What makes a good article?

An article in an online course is a short piece of content which has been created specifically for the course by a course educator/contributor. They differ from journal articles in their tone and should be geared towards the general public, avoiding academic language and long sentences.

When writing an article, you should think about the narrative of the course as a whole. How does it fit into the course? Does it tie in with the learning objectives? Does it have any connections with any of the other steps in the course?

What can an article include?

An article is typically 500-800 words with a reading time of 5-10 minutes. Articles which are longer than this tend to have a negative effect on learner retention. If you have more content to cover, you could consider breaking your article up into a number of steps.

However, beware overloading the learner; each article should have a specific focus linked to the course learning objectives. You can always use links and additional resources to allow learners to explore a subject further.

Can I use images?

Articles can (and should!) include images alongside the text to illustrate or enhance the meaning (e.g. photographs, diagrams, slides etc.).

The Online Learning Team can help you to source and create images so let them know if you have ideas for images that you would like to use in your article.

What tone of voice should I use?

An article in an online course is not as formal as an academic article. You should write conversationally, avoid text-book style copy and let your voice come through.

Open online courses attract learners from around the world so make sure your language is appropriate for an international audience; use the active rather than the passive voice; and avoid jargon and UK English colloquialism.
How can I make my articles easier to read online?

Research shows that online, people tend to scan rather than read text. If you want to effectively get your message across, you should:

- Break up paragraphs.
- Use bullet points or numbered lists.
- Bold text for emphasis.
- Shorten text and avoid fluff.
- Signal top-line messages with strong headings, which make the page feel clearer and lighter.

A clear text structure can also make your article easier to follow. Professor of Educational Psychology, Dr Bonnie Meyer (1985) classified the main text structures as follows:

- **Description**: describe a topic.
- **Sequence**: use numerical or chronological order to list items or events.
- **Compare/contrast**: two or more similar events, topics, or objects.
- **Cause/effect**: give one or more causes and then describe the effects.
- **Problem/solution**: pose a problem or question and then give the answer.

This short journal article by Leonard Houx, a Senior Instructional Designer at Cass Business School gives a good summary of some important considerations to make when writing online learning content.

How can I facilitate discussion?

There is a comments section below each step of content on FutureLearn. This allows learners to discuss the content in context. Including a discussion prompt at the end of your article will increase the amount of discussion on your step, encouraging learners to engage with the content and with each other.

Online learning in action: some example articles from online courses

- **What is electronic monitoring?** (From ‘Crime, Justice and Society’)
- **How close is a sample to the true population?** (From ‘Making Sense of Data in the Media’)
- **Kit fence carpet playgrounds** (From ‘Exploring Play’)

A template for writing your article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction paragraph</th>
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Write your script in this section (Word count 800 words max)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflection question</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(e.g. links to reports, journal articles. interesting websites, youtube videos etc)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>