

September 20, 1999

To: All History Faculty

From: Bob Stacey, Chair

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Re: Reminders about Preparing Syllabi and specifying Grading Policies

As many of you will know already, the wording of syllabi and the specificity of course requirements contained on syllabi have become increasingly important issues, as the legal world moves toward a view of the syllabus as constituting a kind of enforceable written contract between professor and student. I do not believe the problems created by this development will go away. I hope that the suggestions below may help to reduce the potential for misunderstandings between you and your students about your course requirements. How you choose to compose your syllabi is of course entirely up to you. I have no authority to dictate on such matters, nor do I desire such authority. But problems have arisen in the past over these issues. If you choose to follow these suggestions, I believe the number of problems will be diminished.

- 1) Please make sure your syllabus states ALL your course requirements AND the precise numerical weighting you intend to assign to each requirement in calculating student grades. If you intend to grade students on class participation, you need to state this. If you require students to attend your class, and will penalize them for not attending, you need to state this – AND you need to devise some way of determining levels of attendance (basically, you are going to have to take roll: an impressionistic sense that “you weren’t here very often” won’t stand up to a challenge from an aggrieved student). If, however, you are grading students on participation, but not specifically requiring attendance, then you do not need to take roll. Insightful students will realize they can’t participate if they don’t attend, but you do not need to spell this fact out on the syllabus. You should, however, give some thought as to how you plan to evaluate participation, and how you would defend the participation grades you assign, should a student challenge his or her participation grade.
- 2) State the due date of each assignment clearly on the syllabus. Tell students what time of day the assignment is due, and where they should turn it in. If you do not accept late work, you must say this. If you penalize late work, you must state what the penalty will be. If you only accept late work for a certain period of time, and not afterwards, then you must say this. If you count weekends and holidays in the late penalty, say this. If you do not say anything, students will believe they can submit work up until the last day of the quarter and receive full credit.
- 3) If you change the due date of an assignment, put this change in writing and hand it to students. E-mail is another approach that will work. But don’t rely on oral communication alone. If you anticipate altering anything on the syllabus – the topics you will cover, the sequence in which you will cover them, the due dates of papers,

etc. – I strongly recommend that you include on the syllabus a statement that “This syllabus is subject to change.”

- 4) If you require students to submit all the course requirements in order to pass the course, you must say this explicitly on your syllabus. If you do not state this, then students who earn a passing grade by fulfilling 60% of the course requirements (and receiving 0.0 for the other 40% of the course requirements) must receive the passing grade they have earned.
- 5) You may not assign students a grade lower than the one they have earned according to the proportions stated on your syllabus.
- 6) You must indicate on your syllabus how you wish students to contact you: ie, office hours; office telephone; email address; mailing address; etc. It is not necessary that you offer all of these. But you must have (and keep) posted office hours every week, subject of course to cancellation for unavoidable reasons such as illness or absence; and you must provide students with some means of contacting you if they are not in class.
- 7) There are a number of specific statements the University expects faculty to make on their syllabi concerning equal opportunity, disability accomodation, grade appeal procedures, scholarly integrity, etc.. The Department has compiled all of these required statements on a single, lurid green sheet entitled “UW Dept. of History: Information for Students”. If you submit your syllabus to the Department staff to be copied, the staff will automatically attach this sheet to all your syllabi. We strongly encourage you to do this. If you arrange to have your syllabus copied elsewhere, please pick up this form from the 315 staff and include it with your syllabus. Alternatively, you may wish to hand the form out to all students and not attach it to your syllabus. But one way or the other, all students enrolled in your class are expected to have been given this sheet.