

Tools *for* Teaching

SECOND EDITION



Barbara Gross Davis

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The Comprehensive Course Syllabus

A course syllabus, placed on the Web or handed out on the first day of class, gives students an immediate sense of what the course will be about, what they will learn, and how their academic progress will be evaluated.

All courses can benefit from a syllabus. The act of preparing a syllabus helps you organize your course and set the schedule. You can also describe to students what they will need to know and do to succeed in your class.

General Strategies

Understand the multiple roles a comprehensive syllabus plays. Experts have identified various purposes a syllabus can serve: an implicit teaching-learning contract, outlining the reciprocal roles and responsibilities of students and the instructor; a diagnostic tool, helping students assess their readiness for a course by identifying prerequisites and required levels of academic preparation and describing workload and course challenges; an unambiguous source of policies and procedures for course operations; a learning tool, piquing students' interest and providing them with the information, resources, and links they will need to succeed in the course; and a set of promises—what the instructor promises students will learn and the activities students will undertake to fulfill those promises. (Sources: Bain, 2004; Collins, 1997; Eberly et al., 2001; Grunert O'Brien et al., 2008; Lang, 2008; Parkes and Harris, 2002)

Look over the syllabi of other faculty members. If your department does not have a standard format, ask to see your colleagues' syllabi. Other sources of samples include George Mason University's Syllabus Finder, and the University of Texas's World Lecture Hall. Brown University and the University of Minnesota offer online syllabus construction workshops and Honolulu Community College has made syllabus templates available online. In addition, professional associations in your field may have compiled syllabi for introductory and advanced courses.

Anticipate the general questions that will be in the minds of students. What will your students want to know about your course? The three most common concerns of students on the first day of class are likely to be, Will I be able to do the work? Will I like the professor? Will I get along with my classmates? Students may also be asking themselves, Why should I take *this* course? How does this course fit into the larger curriculum or the general education program? Where does it lead intellectually and practically? (Source: Rubin, 1985)

Keep the syllabus flexible. Some classes move more slowly than others. You might anticipate such variations by indicating the topics week by week rather than session by session. Or you might plan to issue a revised schedule midway through the term to account for students' heightened interest in certain topics. Let students know that the course schedule may change, but that the dates for exams and deadlines for assignments are fixed.

Post the syllabus online as early as possible. Students with disabilities may require extra time to convert the readings into alternative media formats.

Creating a Syllabus

Include more rather than less material. Your syllabus need not include all the components mentioned here, but experienced faculty agree that a comprehensive syllabus can be a valuable learning tool for students and can lessen their initial anxieties about the course. Be careful, however, not to include so many details about rules, contingencies, and dos and don'ts that the syllabus loses its intellectual focus. (Sources: Collins, 1997; Garavalia et al., 1999; Grunert O'Brien et al., 2008)

Use a simple layout for the hard-copy syllabus handout. Use headings, text boxes, bulleted lists, and graphics to highlight important information. Some faculty have found that distributing a one-page graphic syllabus to accompany a comprehensive syllabus helps students understand the flow of the course and the logical and chronological relationships among the topics. Other faculty have replaced their text syllabus with an entirely graphic representation of the course. (Source: Nilson, 2007)

Provide basic information. Include the name of the university, current year and term, the course title and number, the number of units, and the meeting time and location. Indicate any course meetings that are not scheduled for the

assigned room. List your name (and what you prefer to be called), office address (include a map if your office is hard to locate), office phone number, department phone number, mobile phone (if you wish, and indicate whether you take voice or text messages), e-mail address, fax number, and office hours. For your office hours, indicate whether students need to make appointments in advance or may just stop in. Let students know your preferred mode of communication: e-mail, telephone, text message, or through the learning management system or a social networking site. Indicate the link for your Web page and the course Web page. List the days, hours, and access addresses for online chat, if your course has this component, and the mail-list for the class if you have established one. Include the names, offices, e-mails, phone numbers, and Web addresses of any teaching or laboratory assistants.

Describe the prerequisites to the course. Help students realistically assess their readiness for your course by listing the knowledge, skills, or experience you expect them to have already or the courses they should have completed. Give students suggestions on how they might refresh their skills if they feel uncertain about their readiness. Show how skills and knowledge from past courses will be used in your course. It is also helpful to clarify the target audience for the course: is the course required for the major in your field? required for the major in other departments? a general elective?

Indicate any instructional technology requisites. Do students need to bring a laptop to class? Do students need to know particular software? If so, let students know where they might go for training.

Give an overview of the course's purpose. Provide an introduction to the subject matter and show how the course fits in the college or department curriculum. Explain what the course is about and why students would want to learn the material. How does the course relate to other courses students have taken? One faculty member writes an essay about the purpose of the course and includes it in the syllabus. He makes an effort to refer to the essay periodically during the term. Another faculty member begins with a story that leads into what students will learn and the challenges and benefits they will encounter. (Sources: Bain, 2004; Shea, 1990)

State the general learning goals, objectives, or outcomes. This clarifies for students what they will learn and be evaluated against. List three to five major objectives that you expect all students to strive for: What will students know or be able to do better after completing this course? What skills or competencies do

you want to develop in your students? In formulating objectives, use active verbs (“interpret” “explain”) and consider skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes. An example of a student learning objective is “Upon completion of this course, you will be able to explain methods of sampling and determination of sample size.” Some faculty members ask students to develop their own learning goals: what they want to know or be able to do after completing the course. (Sources: Collins, 1997; Lang, 2008; Matejka and Kurke, 1994; Smith, 1993; Smith and Razzouk, 1993; Woolcock, 1997)

Clarify the conceptual structure used to organize the course. Students need to understand why you have arranged topics in a given order and the logic of the themes or concepts you have selected.

Describe the format or activities of the course. Let students know the components of the course (for example, discussion sections, fieldwork activities, labs) and how they will be spending class time (listening to lectures? participating in small group work? giving oral presentations? collaborating online?). Select instructional activities inside and outside of class that reinforce the learning you want to encourage.

Specify the textbook, readings, and coursepack information. A coursepack (also called a *reader* or *course reader*) contains instructor-compiled published articles, book chapters, and unpublished documents. Using a coursepack requires obtaining copyright permission for published material. For textbooks, give author, title, edition, ISBN, and availability of electronic or alternative formats for students with disabilities, if known. If appropriate, show the relationship between the readings and the course objectives, especially if you assign chapters in a textbook out of sequence (Rubin, 1985). Let students know whether they are required to do the reading before each class meeting.

Identify additional materials or equipment needed for the course. For example, do students need lab or safety equipment, art supplies, particular software, drafting materials? Be specific about safety issues: why they are in place and needed. (Source: Collins, 1997)

List assignments, term papers, and exams. State the nature and format of the assignments, the expected length of essays, and their deadlines. Indicate how the assignments are related to the goals of the course. Give the examination dates and briefly indicate the nature of the tests (multiple-choice, essay, short-answer, take-home tests). In setting up the syllabus, try to keep the work load evenly balanced throughout the term.

State how students will be evaluated and how grades will be assigned. Students’ behaviors are strongly influenced by the ways in which their learning will be evaluated. Describe the grading procedures, including the components of the final grade and the weights assigned to each component (for example, homework, term papers, midterms, and final exams) and how final grades in the course will be calculated. Students appreciate knowing the weighting because it helps them budget their time. Will you grade on a curve or use an absolute scale? Will you accept extra-credit work to improve grades? See Chapter 43, “Grading Practices.” Bain (2004) encourages faculty to share with students how they jointly can better understand students’ intellectual progress during the term.

List other course requirements. For example, are students required to attend an office hour, post comments to the discussion board, or form a study group in a social networking site?

Discuss course policies. State your policies regarding class attendance; tardiness; class participation; turning in late work; missing homework, tests or exams; make-ups; extra credit; requesting extensions; reporting illnesses; and standards of academic honesty. Try to phrase policies positively in a friendly tone so that you don’t come across as a tyrant or as someone who expects the worst in students. At least one instructor (Warma, 1998), though, devotes several paragraphs in the syllabus to such personally annoying student behaviors as coming late to class, leaving early, and carrying on private conversations while the instructor is lecturing. If you list acceptable and unacceptable classroom behavior, give reasons (“Please refrain from eating during class because it is disturbing to me and other students. If you need to bring food into class for health or medical reasons, please see me privately.”). Giving reasons for policies may be more likely to gain students’ cooperation. Some instructors (DiClementi and Handelsman, 2005) have had success in letting the class as a whole generate rules and strategies for managing rules violations around such issues as eating in class, sleeping in class, using cell phones, and the like.

Invite students with special needs to contact you. Let students know that if they need an accommodation for any type of physical or learning disability, medical needs, or other reasons, they should set up a time right away to meet with the student disability services office and then meet with you privately to discuss what modifications are necessary to ensure their full participation in the course.

Ask students who have conflicts with the dates of the exams to contact you early in the term. Some students may miss exams because of foreseeable conflicts, such as medical/graduate school interviews, athletic competition, and religious

observance. Ask students to set up a time to meet with you during the first weeks of the course to discuss options.

Provide a course calendar or schedule. The schedule states the sequence of course topics, preparations or readings, and the assignments due. If appropriate, pique students' interest by posing provocative questions or using compelling titles for class sessions. For the readings, give page numbers in addition to chapter numbers—this will help students budget their time. Consider giving students pointers on the reading, as necessary (“This is a particularly challenging article. You may find it useful to review Chapter Five in the text beforehand.”).

Take holidays and campus events into account. Try to schedule exams and due dates for assignments so that they do not conflict with major religious holidays and significant campus events. Lists of religious holidays are available at www.interfaithcalendar.org. Ask students to inform you immediately of any scheduling conflicts you may have overlooked. Also be mindful of the topics you schedule immediately after midterms or deadlines for projects, when students' energy levels may not be as high.

Schedule time for gathering feedback from your students. Set a time midway through the term when you can solicit from students their reactions to the course so far. See Chapter 52, “Early Feedback to Improve Teaching and Learning,” for ways to get feedback from students. You might also include an example or two of how student feedback has improved the course. (Source: Chen and Hoshower, 2003)

List important drop dates. Include on the course calendar the last day students can withdraw from the course without penalty.

Estimate student work load. Give students a sense of how much preparation and work the course will involve. How much time should they anticipate spending on reading assignments, problem sets, lab reports, or research? See Chapter 1, “Designing or Revising a Course.”

Include supplementary material as appropriate. For example, consider providing one or more of the following:

- tips on how to study, take notes, and prepare for exams
- glossary of technical terms
- lecture notes or study guides
- bibliography of supplemental readings at a higher or lower level of difficulty in case students find the required text too simple or too challenging

- copies of past exams, model papers, or projects
- areas of difficulty experienced by students in past classes
- characteristics and behaviors of students who have done well in the past classes
- information on the availability of webcasts or podcasts of lectures
- a list of campus resources for tutoring, academic support, and time management (including contact information, physical location, hours of operation)
- calendar of campus lectures, plays, events, exhibits, or other activities of relevance to your course

Include a statement of copyright. Check with legal counsel on your campus about adding language that gives you copyright and ownership of the content and component elements of the course, including the syllabus.

Include a statement on civility and academic freedom. Let students know that you expect them to listen to and respect points of view other than their own. Course content that may be controversial could benefit from a brief note that students' perspectives may be challenged and that they may encounter attitudes, opinions, and information counter to what they believe or think. (Source: Parkes and Harris, 2002)

Describe procedures for emergencies. Indicate what to do if there is an earthquake, fire, bomb threat, or other emergency during class. Identify the location and phone number of campus security. Clarify notification procedures for inclement weather conditions which may force the cancellation of classes.

For the hard-copy syllabus, provide space for names and contact information of two or three classmates. Encourage students to identify people in class they can call if they miss a session or want to study together.

Provide a disclaimer. Let students know what aspects of the schedule may be subject to change (for example, guest speakers, some topics). Dates of exams and deadlines for assignments should not change. If the schedule does change, inform students as early as possible both in writing and orally in class.

End the syllabus in a positive, upbeat fashion. For example, describe that the class will be a joint intellectual discovery. Or end with a meaningful quote, relevant graphic or cartoon, a final thought, or words of encouragement. (Source: Matejka and Kurke, 1994)

Review your syllabus against the checklist in Exhibit 2.1 to decide what you want to include. The checklist summarizes the key components of a comprehensive syllabus.

Exhibit 2.1. Checklist: Components of a Comprehensive Course Syllabus

Basic Information	Course Description	Materials
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name of university, semester, year • Course title, number, unit value • Course meeting times and location • Instructor, GSI names • How to contact instructor/GSIs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – in-person office hours: times and location (with map if needed); drop-in or by appointment? – online office hours: times and how to access (URL) – e-mail addresses – phone numbers: private office and department lines; mobile, if you wish, for text messages – preferred mode of communication (e-mail, phone, text messages, in person, instant messages, through learning management system, through social networking site, etc.) – fax number – optional: times other than office hours when instructor can be reached • Instructor Web page URL • Course Web page URL • Online chat days, hours, and access address, if available • Group mail-list address, if available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prerequisites: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – prior courses – knowledge/skills needed to succeed in this course – permission of instructor needed? • Technology requirements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – laptops for class work – software – clickers – learning management system • Overview of course: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – what is the course about: its purpose, rationale? – what are the general topics or focus? – how does it fit with other courses in the department or on campus? – who is the course aimed at? – why would students want to take this course and learn this material? • Student learning objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – what will students be expected to know or do after this course? – what competencies/skills/knowledge will students be expected to demonstrate at the end of the course? • Methods of instruction: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – lectures – discussion – group work – field work – other methods • Workload: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – estimated amount of time to spend on course readings – estimate amount of time to spend on course assignments and projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary or required books/readings for the course: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – author, title, edition ISBN – costs, where available – availability of electronic or alternative formats, for students with disabilities • Supplemental or optional books/readings • Web sites and links • Other materials: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – lab equipment – art supplies – software – other types of material

Requirements

- Exams and quizzes:
 - how many
 - what kind (e.g., open/closed book; essay/multiple choice)
 - type of knowledge and abilities tested
 - place, date, and time of final exam
- Assignments/problem sets/projects/reports/research papers:
 - general information on type, length, and when due (detailed information can be distributed during the term)
 - relationship between the learning objectives and assignments
 - criteria for assessing student work
 - format for submitting work (online or in hard copy)
 - for research papers and projects:
 - steps in conducting research
 - shorter assignments that build to the research paper (e.g., annotated bibliography of primary sources, thesis statement, fact sheet, etc.)
 - skills and knowledge students needed to complete the research assignments
 - connection between research assignments and course goals and student learning objectives
- Other requirements:
 - attend an office hour?
 - post comments to the discussion board?

Policies

- Grading procedures:
 - describe how students will be graded: on a curve or absolute scale?
 - clarify weighting of course components
 - explain policies regarding incompletes, pass/not pass
 - describe grade appeals
- Attendance and tardiness
- Class participation
- Classroom decorum
- Interrupted exams (e.g., fire alarms)
- Missed exams/makeup exams
- Missed assignments
- Late assignments/extensions
- Reporting illness and family emergencies
- Extra credit opportunities
- Permissible and impermissible collaboration
- Standards for academic honesty and penalties for infractions

Schedule

- Tentative calendar of topics and readings:
 - by week rather than by session
 - or leave some sessions empty for flexibility
- Firm dates for exams and written assignments
- Dates of special events:
 - field trips
 - performances
 - exhibits
 - other special events
- Last day to switch to pass/not pass
- Last day to withdraw from the course

Evaluation of the Course and Assessment of Student Learning

Resources

- **Tips for success**
 - how students might approach the material
 - how students can manage their time
 - tips for studying, taking notes, preparing for exams
 - common student mistakes or misconceptions
- **Copies of past exams or model student papers**
- **Glossaries of technical terms**
- **Links to appropriate support material on the Web (e.g., style manuals, past student projects, Web-based resources, etc.)**
- **Academic support services on campus**
- **Information on the availability of podcasts or webcasts**
- **Space for students to identify two or three classmates' names and their contact information**
 - in case they miss class
 - to form a study group

Statement on Accommodation

- **A request that students see the instructor to discuss accommodations for:**
 - physical disabilities
 - medical disabilities
 - learning disabilities
- **A statement on reasonable accommodation for students' religious beliefs, observations, and practices; for students' foreseeable conflicts because of athletic competition, medical/graduate school interviews**

Statement on Accommodation

- **Student feedback strategies during the semester (other than quizzes and tests)**
- **End-of-course evaluation procedures**

Rights and Responsibilities

- **Students' and instructor's rights to academic freedom (e.g., respect the rights of others to express their points of view)**
- **Students' and instructor's adherence to campus principles of community (e.g., civility in personal interactions)**
- **Statement on copyright protection for the contents of the course, as appropriate**

Safety and Emergency Preparedness

- **What to do in case of an earthquake, fire, hazardous spill, accident or injury, bomb threat, or other emergency**
- **Notification procedures for inclement weather**
- **Evacuation procedures**
- **Lab safety precautions**

Disclaimer

- **Syllabus/schedule subject to change**

Creating Your Syllabus Online

Check with your department for guidelines for online syllabi. Some campuses have preferred learning management systems or collaborative and learning environments for uploading syllabi. Other campuses let faculty design their own course Web sites however they wish. Some departments no longer cover the costs of reproducing hard copy syllabi. Check with your department to see what policies are in place and what resources are provided.

Add links to campus resources. Supply links to campus policies (for example, academic honesty, academic freedom), the bookstore, academic support services, library resources, disabled students services, and relevant campus events. Some campuses have standard templates that include links to academic departments, libraries, and course catalogs. (Sources: Palmiter and Renjilian, 2003; Rankin, 2000)

Add links to off-campus resources. Link to sites that are relevant to your course such as disciplinary databases, topical bibliographies (available through libraries), or style manuals from your professional association.

Provide an e-mail link for students to contact you. Include your e-mail address and a link that students can click on to send you an e-mail. Remind students that it may take you 24–48 hours to respond. (Sources: Palmiter and Renjilian, 2003; Rankin, 2000)

Supply a class roster. If the class agrees, is small enough, and this does not violate campus policy, include a list of all the students in the course and their contact information. If the class agrees, include photos of students.

Create an announcement section. Whenever you announce in class any change in the schedule or a new event, post that information online as well.

Clarify online requirements. Describe your expectations: Will students be submitting work online? Are students required to participate in a discussion forum? Will they have assignments using wiki?

Post an FAQ (frequently asked questions). Provide answers to commonly asked questions about course procedures and policies or the course material.

Add a link to “netiquette” rules. If your course Web site or learning management system has active discussion boards, posts on walls in social networking sites,

or class mail-lists, remind students of basic online etiquette. Stewart (2000) offers the following advice for e-mail:

- Use meaningful subject lines.
- Don’t use ALL CAPS.
- Quote selected parts of a previous e-mail.
- Don’t forward e-hoaxes or chain letters.
- Avoid attachments.
- Forward messages only with the sender’s permission.
- Recognize that your message might be forwarded without your permission.

Stewart (2000) also offers tips for chat rooms and discussion boards:

- Avoid personal attacks and name calling.
- Don’t repeat the same message over and over.
- Don’t flirt in a chat room.
- Be welcoming and courteous to newcomers.

Regularly update the syllabus and list the date it was last revised. One advantage of posting material online is the ease with which you can revise it to reflect changes in scheduling or emphasis. Date the pages so that students will know the information is current. (Sources: Rankin, 2000; Richards, 2003)

Password-protect the site. If the site includes student information or other information that should not be widely distributed, limit access to those who are enrolled in the course.

Keep permanent file copies. If you create an online syllabus, be sure to keep backup files and a complete hard-copy printout. The hard copy will be useful the next time you offer the course, and you may need it for accreditation reviews, curricular analysis, or your merit and promotion decisions.

If you are designing your own online syllabus, give special attention to the layout. Professional Web designers recommend keeping it simple, using color, breaking up text with a limited number of graphics, and paying attention to navigational aids. They recommend using frames (no more than three), with only one window scrollable. They also suggest avoiding underlining for emphasis or in citations because underlining on the Web indicates a link. Instead, designers recommend using color, bold, italics, or different fonts for emphasis. Keep in mind that students may be printing from the

Web site, so the hard copy should be as easy to read as the Web site. (Source: Richards, 2003)

Motivating Students to Read and Use the Syllabus

Highlight information of most interest to students. Not surprisingly, students do not attend equally to all information in a syllabus. When queried, students indicate that they pay most attention to information about exams and assignments (the dates, formats, and length), the reading list, and the course schedule and activities. Further, differences exist among new and continuing students, with new first-semester students more interested in prerequisites and available support services. (Sources: Becker and Calhoun, 1999; Garavalia et al., 1999; Smith and Razzouk, 1993)

Place the syllabus in the coursepack or reader. Besides distributing an online or print version, consider placing a hard copy of the syllabus in the coursepack so that students won't lose it and can refer to it easily during the term.

Ask students to tape the calendar portion of the syllabus to their textbook. One faculty member takes the schedule of readings and dates for exams and assignments to class with a roll of tape. He passes out both and asks students to tape the abbreviated syllabus to the inside of the textbook. (Source: Smith, 1993)

Consider giving students a short quiz or assignment on the syllabus. Some faculty test students on the information in the syllabus, giving extra credit to students who score above a certain threshold or weighting the quiz the same as problem sets. One faculty member asks students to write a paragraph about their expectations for the course, given what they know about themselves as learners. He also asks students to identify those aspects of the course they are looking forward to and those aspects they have concerns about. This assignment is the basis of small-group discussion in the next class session. (Sources: Hammons and Shock, 1994; Raymark and Connor-Greene, 2002)

Go over important information orally in class. Highlight for students the most critical information in the syllabus. Let them know how to use the syllabus effectively. Revisit the syllabus throughout the term, in print or online, as information becomes more relevant. For example, before assignments are due, restate the penalties for late work. (Source: Grunert O'Brien et al., 2008)

Experiment with a student-written syllabus. One faculty member used the first sessions of class to work with students in an English composition class to design their own syllabus. The syllabus included mutually agreed-on outcomes students wanted to achieve, policies on grading and attendance, and in-class and out-of-class activities. Another faculty member tossed his syllabus, began class with only a tentative set of readings for the first few weeks, and evolved the syllabus in partnership with students over the course of the term. Check with your department to see if any university policies prevent this. (Source: Dahlin, 1994; Singham, 2005)

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