

What's In A Syllabus?

Your syllabus *is* your course. It is the single most important document you offer your students. Your syllabus is where you bring together all your strategizing about how to match student learning needs with your choice of teaching tasks in the context of the type of course you have selected to teach. Your syllabus is also *the* means by which you communicate all this to your students. A good syllabus is thus *prima facie* evidence that you have devoted the essential effort needed to create a good course; a bad syllabus is students' first warning that you haven't and that your course is likely to disappoint.

What's in a syllabus? Too often, way too little. How often have you seen a syllabus that gives little more than the course title, number, class period, a cryptic list of reading assignments, and exam dates? So what should a syllabus do? It should:

- Offer students a clear and concise statement of what your course is about;
- Tell them how you are going to teach the material to them and why;
- Provide all the logistical information they need to engage you and the course materials easily;
- Explain to them exactly what is required of them, when and why; and
- Lay out for them the key elements of the social contract that you and they are entering into.

A good syllabus serves a variety of purposes that go well beyond the confines of a specific course. A good syllabus is a road map or even a guidebook. It lays out your itinerary for the semester, and is a student's first reference if (s)he gets lost. It is also a map of the general subject and perhaps even of the field you are teaching, and should give students a clear sense of the disciplinary lay of the land. A good syllabus is a resource for students. It should, at the very least, offer suggestions to assist students in pursuing topics that interest them, but it can also serve as a reference, a field outline to which they can refer long after they have finished your course.

Perhaps most important, your syllabus is the "constitution" of your course; it is a contract that binds both you and your students. It details what you are going to give them and why. It specifies what is expected of them and how you are going to assess their efforts. And it makes clear what the boundaries of your relationship are and what is--and is not--acceptable behavior in the classroom society your course/social contract defines.

Let's look at the key constituent parts of a good syllabus, one after another. There is nothing magical about this list, but it does reflect a lot of thought and student input. You may want to add additional sections--more is always better from students' point of view--but if you choose *not* to include one of the sections we recommend, we suggest that at the very least you make yourself a good argument as to why you think it is unnecessary.

House Keeping Details

- Course title and number
- Department(s)
- Meeting time(s) and place(s)
- Your name and those of any assistants

- Your office address, telephone number and email address
- The office addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses of any assistants
- Your office hours and those of any assistants
- The URL of the course Website, if you have one

Introduction

What exactly you mean by “American Diplomatic History, 1945 to the Present” or “The Victorian Novel” or “Health Communication” may be clear to you, but your students don’t have the foggiest. Take a couple of paragraphs to spell out what your subject is, what the big questions are, and how you are going to answer them over the course of the term. Provide your students with a course abstract, just as you provide readers of professional journals an article abstract.

Requirements

Spell out, in detail, exactly what will be expected of students. If there are any important deadlines, dates students need to mark on their calendars, or organizational peculiarities to your way of doing things, make sure to highlight them. Students have very busy schedules and many of them work; you need to make it possible for the conscientious among them to plan their workloads well in advance. And remember, you need to record *everything* you are going to assign here, in black and white. This is the contract students “sign” when they stay in your course after drop-add period finishes, and you violate it if you change the terms unilaterally later.

Grading

Tell students everything they need to know about grading in your course. Minimally, this means spelling out for them the grading breakdown, whether or not you grade on a curve and if so where the curve is applied, whether rewrites or other kinds of make up work are permitted and if so under what conditions, and what the appeals process is. More generously, you should seriously consider giving students a sense of what exactly you are looking for. Just what *do* you look for in a paper? What constitutes good participation? How do you assess a journal entry? We tend to shy away from setting this down because it is hard to do. But what kind of excuse is that?

Rationale

Our purposes are entirely mysterious to most of our students. Their resulting confusion about what exactly we want them to achieve often limits what they get from our courses. Take a paragraph or two to explain what you want them to learn and why. Tell them, too, why you have chosen to present the material as you have, and why you have chosen this mix of assignments. If you require multiple, small writing and rewriting projects, or class presentations, or group work, or a field placement or whatever, tell them why. They should know that you have given a lot of thought to constructing this learning experience for them. And, of course, once informed, they can be much better collaborators in their own educations!

Course Etiquette

If all you do is lecture, day after day, you can probably skip this section (although you might try to suggest that reading the newspaper is impolite). On the other hand, if you do anything more, it is--especially in these uncivil times--very much worth the effort to spell out some simple rules about how students should treat each other and address you. A few sentences stressing the impor-

tance of respect for others, fairness and a modicum of decorum go a long way. Sadly, you will find that many students will comment on your addressing these issues, saying that no one else in their lives has ever made even this minimal effort to teach the basic arts of association or even to assure them that the classroom is a safe space for open and honest discussion.

Advising, Office Hours, etc.

At the very least, your syllabus must make clear how and when students can find you for consultations about course work. But students, of course, need advice about much more than the details of a missed lecture or a particularly obscure reading assignment. Given rising class sizes and the widening gap between faculty and students, however, students often hesitate to come to their professors for advice or help. To include in your syllabus a specific statement about your interest in your students' concerns--academic, professional and personal--sends a powerful message about how seriously you take your job as a teacher.

Materials

Students need to know what they need to buy for your course and where it is available. Tell them what they should buy, and which book store(s) have it. If you have more than one library, tell them at which library materials will be available.

The Blow-by-Blow

Your syllabus is a student's map to your course and to the subject, and like a regular map, it's not much good if the big place names and major topographical features are missing. Put differently, your syllabus is the course outline, and should be arranged as such. It should be divided into major sections and subsections, each of which should have a clear and meaningful name. (NB: "Introduction" and "Conclusion" don't cut it!) Within each subsection, every lecture or discussion period should also be dated and have a clear and meaningful title. (How else are they supposed to know what the class is about?) Reading assignments and suggested readings should be tied directly to the relevant lectures and should have due dates attached to them. If at all possible, authors and titles should be spelled out, especially if you are using a reader. All scheduled writing assignments, presentations and exams should be clearly dated and highlighted.