

Writing Effective Course Descriptions

Mary Beth Harding
Executive Director
Nashville Community Education



NASHVILLE
COMMUNITY
EDUCATION

Enriching the diverse
fabric of Nashville

nashville.gov/ce

Providing personal and professional enrichment for adults in the Nashville community

- Department of Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County
- Increase in over 1,000 students since August 2015
- And \$60,000 in revenue
- Currently serve almost 4,000 students in FY18 with a revenue of over \$120,000
- Over 380 classes, 3 locations, and 200 instructors
- Only 4 full-time staff and two part-time site coordinators

If people do not read your course description, they will not take your class.

If your course description is vague, wordy or boring they will not take your class.

Course Design

Focus on Titles

Succinct and to the point
No colons, nothing too cutesy

Descriptions

Short, but descriptive: Aim for 5-6 sentences that tell the student exactly what they'll be leaving class having learned.

Use consistent language

If you have branding language (session vs. semester, what your department is called, etc...) make sure everyone knows it, including instructors

Who, What, How?

Each course description should answer:

- Who is this class for?
- What will they learn?
- How will they learn it?

“Where” and “When” are answered in your course details

Guidelines

- 30 - 80 words or 5-6 sentences
- Teacher bio NOT included
- No abbreviations or jargon
- Complete sentences
- emphasize the learner
- Active verbs

Good Openers

- A definition
- The end result
- Outstanding or impressive fact
- A question
- The quotation
- The distraction



Powerful Verbs for Course Descriptions

Maximize the effectiveness of your course descriptions, in your brochures, promotions, newsletters, and on your web site. The first five words of the course description will often determine if the reader will go on or pass to another course description (or be bored by it). The opening sentence should focus on either the content or the learner. It should NOT start with either the course or the teacher (*"This course will..."* or *"Joe Smith will show you..."*).

Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Mary Oliver said: "Every adjective and adverb is worth five cents. Every verb is worth 50 cents." In other words, one verb can do the work of 10 modifiers, transforming a so-so sentence into a powerful one.

Strategy: Read through something you have written, cross out all the adjectives and adverbs and then underline all the verbs. Replace any mediocre verbs with more active, exciting ones to improve your first draft. Keep this list as a reference.

| | | |
|------------|------------|------------|
| Explore | Accelerate | Win |
| Enrich | Maximize | Maximize |
| Discover | Unleash | Mobilize |
| Accomplish | Reduce | Execute |
| Change | Save | Motivate |
| Create | Start | Anticipate |
| Succeed | Stop | Capture |
| Master | Simplify | Conquer |
| Lead | Experiment | Grasp |
| Achieve | Understand | Aspire |
| Conquer | Engage | Assess |
| Become | Find | Convert |
| Exceed | Transform | Survive |
| Enhance | Define | Refresh |
| Develop | Target | Deliver |
| Solve | Excite | Design |
| Energize | Reinforce | Establish |
| Ignite | Solidify | Focus |
| Act | Identify | Gather |
| Improve | Anticipate | Generate |
| Inspire | Boost | Innovate |
| Stimulate | Build | Manage |
| Increase | Choose | Measure |
| Gain | Connect | Persuade |
| Raise | Decide | Overcome |
| Supplement | Ensure | Mobilize |
| Enjoy | Intensify | Position |
| Dream | Plan | Replace |
| Transform | Prepare | Shatter |
| Resist | Retain | Help |

In this workshop...

Resist the urge to use space
wasting language:

- In this class
- In four hours
- This class will
- Joe Smith will...

Good Titles

- Avoid colons
- Avoid more than 5 words
- Keep it simple or catchy
 - Skills classes = simple
 - Idea classes = catchy

Consistency

- Levels and Descriptors:
 - Basics
 - Beginning
 - Level 1
 - 101
- Same for description tone

A Note on Layout

- Title in BOLD
- Description
- Maybe teacher bio
- Logistics

Always choose easy to read, sans serif font and leave lots of white space

Practice #1

Class name:

Servsafe Manager Course/ Servsafe Food Handler

Description:

The Servsafe Manager course would help students preparing to take the servsafe exam who work in the food industry. The course would focus on food safety, preparation, danger zone temperatures, and handling different types of food regardless of the sector an individual works that includes hotel restaurant, food court, QSR, casual dining, hospital or fine dining.

The Servsafe Handler Course would help students that come in contact with food to understand the proper way to handle food in a safe and responsible way

Practice #2

Class Name:

Entrepreneurship 101 for the Self-Employed

Description:

In this workshop we will explore various self-employment opportunities of interest as well as discuss pertinent information on setting up your business in Tennessee. You'll learn the process of forming a business entity including business name reservation to filing paperwork with TN Secretary of State. Also we will cover staying in compliance with Federal, State and Local taxing authorities. In addition, there will be a host of business tools, best practices and community resources provided to support you in your self-employed or business endeavor.

Practice #3

Class name:

Making Comics and Zines

Description:

Learn how to create mini comics, zines, and how to plan and plot a longform comic! In this class, we're going to cover the basics of comic construction, go over planning and scripting, and cover basic drawing techniques and skills to help students feel confident in making comics. Once the basics are down, we're going to talk about those finishing touches- inking your comic, coloring your comic, scanning it, and creating a mini or zine to exchange with other artists.

No drawing skills necessary, just an interest in comics or sequential storytelling!

Class will end the semester with a zine/minicomic exchange.

Group Practice

- Pick at least one course you've offered that has consistently had low enrollment, but you feel like it's a great class
- Share this course title and description with your group
- As a group, come up with at least one change to the title or description
- Share

Remember...

- Who, What, How?
- Avoid boring opening lines or space wasters
- 5-6 sentences
- Emphasize the learner
- Simple title

What happens if a course just isn't making it?

Try a new course 3 times

- Change title and description
- Change time
- Change length/design

If it still isn't getting enough enrollments, it's time to cut it!

Same goes for instructors: 3 complaints (especially if you've given feedback)

Thank you!

Final questions?

Feel free to contact me at:

Marybeth.harding@nashville.gov