

How Do I Create an Effective Syllabus?

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Introduction

The syllabus is typically your students' first real introduction to your course, greeting them with the pertinent details regarding what to expect from the course, and what the course might expect from them. It can set the tone for the entire semester, and as Jennifer Sinor and Matt Kaplan (2010) note, it is one of the few "formal, tangible links between you and your student." It can and perhaps *should be* more than just a sheet of paper listing the basic course information, and is therefore the perfect opportunity for you to prepare your students adequately and set the stage for success! In the sections that follow, this paper will offer some of the primary goals and functions of a syllabus as well as some suggestions for elements that you might include.

Goals and Functions

A syllabus indeed fulfills many functions in a course, and those functions can vary depending on the desires and personality of the instructor designing it. Here are just a few of the most common and useful functions:

- *A plan and contract.* At its core, the syllabus represents an agreement between instructor and student regarding the nature and guidelines of a course. It is in many ways a promise with your students of what the semester holds – what they will be expected to complete, when they will be expected to complete it, and how they will be evaluated. Therefore, you must stay true to the information you present in your syllabus: maintain your timeline and uphold your policies (students will be very unhappy indeed if you add an assignment during the semester, change your grading procedures, or don't follow your own rules!). You can even make your syllabus an actual contract that your students sign to indicate their understanding of the course policies; this can be an effective way to "seal" the agreement between student and instructor!

It's important to note that while you must uphold the policies set forth in your syllabus, it does not mean that the document has to be inflexible. In fact, it is quite smart to incorporate some flexibility to accommodate circumstances that might arise during the course of a class (McKeachie 1986)! Precautions can be easily written into your syllabus (e.g., "This calendar is subject to change with prior notice, at the instructor's discretion"), or built into your course calendar (leave one or two class days free for playing "catch-up" as needed).

- *A communication device.* The syllabus is likely the first form of communication that your students will receive from you, and thus the way you present your syllabus will reveal a great deal about who you are as an instructor. Let your language reflect your personal style in the classroom as well as your overall teaching philosophy, and use the syllabus to help establish a pattern of communication with your students. Help your students get to know you! Further, utilize this opportunity to anticipate important questions your students might have about the course, and provide clear answers (Tapp 2010). (See the section entitled "What to Include" below).
- *A learning tool.* A learner-centered syllabus, or one that not only provides basic information about a course, but also information and tools that help promote learning and intellectual development in

students, can be a powerful tool for student success in your course. In the next sections you'll find some suggestions for elements you might include to make your syllabus more learner-centered.

What to Include: Required or Strongly Recommended Components

Syllabi will certainly vary among disciplines and courses, so you should strive to tailor your syllabus to meet the specific needs of your course, students, and field. Nevertheless, here are some elements that most syllabi include, including some that are required by the university. Those elements mandated by the university are noted as such in the table located below the following sections.

- **Basic course information:** This likely comes as no surprise! Typically, the first items on a syllabus will be the course title, number, section, credit hours, meeting times, and location. It is also a good idea to note any prerequisites for the course so that all students are aware of the required preparation, knowledge, and skills for the course. In addition, most syllabi also include a detailed course description that offers more information than the generic course description provided by the department.
- **Basic instructor information:** In addition to providing students with your title and name, office hours and location, and other means of contact (phone number(s), email address, website URL, etc.), you might also consider delineating what you would like your students to call you. Some instructors choose to provide a personal home or cell phone number as well; however, this is not an obligation. If you choose to provide that information, be sure to include times and other rules delimiting when it is acceptable to reach you at that number. Likewise, it can be beneficial for you as well as your students for you to clarify your preferred means of communication outside of class.
- **Texts, readings, and other materials:** Include a list of the texts for the course, clearly distinguishing between those that are required and those that are recommended, as well as information regarding how students can acquire those texts. (Do they need to purchase them at the bookstore? Have you assembled a course pack or put them on reserve? Are they available online?) You should also make note of any other materials students will need for the course, such as lab equipment, art supplies, calculators, student response devices or “clickers,” etc.
- **A course schedule or outline:** Your syllabus should present your students with some sort of calendar or schedule that outlines what will happen each week or class period of the semester; this will allow your students to plan their time accordingly. You should be especially clear regarding when assignments are due or exams will be held; bold, underlining, or italicized fonts can be particularly useful in this regard! You can decide how much detail you want to provide on your course schedule –i.e., do you simply want to note which readings are due for each class period and the focus of each lesson, or a description of class activities? Remember, you can build flexibility into this schedule!
- **Expected learning outcomes from the course.** Expected learning outcome statements refer to specific knowledge, practical skills, areas of professional development, attitudes, higher-order thinking skills, etc., that faculty members expect students to develop, learn, or master during a course (Suskie, 2004). Your learning outcomes statements will provide you and your students with an important sense of purpose for the course. Writing effective learning outcome statements might take a little bit of time and forethought, but can go far in forecasting your destination for your students. In general, you should limit your learning outcomes to 5 – 10 statements for each course, and they should focus on the most important outcomes for the *course*, not the program or

individual unit. You might first want to find out if your department has pre-determined learning outcomes for your course (Palomba and Banta, 1999). Below are a few tips for crafting effective learning outcome statements, but if you would like additional help, you can contact Dr. Andrea McCourt from the Office of Planning and Assessment for a consultation at 742-1505 or andrea.mccourt@ttu.edu.

Writing Effective Learning Outcome Statements

Learning outcomes have 3 major defining characteristics:

- They specify an action by the students that is observable.
- They specify an action by the students that is measurable.
- They specify an action that is done by the students (rather than by the faculty member).

Effective learning outcome statements also:

- Use concrete, action verbs. (*For good examples of action verbs, take a look at [this webpage](#) from Eastern New Mexico University.*)
- Are specific to the course.
- Focus on the end, not the means.
- Are student-centered.
- Are assessable.

* Try starting your learning outcomes statements with the phrase, “*The student will...*”

- **Assessment methods.** Your students will definitely want to know how their work is going to be evaluated in the course! Therefore, your syllabus should in some way mark out the forms of assessment you plan to use (exams, formal essays, group projects...). Furthermore, those assessment methods should align with the learning outcomes you establish – i.e., those “measurable” outcomes should somehow be “measured” appropriately during the course of the semester (some even like to show clear connections between their learning outcomes and assessment methods; if you choose to do this as well, this can be done with a chart, list, etc.) It can be helpful to provide some description of these assessment methods for your students; however, you need not provide every last detail – students will probably appreciate those details more readily later, rather than be overwhelmed by that information in your syllabus!
- **Criteria for grade determination.** Likewise, your syllabus should make clear how you will determine grades in the course. Provide a transparent breakdown of how different assignments will be weighted and translated into grades. In other words, how much will each assessment be worth in relation to the other assessments, and how will they work together to determine a student’s final grade for the course? Will you use percentages, a point-based system, a weighted system? In this section, you should also include your policy for grade disputes or rewrites.
- **Course/Instructor Policies.** It is imperative to include a section in your syllabus that describes your policies on several important elements of any classroom. In general, the more thoughtful and detailed you can be here, the more useful this section will be for you and your students. Further, it

can be valuable to explain to students *why* you maintain a certain policy so that students don't perceive it as being merely arbitrary. Here are a few issues that you should consider addressing:

- **Attendance and/or tardiness.** Let students know how you approach attendance and lateness in your class: is it mandatory? If so, what is the consequence for missing class? Do you distinguish between “excused” or “unexcused” absences?
- **Missed or late exams or assignments.** Will you allow students to make up exams or turn in assignments late? Some instructors refuse late assignments, while others subtract points or offer flexible due dates; there are many ways you might address the issue of deadlines – the choice is yours! Just be sure to articulate your policy clearly.
- **Academic dishonesty.** The Texas Tech University Operating Policy and Procedure ([OP 34.12](#)) provides some extensive definitions of “scholastic dishonesty” and states that the instructor is responsible for initiating action in each case of dishonesty. The OP lists a course of action for flagrant or repeated violations, but many instructors determine their own initial policies and statements to include in their syllabi. It is crucial to offer in writing how you will respond to academic dishonesty in your course so that ambiguity can be avoided. Likewise, it is important to remember that some students – especially young ones -- might not have a thorough understanding of complex issues like plagiarism (Sinor & Kaplan 2010; Altman & Cashin 1992), so you might consider providing a definition in your syllabus or even spending time discussing it in class.
- **Classroom incivility.** It's always a good idea to provide some sort of statement about the kind of behavior you expect in class, what you consider disruptive, and what the consequences will be for disruptive behavior, because ultimately, it is the instructor's responsibility to maintain a comfortable classroom environment that is conducive to learning. Every instructor and *student* defines disruptive behavior or incivility differently, so it is important to provide a clear explanation. (For instance, will you tolerate texting or cell phones in your classroom? What about eating or drinking in class, sleeping, talking out of turn, etc.?) Don't assume that everyone is automatically on the same page! You might even let your students chime in and add to the definition with what *they* consider disruptive.
- **Class participation.** Instructors vary widely in their perspectives on class participation; some feel that it is impossible to formally evaluate, while others might find grades to be the best way to encourage active participation in the classroom. However you choose to address participation, you must be sure to articulate your policy explicitly for your students, especially if you choose to make it a part of your grading schema.
- **ADA Statement.** The university requires that each syllabus includes the following statement regarding students with disabilities ([OP 34.22](#)):
“ Any student who, because of a disability, may require special arrangements in order to meet the course requirements should contact the instructor as soon as possible to make any necessary arrangements. Students should present appropriate verification from Student Disability Services during the instructor's office hours. Please note instructors are not allowed to provide classroom accommodations to a student until appropriate verification from Student Disability Services has been provided. For additional information, you may contact the Student Disability Services office in 335 West Hall or 806-742-2405.”

- **Statement about observance of religious holidays.** The university also requires that instructors provide a statement about religious holy days. The OP states that “a student who intends to observe a religious holy day should make that intention known in writing to the instructor prior to the absence. A student who is absent for the observance of a religious holy day shall be allowed to take an exam or complete an assignment scheduled for that day within a reasonable time after the absence.” The OP also states that a student may not be penalized for such an absence, but an instructor may respond appropriately if the student fails to complete the assignment satisfactorily. See [OP 34.19](#)

Other Elements to Include: Optional Components

As previously noted, a syllabus can do a great deal to prepare the way for student learning inside and outside of the classroom. There are several easy components you can include to create a more learner-centered syllabus and help your students succeed:

- Suggestions about how to plan for the tasks of the course, how much time to spend on assignments outside of class meeting times, or how to do well on certain assignments (Parkes & Harris 2002).
- General tips regarding time management, study skills, writing, and note-taking. These kinds of tips can be especially helpful for younger students who might still be acclimating to the college classroom or to your field in particular.
- Information to help students assess their readiness for the course (Grunert 1997). Your syllabus can help students be aware of the challenges they might face in the course as well as what they should already know before taking your course.
- A list of available resources and support services within the class, department, or university. Most colleges offer a number of support services to their students, although many students may not be aware of them. Texas Tech, for instance, offers the University Writing Center, the Learning Center, the TECHniques Center, the Advanced Technology Learning Center (ATLC), and of course, the University Library. Your syllabus can help students become acquainted with valuable resources and how to take advantage of them.

Elements of a Syllabus: An Overview

University-Required (OP 32.06)	Recommended	Optional
Course outline	Basic course information	Suggestions regarding planning and succeeding in the course
Expected learning outcomes	Basic instructor information	General strategies for time management, study skills, writing, note-taking
Assessment methods	List of texts, readings, materials	Information to help students assess readiness for the course.
Criteria for grade determination	Course policies on attendance, missed/late assignments, classroom incivility, class participation	List of available resources and support services.
Statements on TTU policy concerning academic dishonesty (OP 34.12); accommodation for students with disabilities (OP 34.22); and student absence for observation of religious holy day (OP 34.19)		

A Few General Strategies and Tips

- **Review.** If it is your first time to teach a particular course or in a particular department, or you would simply like to freshen up or revise some of your former syllabi and policies, it can be incredibly helpful to review some examples from others. Ask some of your colleagues if they might be willing to share some of their ideas or entire syllabi with you. However, remember that syllabi are still intellectual property and should be credited as such (Sinor 2008).
- **More is better... but not too much!** In general, strive to include constructive details in your syllabus for your students; that is definitely preferable to vagueness and can assuage initial anxiety. However, that said, you absolutely don't want to overwhelm your students with a flood of information either; a 20-page syllabus will create a whole new host of anxieties! Save those detailed assignment descriptions, rubrics, and discussion questions for later, when they will be more immediately relevant to your students.
- **Stay organized.** Obviously, you will be providing your students with a lot of important information in your syllabus, so good structure and organization is imperative! Something to keep in mind is that anything you can do to maximize your students' ability to locate information within the document efficiently will serve all of you well (Parkes & Harris 2002). That means that perhaps pages of narrative might be less effective than clearly defined sections with bold headings, bulleted lists, and succinct tables.

Conclusion

Your syllabus will be a continuous point of contact between you and your students, so the more thoughtful work you put into it on the front end, the more functional and effective it will be for all involved. A well-constructed syllabus can help your students have a more complete understanding of your course as well as their roles as students and your role as their instructor. If you would like further help in creating your syllabus, the TLTC is happy to offer individual consultations. In addition, take a look at some of the resources listed below.

Online Resources

General Syllabus Resources

Davis, B.G. (1993) *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/syllabus.html>

Davis's book provides a lot of useful information about many aspects of preparing to teach. Several chapters are available online, including the chapter on creating a syllabus, which offers a general overview of what to include.

"Creating a Syllabus," from Park University's Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence.

<http://www.park.edu/cetl/quicktips/syllabus.html>

This site delineates the practical, theoretical, and institutional functions of a syllabus, and provides a detailed chart of elements that one might include in a syllabus.

<http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/syllabi.html> - This website from Iowa State University's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning presents some additional information about preparing a learner-centered syllabus.

"Syllabus Design/Course Planning," from Washington State University's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology.

https://my.wsu.edu/portal/page?_pageid=177,299649&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

This site offers a number of downloadable PDF files related to syllabus planning. Especially useful are the Course Syllabus Template and observable and measurable sample learning objectives.

Sample Syllabi: <http://crte.ucmerced.edu/syllabus-course-resources>

This website from the University of California, Merced's Center for Research on Teaching Excellence provides some sample syllabi from a variety of disciplines, all of which include learning outcome statements.

Learning Outcomes Resources

"Writing Quality Learning Objectives" from Park University's Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence. <http://www.park.edu/cetl2/quicktips/writinglearningobj.html>

This site provides some additional details about how to write learning outcomes statements and utilizing Bloom's taxonomy, as well as some additional resources.

Bloom's Taxonomy: An Overview -- <http://www.uwsp.edu/education/lwilson/curric/newtaxonomy.htm>

This website provides a nice overview and comparison of Bloom's original hierarchy of human learning with Anderson and Krathwohl's updated version. Being familiar with this hierarchy can help you strive for incorporating learning objectives that push your students towards higher-order skills.

Bloom's Taxonomy: Sample Questions -- <http://officeport.com/edu/bloomq.htm>

This website take a simple, practical approach to Bloom's Taxonomy, and provides some sample questions that might help you think through approaching your Learning Outcomes Statements.

Additional References

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Tapp, S. (2010). What's in a syllabus anyway? Adding learner centered elements to your syllabus. Presentation at the ASU Summer Institute on Teaching and Learning.