

ASSIGNMENT #2: BEST PRACTICES IN CREATING COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

A successful course description gives a broad overview of the course and is aspirational and logical. The assignment asks for **three different course proposals**; one for a beginning course, the second for an advanced course and the final for a course of your choice (i.e, seminar, research-based, wildcard, etc.) In the first draft, do not worry about word number or length. One of these will lead your syllabus.

The **course description**:

1. Gives a sense of the scope and importance of the course or **the goals of the course**. Ask these questions when forming the first sentence in the course description.
 - What is the enduring understanding of the course?
 - What is the overall mission of the course or the greater good of the course?
 - What is the larger value of the course beyond the technique, medium or methods?
 - Why take this course today?
 - What can it bring to the student, where will it lead the student and why is that significant today?

The first sentence of the **course description** can set the power and context of the course and be a compelling and challenging sentence that draws the reader into the content and meaning of taking this particular course today.

2. Describes how the course fits into the institution's **overall educational learning outcomes** for each level and group.
 - What are the learning outcomes or takeaways of the course?
 - What will the student come away with from the course?

These are items all students will come away with after taking the course and can be seen as nouns in example: a deeper understanding, a resolved portfolio, a more advanced personal vision, etc.

3. Speaks to and identifies the particular **audience** of the course is or whom would it be valuable to.
 - What level of student will benefit from this course?
 - Are there prerequisite courses? Where does this fit in a sequence of courses and why?
 - What student qualities would work well when taking with this course?
 - What groups of people would be interested in this course and why?
4. Explains **how the course will function**.
 - What is the structure of the course?
 - What particulars are there making this course unique or special?
 - Are there subdivisions of content for the course?
 - What is the progression of the course or sequence of projects?

- What is the order of content? How does the schedule vary with projects, critiques, visitors, work sessions, etc.?
 - States particular methods or techniques that will also play a role in the course. What is the balance of technical information, varying critical feedback, readings, texts, authors, movements, field trips, extra options, etc?
5. **Delineates corollary information** to each course proposal given separately before or after each course description. These are necessary details that places a course within a department or institution and are required on each course proposal form a faculty has to fill in.
- Instructor's name, meeting place, times of class, capacity number for maximum enrollment for the class, lab fee, estimated cost of materials, who is it serving (undergraduate and/or graduate or non-credit), what level can take the course (freshman, sophomore), is it an elective or required course?
 - What pre-requisites or basic knowledge is required or recommended to take this course?

Reflections on Course Proposals

Writing an effective course description will set the stage for developing a meaningful course syllabus. A dynamic course description will draw appropriate students to the class. A course description has many of the same parts that a syllabus has. By incorporating elements of a faculty's particular teaching and inclusivity philosophy into the course proposal, the instructor can provide a profound and special introduction to the course. In most institutions, a faculty member has agency in forming a course proposal and description with approval and quality guidance and leadership from the director or department head. In some institutions, the course description is written in collaboration with the faculty and the director or department chair and reviewed by public relations and registrar personnel to provide a cohesion and system to the texts. Teaching and learning centers and departments often give formats and prototype examples to forming a course description. Deans of faculty or divisions provide oversight as well as committees on faculty re-appointment or curriculum committees. A course description is tracked, vetted and guided through several layers at an institution. The leadership in a department can set the tone and empower the faculty to be effective in writing course descriptions that follow the mission of the department and knows that carefully constructed course descriptions are the door to successfully filling classes at any level. Use the following questions and suggestions to more deeply reflect upon what will add breadth and richness to your own course description:

Titles

- How does the title of the course relay the overall content, style and ambition of the course?
- Can a course title pose a question to begin an active interaction with the reader, to pose a challenge to the reader, to capture the curiosity of the reader and to lead them more substantially into the description?

Having a **method or technique as a title** provides a basic technical foundation but does not relay all that occurs in effective and inspiring classes. Bring the title to a more successful level: *inject humor, use questions as leads, put a social or civic context to a method, add a theme to a technique as armature, give a more in-depth meaning to an ongoing basic course*. Use a **subtitle** to expand the basic course components with the style, depth or range of the faculty. Subtitles set a further context and need for the course.

The Body of the Course Description

Goal of the Course:

- Don't start a course with the usual two words: "This course". Start a course with the aspirational goals of the course. These are often verbs of action. Form the enduring values of the course in the opening sentence. What is the deeper understanding of the course content? How can we describe the greatest good of the course right at the start?
- Answer or pose the key questions first, then give the outcomes secondly. Why is painting so important today? How does design alter our lives? What content is necessary, powerful and meaningful today? What can color study bring to one's daily experience even in a single course? What does integrated media bring to the arts today?

Course Learning Outcomes:

- How will the course goals be achieved?
- What will occur, what will the result be of the course?
- What understandings and abilities and products will the student come away with at the end of the course? How many assignments, how many critiques, how many stages in learning and making?
- These outcomes are gradable and are what is key to accrediting bodies of an institution.
- How does an outcome vary from a beginning student to an advanced student?
- What indications are there that the outcomes are progressively more complex and conceptual in terms of critical thinking and critical transposition into studio products or results?
- Through what steps and stages in learning will the goals take us?
- What are the outcomes of the course? What does each student come away with at the end?
- What will be accomplished by the successful completion of the course?
- What methods will be integral to the course and how will assessment occur?
- Is there a seminal text that the course will examine or center around?
- What essential questions does the course call forth?
- What are some of specific examples of topics, artists, theorists, designers, or applications the course will embrace and how inclusive are they?
- How does my course description run in tandem to the faculty's teaching philosophy, inclusivity statement and the department's mission?

Assessment or Competency Benchmarks in Composing a Course Description

Basic Competency:

Information is conveyed about the topic. Goals and learning outcomes are streamed together. Some indication of the overall structure of the course is given, but there remains a vagueness in the particular plan for the semester. Little effort in creating the supporting material around the description is seen. Methods and assessments are only briefly touched upon. There is no special spark, rhetorical questions, probing ideas or a sense of context of the medium, means, or details. The title is common and not aspirational. The course descriptions are used repeatedly in an institution without proactive examination, collaborative thinking, or self-reflection.

Advanced Competency:

A compelling voice for the course is conveyed. Questions are at the core of the learning experience and lead the goals of the course. The structure of the course is clear, so a reader gets a sense that the course will advance one's thinking and application in progressively more complex and varied ways about the topic or medium, even within a beginning level course. The underlying structure and range of content has logic. The outcomes of the course are clear and reasonable and have ambition. The methods used to achieve the learning outcomes are introduced through specific names and titles or examples given around critiques, readings, number of projects, and visitors. These are well conceived, inclusive and have currency or historic context. There is an accuracy of terms that is careful and non-repetitive. Specificity of course proposal words are seen as particular capstones, keys or leads to the intellectual and material growth of the students.

Assignment Reading:

Constructing a Course Description Michelle Schwartz Ryerson University Learning and Teaching Center
<https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/learning-teaching/teaching-resources/design-a-course/constructing-course-descriptions.pdf>