

Style for Course-Descriptions in a Course Catalog

The rules of style for course-descriptions in a catalog are different from those appropriate to many other forms of writing. What is good style for the syllabus that an instructor hands out to students may be poor style for a catalog entry, and vice-versa.

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Examples of course-descriptions written in the proper style

The examples below illustrate several templates that may be used. As seen in the examples under Template 1, often a single noun-phrase—a phrase, of any length, functioning as a noun—suffices. This is generally the preferred template when it can accommodate all the intended information.

Template 1: <Noun phrase>.

Examples:

LIN 3680 Modern English Structure

A study of the grammar or current English from the viewpoint of modern linguistics.

MAC 2313 Analytic Geometry and Calculus 3

Solid analytic geometry, vectors, partial derivatives and multiple integrals.

PHH 3111 Ancient Ethical and Political Thought

An examination of ancient Greek and Roman political theories and their ethical foundations.

AST 3047 History of Astronomy After Newton

Development of the science of astronomy, both observational and theoretical, and the rise of astrophysics from the eighteenth century until 1970.

REL 3022 Myth and Ritual

Theory and method in the anthropological and religious studies of myths, rituals, religious specialists and religious movements using examples from cultures throughout the world.

GEA 2210 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.

Template 2: <Noun phrase>. <Noun phrase>. ... <Noun phrase>.

Examples:

CLA 2100 The Glory That Was Greece

A broad cultural view of the classical Greek world. Greek sources read in translation.

CHM 2210 Organic Chemistry 1

The first half of the CHM 2210/2211 sequence intended for majors and preprofessional students. A study of the structures, syntheses and reactions of organic compounds.

ECP 3203 Labor Economics

Determinants of demand for labor and labor supply. Labor market equilibrium and changes in the equilibrium due to changes in unionization, public policies, technology and trade. Study of the effects of skill, job amenities and discrimination on wage differentials.

Template 3: <Noun phrase>. ... <Noun phrase>. <Complete sentence with additional information> .

Examples:

GEA 1000 Geography for a Changing World

The spatial organization of society. Emphasis is placed upon the political regions of the world.

LAS 2001 Latin American Civilization

Interdisciplinary introduction to the study of Latin American societies and cultures. The course provides students with a general knowledge of Latin America and its people, preparing students for future course work in Latin American Studies.

PHI 3693 Ethics of Communication

An examination of ethical issues in communication between individuals and in the media. Possible topics include truth-telling, misrepresentation, privacy and fairness.

PHY 3221 Mechanics 1

First part of two-semester sequence in classical mechanics. Topics include matrices, vector calculus, Newtonian mechanics, frames of reference, conservation laws, harmonic oscillator.

MAS 3114 Computational Linear Algebra

Linear equations, matrices and determinants. Vector spaces and linear transformations. Inner products and eigenvalues. This course emphasizes computational aspects of linear algebra.

Template 4: <Nearly complete sentence with the subject, "this course", left implicit>.

Examples:

HNG 2221 Intermediate Hungarian 2

Improves speaking, reading, writing and listening skills by building upon language principles introduced in HNG 2220.

AMH 4310 U.S. Social and Intellectual History: 1945-1975

Covers important social and intellectual developments that unfolded in the thirty years after World War II.

REL 2000 Introduction to Religion

Introduces the historical underpinnings, geographical movement, development and current expression of a variety of religious traditions.

Template 5: <Nearly complete sentence with the subject, "this course", left implicit>. <One or more complete sentences with additional information>.

Examples:

AST 2037 Life in the Universe

Considers the origin of life on Earth and the possibility of its existence elsewhere. A multidisciplinary approach is followed. Conditions for life to form and the likelihood that such conditions may exist elsewhere in the universe are discussed. Also considered are schemes proposed for the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI).

Template 6: <Adjectival phrase>. <One or more complete sentences with additional information> .

Examples:

LIN 4033 Studies in Etymology: The Roots of English

Designed to equip students with principles of etymology and an ability to recognize the origin of words by their form. Focus is on word formation and change in form and meaning, the linguistic background of English; the sociocultural history of English in England; and the input from classical sources.

TUR 2340 Turkish for Heritage Learners 1

For students with significant bilingual speaking and listening backgrounds. The main emphasis is on reading, writing and expanding vocabulary.

Template 7: <One or more complete sentences whose subjects cannot be omitted>.

Examples:

AMH 4317 History by Hollywood

Hollywood films are compared with traditional historiographic accounts to explore the cultural and political history of the 1950s, '60s and '70s, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott, civil rights, the Vietnam War and political assassinations.

EAP 2932 Introduction to Campus Culture for International Visitors

Through a (1-hour) lecture and (1-2 hour) discussion session per week, the students learn about the major aspects of U.S. university life and activities and contrast them with equivalent structures in their respective countries.

WST 2611 Humanities Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality

This course uses close readings of cultural representations (in literature, the visual arts, movies, television, the Internet, etc.) to understand intersecting categories of identity such as gender, sexuality, class and race. The course will examine how such categories operate in everything from novels to YouTube to the evening news.

Guidelines for writing course-descriptions

1. Complete sentences are usually not necessary, although most other rules of grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and usage should be followed.

2. If the subject of a lead-off sentence would be “this course” (or the equivalent), the subject should usually be omitted; if, in addition, the verb following “this course” would be “is” or “covers”, the verb should also usually be omitted. In these cases, the sentence-structure is implicit: the noun-phrase is the predicate of a sentence whose subject, and possibly whose verb, have been omitted. The same rules apply to subsequent sentences (if any) until a sentence with a different subject or verb appears.
3. When possible, a course description should be simply a noun-phrase that is descriptive of the course content, as in Template 1.
4. When a single noun-phrase will not suffice, it is still usually preferable to make a descriptive noun-phrase the lead-off “sentence” of the description. It may then be followed by another noun-phrase or a sentence, as in Templates 2 and 3.
5. A lead-off sentence may start with a third-person verb, with “this course” implicitly the subject, as in Templates 4 and 5. The same is true of subsequent sentences (if any) until a sentence with a subject other than “this course” appears.
6. A course description may start with an adjectival phrase that functions implicitly as the predicate of a sentence whose initial words “This course is” have been omitted, as in Template 6.
7. When “this course” (or the equivalent) is implicitly or explicitly the subject of a verb, the writer should check the subject/verb combination for proper usage. A common error is to have “this course” as the subject for a verb that can take only a person or persons as subject. For example, a course cannot *discuss*.
8. First-person and second-person constructions should be avoided. A catalog course-description is neither direct communication from a specific person, nor direct communication to a specific audience (or even to a specific *type* of audience, such as “students” or “potential students”). The words “we” and “you” should never appear, with the exception that “we” may be used to refer generally to all human beings, as in “the science of weather (what we get short-term) and climate (what we expect long-term),” or “the nature of perceptual experiences and their relations to the perceptual beliefs we form on their bases.”
9. In a course-description in a catalog, passive voice need not be shunned; it is a perfectly acceptable way (and often the best way) to avoid first-person constructions and improper subject/verb combinations. A great many errors are made in an unnecessary attempt to avoid, at all costs, the passive voice.
10. Complete sentences are allowed when the subject cannot safely be omitted (and the subject is not a first- or second-person pronoun), as in Template 7.
11. Almost always, shorter is better.

Some examples of how to edit a draft of a course-description

Below are a few examples intended to illustrate some ways that common stylistic errors can be fixed, and unnecessarily-long descriptions shortened. All are taken from Forms UCC1 (New Course Transmittal Form) submitted to the College Curriculum Committee.

1. Initial draft:

This course is an introduction to X. In this course, we will discuss A, B, and C.

Acceptable version for catalog:

An introduction to X. Topics include A, B, and C.

In this example, eliminating "we" was mandatory. Eliminating "This course is" was optional, but improved the description.

2. Initial draft:

This course will introduce you to X, Y, and Z.

Acceptable version for catalog:

An introduction to X, Y, and Z.

In this example, eliminating "you" was mandatory.

3. Initial draft:

This course is designed to explore the political history of Freedonia. The course discusses ways in which Sylvania manipulated the Freedonian government.

Acceptable version for the catalog:

The political history of Freedonia, with a focus on ways in which Sylvania manipulated the Freedonian government.

In this example, the original first sentence was not wrong, but the first six words served no useful function. The second sentence had to be fixed because "course" is not a valid subject for "discuss".