



INSTRUCTIONAL & MANAGEMENT SERVICES
INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

*Illini
Instructor
Series*

No. 3

PREPARING A COURSE SYLLABUS

A syllabus is the basic document developed by instructors to reflect their planning for a course. The chief purpose of a syllabus is to help the instructor present an organized, coherent, and academically responsible course. It also provides structure to students taking the course and serves as a guide for TAs working with the instructor. Once the syllabus is complete, instructors can rightfully feel they have realistically accomplished an important part of their responsibilities for teaching their course.

What is the rationale for having a syllabus?

The rationale is based on information received from instructors who have successfully developed syllabi for their courses. Most instructors agree that an effective syllabus accomplishes the following:

1. requires instructors to organize early (experienced instructors know this is essential to a successful class);
2. helps students understand what is expected of them from the start of the course and efficiently plan their semester;
3. reduces opportunities for capricious grading charges;
4. presents a positive image to students (a well-prepared syllabus is evidence that you take teaching seriously);
5. provides pertinent information about the course to your departmental office and colleagues.

How do you get started?

Begin by studying syllabi from other instructors. Request copies from colleagues with

reputations for being successful teachers. Specialists in the Instructional Development Division of IMS have a variety of examples as well. You might also ask colleagues what has and has not worked for them. Question them as to why they chose one format over another.

Once you have examined a number of syllabi, your next step is to determine a format which suits you and the course you will teach. Because syllabi vary as to format and content, you will have many choices. There is no one correct form to follow.

It is important to be aware of university policies and regulations related to examinations, academic dishonesty, and other matters that affect you, your TAs and your students. Become familiar with the school calendar. Check for religious holidays not in the calendar, or those not honored by the campus. These may not be official holidays to the university, but they may be days when many of your students will be absent. Remember to check sporting event calendars as well.

The "Code on Campus Affairs and Regulations Applying to all Students" is available to faculty members from the Office of Admissions and Records or through their departments. The school calendar can be found in current issues of the campus phone book or semester timetable.

What do you include in your syllabus?

Your syllabus can include as little or as much as you want. Experienced instructors include more rather than less material. Instructors who have used a syllabus for a period of time generally agree that certain topics should be considered.

1. Relevant information about the course

This information should include the current year and semester, the course title and number, and the meeting time and location. In addition, it should include the instructor's name, office and phone numbers, and office location and hours. This should be placed at the beginning of the syllabus.

2. A clear statement of course objectives

Course objectives are unambiguous statements of learning outcomes. They are of most use to students when the language used describes what the student will be expected to know or accomplish rather than what the instructor intends to do during the semester.

3. A description of the means (or activities) by which the course objectives will be met

This is *not* to be confused with a list of assignments. It is rather, a description of activities that the course will include. The description might include such activities as field-trips, readings, lectures, discussion sessions, discussions with active participation, research projects, laboratory assignments, problem sets, group presentations, case studies, or guest lecturers. Also, the amount of student study time you estimate for the activity can be included in the description.

4. A list of resources available to the students

The most important item to be included in this section is the required text and reading assignments. Because it is helpful to many students to have alternative readings, these can be included here as well. If you plan to make sample tests, tapes of the lectures, or sample projects available to the students, mention these items in this section.

5. A statement of grading criteria

A lengthy description is not necessary. Most faculty suggest that the statement contain only the assignments and tests along with the grading weights of each. Other grading practices you plan to use, such as a grade for participation in class discussion, or an adjusted normal curve, can be included here.

6. A schedule

This is probably the most time-consuming part of preparing your syllabus. In terms of course organization, the rewards for doing it are well worth the effort. The schedule should contain dates with the corresponding sequence of lecture or lab topics, the preparations you suggest, and the assignments which will be due. A typical format is a table like the following:

date	topic	activities	assignments	due date

Mapping out this daily/weekly schedule with midterm and final dates, as well as holidays, lets you know exactly how many class days are available to you and what is expected of the students on each day.

7. A discussion of course policy

Policies need to be clearly stated regarding: attendance; below average performance; discipline; excuses from tests; quizzes and assignments; cheating; and plagiarism. It is important that the language you select be direct, matter of fact, and in a non-punishing tone. Once you have written this section, have others read it for feedback as to its clarity, completeness, and tone.

Once class begins, how do you best use your new syllabus?

While there is no one particular rule to follow,

there are a few suggestions that have been collected from instructors who use syllabi successfully.

1. Hand out the syllabus on the first day of class.

When you do this you set the tone for the course. The syllabus lets the students know you have completed your preparation and intend to present an organized course.

2. Review and discuss the syllabus with your students.

Be prepared to answer questions about your testing and grading policies, and other matters of concern to students. Most instructors prefer to handle the initial discussion themselves, so that answers to questions about course policies are given by the major instructor rather than a TA.

3. Be prepared to alter the syllabus.

If there is a typographical error, a date which you have miswritten, or a holiday on which you have inadvertently scheduled a lecture, you can be sure that the students will spot it. It is advisable that you put in writing any changes you make concerning important items.

4. Duplicate more copies than you have students.

Be prepared to replace lost syllabi, and have copies available for students enrolling late.

A final note

A well thought out and carefully prepared syllabus becomes a clear and concrete contract between you and your students. You will know that it is useful when students want and need to refer to it frequently.

ADDITIONAL HELP

The Instructional Development Division of the Office of Instructional and Management Services at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a campus-wide unit that works with faculty, departments and colleges to promote effective instruction.

For further information contact:
Instructional Development Division
307 Engineering Hall
1308 West Green St., Urbana, IL 61801
217-333-3370
MGH:86
