Do the Written Words Support and Describe the Spoken Ones? Part 1: The Title and Description



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When people read the title and description of your presentation, do they know what you will be speaking about or are they left wondering? How about when they read your accompanying written information: does it complement your presentation, give different or contradictory information, or provide nothing additional at all (other than a reduction in trees)? Sometimes it is hard to answer these questions. Getting feedback from others is really the best assessment (a good reason to be involved in the Genealogical Speakers Guild and to network with others). Let's take a brief look at these two "written" elements of the presenter's work in two parts. In this issue of *Speak!* I will focus on the lecture title and description (usually used in promotional material or the conference program) and in the August issue I will examine elements of the syllabus or handout material.

The title is usually your audience's first exposure to your topic. If you are speaking at a large seminar, sometimes there is nothing more than the title for a prospective attendee to use to judge whether or not your lecture will be useful. Consider a title such as "Computers: The Genealogist's Friends."* What sorts of things might be covered in such a lecture? Offhand I'd think: how to use a computer, how to buy a computer, different computer options, transferring paper records to the computer, etc. If I am already using a computer to do my genealogy, I doubt I would consider attending this presentation. If I found out later that it dealt with the latest innovations expected in the technology world and how they will be useful to genealogists, I might regret my decision. A better title: "Computers as Genealogy Tools: What's Ahead in the Next Five Years." Now I know a little more about what to expect.

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On the other hand, a title that promises more than will be delivered is equally deceptive: "How Computers will Benefit Genealogists in the Next Five Years" promises something about the ways in which technology will advance. If the presentation is a beginning computer use program or one on a specific brand of computer, I may consider my time was wasted. We have all been there: I have heard many people (usually in the restroom) complaining, "That wasn't what I expected. I thought I was going to learn *how* to use a computer, not what brand I should buy. It was nothing more than a sales pitch!" When you develop your title, consider having a "working title" (the one you use while you create the presentation) and then a "final title" (the one that clearly tells what is being presented). Yes, these may end up being the same, but allow yourself the latitude to make changes.

Even when a presentation is marked "beginner," it helps when your title implies that it is for the genealogist who is just starting out. I have a presentation titled "This is *Not* Your Grandmother's Genealogy: Making the Transition from Paper to Electronic Record Keeping." The title should be clear enough to tell people that it is for genealogists of all levels who are not yet keeping their records on computers. Yet I still get the occasional attendee who is upset that I am not going to explain how to use a computer or provide detailed specifics on organizing files. So in the presentation description, I clarify what will be covered and that clarification is also reiterated in the first couple of slides of the program so that people who want something a little more advanced can slip out.

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* Titles used here are the product of the author's imagination and any connection to titles used in actual presentations, past or present, is purely coincidental.

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Most seminar organizers allow a limited number of words to be used in the description of a talk and some require the total number of words to *include* the title. In this latter case, you don't want to repeat yourself (e.g., if you are allowed only twenty-five words for title and description, avoid repetition).

Instead of

> DOES SIZE MATTER? THE PROS AND CONS OF NETBOOKS
> The popularity of the compact netbook is appealing; this lecture will examine the advantages and disadvantages.

try

> DOES SIZE MATTER? THE PROS AND CONS OF NETBOOKS
> Keyboards, screens, price, memory, and speed all should be considered when selecting a portable computer.

In the second example, the prospective attendee knows what aspects of netbooks will be discussed. This promotion is detailed enough to weed out audience members who have already made their choice or who are interested in other aspects of netbook use. You want every word to work for you.

Many people like the title format of main title and subtitle (such as the one above, with "Does Size Matter?" as the main title, catching the reader's eye, and "The Pros and Cons of Netbooks" being the subtitle that supports and clarifies what the first phrase is referring to). There is an advantage to this, as just alluded to: the first words get attention and usually will drag the person's gaze to what will be discussed. But there is also a disadvantage. In some situations, the promotional material has room for only a very few words. (Hopefully the promoter will give you a word limit, but I've found that is not always the case.) When my lecture "This is *Not* Your Grandma's Genealogy" is shortened to just those six words, no one has any idea what it will cover; and if there is no description included, there is bound to be disappointment. In those cases (and I try to find out about the restrictions in advance), I ask that they promote the lecture as "Making the Transition between Paper and Electronic Record Keeping" instead. Everyone is happier (except perhaps the printer who has to deal with a few more words).

Some presenters prefer to reverse the two-tiered title, with the specific description coming first, followed by the "cutesy" phrase (e.g., "Making the Transition between Paper and Electronic Record Keeping: This is *Not* Your Grandma's Genealogy"). The problem with that, of course, is that the whole purpose of the double title is to have something catch attention and then let other information support and clarify it. If you are in a position where the word count is crucial, I would recommend using all the words to convey information and forget about using attention-getters. My presentation on interviewing is simply called "The Two Sides of Interviewing." This leaves me lots of space to clarify what is meant by "two sides" and provide an overview that will be strictly informative.

Finally, I am one who believes in peer feedback. One of the reasons for organizations such as ours is for us to help each other. I hurt for one of my colleagues about whom I have heard negative remarks (such as those mentioned in the beginning of this article) because the communication was unclear when they presented their title and description to a selection committee. No one on the committee is going to help you rewrite a poorly worded description or an ambiguous title, so seek feedback from your peers. Let's help each other to be the best speakers, as well as good representatives of the Genealogical Speakers Guild.

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