study of” in an effort to reduce the number of words in a title. In an article on titles published in an Orthopaedics and Sports Medicine journal, it was recommended that 14 to 16 words should be the maximum length of an article title (Rossi & Brand, 2020). Article length also matters in order to get work published in the first place, with a study of article title length in the field of ecology and evolution indicating that articles with an intermediate word length (i.e., between 10 and 13 words) were more likely to be sent for peer review (Fox & Burns, 2015).

Questions

Interrogative article titles usually incorporate some form of question to pique the interest of the reader. However, the use of questions within a title can be associated with lower citations (Paiva et al., 2012) or no significant impacts (Tran et al., 2024). In a study of over 5,000 titles across six disciplines, it was found that interrogative titles were most common in the education discipline with 23.6% of titles incorporating a question (Hyland & Zou, 2022). In a study of titles in linguistics and literature research, it was found that titles incorporating questions tended to foreground elements of the study such as variables, phenomena, or the research problem addressed in the article, whereas articles titles expressed as a statement focused more on thematic arguments or interpretive outcomes (Chodhary & Ahmad, 2026). In defence of the use of questions in titles, Hyland and Zou (2022) have argued that questions in titles “exploit the interactivity of familiar conversational discourses and have the impact to grab the reader at the outset with an arresting directness and to demand attention with a striking expression” (p. 6).

Humour and cultural references

It is tempting to assume that the use of humour in an article title would more likely attract the attention of readers, ultimately leading to higher citations. However, the reality is far more complicated. In a study of 2,439 articles published in ecology and evolution journals, it was reported that only 17% of article titles contained humour and that the number of citations declined as the humour score increased (Heard et al., 2023). A similar finding was apparent in a study of psychology articles where title amusement level led to a slight increase in article downloads, but no association was found with citations (Subotic & Mukherjee, 2014). Instead, there is a risk when using humour in a title that the reader may assume that the work is frivolous or lack credibility (Francl, 2014). Another challenge of this approach is that humour, along with irony and cultural references, may be difficult for non-native speakers to understand and therefore should be used with care or avoided altogether (Hartley, 2007; Heard et al., 2023). An example of a title that includes humour and cultural reference, published in AJET, was “Smartphones give you wings: Pedagogical affordances of mobile Web 2.0” (Cochrane & Bateman, 2010). This title references the famous marketing campaign used by the Red Bull drinks company, although this reference to Red Bull is only evident in the title and is not further explained in the article itself. In the media and communication field, titles including catchphrases have been associated with lower engagement (Tran et al., 2024). Recent research has also

shown that using generative AI to generate humorous titles can also be difficult as the models were found to underperform humans in creating title puns (Chen & Eger, 2023). It is therefore recommended that authors should avoid such catchphrases, as well as sensational language and unnecessary jargon in their titles, to maximise potential for impact.

Special characters

The evidence in relation to the use of special characters, such as colons, dashes, periods, and semicolons, has been mixed and can be very discipline dependent (Donovan, 2025). In one study, there were 29 different non-alphanumeric characters found to be included across article titles (Buter & Van Raan, 2011). One of the most commonly used special characters in titles is the colon (Milojevic, 2017). The first use of a colon in a research article has been attributed to an article published in 1886 by Henry Alfred Todd titled “Guillaume de Dole: An unpublished old French romance”. Subsequently, some have claimed that use of a colon in a title is “a mark of scholarly distinction” and “an indicator of scholarly complexity” (Dillon, 1982, p. 94). In a review of studies on the impact of the colon in titles, it was found that across 14 disciplines the colon was associated with higher citations in nine disciplines, with only one discipline (biomedical research) finding a negative correlation (Donovan, 2026). A study in the discipline of media and communications found that colon use was associated with increased publication metrics (Tran et al., 2024). The finding in relation to other special characters has been mixed, with some negative associations found (e.g., Nair & Gibbert, 2016). Over time, non-alphanumeric characters have been found to play less of a role in search optimisation as greater scanning of keywords, abstract, and full text of papers became available (Nair & Gibbert, 2016).

Geographic location

The inclusion of geographic locations, whether they be continents, countries, or other regions are often associated with fewer citations (Paiva et al., 2012; Tran et al., 2024). Recommendations for title writing often advise caution in the use of geographical locations as they may suggest limited applicability of the research to other contexts (Abramo et al., 2016). A move to denationalise the titles of journals over the last 60 years to increase international visibility also aligns with this advice (Khelfaoui & Gingras, 2025). If the location of the research study is absolutely central to the outcomes, then the use of geographical location may be appropriate. However, in an ever-increasing global publishing environment, the ability of authors to show the broader applicability of findings from their research is something that journals look for in their editorial review processes.

Acronyms

Generally, acronyms in titles are discouraged unless they are universally recognised. However, in medical disciplines, the inclusion of acronyms in article titles is associated with higher citations (Jacques & Sebire, 2010). In the top 10 educational technology journals, several journals provide statements like “Please avoid abbreviations and formulae, where possible, unless they are established and widely understood, e.g. DNA.” (e.g., *Computers & Education*; *Computers & Education: Artificial Intelligence*) to discourage acronym inclusion. The *British Journal of Educational Technology* (BJET) and *Interactive Learning Environments* specifically prohibit the use of acronyms. However, in the most recent two issues of BJET several acronyms have been used. These include AI (artificial intelligence), GenAI (generative AI), and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), which could be said to fit the criteria of being widely understood, although there were also articles that used the acronyms LMICs (low- and middle-income countries) and DIKSHA (digital infrastructure for knowledge sharing), which may be far less recognisable.

Keywords

As a title is often one of the main elements of an article that is indexed by academic databases and used by search engines, it is important to include keywords related to the study in the title. Research has shown that there is strong evidence that the inclusion of keywords in titles can enhance discoverability (Rossi &

Brand, 2020). In our editorial on choosing the right keywords (Corrin et al., 2022), we discovered that some journals actively encourage authors to incorporate keywords into article titles, while others do not. For example, BJET recommends “a short informative title containing the major key words”, while the guidelines for *Interactive Learning Environments* include that the title should “Incorporate the keywords, so that the article is more likely to be included in the results for relevant online searches”. For the purpose of optimising an article’s discoverability by search engines, it is recommended that authors incorporate keywords in the title wherever possible but not at the expense of clarity and cohesiveness. It is also important to consider when incorporating humour, quotations, or catchphrases, how far these words are removed from the key elements of the research that is being presented and whether or not it would be better to make the title more targeted towards the keywords so as not to distract from the main message of the research.

An analysis of article titles in AJET over time

This analysis of the literature led us to explore trends in title design in articles published in AJET over the last 41 years that the journal has been in production. We compiled a list of all published articles over this period, excluding editorials and book reviews. This resulted in a sample of 1,452 articles published between 1985 and 2026 (including papers that are in early release as at the end of July 2026).

The first element we explored was the length of titles of AJET articles over time. The overall average length of article titles in AJET across time is 12.5 words or 94.6 characters. The shortest AJET article title is “Drama online” (Nicholls & Philip, 2001) which reported on the outcomes of evaluation of an online collaborative assignment incorporated into a first-year drama unit. The longest AJET article title is “Examining self-regulated learning as a significant mediator among social presence, cognitive presence, and learning satisfaction in an asynchronous online course: A partial least squares structural equation modelling approach” (Hu et al., 2023) at 225 characters long. This title gives a complete description of the goal of the study and, as a compound title using a colon, also includes details of the method. It can be seen from the analysis of average title word counts, presented in Figure 1, that average word counts have steadily increased over time. The growth in length of titles in academic publishing more generally has been attributed to several possible reasons including search engine optimisation, as well as an association between longer titles and the increase in larger authorship teams (Hyland & Zou, 2022).

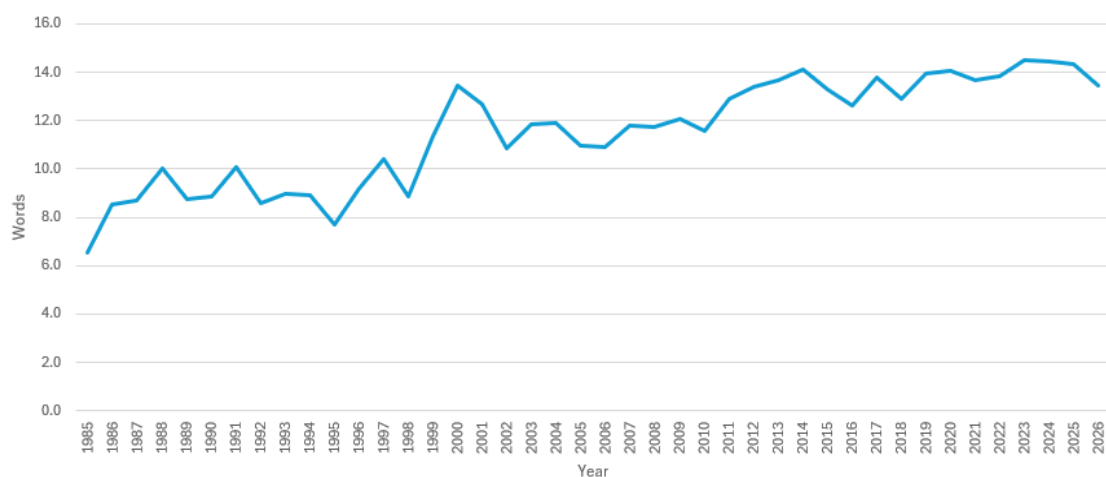


Figure 1. The average AJET article title length in words over time

In terms of special characters, the colon is by far the most common special character used in AJET article titles, being present in 49.9% (724 out of 1,452) of titles. Figure 2a shows that the use of the colon has increased substantially in recent years with over 80% of titles including a colon in 2025. A spike in colon use was first observed around the year 2000, which is when an initial increase in title length was first observed (see Figure 1). It is not clear what prompted the increase in colon use nor did we find a

statistically significant association between length and colon use over time. The next most commonly used special character after the colon is the question mark in 6% of titles, followed by the dash (em dash and en dash) in 0.8% and the exclamation point in 0.01% of titles. Interestingly, the question mark was more commonly used during some, but not all, of the earlier years of AJET (pre-2000) as can be seen in Figure 2b.

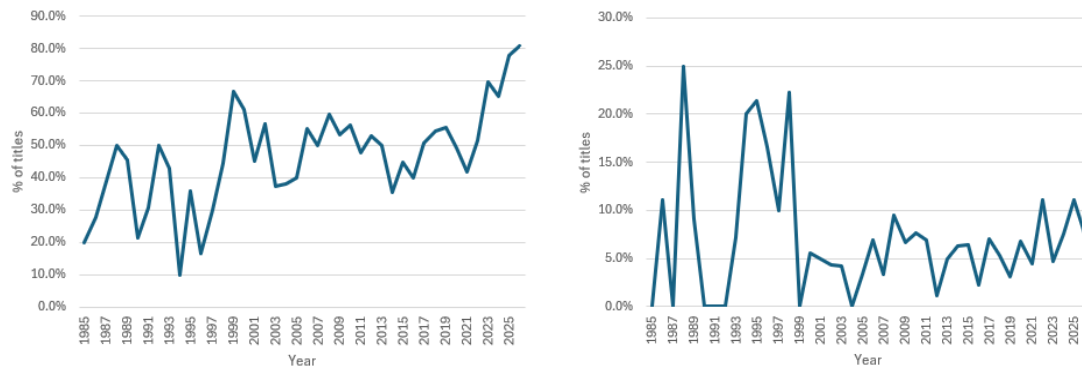


Figure 2. (a) AJET titles containing a colon; and (b) AJET titles containing a question mark

The 15 most frequently used words in AJET article titles include learning (41%), education (17%), students or student (25%), online (15%), teachers or teacher (14%), technology (10%), teaching (7%), higher (7%), design (7%), university (6%), educational (6%), digital (5%), and development (5%). In terms of geographical location, 12.5% (182) of titles included either a place name (e.g., Australia, China, Singapore, Queensland, Perth, Shanghai, Tanzania, etc.) or demonym form (e.g., Australian, Chinese, Malaysian, Taiwanese, Asian, European, Victorian, etc.). The most frequently mentioned geographical locations were Australia/Australian (55), China/Chinese (24), New Zealand (8), Malaysia/Malaysian (12), Singapore (7), Taiwan/Taiwanese (11).

Table 1 contains the top 10 most cited AJET articles ranked by Scopus. It is interesting to note that 80% of these titles are compound titles, with 7 of the 8 compound titles using a colon. The most cited article title contains both a colon and question mark. Eight of the titles contain information about the sample and/or educational context, which is a useful indicator to readers that the article will relate to their own context (e.g., higher education, university, college, etc.). Only one title includes a geographic placename. Interestingly, only two of the titles contain the name of a specific technology (e.g., Facebook), with authors more commonly using broader category labels to indicate the technology in question such as mobile, podcasting, Web 2.0, or e-portfolio system.

When compared with a list of the most commonly viewed and downloaded articles on the AJET website (see Table 2), we observed that only four articles are included in both lists. While none of the articles in Table 1 contained humour or cultural references, the third most viewed title in Table 2 contains a reference to a pop culture catchphrase ("Stop! Hammer time!"), albeit one that was almost 30 years old at the time of publication. This is consistent with the finding that the use of cultural references may attract viewing attention, but this may not translate into ultimate citations (Heard et al., 2023).

Table 1

Top 10 most cited AJET articles (according to Scopus in August 2026)

Title	Year	Citations
First year students' experiences with technology: Are they really digital natives?	2008	744
Personalised and self regulated learning in the Web 2.0 era: International exemplars of innovative pedagogy using social software	2010	632
Blended learning in higher education: Three different design approaches	2014	287
A review of podcasting in higher education: Its influence on the traditional lecture	2009	283
Pre-service teachers' attitudes towards computer use: A Singapore survey	2008	275

Title	Year	Citations
Perceived convenience in an extended technology acceptance model: Mobile technology and English learning for college students	2012	271
Can Web 2.0 technology assist college students in learning English writing?	2011	269
Integrating Facebook and peer assessment with blended learning		
Learning about problem based learning: Student teachers integrating technology, pedagogy and content knowledge	2009	247
Analysis of the technology acceptance model in examining students' behavioural intention to use an e-portfolio system	2011	238
Students' perceptions of using Facebook as an interactive learning resource at university	2012	231

Table 2

Top 10 most viewed and downloaded AJET articles on the AJET website

Title	Year	Abstract & file views
Blended learning in higher education: Three different design approaches*	2014	62,198
Facilitating student engagement through educational technology in higher education: A systematic review in the field of arts and humanities	2020	45,462
Stop! Grammar time: University students' perceptions of the automated feedback program Grammarly	2019	44,564
First year students' experiences with technology: Are they really digital natives?*	2008	43,230
Personalised and self regulated learning in the Web 2.0 era: International exemplars of innovative pedagogy using social software*	2010	37,758
Patterns of engagement in authentic online learning environments	2003	37,076
The importance of choosing the right keywords for educational technology publications (Editorial)	2022	35,831
Bullying in the new playground: Research into cyberbullying and cyber victimisation	2007	35,485
Older, online and first: Recommendations for retention and success	2019	34,647
Analysis of the technology acceptance model in examining students' behavioural intention to use an e-portfolio system*	2011	33,756

*Titles that are included in both in Table 1 and Table 2.

So, given the evidence presented so far, which is certainly not clear cut, what constitutes a good title for an educational technology paper?

What makes a good title for educational technology research?

As we have seen, there is no single formula that determines what makes a good and impactful title for educational technology research articles. In our investigation of guidance from other educational technology journals and studies in the area, it has become apparent that title design is not something that has been examined in this field as much as it has been in other disciplines, especially medical and medical-related fields. Based on the literature on title design and the trends present in AJET articles over time, we have distilled our findings into three key recommendations for title design.

Clarity over cleverness

A clever title is always a pleasure to read. However, the research indicates that cleverness can sometimes work against discoverability and impact. Care should be taken when incorporating humour, cultural references, or wordplay, which may not stand the test of time nor be fully understood by readers who are reading articles outside their first language. An article title should focus on what the article is about, and excess placeholder phrases such as “a study of ...” or “investigations into ...” should be avoided. As

more concise titles have been shown to be associated with high citation rates, it would be advisable to use a subtitle only when it adds real information, as compound titles tend to add length to a title.

An example of a recent clever title for an AJET article is “Beyond artificial encouragement: Why pre-service teachers value critical over positive feedback” (Thomson et al., 2026). This article is about a mixed methods study of the differences in feedback given by humans versus generative AI, in terms of quality and students’ preferences. The title contains clever wordplay by incorporating the word “artificial” which hints at the presence of AI in the study. Although, from a search engine optimisation perspective, this may not be an easily discoverable title as the full term “artificial intelligence” or “AI” is not used in the title. However, as most search engines would use both the title and the keywords (and possibly also the abstract) in a search query, the article would still be discovered as the keywords for the article include “generative artificial intelligence (GenAI)”.

One way to assess whether a title is clear is to consider whether someone new to the field would understand the title. It is also important not to sensationalise or present misleading information in an effort to attract more readers (Rossi & Burke, 2020). Recent research has shown that the use of clickbait-style titles in academic articles often results in a negative impact on citation metrics (Zhu et al., 2023). As Rossi and Brand (2020) observed, “Simply put, the title must put it simply” (p. 2025).

Keywords matter

The inclusion of keywords in an article title can enhance discoverability. With articles increasingly being found through the use of search engines, academic databases, and AI, ensuring that keywords feature in the title will help these articles to be found. AJET makes use of the *American Psychological Association* (APA) Style Guide (7th ed.) to guide the formatting of articles. In the guidelines for title writing, the APA states that, “There is no maximum length for titles; however, keep titles focused and include key terms.” (APA, n.d.).

It is important to note that some search engines, such as Google Scholar, will rely on information that is freely available on the Internet, such as the title and citations, to determine the relevance of an article to the search terms when putting together an ordered list of results (Rossi & Brand, 2020). The use of clear and widely accepted names for technologies, methods, theories, and contexts is therefore very important in helping these technologies to identify what should be found and the relevance. Authors should avoid cultural references or buzzwords that may lose their relevance over time, unless they genuinely represent the study. Minimising words that are not relevant to the article content and outcomes in favour of incorporating keywords will result in a more discoverable title with greater potential for long-term engagement.

Balance specificity with readability

It is important that a title contains enough detail to be understandable, but it should not be so detailed that it becomes hard to read. Authors should aim for a clear descriptive core that maintains a conceptual focus rather than being too specific (Fox & Burns, 2015). For example, as discussed above, it is better to avoid unnecessary place name specificity unless the geographic location is conceptually essential to the purpose of the article. Similarly, if the focus of the paper relates to a more obscure topic, choosing a title that reflects the wider lessons that come from the research can make the article more appealing to readers (Rossi & Brand, 2020). It is a delicate art to find just the right amount of detail to incorporate in a title so that it is discoverable, but does not become overwhelming to the reader. Making use of keywords and abstracts to provide this further detail is one way to ensure that the title remains appropriate and enticing.

Conclusion

Writing a good title is a key research communication skill for all researchers. In the current competitive academic publishing environment, ensuring that a paper can be found and attracts the attention of the right readers through the use of a good title is more important than ever. However, while the ability to enhance an article's impact is important, it is not just about citations. The key goal of a title is to make sure potential readers can recognise that the paper is worth engaging with for whatever purpose they require. Nevertheless, it is also important to consider the ways in which researchers and readers are able to find the article in the first place, especially now that AI is playing a bigger role in search tool operations, academic databases, and bespoke AI research agents. This challenges authors to devise titles that are as findable and understandable to a machine as they are to a human. The result may be fewer witty, clever titles in the future. However, there are still ways to be creative that can be universally understood, so there is still hope.

So, how does this editorial perform in terms of its title design? It is a compound title that is 13 words long – so it is close to the average length for an AJET article. The first part of the title was designed as a deliberate hook to get readers' attention, quite literally through the use of the word "attention". It could be argued that the first part is unnecessary from a search optimisation perspective, but we felt that it provided some creativity that might appeal to readers. The second part of the title sets out the goal and context, yet we have not included any indication of the methodology used or that this is an editorial, so as not to make the title too long. The title has been carefully aligned to incorporate several keywords associated with the content of the article, including "educational technology", "article titles", and "impact". Only time will tell if this editorial will be impactful, and its title is only one factor in getting readers to engage with the editorial as a whole. But this examination of the complexity of title design in academic publishing has focused our interest on how we can better work with our authors to ensure that articles have optimal titles to attract attention to the quality work AJET publishes. This is valuable information that we will incorporate into our guidelines for authors in the near future.

Author contributions

Linda Corrin: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Writing – original draft; **Henk Huijser:** Writing - review and editing; **Feifei Han:** Writing – review and editing; **Chris Deneen:** Writing – review and editing.

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