

## Study Nicknames

By Norman M. Goldfarb

Most clinical trial names, particularly those of pharmaceutical and medical device interventional studies, are long, technical and opaque to the public. Some investigators therefore create nicknames for their studies that are short, nontechnical and meaningful. Potential study participants (and others) should assess the merits of a study based on its substance, but an appealing — or unappealing — study name must surely influence some people.

To assess the merits of a study nickname, a study sponsor can ask how it sounds in the context of two common questions:

- A physician asks a patient, "How would you like to be in the \_\_\_\_ study?"
- A potential study participant asks a friend, "I'm thinking of joining the \_\_\_\_ study."

Further, physicians, study coordinators, and possibly even FDA personnel might not be immune to the charm, or lack thereof, of a study nickname.

As of January 24, 2016, ClinicalTrials.gov listed 205,960 studies. Twenty-three percent of studies include data in the Acronym field. However, many of the entries in this field are not actually acronyms (words formed from the initial letters or groups of letters of words in a series of words). Many, instead, are serial numbers or codes like 6604, 02VNS2009, 7vPCV and AC105. Many others are merely inspired by the study name or entirely unrelated to the study name. Thus, these "acronyms" are better classified as *nicknames*.

This article analyzes a sample of 3,305 representative study nicknames, most of which are actual words (i.e., in dictionaries) or are similar to actual words. Readers can use this article for guidance in creating nicknames for their own studies.

Study nicknames are not unique, far from it. Table 1 presents the 10 most popular nicknames:

**Table 1. Most Popular Study Nicknames**

Nickname	# of Uses	# of Uses including Additional Text
IMPACT	39	72
SMART	38	90
STAR	31	94
START	27	59
FAST	26	87
ASPIRE	23	28
ADAPT	22	32
CARE	22	158
EPIC	22	41
POEM	20	27

Most nicknames are in all-caps, but some are not, e.g., Anaconda, CaSHeW and tnAcity. Mixed upper and lower case letters might indicate the presence of a true or close acronym, as do nicknames that are akin to real words, e.g., CLOCS, OBAAMA and LAANTERN.

This article does not assess the memorability of study nicknames, but memorability varies widely, from the memorable OUCH, to the unmemorable DURATION, to the impossible-to-remember ESoQoLiO.

Another characteristic of many study nicknames is that they are verbs that encourage patients to participate (e.g., BELIEVE, DREAM, EMBARK), suggest the study will act in a positive way on participants (e.g., ACCLAIM, BENEFIT, CURES), or indicate that the study will have a significant impact (e.g., ASSURE, DISCOVER, UNRAVEL).

The appeal of a nickname is highly dependent on a person's knowledge and attitudes. For example, the DROPSY study should appeal to people who are familiar with the word and have the condition (now known as edema). It might also appeal to people who think the word is cute. However, it probably will not appeal to people who are familiar with the word but do not have edema. As it turns out, DROPSY is the nickname for The Darlington Retrospective Outpatient Study, an observational study of the diagnosis, management and outcome of patients with heart failure. A common symptom of congestive heart failure is edema.

The author has subjectively classified the study nicknames based on their level of appeal, from Very Appealing to Very Unappealing, as summarized in Table 2:

**Table 2. Study Nickname Appeal**

<b>Appeal</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
(5) Very Appealing	252	7.6%
(4) Appealing	446	13.5%
(3) Neutral	2,284	69.1%
(2) Unappealing	219	6.6%
(1) Very Unappealing/Questionable	105	3.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,305</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

The average level of appeal is 3.2, slightly higher than neutral, but the level of appeal varies widely. The 252 Very Appealing nicknames strongly support patient recruitment, but some of these nicknames (e.g., BEAT-HIV, CURE, HEAL, NICEGUT and SVELTE) raise ethical issues because they suggest that patients will directly benefit from participating in the study. It is not ethical to advertise a study by claiming, for example, that it will heal participants with hepatic encephalopathy, so how can it be ethical to advertise the HEAL study for hepatic encephalopathy?

Other nicknames (e.g., AMIGO, AMAZING, CHAMP, WISDOM, EMBRACE and WeLCoMe) suggest the study is a particularly good one, appeal to the patient's self-esteem, or encourage the patient to apply. What young girl would not want to participate in the UNICORN study?

However, it is hard to explain the 105 Very Unappealing nicknames like BEWARE, HYPE, FAKIR, KUDZU and LABARFA. In some cases, the author might not be aware of the context. In other cases, the investigator might not know a meaning of a nickname, especially if it is slang, e.g., DIPSTICK. The DIPSTICK study, Spot Urinary Analysis to Assess Loop Diuretic

Efficiency in Stable Heart Failure, probably uses a dipstick to test the urine. In other cases, the investigator might place a high priority on finding a clever, meaningful or memorable name and a low priority on its appeal to potential study participants. For example, the nickname BOOP is memorable and might refer to the beloved cartoon character, Betty Boop, but do you want to tell your friends you are in the BOOP study?

Study nicknames that describe a medical condition, medical treatment, or part of the body can appeal to patients with a relevant disease.

Google Translate can be used to check meaning in multiple languages. For example, SOURIS means “mouse” in French. SURNUT means “cadaver” in Estonian. BATAR means “sink” in Turkish and is also a type of rocket launcher developed by Hamas during the Palestinian intifada. Of course, unfortunate meanings in obscure languages like Esperanto have limited significance.

The author has also classified the study nicknames by the categories in Table 3. (Caveats: Many nicknames fit into two or more categories. Compound nicknames (e.g., SmartABC, Large\_Vx and MAGNABULATE I) were largely ignored. Only a small percentage of “Hard to remember,” “Akin to a real word,” and “Not a real word” nicknames were drawn for the sample.)

**Table 3. Study Nickname Counts and Appeal by Category**

Category	Examples	Count	Appeal
<b>Special</b>			
Inspirational & motivational	BRAVO, CHAMPION, HEROICS	170	4.7
Friendly & welcoming	2Gether, BELONG, InVited	35	4.3
Cute & clever	ACTFAST, BConvinced, BEAR SMART	134	3.2
Intriguing	Brain-Muscle, MicroGiant, SCHIZOBAT	77	3.3
Rhyming	MARFANSARTAN, MUFA PUFA, ROLOCO	11	3.0
Three-letter	MOM, VIP, YEP	77	3.2
Foreign	AFICIANADO, AMICUS, CAPITA	163	3.0
Hard to remember	CSiABTEC, ESoQoLiO, PHYSACTINMS	10	1.0
Akin to a real word	ACCES, AKROBATS, AL1ITER	165	3.0
Not a real word	BRAFETO, CADIRIS, CANABIC	16	2.6
<b>Medical &amp; Study</b>			
Study benefits	ADVANTAGE, ANTIPAIN, HEALTH	59	4.7
Medical treatments	DILATE, ELIXIER, NUTRITION	31	3.2
Medical conditions	ADDICT, CRAMPS, ISCHEMIA	16	3.8
Body & mind	ABDOMEN, AORTA, ConsCIOUS	55	3.0
Study elements & characteristics	BASELINE, DURATION, REGIMEN	31	3.0
Data, analysis & results	CHARACTERIZE, DISCERN, MEDIAN	68	3.0
<b>Names</b>			
Historical figures	ALCAPONE, ARISTOTLE, DANTE	66	3.0
Fictional characters	ALADIN, DORIAN, RAMBO	30	3.3
Female	ALICE, DAGMAR, EMILIA	61	3.0
Male	BENEDICT, CASPER, DIEGO	24	3.0
<b>Mythology &amp; Religion</b>			
Biblical	ADAM, BALTAZAR, MAGDALENA	10	3.1
Greek	ACHILLES, ADONIS, CHIRON	45	2.8
Roman	CASTOR, JUNO, MARS	11	3.1
Other	HORUS, MANTICORE, MORDOR	9	3.3
<b>Places</b>			
Cities	ATHENS, ODESSA, RENO	129	2.9
Countries	FRANCE, NEPAL, PERU	9	3.0
Regions	AFRICA, ARCTIC, THRACE	18	3.0
Geographical features	BEACH, CITY, PInNACLE	29	3.0
Holiday destinations	BALI, MT FUJI, SPHINX	23	3.0

<b>Animals</b>			
Mammals	AARDVARK, BADGER, BEAGLE	37	3.2
Birds	ALBATROSS, CANARY, CARDINAL	21	3.1
Sea creatures	CORAL, OCTOPUS, SHARK	8	2.4
Reptiles & amphibians	CAIMAN, COBRA, TADPOLE	5	2.0
Insects	BUTTERFLY, CRICKET, FIREFLY	7	2.7
Parts	ANTLER, FANG, FEATHER	4	2.5
<b>Foods &amp; Beverages</b>			
Fruits, nuts & vegetables	APPLE, Pistachio, PUMPKIN	23	3.0
Desserts & snacks	CAVIAR, ÉCLAIR, PopCorn	19	3.0
Spices & flavorings	BASIL, PEPPER, SESAME	14	3.0
Beverages	CABERNET, COLA, MILK	19	3.2
Other	CARB, GRANOLA, Gyro	12	3.0
<b>Plants</b>			
Flowers	ASTER, DahLIA, LOTUS	16	3.0
Trees	DOGWOOD, PALM, SPRUCE	7	3.0
Other	BAMBOO, KUDZU, THISTLE	8	2.8
Parts	BLOSSOM, BRANCH, THORN	9	3.0
<b>Materials</b>			
Precious metals & gemstones	AGATE, EMERALD, SILVER	15	4.1
Common metals, rocks & minerals	BASALT, COPPER, TALC	13	2.7
Elements & chemicals	ARGON, CARBON, CHLORIDE	7	3.1
<b>Other Topics</b>			
Physical objects	ABACUS, AVALANCHE, CIGAR	129	2.9
Roles	ALCHEMIST, CAVALIER, CHORINE	88	3.4
Music & the arts	BALLET, CLARINET, Kabuki	51	3.1
Astronomy, astrology & atmosphere	ANTARES, CASSIOPEA, COMET	44	3.2
Buildings & architecture	AIRPORT, ARCADE, ENTRANCE	37	2.9
Entertainment, sports & recreation	BOOGIE, FIESTA, SNOWBOARD	27	3.4
Brand names	ANDROID, BENTLEY, EGGO	19	3.4
Weather	NIMBUS, RAINBOW, TYPHOON	15	2.3
<b>Parts of Speech</b>			
Verbs	ACCELERATE, ANCHOR, BALANCE	473	2.9
Nouns	ACADEMY, ACCORD, ACES	471	2.9
Adjectives	ABLE, ABOVE, ABSOLUTE	226	3.4
Other	AFTER, RATHER, OUCH	11	2.9

## Conclusion

A study nickname, while far from the most important element of a clinical study, does communicate something about the study and can, therefore, influence its success, especially with respect to patient and, perhaps, investigator recruitment. As a side benefit, nicknames give the study sponsor the opportunity to express some creativity and perhaps have some fun before the real work begins.

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