THE COURSE SYLLABUS

PURPOSE

The course syllabus not only outlines the basic course information, but sets the tone for a class. This tool explores ways the course syllabus may be used to organize and deepen student Learning Model experiences.

DESCRIPTION

The syllabus is often a student’s first impression of your course. As they read it, they will draw consequential conclusions about you, your personality, your expectations, the course, and their level of dedication, often before you ever meet them. The average student refers to the syllabus once a week to review their assignments or to reference information on the standards by which they’ll be assessed. In case of trouble or dispute at the end of a course, the syllabus also functions as concrete evidence of the implicit contract between instructor and student.

Designing an effective syllabus is critical to shaping student assumptions and motivation, defining expectations and course structure, and leaving a record of the course experience.

The typical syllabus fulfills these three purposes by including most or all of the following components:

1. **Contact information.** This includes office location, office hours, email addresses, web pages, phone numbers, and virtual environments like I-Learn.

2. **Course description.** Often this is taken directly from the campus catalogue. A more effective course description describes your methods and approach to the course. This sometimes takes the form of an open letter to the students which explains a course rationale or a description how a student will most benefit from the course.

3. **Learning Model implementation.** This is a short textual or graphical description of specifically how the Learning Model will be applied in the class.

4. **Learning outcomes.** Students prefer coming to a course with a clear idea of what they’ll be doing. Students generally want to understand what they can expect to “get” from a course, and how each assignment, assessment and classroom experience helps them achieve that goal. Clearly organized and aligned objectives accomplish this. Objectives should be organized according to one of the many taxonomies available. Often, objectives listed in the syllabus are addressed to the students. (You will gain a working familiarity with...).

This section of the syllabus can also include short descriptions of assignments, due dates, and assessment criterion that will be used to achieve the course outcomes.

5. **Grades.** A syllabus should contain basic information about the weighting of various parts of the overall student grade. It may also describe the standards against which the various assignments will be assessed, refer to rubrics attached to the syllabus, or explain scaffolding or support available to students.

6. **Course calendar.** Beyond the traditional headers of Topic and Assignments Due, course calendars may also include key questions for classroom discussion that influence how students will prepare for class activities. This calendaring should be structured using the Learning Model language of Prepare, Teach One Another, and Ponder/Prove.

7. **Course requirements or rules.** Establish the course policies and procedures in a way that makes the responsibilities and boundaries clear, while motivating or exciting students about the course. Along with the explanations of policy, this section should also contain your guidelines on how to best succeed in your course.

8. **Additional items.** The back pages of the syllabus should be used to include information on accommodations for students with learning disabilities as well as any other information required by the university (i.e., copyright notices, caveats etc.). This is also a good place to point students to general support services offered by the university they might otherwise not find (i.e., tutoring, counseling, etc.) or to remind them about the Honor Code expectations.
EXAMPLE

Although the typical syllabus is composed of mostly text and tables, a graphic syllabus can be very useful in understanding the overall flow and purpose of the course and its activities.

A graphic syllabus is a flowchart showing the relationship of various units or ideas as presented in your course. It is an ideal way to give students ‘the big picture.’ A graphic syllabus typically shows either the connection between content units, or the relationship between course outcomes.

![Example Syllabus Flowchart]

Fig. 1 – From World Foundations

Most of today’s students are far more practiced at processing graphical information that written text. Graphics are also better at introducing students to the structure of a field about which they know little. With this in mind, it would be worth considering adding graphical representations of the structure or outcomes of your course to the course syllabus.

TIPS

- **Motivate your students.** Giving your students a sense of both you and the course through your syllabus is as important as conveying more concrete information.

- **Keep the length manageable.** Keep the syllabus of a manageable length: 3-5 pages. If there is other material you need to share like rubrics or readings, use a course packet.

- **Review the syllabus.** Consider using discussion or some other classroom activity which directly references the syllabus. Follow this with a quiz as a way to meaningfully engage your students with the syllabus.

- **Online syllabi.** Online, syllabus information is spread throughout a number of links (Calendar, Reminders, Rubrics, etc.) This increases the need for absolute clarity regarding purpose, structure, and expectations of the course.

PITFALLS

- **Poor presentation.** Improper formatting or phrasing of information can sink an otherwise excellent syllabus. In a world of desktop editing, students are used to seeing professional-looking documents.

KEY ARTICLES


OTHER RESOURCES

- **Course Quality Guide**

https://www.byui.edu/learning-and-teaching/instructional-tools