

Guide to Developing a Creative and Meaningful Course Description

Introduction

A course description is a short, concise student-centered statement about the course's subject matter and learning activities. A course description should focus on the

1. **WHY?** Purpose or rationale for the course/subject area covered (1st sentence)
2. **WHAT?** Key content/principles/topics to be learned (2nd sentence and/or 3rd sentence)
3. **HOW?** Types of major learning activities and student experiences in the course (last sentence) (case study, mock interviews, role-playing, group discussions, etc.)

General Guidelines for Developing a Course Description

(Mohawk College, n.d., para. 2 – 3)

Course descriptions should:

- Be student-centered, rather than teacher-centered or course-centered
- Use brief, outcomes-based, descriptive phrases that begin with an active verb (e.g., design, create, plan, analyze)
- Be clear, concise, and easy to understand (45 - 120 words)
- Detail benefits to students
- Align with the outcomes

Course descriptions should avoid:

- Obvious, redundant, or repetitive language (such as “this course will...” or “students should expect to...”)
- Marketing language (such as “Concept X is a critical part of success in Industry Y” or “Course A will change the way you think about everything”)

How to Write a Course Description

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 (University of British Columbia, n,d, para 1.).

The Opening Sentence

The first five words of a course description are the most important. 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...

Click [here](#) for additional phrases to avoid.

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 British Columbia, n.d.).

As you construct your first sentence, ask yourself if it answers the questions listed below.

- Does the course seem unique and of value?
- Is it clear what students will be learning?
- Is it clear how the course will benefit them?

Here is a sample first statement 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).

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.

Consider this analysis of a course description provided by Schartz (n.d., p.3)

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.

Revised course description Bike Repair 101

A how-to course for basic bike adjustments and repairs. Learn how to fix flats, overhaul bearing systems, and adjust gears and brakes. Offers the opportunity to receive individualized instruction on bikes provided by All Things Cycling, Inc.

References

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