

Constructing a Syllabus

Designing a Course and Constructing a Syllabus Best Practices in Teaching and Learning

We're going to talk about the syllabus first, because it's often the first thing that a student will receive in a course. Then we'll discuss how to design an effective course in further detail.

A syllabus is essentially a road map for your course. It describes where you are going during the course, your reasons for going the way that you are, and how you are going to get there. A syllabus also serves as a contract between the instructor or instructors and the students. It is an explicit contract in that it documents all of the necessary course details and policies. It also serves as an implicit contract, because it sets the stage for instructor's teaching style and what is expected of the students in the course.

Professor Michael Shafer at Rutgers University states, "A good syllabus is 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."

This quote signifies the importance of a syllabus in providing evidence for students that their instructor has sufficiently prepared the course. A syllabus is especially important if your course is an elective course. Students may make decisions on whether they will take your course based on your syllabus.

Now we'll talk about the components that are at the core of a syllabus's explicit contract. First, the syllabus should contain basic course information, such as the course title, meeting times and locations, course website, and information about the course instructor and any teaching assistants, including their name and contact information.

Oftentimes, the syllabus is just a list of topics that will be covered during the course, and this is unenlightening. The syllabus should contain a description of the course, including the big idea or ideas of the course. And it should include a statement about the overall course goals and objectives. These are included in a well-designed syllabus to indicate the concepts that students should know or be able to do by the end of the course. This helps to address the question of, where are you going in the course?

Information on course assessments, including their number and type, as well as specific grading information is also included in a syllabus to indicate how you will know if students have achieved the course's learning objectives. A syllabus should also include a lecture schedule or a complete course calendar. And it should include descriptions of the instructor's policies, clearly defining for students if they can collaborate with others, what happens if they cheat, and how they can make up missed exams.

Let's take a look at an example syllabus. The example syllabus that I will be using can be accessed on the course website. The syllabus contains the course title and course number, as well as the semester in which it is being implemented. The course meeting times and locations are listed at the top of the syllabus, along with the instructor's name, contact information, and office hours.

Then the syllabus contains a description of the course. Notice that this describes the impetus for creating the course and the big ideas of the course. The description also contains the reasons for including specific learning techniques in the class.

The instructor has also written learning objectives that clearly state the skills, knowledge, and attributes that the students should have by the end of the course. The syllabus lays the foundation for the instructor's expectations for the students, which represents the course's implicit contract. The necessary texts and materials are included in

the syllabus along with information regarding the assessment methods, which includes information about the types of assignments and grading. Lastly, the syllabus contains a lecture and assignment schedule.

This is an example of an effective syllabus that presents all of the necessary components of a syllabus. It clearly demonstrates to students in the course that the instructor has devoted the necessary time to design an effective course. If you would like to look at the syllabus in more detail, it is available on the course website.

Let's talk about the components of your syllabus that serve to define the implicit contract. The syllabus serves as an example of your teaching style and sets the stage for your expectations of your students. But remember, your teaching style in the classroom, which active learning techniques you use, and how you respond to your students in class will set the stage for how your students will learn.

Answering these example questions here will help you establish the norms for your classroom. For example, who talks in the classroom? When do they talk, and for how long? Is the instructor the only person to talk in your classroom? Or is your course an interactive discussion course?

How strict are your assignment deadlines? Do you allow late submissions? How are students are expected to act in the classroom? Is there a hierarchical relationship between the instructor and student, or is it collaborative in nature?

And how are students are expected to interact with each other? Are students allowed to collaborate with one another? The answers to these questions and others will set the stage for learning in your course.

Creating a syllabus once the course is designed is the easy part. For the remainder of this session, we will discuss how to design each of the components of a course that are reflected in the syllabus.