

# Science Papers with Simple Headlines Are More Likely to Go Viral



By Alex Berezow — June 26, 2017



Credit: Shutterstock [1]

Whether they like to admit it or not, scientists want to have a broad impact on society. Sure, recognition from other academics is nice, but most scientists would prefer to see their research splashed across the front pages of the *New York Times* and BBC News. How does one achieve that?

Obviously, it helps to have compelling research. As a general rule, the public thinks that aliens and dinosaurs are inherently more interesting than the sex lives of slugs. But new data suggests another important factor: Research papers should be given simple titles\*.

Two European scientists examined the titles of 108 medical and health science papers that were ranked in the Altmetric Top 100 from 2013 to 2015. ([Altmetric](#) [2] is a service that assigns a score to a paper based on how much buzz it creates on social media and in the news.) Then, they compared these titles to those of 216 other papers that were randomly selected from the same journals.

The authors analyzed three different variables: The length of the title (measured as the total number of characters); the number of uncommon words used in the title; and whether the title was "declarative" (defined as a title that stated the main finding of the research and used an action verb).

Their results showed that the titles of the Altmetric Top 100 papers were likelier to be shorter (102.6 characters vs. 109.3), to use fewer uncommon words (3.4 vs. 4.7), and to be declarative (29.6% vs. 21.8%). The authors went on to say that "declarative titles hav[e] 2.8 times the odds of being in the top list," and that "for each uncommon word increase in the title, there was a 1.4

increase in the odds of not being in the Altmetric top 100."

## **Keep It Simple, Stupid**

When I was in graduate school, my mentor told me that there is no such thing as a statement that is too obvious. What is obvious to me may not be obvious to anyone else. Therefore, explain everything as if your audience has no clue as to what you're talking about... because in all likelihood, they don't.

Whether you're a journalist, scientist, or layperson, the KISS method (Keep It Simple, Stupid) appears to be an effective strategy for getting your message across.

*\*Note: Perhaps this is why [my first paper](#) [3] (entitled "The structurally similar, penta-acylated lipopolysaccharides of Porphyromonas gingivalis and Bacteroides elicit strikingly different innate immune responses") never received the international attention it so rightly deserved.*

**Source** [4]: Nicola Di Girolamo, Reint Meursing Reynders. "Health care articles with simple and declarative titles were more likely to be in the Altmetric Top 100." *J Clin Epidemiol* 85: 32-36. Published: May 2017.

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