

APC Advisory on Course Proposals

Last revised February 2009

Background

Each year, the Academic Priorities Committee reviews the hundreds of course descriptions proposed for our approval as new permanent courses, one-time courses, first-year seminars and/or revised permanent courses. We hope the following advice will assist faculty in drafting or re-writing course proposals.

With regard to course descriptions, our goal is to ensure that course descriptions across the college share some minimal consistency of approach, while retaining the individuality appropriate to the diversity of the College's courses and faculty. We reserve the right to suggest revisions to course descriptions as part of our review. Our experience has been that these are often accepted, without question, as improvements. In the rare cases they are not, we work, through the Registrar or directly, to broker a mutually-agreeable resolution.

Advice on Course Descriptions

Audience

Please remember that the audience for course descriptions is broad. Beyond the obvious audience of current Mount Holyoke students, 5-College students, and their advisors, other audiences include:

- Transfer credit evaluators at other schools trying to decide whether/how to transfer one of our courses;
- Academic colleagues (prospective faculty, graduate-admission evaluators, and others) browsing our course listings in order to get a sense of the strength, breadth and depth of one or more of our department's offerings; and
- Prospective students (transfer or high-school) trying to get a sense of whether our offerings offer a compelling match to their own interests.

Goal

You should succinctly describe the course in a lively and compelling way, without overt advertising. Good descriptions provide sufficient detail for readers to gauge the goals and scope of the course.

Specific Recommendations

- Use the present tense where possible, though the future tense is also suitable.
- Use the active voice.
- Avoid jargon. Ideally, a student should be able to understand the description before she takes the course.
- Avoid using the 2nd person. The APC recommends “we”, “the course”, or “the student”.
- Refer to “student(s)”, rather than “participant(s)”.
- Refer to the “course”, rather than the “class”.
- Include “taught in English” only where needed (in descriptions of courses offered by foreign language departments but taught in English). Similarly, “taught in French” may be needed in the Gender Studies cross-listing of a course offered by the French department.
- Use full sentences for the majority of the description, although sentence fragments at the beginning and/or end of a description can be useful for dramatic impact and brevity. End fragments with a period.
- List book titles in italics and article names in double quotes.
- For major authors, use last names only where confusion is unlikely, but use initials or full names where needed for clarity.
- Record statements about prerequisites (academic course prerequisites and eligibility like “juniors only”) in the separate field provided to capture those restrictions -- not in the course description itself.
- Similarly, record organizational details such as special instructions on things to bring to the first class meeting, course fees, etc. in the Visible Notes field for the Catalogue instead of in the description itself.
- Unless there are truly remarkable attributes to the course, comments about major class assignments (e.g. “includes final paper”) or content-delivery format (e.g. “Lecture sessions will be complemented by...”) belong in the course syllabus – not the course description.
- Do not use ampersands or awkward abbreviations. If the drafted description doesn't fit within the 700-character maximum (spaces included), make substantive cuts until it fits gracefully.

Do not include URLs or potentially ephemeral references. Published course descriptions should stand on their own for the sake of those interpreting our alumnae’s transcripts in future.

“Writing-intensive” and “Speaking-intensive” designations

We provide the following guidelines, drawn from a description of these designations approved by the APC in December 2005:

Writing-intensive courses:

- 1) make the process of writing expository prose, in addition to the subject of the course, a significant focus of student and faculty attention;
- 2) ordinarily require frequent relatively brief papers (usually at least four) -- ordinarily at least twenty pages of writing per semester -- with opportunities to draft, receive comments on their style and argumentative strategies, and then revise; and
- 3) almost always, require students to meet with the course instructor individually for further discussion of their development as writers.

Speaking-intensive courses help students develop their skills at making formal oral presentations and at participating in discussion and debate. Sometimes speaking skills are a principal focus of the courses, with students making a series of speeches or participating in debates or exercises in role-playing. In other courses, oral presentations, like essays, serve as one mode by which students develop and display their understanding of the materials the course studies.

Note: although courses focused on teaching a foreign language share many of these characteristics, these should not routinely be marked with the “writing-intensive” and “speaking-intensive” designations.

Samples

There are many good course descriptions in our current catalogue. Although for the sake of greater consistency across descriptions we would prefer greater use of the present tense, here are a few examples:

Russian and Eurasian Studies 240:

Russian Politics

Russia was transformed by communist revolution into a global superpower that challenged the dominant ideologies of liberalism and nationalism. It became a powerful alternative to capitalism. In 1991, this imperial state collapsed and underwent an economic, political, and cultural revolution. What explains the Soviet Union's success for seventy years and its demise in 1991? What sort of country is Russia as it enters the twenty-first century? Is it a democracy? How has Russia's transformation affected ordinary people and Russia's relationship to the West?

Critical Social Thought 255:

Human Agency and Historical Transformation: Pivotal Moments

This seminar examines evidence and theories on the origins, development, and dynamics of capitalism and the modern state. We shall focus on the transition to (agrarian) capitalism in early modern England, the industrialization of production in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States, and the political and economic crisis of the 1930s depression. As we ask how fundamental changes in human communities come about, we shall consider the relative contributions of individual agency and social determination to the creation of a world so many now regard as either natural or inevitable.

Psychology 110:

Introductory Seminars in Psychology: Brain/Mind

What is the relationship between brain activity and how we think, feel, perceive, remember, and communicate? How does the brain contribute to our development as unique individuals? How does subjective experience shape the structure and activity of our brains? In approaching these questions, we will bridge the perspectives of psychoanalysis and neuroscience. We will explore how the brain works; the role of conscious and unconscious processes in determining our behavior; and the effects of traumatic injury to the brain.

Theatre Arts 215:

Topics in Performance: Suzuki Actor Training

This course will focus on Suzuki actor training, a rigorous, physical method developed by Tadashi Suzuki. Drawing from the classical Japanese art forms, Noh and Kabuki, and other sources, Suzuki trains actors to connect to their "animal" energy and also to the ground. Through a series of exercises, actors develop physical strength and projection. The work will culminate in a performance based on a dramatic text.

Biological Sciences 301:

Animal Cloning and Stem Cells: Past, Present, and Future

When Dolly the lamb was born, the world changed. Developmental biologists have been cloning organisms for decades—why the intense emotion over a sheep? This course will focus on the history of animal cloning, exploring both conceptual and technical advances over time. We will look at the current state of mammalian cloning and the debate about human stem cell research, reading from primary literature. While the emphasis will be on the biological phenomena involved, we will also discuss the legal, ethical, and moral implications of human cloning and stem cell research.