

Preparing a Course Syllabus*

A syllabus is the basic document developed by instructors to reflect their plan for a course. The chief purpose of a syllabus is to help the instructor present an organized, coherent, and academically responsible course. It also provides structure for students taking the course and serves as a guide for TAs.

What is the rationale for syllabi?

The rationale is based on information from instructors who have successfully developed syllabi for their courses. Most instructors agree that an effective syllabus accomplishes the following:

1. requires instructors to organize early (experienced instructors know that this is essential to a successful class);
2. helps students know what is expected of them and efficiently plan their semester;
3. reduces opportunities for capricious grading charges;
4. presents a positive image to students (a well-prepared syllabus is evidence that you take teaching seriously);
5. provides pertinent information about the course to your department and colleagues.

How do you get started?

Begin by studying syllabi from other instructors. Request copies from colleagues with reputations for being successful teachers. Ask colleagues what has and has not worked for them.

Once you have examined a number of syllabi, your next step is to determine a format that suits you and your course. There is no one correct form to follow. Familiarize yourself with university policies and regulations about examinations, academic misconduct, and other issues that affect your students, TAs, and you. Check the Academic Calendar for holidays and other events potentially relevant to your students; available through Office of the University Registrar <<http://www.registrar.psu.edu/>>.

Familiarize yourself with relevant policies:

University Faculty Senate:

<http://www.senate.psu.edu/fac_resources.asp>

General University Reference Utility:

<<http://guru.psu.edu/home.cfm>>

Student Code of Conduct:

<<http://www.sa.psu.edu/ja/conduct.shtml>>.

What should you include in your syllabus?

Your syllabus can include as little or as much as you want. Experienced instructors include more rather than less material. Instructors generally agree that certain topics should be considered.

1. *Information about the course*

- current year and quarter
- course title and number
- meeting time and location
- instructor's name, phone number and email address, office location and office hours

2. *Clear statement of course objectives*

Course objectives are unambiguous statements of learning outcomes. Phrase them in terms of what the student is expected to learn or accomplish rather than in terms of what the instructor will do during the quarter.

3. *Description of how students will meet the course objectives*

This is *not* to be confused with a list of assignments. Instead, it is a description of activities that the course will include. The description might include such activities as field trips, readings, lectures, discussions, research projects, laboratory work, problem sets, group presentations, case studies, or guest lecturers. You might also include estimates of student study time with each activity.

4. *List of resources available to students*

The most important item to be included in this section is the required text(s) and reading assignments. Optional or supplemental readings should be included here as well. If you plan to make other materials available to students (e.g. sample tests and projects, tapes, or readings) mention these items in this section.

5. *Statement of grading criteria*

A lengthy description of your grading policy is not necessary. Most faculty suggest that the statement contain only the assignments and tests along with the grading weights of each. Other grading practices that you plan to use, such as a grade for participation, or grading on a curve should be noted here.

6. *Schedule*

This is probably the most time-consuming part of syllabus preparation. In terms of course organization, however, the rewards are well worth the effort. The schedule should contain dates, the corresponding sequence of topics, assignments and your suggestions for preparation. One common format is a table.

Date	Topic	Activities	Assignments	Due date

Mapping out this daily or weekly schedule with midterm and final dates, as well as holidays, lets you know exactly how many classes are available to you. It also lets students know what is expected of them on each day.

7. *Discussion of course policy*

Clearly state your policies on:

- attendance
- below average performance
- discipline
- excuses from tests, quizzes, and assignments
- cheating and plagiarism

Use direct, matter-of-fact language, but make sure your tone is respectful and non-punitive.

Once you have written your syllabus, ask others to read it for feedback on its clarity, completeness, and tone.

Once a class begins, how do you use your syllabus?

While there is no one particular rule to follow, below are some suggestions from successful faculty:

1. *Hand out the syllabus on the first or second day of class.*

Handing out the syllabus on the first day sets the tone for the class. It lets students know that you are prepared and plan to present an organized course. If you plan to ask students about their expectations, and incorporate their feedback into the syllabus, you might want to hand out the syllabus on the second day.

2. *Review and discuss the syllabus with your students.*

Be prepared to answer questions about your testing and grading policies and other matters of concern to students. Most instructors prefer to handle the initial discussion themselves, rather than leave it to their TAs. This ensures that answers to questions about course policies are consistent across all sections. Consider creating a first-week homework assignment asking students to answer questions that can be answered only by reading your syllabus.

3. *Be prepared to alter the syllabus.*

If there is a typographical error, a date that you have miswritten, or a holiday on which you have inadvertently scheduled an activity, you can be sure that students will spot it. Put all changes to the syllabus or schedule in writing.

4. *Duplicate more copies than you have enrolled students.*

Some students will choose not to take the class, while others will enroll late. Be prepared to replace lost syllabi.

Final Note

A carefully prepared syllabus becomes a clear and concrete contract between you and your students. Students will consider the syllabus useful if you use it in class. For example, every couple of weeks, ask students to examine it and to identify activities and/or topics from class that are linked to your course objectives.

* Modified from: *Illini Instructor Series*, No. 3. Instructional & Management Services, Instructional Development Division, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.