

### **Suggested Steps for Planning Your Syllabus:**

- Develop a well-grounded rationale for your course
  - If you don't know why you are teaching this topic, neither will students!
- Decide what you want students to be able to do as a result of taking your course, and how their work will be assessed
- Define and delimit course content
- Structure your students' active involvement in learning
  - How will they interact with the material, each other, and you?
- Identify and develop resources
- Compose your syllabus with a focus on student learning (rather than your teaching)

### **Syllabus Functions:**

- Establishes an early point of contact and connection between student and instructor
- Helps set the tone for your course
- Describes your beliefs about educational purposes
- Acquaints students with the logistics of the course
- Defines student responsibilities for successful course work
- Describes active learning that will take place to meet learning objectives
- Helps students to assess their readiness for your course
- Sets the course in a broader context for learning
- Provides a conceptual framework
- Describes available learning resources
- Communicates the role of technology in the course
- Can include material that supports learning outside the classroom
- Can serve as a learning contract

### **Checklist for a learning-centered syllabus:**

- Instructor Information
- Letter to the Student – this is your opportunity to tell them about yourself, the course, and your hopes for their learning in a more informal way.
- Purpose of the Course
- Course Description and Requirements

- Course and Unit Objectives
- Resources and Readings
- Course Calendar
- Assessments of Learning
- Grading Procedures
- How to Study for This Course
- Learning Tools (are you using any software, the Elearning system, lab tools, etc. that they should know about?)

**Grunert, Judith (1997) *The Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centered Approach.***

Bolton, Massachusetts: Anker Publishing Company, Inc., available in the CTE Library, 212 Gore Hall.

# THE SYLLABUS AS A TOOL FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING

**Adapted From: Judy Greene and Kathleen Therrien  
*About Teaching, No. 44 (April 1993)***

The syllabus has traditionally been regarded as a simple "table of contents" for a course. Another approach, however, designates it as an "informal contract between the instructor and the student, giving both members of the team a definite idea of what is expected" (Millis). Current research suggests that a well-constructed syllabus actually helps students be more efficient learners and allows both instructors and students to interact more effectively.

The syllabus' greatest strengths lie in the fact that advanced course planning must take place and that it is the first thing students will see from you on the first day of class. Sharon Rubin, Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Maryland, points out that both professors and students have similar worries on the first day of class. She cites a 1982-83 study by Lee Knefelkamp of the University of Maryland, who found that faculty members' primary first-day concerns include getting students involved and being liked, while students are anxious about being able to do the work required and liking the professor. A well-designed syllabus can help address these concerns and get the relationship between student and teacher off to a good start.

There are three essential areas that need to be covered in order to produce a truly effective syllabus:

## **1. Basic Information**

You, the instructor, should provide your full name, office location, office hours, phone number, e-mail address, and any other way you like to communicate (Facebook, Elearning e-mail); the same information should be provided for TAs. Make sure you clearly state how long students should expect to wait to hear back from you. This information allows the student to know who you are and the grounds and times upon which you are available. (After all, introducing yourself and inviting contact are the first steps in establishing a positive relationship.)

Make sure that the course title and number are on the syllabus; credit hours, meeting times, and location can be helpful too. Make sure that all texts and supplies are listed so that students can be sure that they have all necessary materials. Distinguishing between primary and recommended texts can greatly aid financially strapped students.

## **2. Course Description and Policies**

**A. Description:** Many instructors leave the course description, which outlines course content and learning objectives, off the syllabus. They feel that students either should know what the course is about--they selected and registered for it, didn't they?--or that this material will become apparent during the opening lecture or over time. If the content and objectives of the course are clear and in writing from the beginning, however, student anxiety can be reduced and a firm, common base of expectations and goals is established between students and teacher. As Barbara J. Millis of the United States Air Force Academy states in her *Syllabus Construction Handbook*, "Clear objectives can foster a sense of partnership and an awareness that you and your students are working toward the same goals."

One way of establishing course objectives and content is to clearly indicate what major topics, developments, or areas the schedule will cover. Demonstrating the logistical breakdown of materials and topics to be covered in a class will indicate to students that there really is a rhyme and reason behind what may appear to be mysterious or arbitrary selections; it can also provide students with patterns and a logical sequence to follow while studying. A class that is organized historically, for example, may break the course schedule into discrete time blocks or subdivide areas by themes; one that is thematic may lend itself to discrete sub-themes or be organized by historical developments. In some cases, such as broad survey classes, it is even possible to provide a description of each day's or week's topic.

A description of the instructional format should be provided as well. Students need to know if they will be expected to participate in discussions, engage in computer simulations, work in small groups, listen to lectures, or perform hands-on work; this allows them the chance to prepare adequately, both materially and psychologically.

**B. Policies:** Students need to know what is expected and required of them so that they can meet criteria for evaluation. Basic classroom governing principles, such as attendance, lateness, and participation policies, should be stated in writing. This is particularly important if these policies will affect grades; for example, students need to know that if you limit unexcused absences, skipping too many classes will lower their grades. Actually, all grading and grade-affecting policies should be set forth in writing and adhered to strictly. Students want to know if they can do the work required in a class, and letting them know what that work will be--for example, that they will take two cumulative multiple-choice exams worth 50% each or write six short papers--will help them make that decision and feel more comfortable with the class. Also, making certain grading policies more specific, such as make-up exams, re-writes for papers, late penalties, and/or a "no-scaling/curve" rule, gives students a sense of limits, possibilities, and fairness.

If there is a participation grade, the weight and means of evaluation should be made clear--will it effect final grades only in borderline cases? Is showing up enough or is frequent participation in discussion necessary?

A well-stated grading policy can also help teachers avoid one of the most troubling (or at least annoying) teaching problems: grade challenges. Millis states:

*Problems concerning grades unfortunately tend to prompt most student letters of complaint. Concerns include: a) changes in announced grading policy; or b) differences arising from a vaguely stated or never-stated grading policy. A carefully thought-out grading policy, documented in your syllabus and fairly applied, will alleviate some of the student anxiety about final grades and protect you from one of the worst hassles of the teaching profession.*

One important note here: Both Millis and Rubin caution against being a "scolder" in the "rules & regs" section of the syllabus. As Millis says, including details about complicated assignments and harshly worded warnings and threats are frightening, not encouraging. While some anxiety is necessary for learning to occur, too much serves only to block the process. Using clear and even humorous language in this section will allow students to see your policies as guidelines and limits, not as threats and intimidations. This allows you, in turn, to operate from a position of established strength, not one of arbitrariness or bullying.

### **3. Course Schedule**

Many instructors complain that setting out a course schedule "limits" them--that they will not be free to spend more time on areas that prompt discussion, that they will not be able to shift areas of concentration. There is a simple solution this problem: Write in the syllabus that the schedule is tentative and liable to change--and that the student is responsible for keeping up with alterations. Some teachers also schedule an "open day" (e.g., listing the day's activity as "In-class work" or "TBA") to accommodate run-overs or unexpected cancellations.

To perform their best in your class, students need to know in advance what they are expected to have prepared for class; this allows them to feel that they have control over their performance and, as Millis says, to "balance their own simultaneous commitments." Students also need to know when evaluative tasks are going to be performed. Tests, exams, papers, and the like must be scheduled in advance so that students have time to prepare and pace their schedules. Changes in these dates should be always be announced in advance.