

Constructing Course Descriptions

The goal of any good course description is to convince a potential student to take your course! Think of your course description like a blurb for a movie. In just a few words, a sentence at most, a blurb has to convey what a movie is about and why you should watch it. For example, imagine you are scrolling through the cable guide, which blurb for the film *Halloween* would most immediately catch your eye?

- a) In this classic Halloween horror movie, a masked man pursues actress Jamie Lee Curtis through a suburban neighbourhood
- b) Masked killer pursues Jamie Lee Curtis through the suburbs in this classic horror film.

The second description is more effective because it pushes a description of both the action and the star to the beginning of the sentence. The first few words of the blurb aren't wasted stating the obvious—that what you are about to see is a movie—nor repeating the title of the film. Everything you really need to know about the movie is contained in the first six words, or even just the first two—"masked killer."

Just like with movie blurbs, an ineffective course description contains words and phrases that are redundant or self-evident. It will use confusing jargon or acronyms, or include cliché or faddish terms that hold little interest or meaning to students. The following example of an ineffective course description contains all these problems.

Bike Repair 101

In this course you will learn how to repair your bicycle. Introduces students to a variety of techniques for repairing different types of bicycles, including SRAM and XTR groupsets. You will develop the key competencies necessary for this empowering 21st century skill.

Where does this course description go wrong?

- **Redundant:** "repair your bicycle" and "repairing" are implicit in a course titled "Bike Repair."
- **Self-evident:** "In this course you will" is unnecessary in a course description, "introduces students to" is unnecessary when the course is already listed as an introductory level course.
- **Wasted words:** "a variety of" and "different types" are implied by the pluralization of the words "technique" and "bicycle." They are also very non-specific and thus meaningless to a student looking for information.
- **Jargon and acronyms:** "SRAM" and "XTR groupsets" are terms that would be unfamiliar to students looking to take a 101 level course.
- **Cliché and faddish words:** "key competencies necessary for this empowering 21st century skill" doesn't convey anything meaningful to a potential student.

How to Write an Effective Course Descriptions

An effective course description will meet the following criteria:

- Student-centered
- Clear, concise, and easy to understand
- Detail significant learning experiences and benefits students can expect
- Align with the outcomes identified for the course (Mohawk College)

Getting Started

To get started writing your course description, first ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the value of this course?
- What are the learning outcomes?
- What is the benefit to the student?
- What makes the course unique or special? (Friese, 2015).

Once you have a few bullet points for each, start writing your first draft:

- State clearly and precisely what the course is about
- Keep descriptions succinct
- Use economical language
- Write in the present tense (UBC).

The Opening Sentence

Just like in that movie blurb described above, remember that the first five words of a course description are the most important. Students reviewing a course catalogue will skim those five words and decide whether or not they want to keep reading or move to the next course description (Coates, 2015). Therefore, when writing your opening sentence, avoid redundant and unengaging openers like:

- This course will...
- In this course...
- An introduction to...
- Introduces students to...
- Continues to develop students'...
- This course will provide an overview of...
- At the end of this course, you will...

Remember that if the grammatical subject of the opening sentence would be “this course,” you can omit the subject. If the verb following “this course” would be “covers” or “is,” you can omit the verb. “This course” and “covers” are implicit. “You,” “we,” and “the students” are also implicit. If the course is entitled “Introduction to Bike Repair,” “introduction” is redundant. If the course is entitled “Advanced Bike Mechanics,” “continues to” is redundant (University of Florida; University of British Columbia).

As you construct your first sentence, ask yourself if it answers the questions listed above. Does the course seem unique and of value? Is it clear what students will be learning and how the course will benefit them? Here is a sample first sentence for a course at the University of Florida on the “Geography of the United States and Canada”:

A comprehensive systematic survey of the physical, economic and social character of the geographic regions of the United States and Canada and their significance in the economic and political affairs of the world.

This first sentence is excellent because it explains the topic of the course beyond just what is indicated by the title (for instance, mentioning that it will look at the physical, economic, and social characteristics of the two countries at a regional level), the method that will be used to cover that material (“comprehensive systematic survey”), and conveys to students the value of the course (helping them understand the economic and political affairs of the world).

Use active, outcomes-based verbs

To help convey what’s in it for the learner, start with the learning outcomes from the course. Construct brief descriptive phrases beginning with an active verb (e.g. design, create, plan, analyze) taken directly from the learning outcomes (Mohawk College). The examples below demonstrate how to write engaging and informative course descriptions using active, outcomes-based verbs:

- **Prepare and analyze** financial information of a business to develop sound managerial decisions relating to Corporate Finance, including the valuation of securities, working capital management, and short-term financing
- **Examine** a wide variety of technologies that have influenced our society. **Analyze** the contribution these technologies make to society, associated ethical dilemmas, and **critique** their value to the individual and society (Mohawk College).

Edit Your Draft

Once you feel that you have a first draft that is student-centered, outcomes-based, and that conveys the value of the course, start editing for clarity and concision.

On your first pass, eliminate jargon, unexplained acronyms, vague terms, and cliché or faddish words that will be of little interest or confusing to students (UO Creative). For example:

- **Original:** Continues to develop students’ communicative competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing
- **Revised:** Develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (University of California).

On your second pass, try to simplify your course description as much as possible. Eliminate any superfluous words, ambiguous terms, any redundancies, or anything obvious (University of British Columbia). For example:

- **Original:** In this course, you will learn the fundamentals of human resources management
- **Revised:** Learn the fundamentals of human resources management.

Practice

If you can, write course descriptions together with your peers and take turns reviewing them. Work together with your colleagues to write and edit one ideal course description and use it as a model. Whenever you see a course description, think about how you would change it to make it better. The more practice you can get writing and editing course descriptions, the easier it will become.

Work Cited

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