Preparing a Syllabus

teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/course-design/preparing-a-syllabus

Construct your syllabus well in advance, as part of the process of planning the course (see Designing a Course and Course-Planning Timeline).

We have designed a syllabus template with selected elements of an effective syllabus, as well as recommended language related to University policies and resources for students. Use our syllabus template to create your own.

The course syllabus has multiple functions:

1) The syllabus is a course-planning tool. It helps the instructor prepare and organize the course. Taking the time to construct a detailed syllabus will help you define the course goals; plan the course structure and assignments, exams, review sessions, and other activities; and determine how much time you should devote to particular topics.

2) The syllabus is a prospectus that answers a question on the minds of many students on the first day of class: "Why should I take this course?" The syllabus communicates to students a clear idea of the course content, your approach to teaching it, and what they can expect to do and to learn in completing the course requirements. The syllabus should also stimulate interest in the course topic by indicating why the topic is important or intriguing. Keep in mind that colleagues, administrators, and others interested in the course will read your syllabus. Thus, the syllabus provides an opportunity for you to communicate with a larger audience about the course and its significance to broad educational goals.

3) The syllabus is a reference guide. It provides students with a compendium of information that they will consult throughout the course, including logistical information such as course name and number, prerequisites, and instructor's name and contact information, as well as due dates, exam times, and course requirements and policies.

4) The syllabus is akin to a contract, in that it sets out course requirements and policies regarding grading, academic integrity, student conduct, attendance, late work, and other issues. Students are responsible for reading and understanding the syllabus, the terms of which they implicitly agree to abide by when they take the course; encourage students to ask questions to ensure that they understand the course policies and requirements. You should include a caveat, however, indicating that you may make changes and adjustments to the document throughout the course, as needed.

Additional Considerations

- When preparing the syllabus, pay attention to organization, layout, and typography to ensure that the document is easy to read.
- Date the syllabus before you distribute it to students.
- Consider putting your syllabus online as well as on paper. As part of a course Web site, the syllabus will be easy for you to modify throughout the semester and will be accessible for students who misplace their first copy. If you modify the syllabus during the semester, inform students that a change has been made, highlight the change in a visible way (for example, with a font of a different color), and add an updated date in the "footer" of the document.
- On the first day of class, have plenty of copies available—especially if the course is likely to be popular and students are "comparison shopping"—and go over the syllabus carefully to reduce the risk of future surprises. Depending on the size of the class, consider requiring each student to submit a question about the syllabus during class or on an online discussion board. Finally, record student questions so that the next syllabus can be even clearer and more complete.

What information should appear on the syllabus?

Note that you can choose to put some information on a course Web site or on Blackboard rather than including it on the written document. It is always a good idea, however, to put the "essential information" listed below on the printed syllabus, even if it also appears online.

Essential Information

- **Course title, number, time, days, and location; URL for course Web site, if applicable**
- **Name and contact information of instructor(s) and, if applicable, TA(s)**

In addition, indicate how students should contact you, whether by e-mail or by phone, for example; include the appropriate contact information. If the course has TAs, be sure to include their contact information, as well. Include times, days, and locations of office hours, as well as study groups and help sessions.

Prerequisites

Course prerequisites communicate your assumptions about your students and help the students determine whether they have completed the necessary academic preparation for the course.

Topics outline

The outline may be detailed or not, depending on your expectations for students' preparation and learning. For example, if you want students to come to class ready to discuss particular chapters or articles, your outline will be detailed, listing the specific reading assignment for

each day of class; in this case, the topic outline will be equivalent to the course schedule (see below). If you are using a lecture format, on the other hand, you may prefer to list the number of days you expect to spend on each topic and the portion of the required texts that are related to the lectures during those days.

Texts, materials, and supplies

Information about each text should include the title, author, edition, publisher, and where the text can be purchased, borrowed or accessed (if placing material on <u>Ares</u>, the library reserve-system, or on <u>Blackboard</u>). If students will need additional materials such as a calculator, safety equipment, or art supplies, provide a detailed list and indicate where the materials can be acquired. For each text or other material, specify whether it is "required" or "optional, but recommended."

Assignments and exams

Briefly describe the nature and format of assignments; add a note indicating that detailed assignments will be distributed and posted on the course Web page, if applicable, at a later date. Include due dates for major assignments such as papers, presentations, and projects, as well as any initial drafts or other preliminary work. Indicate the nature, date, and length of any exam.

Additional course requirements

Include dates and descriptions of required events such as field trips, seminars, additional sessions, or study groups.

Grading scale and policies

Explain the grading scale, indicating the weight of each component, such as homework, papers, quizzes, exams, reports, and participation, within the course grade. Indicate whether the grade is determined on a "curve" or an absolute scale. Note whether any graded assignment can be dropped and how that dropped grade will affect the final grade. Indicate policy on re-grades, if applicable. Direct students to applicable grading rubrics, which you can provide both on paper and on the course Web site.

Additional course policies

Explain in detail policies concerning attendance; class participation; late work; missed exams; academic integrity; requests for extensions and for rescheduling of exams; and expectations for student conduct in the classroom, laboratory, or studio. Keep in mind that incidents of academic integrity are on the rise, and instructors need to take a proactive approach in preventing and responding to these incidents. Express your willingness to help students understand the <u>Academic Integrity Policy</u> and how they can avoid plagiarism and its serious consequences by learning to cite sources correctly and leaving plenty of time to complete assignments.

Recommended Information

Caveat

Indicate that you reserve the right to make adjustments or changes throughout the semester. Remind students that they are responsible to learn about these changes if they miss any class time.

Course goals

The course goals describe what each student should know or be able to do by the end of the course. Including these goals in the syllabus can help you articulate the rationale behind assignments, exams, and the organization of the course. (See Designing a Course.)

Subsection information

If the course contains subsections, list their respective start dates, and the time and place that they will be held. Explain their purposes and indicate whether any quizzes or homework will be due during these sections.

Helpful Additions

Course description

The description should be consistent with that which appears in the course listings; it may be even more detailed, providing a clear idea of the specific course topic and its significance.

Course schedule

Include on the course schedule the dates that you will be covering specific topics, the due dates for major assignments; and the date of the final exam. The more detailed the course schedule, the more useful it will be for the students. When preparing the schedule, consult the relevant academic calendars and keep in mind religious holidays and significant campus events (for example, Homecoming and Thurtene Carnival).

Student resources

List information about relevant resources that might be helpful to students in your course, such as those found at The Writing Center, Cornerstone (academic mentoring, tutoring, and disability resources), and the University Libraries. Include information about any available lecture notes or videotapes of lectures.

Supplementary material

Include a note about any relevant supplementary materials such as study hints, safety guidelines, information about exam preparation, and online resources; the note might, for example, direct students to find these materials on the course Web site.

Links and References for Preparing a Syllabus

"Creating a Syllabus." Instruction at FSU: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Practices. Instructional Development Services. Florida State University. http://learningforlife.fsu.edu/ctl/explore/onlineresources/docs/Chptr3.pdf

Davis, Barbara Gross. "Creating a Syllabus." Tools for Teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

"Designing a Syllabus." Center for Learning and Teaching. Cornell University. http://www.cte.cornell.edu/documents/cte/CTE%20Designing%20Syllabus.pdf.

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