

Writing an Effective Syllabus

By

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An effective syllabus should accomplish several things. It should clearly identify the Course for which it applies. It should inform the student what will be accomplished in the course. The student needs to know how these objectives will be taught and how they will be evaluated. A good syllabus will also inform the student what resources are needed need to accomplish the goals.

When designing a syllabus there are several things that should be on all of the cover pages. These are the name of the institution for which the instructor is teaching the course. The name and number of the course should be clearly stated as well as which semester the course is being offered. It is important to include the name of the instructor on the cover sheet. With several classes going on the students need to know who to contact if they have a question. Some instructors will include their phone number, mailing address and email address on the cover sheet also. This information should be somewhere in the syllabus. If it is on the cover sheet students can find it easier than looking through the syllabus.

One of the first things a student should look for after opening the syllabus is why the course is being offered. Why is this class important for them to accomplish their goals? Any prerequisites or corequisites should be listed in this section. Let the students know when the class meets. What day(s) and what time are they expected to be present?

Every course should have some broad objectives. These are the objectives that will be written into the syllabus. The lesson plans for each individual topic should be specific with measurable criteria.

The Course Outline is an important part of the syllabus. This tells the student what topics will be covered and when. You can set them up on a weekly or daily

schedule. The weekly schedule allows more flexibility in your schedule. Your topics can be broad or specific. At the end of the schedule it is important to put add a clause stating that the schedule is not permanent, but that it may change. I use the phrase “The above schedule may change to accommodate student learning needs”. Somewhere in the syllabus inform the students what methods will be used to teach the information. This could be; lecture, discussion, group projects, computer programs, etc.

You’ve told your students why they need the information, what they will be taught and how you will teach it. Now you need to let the students how they will be evaluated. Group your tasks together (exams, homework, projects, papers). With each given task tell the students how many points are possible and what they need to receive an “A”, “B”, or “C” in the class. Some of your tasks may need further explanation. For example, will chapter exams be for material only in that chapter or will there be questions from previous exam. Will the final exam be comprehensive from the beginning of the course or only from the midterm exam? What happens if a student is absent on the day of the exam? Can they make up the exam? I give myself a week to get exams back. They usually get them back the next day but students know that I won’t be keeping the exams for a month.

Tell students what is expected with regards to homework. I remind students here that homework is due at the beginning of class. If it is not there is a penalty. For each day late there is a deduction. Students are encouraged to do the homework no matter how late it is so that they still gain the benefit of doing it. If it is more that four days late they only receive half credit for it. This is where you put that policy in writing.

If the class will require a lengthy project or research paper this is a good time to let the students know. You can attach the rubric that will be used to evaluate the project along with the date the project is due and any other timelines that are important.

Somewhere (usually at the end) include a list of references or textbooks that the students will need. Some people only list the required books. Some people will list the required books and include a separate section for optional resource materials. I have found both to be very effective.

If you as an instructor have set office hours these need to be in the syllabus somewhere. They can be on the cover with your name or at the end of the syllabus if that is where you put your name. If you were to put your course together into a book your syllabus would serve as the cover, table of contents and index for the course.