

## Creating Your Syllabus

Jennifer Sinor and Matt Kaplan  
Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

The syllabus—what students eagerly await on the first day; a record of the class; one of the only artifacts to remain after the students move on. Your syllabus represents both an end and a beginning—a final product of your course planning and a valuable way to introduce yourself and the course to your students. Because your syllabus is one of the few formal, tangible links between you and your students and because it will be referred to throughout the semester, time and energy should be spent on constructing your syllabus. Research indicates that outstanding instruction and a detailed syllabus are directly related (Grunert, 1997). Students will appreciate and respond positively to a syllabus that bears the marks of being well planned.

The information you will need to include in your syllabus will vary depending on the course or section you are teaching as well as your responsibilities in the class. For example, GSIs teaching discussion sections will include different kinds and amounts of information than GSIs who are responsible for an entire course. Therefore, you will need to tailor the following description to your particular teaching duties. **It is, however, a good idea in all courses and sections to hand out some form of syllabus on the first day.** Examples of syllabi representing a variety of teaching responsibilities can be found on subsequent pages.

The syllabus sets forth your responsibilities and those of your students. This does not mean that your calendar or your assignments are set in stone on the first day and that you have no flexibility. Those kinds of precautions can be written in (e.g., This calendar is subject to change.). What it does mean is that both you and your students are agreeing to a certain course of action, with specific expectations on both parts, and you are all accountable for maintaining the agreed upon route. Major changes—like changes in the grading policy or additions of assignments—are not fair to students and should be avoided.

In the initial planning stages, you may find it helpful to look at others' syllabi, especially if you can find past examples from the course or section you are teaching. This will give you a good idea of what has been expected in the past in terms of the

average number of pages of reading assigned per week, the kinds of texts used, average page length of papers, and general policies for the course or section. It is also useful to read the department's course description that can often be found on the Web or in the departmental office. Additionally, there are many Internet resources on syllabus planning that can be helpful in designing your syllabus. Get a feel for what others' syllabi look like and don't be afraid to use others' structure or language. Just remember that course material, like other academic writing, is intellectual property and the original source should be given credit.

Also, take some time to think about the tone you would like to establish in your syllabus. Usually the syllabus is the first document students receive from you and one which will be closely examined and continually revisited. Make sure to communicate the high expectations you have for your students. The tone you set throughout your syllabus should reflect your teaching style. For example, if you have an informal style of teaching you might wish to write your syllabus in a more familiar tone, maybe in the first person. If you would prefer to create a more formal atmosphere, a third person approach might be better.

### Mapping the Territory: Goals for Student Learning

If you think of your syllabus as a map to your course or section, then you realize how important it is to have an intended destination. Before you actually begin constructing the syllabus, take some time to think about what you expect your students to learn over the course of the semester. What knowledge do you expect students to acquire? What skills (e.g., critical thinking, analytical ability, mathematical or computational skills, forming and testing hypotheses) do you expect students to gain? As you do this, it is important to keep in mind the level of the course and the level of the students, especially in introductory courses. Remember that for many students an introductory course is often the last (rather than the first) exposure they will have to your discipline during their time at the University. Plan to meet the needs of those who

are just passing through as well as those who are beginning extended study.

To help you stay focused on the students in your class, describe your course goals in terms of learning, using active verbs that indicate what students will need to do as the semester progresses. For example, in a course on history, one instructor told students that they would acquire the “basic skills used by historians,” which included the ability to:

- critically analyze primary documents
- identify an author’s thesis and evaluate how well it is supported
- write a logical and coherent argument of their own.

For instructors, having a clearly articulated set of goals has at least two benefits. First, if you know what you expect your students to accomplish, it will be easier to plan out the semester and the individual class sessions. Second, by knowing what you expect students to learn, you will have a clearer sense of how to evaluate students (which will make it easier for you to create and grade exams and assignments).

## What to Include

Actual syllabi will vary from field to field and course to course. Keeping in mind your responsibilities and goals for the course or section, you will need to tailor your syllabus to meet the needs of your class. That said, most syllabi include the following features (a checklist can be found on page 23).

### *Basic Information*

Your syllabus should include the name of the course or section and the course or section number as well as the particular semester and year (e.g., Fall 2008). Include the meeting times and days of the class as well as the building name and room number where you will meet. You should also include your name, your email address, the location of your office, your office phone number (or a university number where messages can be left), and the days and times of your office hours. If your syllabus or other course or section material is available on the Internet, you will want to include the URL address. Also, if you have created a group email for the class, you may provide that email

address as well. Some instructors choose to give students their home phone numbers. You should not feel obligated to do this. If you decide to include your home phone number, emphasize to students that this is a privilege. Include times when it is acceptable to call you at home (e.g., Please call only between the hours of 9AM and 10PM.). Many instructors and students prefer the convenience and flexibility of email communication, and you may consider encouraging your students to contact you this way.

### *Course or Section Description*

Course or section descriptions can vary significantly. Typically they are from one to several paragraphs in length and are meant to give students an idea of the course or section content and objectives. They may be in the form of a letter welcoming students to your class, or they may be more formally laid out with specific, bulleted goals. You can rely on the generic course description written by the department, or you may prefer to describe why the subject is of interest to you, what you bring to it, or how your own background informs the direction you see the class taking. You could use this space to illustrate overarching themes or connections for the students (maybe adding a note encouraging students to revisit the course/section description throughout the semester). You might also consider describing the teaching methods you will be using (e.g., small groups, lectures, writing workshops, class discussions), or you can describe the relevance and applicability of the course. This is also a space to list any pre-requisites that are required or recommended as well as any philosophical or pedagogical assumptions you are making (e.g., I am assuming that you have taken Introductory Composition or the equivalent and that you are familiar with the basic modes of writing. If not, please come and see me).

Whatever you decide to include in this section, remember that this is a place where tone is really important. It is the section where you are creating a narrative about your class. You do not want to overwhelm students with information that might be better understood later in the semester, such as in-depth descriptions of key concepts. Instead, think of this section as a place to really get students excited about the semester.

### *Texts/Materials*

Include the texts you will be using for the course or section, making sure to clearly mark which are required and which are recommended. Let students know where the texts can be purchased (including name and address of the bookstore). It is also helpful if you let them know if you have placed the texts on reserve at the library or if they will be available as a pdf on your Ctools site. (For information about reserving course texts online and obtaining a pdf version of your texts, see “Electronic Reserve Systems @ University Libraries” at [www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/publinks.php](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/publinks.php). For standard course reserves, see [www.lib.umich.edu/reserves/](http://www.lib.umich.edu/reserves/).) Give the same information about coursepacks. You also may decide to use this space to give brief descriptions about the texts to peak student interest. Just don’t overwhelm them with too much information.

If applicable, include other materials required for the course including calculators, lab equipment, or specific tools. Specify make, model, or brand and provide information about where to purchase these supplies.

### **Course Schedule/Weekly Calendar/Assignments**

The course or section schedule is a description of what is happening each week in class. As mentioned above, it is often a good idea to indicate to students that the schedule is tentative and subject to change. Keep in mind, though, that if you want your students to perform well on tests and assignments it is best to give them a clear and stable sense of due dates so that they can plan their time accordingly. Make sure to **bold**, underline, or *highlight* significant due dates for papers, projects, or lab reports (including dates for preliminary drafts) and dates of exams, quizzes, or finals. To reinforce the importance of these dates, you may consider handing out a separate list of all the major assignments and their due dates. Also include in your syllabus dates of special events or guest speakers and school holidays.

You may choose to simply list the date of the class and the assignment that is due that day.

Week	Date	Topic	Reading Due
1	1/7	Intro. to Natural Selection	Ch1 in Barney

Or you may want to give a more detailed description of what you will be doing in each class (adapted from Grunert, 1997).

#### **Monday, January 10**

**In class:** Demo on marking up artwork for printer critique of typographic poster roughs

\*four page layout: due as hard copy, mounted and flapped and marked for printer by the end of class

\*typographic poster/ad: 3 rough drafts due next week. I will provide clip art.

**Assignment:** Begin reading Bigg’s *Into Art We Go* (Chapters 1, 3, 5-7).

You may also choose to include a section that gives further detail about the major projects or writing assignments of the class. You could describe, briefly, the various writing opportunities or research projects. You can also use this space to describe additional lab requirements or other various learning opportunities. Again, you could decide to distribute this information at a later date if you are worried about giving too much information all at once or if you would like this information to receive separate time and attention.

#### *Course or Section Policies*

This section provides students with the logistical information about your daily expectations. Depending on the course or section being taught, some instructors have more flexibility than others to create their own policies. In some large courses, instructors are asked to maintain the same policies across sections. These section policies may be predetermined by the department, or you may meet with other section instructors before classes begin to determine section-wide policies like attendance and late assignments. Find out what your responsibilities are for creating course or section policies.

**Attendance:** Make sure to include your attendance policy as well as your tardy policy (if you choose to have one or both). Let students know how you will

be keeping attendance (e.g., passing a sheet around, calling role) and the specific penalty for accumulating absences or tardies. Be clear and make sure to call students' attention to this section.

**Class participation:** Some instructors decide *not* to formally evaluate class participation. They may feel it is impossible to grade participation fairly or objectively, or they may feel active participation is a given. Other instructors prefer to encourage class participation and discussion by making it a formal component of assessment. If you do choose to grade students on class participation, you need to let students know how you will be evaluating their participation as well as how it will figure into their course or section grade. Be specific.

**Late/Missing Assignments and Exams:** Most instructors choose to have a late/missing assignment policy. Some refuse to accept late assignments. Others create a sliding grade scale for each day the assignment is late. You should also include information about your make-up policy for missed exams, if applicable. Indicate and **HIGHLIGHT** these important policies and be fair to your students by upholding them.

**Academic Dishonesty:** The University of Michigan has a Code of Student Conduct that frames the university's policy on academic dishonesty and student misconduct. Each school and college, however, has developed a more detailed and discipline specific code that defines academic dishonesty and describes the procedures for dealing with violations. (See pg. 128 for links to the policies of the different schools and colleges.) Some instructors choose to include the actual statements in their syllabi. Whether you include the institutional statement or create your own, it is really important to have stated in writing how you will respond to academic dishonesty. Because some students (especially first- and second-year students) simply do not know when or how they should cite sources, many instructors spend an entire class talking about what counts as plagiarism or cheating. If your students will be engaging in group work on assignments you may want to refer specifically to fair and effective collaboration. Openness about what cheating is, and what the repercussions are, will reduce both ignorance and the number of infractions.

**Grading Criteria:** You should include a statement about assessment and evaluation. You can be

assured that students will want detailed descriptions of how you plan to assess them, the criteria you will use, and how you will arrive at their final grade. Even if you decide to include this information on a separate handout, it is always a good idea to have at least the framework in your syllabus—including percentages and/or respective weight of the different components of assessment. Let students know how much lab reports count, or essays count, whether you accept rewrites or extra credit work. Again, if you are planning on having students engage in group work for a group grade, be especially clear about how you will be determining that grade.

**Expectations about Scholarship:** You may want to provide students with explicit information about incompletes and/or withdrawals. Check with your department to find out the school or college's policy. You also can estimate the number of hours of course work you are expecting students to complete outside of class time. A standard measurement is two hours of work outside of class for every hour spent in class.

**Accommodations:** You should also include a section or a statement on accommodations for students. It can address multiple learning needs or individual needs. An example would be: Please see me or email me if you require special accommodations due to learning disabilities, religious practices, physical requirements, medical needs, or any other reasons.

## Other Information That Can Be Included

- lab use or safety procedures
- additional support services
  - writing centers
  - tutoring centers
  - computer centers
  - library hours
- strategies for success in your class
- how to take good notes
- sample test questions
- detailed assignment expectations
- guidelines for papers or reports

## Final Thoughts

Keep in mind, too, that your syllabus demonstrates the kind of teaching you do. It is a record of your approach to learning. You may want to include your syllabus as well as other documents (like assignments, sample exams, student papers, and other handouts) in your teaching portfolio when you go on the job market. Begin collecting these documents early on in your teaching career.

Your syllabus is an extension of your teaching self. It is more than a list of information. It is a way to get students excited about the upcoming semester and interested in the class. Personalize it by adding quotations or interesting facts related to the subject

you will be studying. You can even add cartoons and other graphics. Put your syllabus on your Web page if you have one or post it outside your office. Like any learning tool, your syllabus can create new opportunities for students to consider and reconsider the subject you are teaching and their time spent in your class.

## References

- Altman, H.B., & Cashin, W.E. (1992). Writing a syllabus. *Exchange, September*, unpaginated.
- Grunert, J. (1997). *The course syllabus: A learning-centered approach*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Co., Inc.
- The Center for Teaching and Learning. (1991). *Teaching at Carolina: A handbook for instructors*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.