

How Do I Create an Effective Syllabus?

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Introduction

The syllabus is typically your students' first real introduction to your course, greeting them with pertinent details regarding what to expect from the course, and what the course might expect from them. It can and should be more than just a sheet of paper listing the basic course information and is therefore the perfect opportunity for you to prepare your students adequately and set the stage for success! In the sections that follow, this paper will offer some of the primary goals and functions of a syllabus as well as some suggestions for elements that you might include.

Goals and Functions of a Syllabus

A syllabus fulfills many functions and outlines requirements for a course, and those functions and requirements will vary depending on the approach and personality of the instructor designing it. Here are a few of the most common and useful functions:

A syllabus is a plan and a contract.

At its core, the syllabus represents an agreement between instructor and student regarding the nature, expectations, and guidelines of a course. It is in many ways a promise with your students of what the semester holds—what they will be expected to complete, when they will be expected to complete it and how they will be evaluated. Therefore, you must stay true to the information you present in your syllabus, maintain your timeline, and uphold your policies. Students tend to become very unhappy if you add an assignment during the semester, change your grading procedures, or fail to remain consistent with your set guidelines. You can even make your syllabus an actual contract that your students sign to

indicate their understanding of the course policies, and this can be an effective way to “seal” the agreement between student and instructor. It is important to note, however, that while you should strive to uphold the policies set forth in your syllabus, it does not mean that the document is completely inflexible. In fact, it can be wise to incorporate some flexibility to accommodate circumstances that might arise during the course of a class. Precautions can be easily written into your syllabus, e.g. "This calendar is subject to change with prior notice, at the instructor's discretion", or built into your course calendar, e. g. leaving one or two class days free for playing "catch-up" as needed.

A syllabus is a communication device.

The syllabus is likely the first form of communication that your students will receive from you, and thus the way you present your syllabus will reveal a great deal about who you are as an instructor. Plan to let your language reflect your personal style in the classroom as well as your overall teaching philosophy and use the syllabus to help establish a positive pattern of communication with your students.

A syllabus is a learning tool.

A learner-centered syllabus is one that not only provides basic information about a course, but also information and tools that help promote learning and intellectual development in students. It can be a powerful tool for student success in your course. The following sections contain suggestions for elements you might include to make your syllabus more learner centered.

Elements of a Syllabus: An Overview

TABLE 1: ELEMENTS OF A SYLLABUS: AN OVERVIEW

University-Required (OP 32.06)	Recommended	Optional
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Course outline	Basic course information	Suggestions regarding planning and succeeding in the course
Expected learning outcomes	Basic instructor information	General strategies for time management, study skills, writing, and note-taking
Assessment methods	List of texts, readings, materials	Information to help students assess readiness for the course
Criteria for grade determination	Course policies on attendance, class participation, and missed/late assignments	List of available resources and support services
Statements on TTU policy concerning (1) academic integrity (OP 34.12); (2) accommodation for students with disabilities (OP 34.22); (3) student absence for observation of religious holy day (OP 34.19); and (4) Accommodations for Pregnant Students .	Course policies on classroom incivility	Statements about TTU resources for a safe campus, student support, and food insecurity

What to Include and Why: Required or Strongly Recommended Components

Syllabi vary among disciplines and courses, so you should strive to tailor your syllabus to meet the specific needs of your course, students, and field. Elements required by Texas Tech University are noted in the table on page 3. You will also find that the Syllabus feature in RaiderCanvas has a pre-established template that faculty can choose to use. This may be particularly helpful to those instructors creating a syllabus for the first time.

Basic course information

Typically, the first items on a syllabus will be the course title, number, section, credit hours, meeting times (if applicable) and location. It is also a good idea to note any prerequisites for the course so that all students are aware of the required preparation, knowledge, and skills for the course. In addition, most syllabi also include a detailed course description that offers more information than the catalog course description.

Basic instructor information

In addition to providing students with your name and title, office hours and location, and other means of contact (phone number(s), email address, web links, etc.), you might also consider delineating how you would like students to address you. When listing contact information, it may also be helpful to suggest how much response time students may expect. For example, email replies may take up to 48 hours, etc. Likewise, it can be beneficial for you as well as your students to clarify your preferred means of communication outside of class.

Texts, readings, and other materials

You will need to include a list of the texts and materials for the course, clearly distinguishing between those that are required and those that are recommended. Has a course packet been assembled by you, are the materials available digitally, or are there materials on reserve. You should also make note of any other materials students will need for the course such as lab equipment, art supplies, software, etc.

A course schedule or outline

Your syllabus should present your students with some sort of calendar or schedule that outlines what will happen each week or class period of the semester. You should be especially clear regarding assignment due dates and exam dates, perhaps denoting those in bold, underlining, or italicized fonts to help them stand out as important. Remember,

you can always build flexibility into this schedule, but students should have a clear idea of what to plan for and expect each week.

Expected learning outcomes from the course

Expected learning outcome statements refer to specific knowledge, practical skills, areas of professional development, attitudes, and higher-order thinking skills that faculty members expect students to develop, learn, or master during a course (Suskie, 2004). Your learning outcome statements will provide both you and your students with an important sense of purpose for the course. Writing effective learning outcome statements takes time and forethought but can be very effective in setting expectations and fostering student success. In general, learning outcomes should be limited to 5 - 10 statements for each course, and they should focus on the most important outcomes for this particular course and not the program or individual unit. You will want to check with your course coordinator, as the course you are teaching may have pre-determined learning outcomes for each course written at the department level.

Writing Effective Learning Outcomes Statements

Learning outcomes have 3 major defining characteristics:

- They specify an action by the students that is observable.
- They specify an action by the students that is measurable.
- They specify an action that is done by the students rather than by the faculty member.

Effective learning outcome statements also:

- Use concrete, action verbs. For good examples of action verbs, it may be helpful to utilize a model such as Bloom's Taxonomy; see the online resources below.
- Are specific to the course.
- Focus on the end, not the means.
- Are student-centered.

- Are assessable.

Assessment methods

Your students will want to know how their work is going to be evaluated in this course! Therefore, your syllabus should in some way mark out the forms of assessment you plan to use, e.g. exams, formal essays, group projects, etc. Furthermore, those assessment methods should align with the learning outcomes you establish, i.e. those “measurable” outcomes should be measured appropriately during the semester. Some instructors like to show clear connections between their learning outcomes and assessment methods or their accrediting board standards; this can be done with a chart or list. It can be helpful to provide some description of these assessment methods for your students; however, you need not provide every single detail, as students will probably appreciate those details more readily later, rather than be overwhelmed by that information in your syllabus.

Criteria for grade determination

Likewise, your syllabus should make clear how you will determine grades in the course. Provide a transparent breakdown of how different assignments will be weighted and translated into grades. In other words, how much will each assessment be worth in relation to the other assessments, and how will they work together to determine a student’s final grade for the course? Will you use percentages, a point-based system, or a weighted system? In this section, you should also include your policy for grade disputes or rewrites. For example, some faculty might choose to share the “24/7” grade review policy stating that to dispute a grade, students must wait 24 hours, present their request in writing including the specific concerns warranting the review request and that all disputes must be submitted within 7 days.

Course/Instructor policies

It is imperative to include a section in your syllabus that describes your policies on several important elements of any classroom. In general, the more thoughtful and detailed you

can be here, the more useful this section will be for you and your students. Further, it can be valuable to explain to students why you maintain a certain policy so that students do not perceive it as being merely arbitrary. Here are a few issues that you should consider addressing:

Attendance and/or tardiness

Let students know how you approach attendance and lateness in your class. Is it mandatory? If so, what is the consequence for missing class? Do you distinguish between “excused” and “unexcused” absences? We strongly recommend using the aPlus+ Attendance tool in RaiderCanvas. This tool is integrated with Banner and Raider Success Hub and allows students to use a QR code to log their attendance.

Missed or late exams and assignments

Will you allow students to make up exams or turn in assignments late? Some instructors refuse late assignments, while others subtract points for late work or offer flexible due dates. There are many ways you might address the issue of deadlines – the choice is yours! Just be sure to articulate your policy clearly.

Required Syllabus Statements:

There are four required statements on all Texas Tech syllabi, outlined below, regarding academic honesty, special accommodation for students with disabilities, student absence for observance of a religious holy day, and accommodations for pregnant students. Faculty have two options to add the required information to their course syllabi.

1. **Recommended method:** In the Syllabus feature in RaiderCanvas, the required statements, recommended AI statements, and additional recommended statements are already added in RaiderCanvas. You add your syllabus information, leave the required statements, choose your preferred AI statement or add your own statement (deleting the others), and then review the other recommended

statements (deleting those that are not relevant to your course or that you would rather not leave in your syllabus).

2. If you prefer to add links to your syllabus, you can find the **required syllabus policies** here: www.depts.ttu.edu/tlpdc/required-syllabus-statements.php Please **add a separate link to each** individual statement that you choose to include in your syllabus. You can also add the **recommended syllabus statements** directly to your syllabus. These statements can be found here: www.depts.ttu.edu/tlpdc/recommended-syllabus-statements.php
3. The recommended statements include the AI statements. Please consider your teaching philosophies and learning goals before choosing one of the recommended [AI Syllabus Statements](#) or creating your own statement. For help thinking through the impact of artificial intelligence in your courses, we invite you to [schedule a consultation with our AI Faculty Fellow, Lisa Low](#).

Start of term messaging

A few days before the start of classes, it may be helpful to e-mail students to highlight expectations. You can use the Inbox feature in RaiderCanvas to email all classes or specific classes/sections. You might also consider using the Announcements feature in RaiderCanvas. Students have access to RaiderCanvas on the first day of classes.

In your message you may introduce yourself, set a positive tone about the upcoming term and the content and objectives of your course, and inform students of required textbooks or other course materials they need to acquire and anything else you feel it might be important for them to know before class begins.

Classroom incivility

It's a good idea to provide some sort of statement about the kind of behavior you expect in class, what you consider disruptive, and what the consequences will be for disruptive

behavior, because ultimately, it is the instructor's responsibility to maintain a comfortable classroom environment that is conducive to learning.

Class participation

Instructors vary widely in their perspectives on class participation; some feel that it is impossible to formally evaluate, while others might find grades to be the best way to encourage active participation in the classroom. However you choose to address participation, you must be sure to articulate your policy explicitly for your students, especially if you choose to make it a part of your grading schema.

More is better... but not too much!

In general, strive to include constructive details in your syllabus for your students; that is preferable to vagueness and can assuage initial anxiety. However, that said, you don't want to overwhelm your students with a flood of information either; a 20-page syllabus will create a whole new host of anxieties! Save those detailed assignment descriptions, rubrics, and discussion questions for later, when they will be more immediately relevant to your students.

Conclusion

Your syllabus will be a continuous point of contact between you and your students, so the more thoughtful work you put into it on the front end, the more functional and effective it will be for all involved. A well-constructed syllabus can help your students have a more complete understanding of your course as well as their roles as students and your role as their instructor. If you would like further help in creating your syllabus, the TLPDC is happy to offer individual consultations. In addition, you are welcome to explore the resources listed below.

References

- Palmer, M.S., Bach, D.J., & Streifer, A.C. (2014) Measuring the promise: A learning-focused syllabus rubric. *To improve the academy: A journal of educational development*, 33 (1), 14-36.
- Palmer, M.A., Wheeler, L.B., & Aneece, I. (2015) Not your granddaddy's syllabus: Investigating student perceptions of course syllabi. Presentation at the Professional and Organizational Development Network Conference. San Francisco, CA.
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