Taking your first steps into the world of NLP
Which way to go?
Praise for the Guide when it came out:

What a great service to the field.
Judith Delozier
NLP Pioneer and Author, www.nlpu.com

NLP is not about what we do but HOW we do it. It is a process of modelling excellence and the biggest challenge is to live the principles that seem so very obvious on paper. And so trainings in NLP are not so much about what is covered which can vary enormously but HOW they are conducted and this guide is a pointer to just that – the criteria by which we can evaluate which training might suit us best. This is the most comprehensive guide to the criteria that truly make the difference that I have ever seen. I recommend it.
Sue Knight
Author of NLP at Work, www.sueknight.co.uk

This is a very useful guide - I've occasionally sent enquirers a page or so of criteria of what to look for in a practitioner course but this is far more comprehensive.
Andy Smith
NLP Coach and Trainer, www.practicaleq.com

As I have often been asked about training providers this is a very useful guide for anyone getting curious about NLP. It addresses many of the most common decision criteria including questions about what you want your training for, an excellent reference for newcomers.
Mark Underwood, www.business-matters.org

Let me add my name to the list of people to be really impressed by the extremely comprehensive guide you have produced!!

-We really, really like your guide to NLP. It's the sort of thing our members would really enjoy.
Toby McCartney, British Board of NLP, www.bbnlp.com
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Welcome to this Guide!

You may have heard about NLP training through meeting someone who has undertaken a training and been impressed by their confidence and way of interacting with people. Perhaps you’ve picked up an NLP book and been intrigued. Today when more and more top business people are attending courses in NLP, you may be considering taking a course yourself.

NLP has a broad range of applications, and a wide variety of people are taking NLP training. You may have already begun to research possible options on the internet and elsewhere. When you begin to investigate, you may be daunted by the sheer choice. There are so many possibilities out there!

An NLP Training represents a significant investment in both time and money, so you want to choose wisely.

- How do you go about it?
- How do you steer your way through the variety of offers?
- What should you look out for?
- How can you guarantee that you will get value for your money?

I offer you a short cut through the maze, to tell you what to look out for and the questions to ask.

After reading this guide:

- You will be able to find training that suits your own personal requirements
- You will know how to distinguish between training providers
- You will feel more confident to approach training providers to ask the questions
- You will be reassured that you are getting good value for money

Understanding the choice of NLP courses

If you want a taster of NLP, there are many evening, one-day or two-day introductory programmes available. These serve mainly to arouse your curiosity, give you one or two initial tools and of course promote the services of the training organisation. They are a good way to see if the provider is a good match for your style of learning.

Be careful though: they could even put you off if they are run by a poor or an unqualified trainer. It’s worth trying a few different providers and getting a good feel for what’s available.

These tasters are certainly not sufficient for you to get a grasp of the main body of NLP material. A good way to do that is to embark on one of the main training programmes. These are offered by many different providers, but almost all organise their training programmes into three levels:

- Practitioner
- Master Practitioner and
- Trainer
This might suggest to you that there is a standard syllabus, but in fact that is not the case. There are many different bodies that set standards to regulate NLP training, and NLP training providers don’t have to follow any of them. There is no one body that oversees NLP training providers and sets minimum standards.

Courses can differ significantly in emphasis. Most courses are for the generalist. There are also some that are directed towards business, education, therapy, sports psychology, health, selling, coaching and so on. Be sure to check out how the course is different if it claims to focus on a particular area of application and make sure the emphasis is right for you.

Typically, Practitioner courses will share about 80% of the same content. In Master Practitioner courses, that drops to about 50%. By the time you reach Trainer Training perhaps only about 20% of the content is the same. This isn’t a problem as such but it’s worth checking what you are getting before you commit. Most training providers will be happy to provide an outline of what subjects will be covered during the course and individual course modules.

This guide is focused on how to select a Practitioner-level training. It is common then to go on to further levels of training and I have included some additional notes below on the three basic course levels. Note that most providers will require you to complete a Practitioner level training before you can go on to further levels of training.

**NLP Content**

**What should a Practitioner Course cover?**

A Practitioner course should include most of the following: (these might be jargon words to you at present but you will find it a useful checklist for future reference)

- Sensory awareness and calibration
- How to establish and maintain rapport
- Presuppositions of NLP
- Representational systems
- Precision questioning
- Influential language
- State management
- Perceptual positions
- Use of anchors
- Well-formed outcomes
- Meta programs
- Sub-modalities
- Strategies
- Framing

There may be specific reasons why different courses focus on some topics rather than others but the above subjects will appear in most programmes.
What should a Master Practitioner course cover?

At this level there is more variation but there are still key features to look for. Practitioner Training shows you what you can do in terms of behaviour to be more effective in your dealings with others and with yourself. It also shows you how to operate more successfully. At Master Practitioner level you would expect to work more on your Values, Beliefs and Identity in order to succeed at a deeper level. You would also expect to develop greater flexibility in using the basis NLP tools and begin to explore developing your own.

Modelling excellence is also at the heart of NLP and a Master Practitioner course will probably cover advanced modelling tools, usually including a modelling project.

Many of the main providers of Master Practitioner Courses also have more than one trainer during the course in order to offer different models and expand your experience of NLP.

Choosing a Trainer Training course

At this level there is less choice and courses vary widely. Perhaps the first consideration (and at all levels of NLP!) is the wisdom, skills and attitude of the trainer. Content matters too but it's particularly important at this level to find trainers who walk the talk (who are congruent in NLP jargon), who model themselves what you are looking for and who know how to share their wisdom with you.

Regarding the content, some trainers run the course as an advanced presentation skills programme. This might help you be more impressive when you stand up in front of an audience but is only a limited part of the skill-set needed by a successful NLP Trainer. It’s best to find a trainer who will teach you also how to run successful demonstrations, to connect with and understand their participants, to design effective course material, to evaluate and to cope with varied beliefs, expectations and resistances.

By the time you get to consider a Train the Trainer programme you will almost certainly know some training providers personally. These should be good reference points for deciding where next to take your NLP training.

Choosing a Practitioner Course

How long is the training?

A full Practitioner training varies in length from about 7 days to about 25 days. In today’s climate companies are moving more and more to shorter trainings to attract people with limited time. If you choose a shorter option you need to check carefully what you are getting.

The Practitioner Course has traditionally been in the region of 120 hours, which translates into about 20 days of training depending on the length of each day. This is a significant period of time for anyone and for people who choose this option training providers offer different formats to accommodate different circumstances. Some courses take place over about 20 consecutive days – sometimes in an attractive holiday destination where you can combine the
training with a holiday. This gives you a concentrated and sometimes more intense experience. Other courses spread the training over a period of a few months with 5 or 6 individual modules of 3-4 days, or sometimes 3 modules of 6-7 days. These courses over a period do have the advantage that you have time between modules to practise and integrate the learning with the reassurance of help on the next module with any issues that arise for you as you practise the skills.

Check out how many days you will need to take off work. There are courses that just run at weekends. These have the advantage that they do not eat into work time at all, but the down-side of losing 9-10 entire week-ends over the training period. Others take place just on week-days. Others offer three or four-day modules which span long week-ends.

It’s up to you to determine what fits best with your own lifestyle and circumstances but this is an important consideration. What’s the best mix of learning, reflection and work-life balance for you?

**Shorter Courses**

The challenge of full-length 120 hour programmes is the amount of time-commitment and associated travel and/or accommodation costs and the necessity to book out your time well in advance. This might be difficult if your job throws up unavoidable assignments at short notice.

Many companies are now offering shorter programmes, and you may want to look at these if you cannot afford the luxury of 20 days for training.

Some providers offer distance learning options. For example, the course requirements will include supplementary reading or DVDs and audio material. If you can, ask someone who has taken one of these trainings about the quality of these. Some companies put in these elements just to make up 120 hours on paper to satisfy the recommendations of various national and international bodies and the materials are of doubtful quality or just re-vamp books already published. They are useful familiarisation materials but not much more. But some companies are moving into the 21st century with well-developed materials that do stretch and challenge you. It really depends what is offered and most importantly, how it is supported.

In this Guide we are talking just about Practitioner training. If you look beyond this remit there are short courses which will give you the tools of a Practitioner training and beyond if you choose with care. Many people who study NLP build up their learning through short courses with trainers who have high reputations in particular fields. You will get the best out of this method if you go for depth as well as breadth of learning.

**Practical nature of learning**

Practical learning is particularly important in NLP and the best courses will include major elements of this. Most people with experience of NLP will tell you that it is a highly practical and interactive learning experience and that taking part in demonstrations and exercises is the best way to consolidate learning. Those that begin their study of NLP from books or DVDs usually move towards experiential learning eventually if they want to progress. People who have studied NLP frequently say that the best learning is experiential, that they may have thought they knew something intellectually but realised they hadn’t at all when they went the stage further to experience it in a more integrated way.
Some courses give you practical assignments to practise your learning, as well as projects to develop your NLP skills. If these are well-run and well-supported they will go a long way towards developing your practical expertise. And practice is what you need: NLP is more like learning golf than swotting up the periodic table or learning case law. You can learn about golf in the armchair but you don’t become an expert without getting out on the course.

NLP and hypnosis

There is another kind of short course where trainers run the whole programme with the participants under hypnosis, with the claim that the learning is installed unconsciously. Participants of such programmes can indeed acquire a good level of learning but don’t have conscious knowledge of what they have learned. It’s good to be aware that this will leave you with more to learn if you want to proceed onto a more conventional Master Practitioner programme, use NLP in more conscious ways with others or indeed teach it.

Flexibility

Some training providers offer their programmes in modular form. They may allow you to pick up a missed module at a later date, usually without penalty although some may charge additional fees. If your work situation tends to be demanding or you have family commitments, this can be helpful. Check what penalties, if any, are exacted by companies for changing dates if you have to miss a session.

What should you look for in the trainer?

One of the reasons for the ongoing debate about the merits and usefulness of NLP is that people have very different experiences in NLP training. For some it is a truly life-changing experience, for others it is no different from any other course with a pack of technical skills and specialist language to learn. The quality of the trainer has a major impact on your learning and differences in the experience of learners are almost entirely down to the skill, personality, expertise and wisdom of the trainer. So it’s important not just to sign up without any idea of who you are getting.

Experience

What should you look for in your trainer? Well, at the very least they should be qualified, which means they have been certified as NLP Practitioner, NLP Master Practitioner and NLP Trainer with a reputable training provider.

They also need experience in actually using NLP in a professional setting. It is possible to qualify as an NLP Trainer incredibly quickly. Some training providers offer the Practitioner and Master Practitioner over just a few months so someone could be qualified on paper as an NLP Trainer 9 months after their very first experience of NLP. As a minimum I would recommend looking for someone who has taken the training over a period of years and been practising subsequently for a good while.
There are certain aspects of NLP training where the trainer’s expertise is particularly important. One is the ability to give practical one-to-one demonstrations. This means that the trainer is able to work with an individual with the rest of the participants observing and show how practical change works in action. Such sessions can be the high points of a course and they require high awareness, sensibility and skill on the part of the trainer. Asking people who have done the course about the success or otherwise of such demonstrations gives you one good way to determine levels of skill and expertise.

A second important area is in dealing with participants’ individual questions, issues and difficulties during the training. Their ability to deal with such matters sorts out very quickly the highly competent from those who are less so.

**Personality and Style**

The choice will depend somewhat on your own preference and ethics. Trainer personalities will vary widely. Some trainers will be keen to demonstrate sales techniques to increase influence, and offer a model that stresses persuasive power and personal impact. Others will want to help you work more productively and successfully in business with clearer goals and better relationships. Others will stress your personal growth as the way to increase success and happiness in all areas.

This is perhaps the moment to mention jargon. Some trainers will emphasize the technical jargon of NLP and give you great lists of language distinctions, categories of questions and complex explanations in specific NLP language. It can be interesting but you don’t need it to be successful in using NLP to communicate well, develop your personal skills or effect change. The best NLP is simple, direct and elegant, so do not allow yourself to be bamboozled by technology if you want NLP for its practical benefits. This element may be one of the first things you notice about a trainer.

Their style needs to suit your learning preferences. How do you learn best? Do you enjoy lightness and fun in your learning? Do you prefer a more serious process-driven approach? Do you like working with someone who gets you to think and be creative? Do you want a fast pace that gives you lots of content or a steadier pace that allows you to integrate the learning more fully? You will learn best if you are comfortable with the trainer’s style. You need to see them as a model of excellence. After all, you will probably pick up much of their way of being unconsciously so it needs to be a model you approve of!

Finally, is your trainer interested in you personally? Do they go out of their way to make sure you are happy with the learning? When you speak to others who have studied with the trainer what is their story? Did the trainer answer their questions helpfully and have time for them? Did he or she seem to care about their progress and welfare? Was the trainer available when you were practising new techniques or between course modules?

A few NLP Practitioner Courses offer more than one trainer; more often this happens at Master Practitioner level. This can be a good way to experience different styles of NLP in action. It gives you a chance to get information on a wider range of topics and to get different takes on subjects that interest you. The possible downside can be lack of coherence in the programme if there is no lead trainer to coordinate the programme as it progresses and individual trainers just ‘do their own thing’.
Focus of training

Do you want NLP for increased business success or to improve sales? Are you most interested in the therapeutic or health side of NLP or NLP for sports excellence? Is your focus on education or perhaps you see NLP as an essential coaching tool?

Most Practitioner and Master Practitioner courses would claim to be general courses suitable for any application of NLP, but individual trainers will have a particular focus of interest and specific experience in using NLP in a range of contexts. These questions become important when you come to choose a trainer. Ask the training provider about their approach to different applications of NLP. If they specialise in one particular aspect check that it is the application you are looking for. It’s important that the approach is wide enough to satisfy your learning goals as you expand your sense of what is possible with NLP.

Your learning experience

What is the ideal group size?

There is perhaps no ideal group size, but there are various factors to consider.

Every course participant requires one-to-one assistance from time to time. Most trainers employ assistants (sometimes called the resource team) to help with practical exercises and participants’ queries. It is a good idea to ask your training provider about the ratio of assistant to participant – if it is more that 1 to 10 you might begin to doubt whether assistance will be available when you require it. Assistants should also have sufficient experience of NLP to be able to help you. Ideally they will be models that you can also learn from. On some courses they can be a great support and source of learning; on others they will be little more than administrative and sales staff and not particularly interested in your personal welfare.

A large group can be good fun at times but if it is too large it may be overwhelming, the training room becomes impossibly noisy during exercises, and you are unlikely to have much personal contact with the trainer. Some training providers run courses with enormous numbers. A seven-day course with over 400 participants is going to be a particular kind of experience and you need to be confident that you will enjoy it. Check it out with the provider first and make sure that your individual learning needs will be catered for as it is easy to ‘disappear’ in a large group.

Some training providers specialise in very small groups and there are clear advantages to this. You are likely to get more personal attention and you will get to know the other members of the course well. The down-side might be lack of variety and challenge. During a typical Practitioner training you will do processes in pairs or threes on many occasions and it is always good to work with a variety of partners, to experience a range of different approaches to life. If you get the opportunity to do this in your training you will have ready strategies for any kind of encounter in the outside world. If the group is too ‘cosy’ you will soon know people all too well and might not learn as much about dealing with differences. Providing that you still get personal attention a slightly larger group can be more beneficial from this point of view.

In some ways you get the best of all worlds in a medium-size group supported by a positive well-trained resource team. You still get personal attention and
assistance when you need it and you avoid the anonymity of the large group, but you still experience plenty of variety and excellent opportunities for networking. If you speak to people who have trained in NLP many will say that the networking opportunities were a valuable bonus. Many people establish important work contacts and form friendships that last long after the training.

What happens between trainings?

What activities are suggested for in between training sessions? Some companies have no interest in what happens outside the training room. Other companies are interested in your personal development between sessions and want to hear about it and support you when you return to the training room. With other trainings the time between is a particularly valuable part of the training where you practise skills in real life, maybe keep a journal, undertake a modelling project and find out what you can and can't yet do. When this is well organised and supported it can be almost as valuable as time in the training room.

What sort of follow-up and support is offered?

In between sessions and when the training ends is it easy to integrate the learning into real life? This can be the very time you come up with new questions and most need support. Does the support continue or come to a standstill?

With some training providers support does not go beyond the training room. With others you have access to a coach for which you pay separately. Some training providers offer support as part of the package. This might include one-to-one coaching between modules, group coaching via telephone or action learning.

The network of fellow participants can be a valuable source of support and new direction. Some training providers encourage such networking by facilitating contact with peers between modules. Other training providers just send you out of the training room to fend for yourself without even a list of names of the other participants on the course.

One of the early reviewers of this guide wrote;

"...a shared concern was the constant enquiries about which courses to do from newcomers, and then post training about the lack of "integration" of material in some people. They were often so full of 'technique' that rapport was sometimes lost on their immediate circle, ("You've been on another course haven't you?")?"

The best training providers will encourage and facilitate practice during the course, between modules and after the course has finished.

Certification

What is the value of NLP Practitioner Certification?

Almost every course will offer you a Practitioner Certificate but there is no single international or national certifying board to regulate courses and validate qualifications. The worth of your certificate is to some extent a popular judgement based on reputation. Certain courses are well-considered because of the reputation of the trainers and the rigour of their own training. A good
indication will be the practical competence of their graduates. Other companies have acquired a poor reputation because their graduates are found to be deficient in knowledge and skill when they embark on more advanced courses.

The field of NLP is still young enough that most respected qualifying bodies are led by people who were involved in the early development of NLP or who studied with the early innovators. Some of the better known are:

- The Professional Guild of NLP  
  www.professionalguildofnlp.com
- NLP University
  www.nlpu.com
- The American Board of Neuro Linguistic Programming  
  www.abnlp.com
- International NLP Trainers Association  
  www.inlpta.com
- The Society of NLP  
  www.purenlp.com

Most of these organisations offer their own training so cannot be said to be entirely neutral. The founders of NLP themselves would say that a qualifying body is in itself no guarantee of quality. You are better served to investigate courses yourself, asking the kind of questions I suggest here.

Even with such variation, most course providers will ask for a Practitioner Certificate before they will accept you onto a Master Practitioner Course and similarly a Master Practitioner Certificate before they will accept you onto a Trainer Course. The certificate is at least proof that you have had some training in NLP and suggests that you are familiar with certain concepts and processes.

**How is your proficiency assessed?**

Training courses vary widely in their approach to this area. Some trainers just pass everybody simply for being there. If you’ve completed most of the modules you get your certificate as simple as that. Some trainers go to the other extreme, and you are faced at the end of the course with a series of rigid assessments including written exams. It’s good to feel that your certificate is worth something, but NLP is about practising what works rather than accumulating knowledge. Effective NLP is about what you can do rather than what you know.

Most of the better courses give you practical assessments or assignments over one or two days at the end of the course as well as monitoring your progress and giving you direct feedback during the course. This allows the assessment process to be thorough while not presenting too daunting an experience.

If the numbers on the course are large you will want to check that the people monitoring you are themselves qualified to do so. Some courses use assistants with minimal experience to carry out this monitoring and assessment process. Go at the very least for a training provider whose assistants have an NLP Practitioner qualification and some experience in practising NLP.
What you get for your money

What does your course fee include?

Do you get the bare bones and pay for all the extras or are they part of the package? What exactly do you get?

Venue and access

If the training environment matters to you it’s a good idea to check out the venue. Some providers are vague about the exact location until you have signed up and then send out joining instructions.

Venues vary quite a lot. You may want to ask yourself:

- Is the venue easily accessible with good transport links, and/or easy parking?
- Do I want to get home easily each evening, or do I need overnight accommodation? In which case, are there convenient hotels nearby or do I want to look for a residential course?
- Is the venue in a location that suits me, whether rural or town-centre with parks and green spaces or shops nearby?
- What quality of training environment will suit me best? Many providers use mid-range hotels, which are comfortable if anonymous. Some go for luxurious or Spartan residential country retreats. Some training providers skimp on the venue and you find yourself in a sports hall or community centre with minimal facilities.
- Regarding refreshments, morning and afternoon drinks are usually provided. Sometimes lunch is included – as part of a hotel package for example. This may represent value but you might find that you get to know fellow participants better and feel more refreshed by going outside the training venue to a nearby restaurant or pub. So another question might be whether there is a good choice of eating places nearby.

Training materials

Ask a training provider what training materials are included. The reputable training providers will all offer you a training workbook or manual. This should be comprehensive enough to give you access to all the various processes you will cover and be in a style that is clear and interesting. Bulk is not important: excellent factual content and ease of use is.

You might like to know that your workbook will be well presented. You might enjoy the training providers that suit different learning styles by offering a variety of formats such as mind maps, audio tapes or DVDs.
Supplementary learning and extras

You may be offered one-to-one coaching which you have to pay for separately or which may on occasions be included in the price you pay.

You may be offered facilitated audio-classes afterwards, in which case are they covered by separate payments or included in the deal?

What about recordings of the training to play at home to continue your learning after the course? Training providers can charge up to £300 or £400 ($500-$700) for an audio recording of the training you have just taken. Occasionally they are included.

Some training providers offer other special features such as a particular fun experience or a personal challenge. Others enrich the training experience with guest trainers. Sometimes the venue itself offers extra possibilities especially if it is located in an exciting part of the world!

So, how much should you pay?

As you can see from the above, what you pay rather depends on what you are getting. So check the features out carefully first. Then look at the prices and you will find that these vary widely. You may find two training providers that charge similar amounts but one is offering 20 days well-supported training and the other is offering 7 with no extra support, or one guarantees under 50 participants while the other fits in 300 plus. So the devil is in the detail.

Are workbooks and other study materials included in the price? Do you have to pay extra for certification? Do you have to pay extra for a pre-course or an assessment day? Can you change dates without incurring extra costs? How much free support is offered? Do you have to pay for extra coaching?

An extra hidden cost which can appear much later on in the training is the demand for a fee once you have qualified for you to train and coach 'under the auspices' of the company that trained you. Be sure to check this out before you start.

What about ‘freebies’?

Several companies offer the first day or even three days for free, and this might give you the opportunity to try out a supplier before committing to a longer training and represent a good deal. However, unless you are immune to manipulation, beware the companies that offer you three days for free, and then employ heavy-handed – even deliberately hypnotic – sales ploys to lock you into the rest of the course. Certain of the larger concerns do just that, and they can be difficult to deal with in a large group setting. There are companies that flood the market with ‘vouchers’ for courses, ‘discounted’ from several hundred pounds to zero: these are just ‘freebies’ and should be considered as such.

What guarantees are offered?

Reputable providers don’t want you to continue with their training if you are not happy with it so they will offer you a guarantee. Some will give you your money back, or at least that proportion that you have not yet spent, if you are not entirely happy. Others will transfer you to other modules or sessions without
extra charge if you are unavoidably unable to attend. Some offer you instead a recording of the sessions you missed which is not as good but better than nothing.

However much research you undertake before embarking on a course, it is still possible to make a mistake so check out what guarantees are offered for your peace of mind.

Making Your Choice

Finally, speak to the training providers. This exercise can tell you a lot. Do you have access only to office staff who have instructions merely to take as many bookings as possible? Are you able to ask questions of someone who is knowledgeable about the training? Are the trainers themselves available for questions?

This is the stage at which your intuition will serve you well. Do you trust this company? Do you have confidence that their deepest wish is for you to find an excellent training that best suits your personal requirements or do you sense that they are employing sales techniques that discount you as an individual? What is your gut feeling? A key aspect of NLP is relations between people and you will want the experts who offer you training to relate to you in a way that you respect and trust. If that is not happening look for other training providers. You will know when you have found a training provider that you trust.

So, good luck with your choice!

Finally...

I have attempted to give you unbiased information to enable you to make the best choice for you. I realise there is no such thing as entirely unbiased information and my own opinions will have crept in from time to time. However all the information is correct to the best of my knowledge and belief and delivered to you in as fair a way as I can achieve. I wish you the very best with your selection.

I do know that NLP training delivered competently with an honest spirit can be the beginning of an amazing journey of self knowledge and high achievement. I am delighted that you are curious about learning more about NLP.

Good luck on your journey and I hope to see you on the way...

Judy Apps

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