

# 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 the pertinent details regarding what to expect from the course, and what the course might expect from them. It can set the tone for the entire semester, and as Jennifer Sinor and Matt Kaplan (2010) note, it is one of the few "formal, tangible links between you and your student." 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 indeed 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 (McKeachie, 1986). 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. Further, utilize this opportunity to anticipate important questions your students might have about the course, and provide clear answers (Tapp, 2010). For more details, see the next section on "What to Include."

### 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<br>( <a href="#">OP 32.06</a> )  | Recommended   | Optional   |
|--|---|--|
| 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, missed/late assignments, classroom incivility, and class participation | List of available resources and support services                                       |
| Statements on TTU policy concerning academic integrity ( <a href="#">OP 34.12</a> ); accommodation for students with disabilities ( <a href="#">OP 34.22</a> ); and student absence for observation of religious holy day ( <a href="#">OP 34.19</a> ) | Statements pertaining to COVID-19 protocols   | Statements about TTU resources for a safe campus, LGBTQIA 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. Nevertheless, here are some elements that most syllabi include, including some that are required by the university. Elements required by Texas Tech University are noted in the table on page 3.

### Basic course information

Typically, the first items on a syllabus will be the course title, number, section, credit hours, meeting times 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 for you 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, as well as information regarding how students can acquire those resources, e.g. do they need to purchase them through the campus bookstore? Has a course packet been assembled by you or put them on

reserve, may they order online? Etc. You should also make note of any other materials students will need for the course such as lab equipment, art supplies, calculators, 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. You can decide how much detail you want to provide on your course schedule such as readings required before class or a description of class activities. 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 (Palomba & Banta, 1999).

### 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 course of 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, 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?

#### 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 three required statements on all Texas Tech syllabi, outlined below, regarding academic honesty, special accommodation for students with disabilities, and student absence for observance of a religious holy day. The other statements are optional or recommended. The final set of recommended syllabus statements pertains to COVID-19 protocols.

### Academic dishonesty

The Texas Tech University (TTU) Code of Student Conduct and the TTU Operating Policy and Procedure ([O P 34.12](#)) provide extensive definitions of "scholastic dishonesty" and state that the instructor is responsible for initiating action in each case of dishonesty. The OP lists a course of action for flagrant or repeated violations, but many instructors determine their own initial policies and statements to include in their syllabi. It is crucial to offer in writing how you will respond to academic dishonesty in your course so that ambiguity can be avoided. Likewise, it is important to remember that some students, particularly those who may be new to or unfamiliar with academic expectations at the university level, might not have a thorough understanding of complex issues like plagiarism (Sinor & Kaplan 2010; Altman & Cashin 1992), so you may want to consider providing a general definition in your syllabus and plan to spend time defining and discussing the definition in class. Additionally, you may choose to include a definition of plagiarism and/or other forms of academic misconduct, such as the following:

### Plagiarism

Texas Tech University expects students to "understand the principles of academic integrity and abide by them in all class and/or course work at the University" ([O P 34.12.5](#)). Plagiarism is a form of academic misconduct that involves (1) the representation of words, ideas, illustrations, structure, computer code, other expression, or media of another as one's own and/or failing to properly cite direct, paraphrased, or summarized materials; or (2) self-plagiarism, which involves the submission of the same academic work more than once without the prior permission of the instructor and/or failure to correctly cite previous work written by the same student. [This video](#), retrieved from the University of Kansas Libraries website, provides an example of a plagiarism definition as well as examples of plagiarism and how to avoid it. Please review [Section B of the TTU Student Handbook](#) for more information related to other forms of academic misconduct, and contact your instructor if you have questions about plagiarism or other academic concerns in your courses. To learn more about the importance of academic integrity and practical tips for avoiding plagiarism, explore the resources provided by the [TTU Library](#) and the [School of Law](#).



### ADA statement

TTU requires that each syllabus includes the following statement regarding students with disabilities ([O P 34.22](#)):

Any student who, because of a disability, may require special arrangements in order to meet the course requirements should contact the instructor as soon as possible to make any necessary arrangements. Students should present appropriate verification from Student Disability Services during the instructor's office hours. Please note: instructors are not allowed to provide classroom accommodations to a student until appropriate verification from Student Disability Services has been provided. For additional information, please contact [Student Disability Services](#) in Weeks Hall or call 806.742.2405.

### Statement about observance of religious holidays

The university also requires that instructors provide a statement about religious holy days. [O P 34.19](#) states that:

1. "Religious holy day" means a holy day observed by a religion whose places of worship are exempt from property taxation under Texas Tax Code §11.20.
2. A student who intends to observe a religious holy day should make that intention known in writing to the instructor prior to the absence. A student who is absent from classes for the observance of a religious holy day shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment scheduled for that day within a reasonable time after the absence.
3. A student who is excused under section 2 may not be penalized for the absence; however, the instructor may respond appropriately if the student fails to complete the assignment satisfactorily.

### Classroom incivility

It's always 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. Every instructor and student defines

disruptive behavior or incivility differently, so it is important to provide a clear explanation. For instance, will you tolerate texting or cell phones in your classroom? What about eating or drinking in class, sleeping, talking out of turn, etc.? Don't assume that everyone is automatically on the same page. You might even let your students chime in and add to the definition with what they consider disruptive.

### 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.

### Statement about TTU resources for a safe campus

The following is an optional statement regarding student safety and sexual assault that you might consider including on your syllabus, composed with the assistance of the Student Resolution Center and Title IX Investigators:

“Texas Tech University is dedicated to providing a safe and equitable learning environment for all students. Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to The Student Resolution Center: (806) 742-SAFE (7233). The [TTU Counseling Center](#) provides confidential support (806-742-3674) and the Voices of Hope Lubbock Rape Crisis Center has a 24-hour hotline: 806-763-RAPE (7273). For more information about support, reporting options and other resources, visit the [Title IX page](#).”

### Statements about LGBTQIA support

If you would like to communicate that you identify as an ally for the LGBTQIA community or provide related resources, you are invited to include this statement on your syllabus:

"I identify as an ally to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) community, and I am available to listen and support you in an affirming manner. I can assist in connecting you with resources on campus to address problems you may face pertaining to sexual orientation and/or gender identity that could interfere with your success at Texas Tech. Please note that additional resources are available through the Office of LGBTQIA Education & Engagement, 201 Student Union Building, [www.lgbtqia.ttu.edu](http://www.lgbtqia.ttu.edu), 806.742.5433."

If you would prefer to list campus resources rather than a statement about ally status, you might include the following among other campus resources you wish to share:

"Office of LGBTQIA Education & Engagement, Student Union Building Room 201, [www.lgbtqia.ttu.edu](http://www.lgbtqia.ttu.edu), 806.742.5433. The Office serves the Texas Tech community through facilitation and leadership of programming and advocacy efforts. This work is aimed at strengthening the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual community and sustaining an inclusive campus that welcomes people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions."

#### Statement about food insecurity

You might choose to include a statement related to food insecurity such as the following:

"Any student who faces challenges securing their food or housing and believes this may affect their performance in the course is urged to contact the Dean of Students for support.

Furthermore, please notify the professor if you are comfortable in doing so. The TTU Food Pantry is in Doak 117. Please visit the website for hours of operation at <https://www.depts.ttu.edu/dos/foodpantry.php>."

#### Statements pertaining to COVID-19 protocols

Texas Tech is continually offering up to date guidelines for faculty, staff and students regarding COVID-19 safety protocols. You may access the most current information [here](#). The Office of the Provost recommends the following elements for faculty to include in their syllabi and communications with students:

*What do I need to communicate to students before the start of classes?*

At least a couple of days before the start of classes, e-mail your students to highlight class expectations. Introduce yourself, be positive about the upcoming term and the content and objectives of your course, inform them of required textbooks or other course materials they need to acquire, and that you would like to outline a few expectations for everyone to have as they come to the first class period. Remind students that the COVID-19 protocols have been lifted and that face coverings are optional, but that it is highly recommended that those who have not been vaccinated for COVID-19 wear face coverings to help prevent the spread of the virus. To access TTU's COVID-19 vaccination recommendations, please access [this link](#). It is also important to stress to students that CDC guidelines encourage the use of face masks in public spaces.

*What about student appointments and meetings?*

We can anticipate having in-person advising, office hours, and academic support interactions. Face masks will be optional but social distancing may be applicable where feasible and conducive to interaction. All student appointments and related academic correspondence should be documented by the faculty member, advisor, or other appropriate staff member in the student's educational record using [strive.ttu.edu](http://strive.ttu.edu). You may also wish to consider offering virtual office hours. If so, these should take place only via TTU approved and supported online meeting technologies.

*What new information should I provide in my course syllabi?*

**Seating Charts and Social Distancing:** There is no longer a mandated social distancing protocol for classroom seating, but diligence is encouraged when indoors and not wearing masks. A seating chart might be used in the classroom to facilitate attendance, class interactions and other in-class engagement activities. Social distancing may also be recommended where possible, including the continued use of virtual meeting options.

**Illness-Related Absences:** As you formulate your course policies regarding illness related absences, consider the ongoing threat of COVID-19 when students report absence due to the virus (e.g., some may need extended days of absences and time to make up missed work).

**Personal Hygiene:** We all should continue to practice frequent hand washing, use hand sanitizers after touching high-touch points (e.g., door handles, shared keyboards, etc.), and cover faces when coughing or sneezing.

**Potential Changes:** The University will follow CDC, State, and TTU System guidelines in continuing to manage the campus implications of COVID-19. Any changes affecting class policies or delivery modality will be in accordance with those guidelines and announced as soon as possible. For a complete and updated list of current TTU COVID-19 Protocols please visit [TTU's COVID 19 response page](#).

## Other Elements to Include: Optional Components for a Learner-Centered or Learning-Focused Syllabus

As previously noted, a syllabus can do a great deal to prepare the way for student learning inside and outside of the classroom. In addition to clear learning goals, adequately paced assessment activities, and a clear, logically sequenced schedule, a learning-focused syllabus should also help construct a supportive learning environment that fosters motivation, promotes a learning (rather than performance) orientation, and communicates high expectations and confidence in students through a positive and respectful tone (Palmer, Bach, & Streifer, 2014).

There are several easy components you can include to create a more learner-centered syllabus and help your students succeed:

### Planning for success

Suggestions about how to plan for the tasks of the course, how much time to spend on assignments outside of class meeting times, or how to do well on certain assignments (Parkes & Harris, 2002).

### Strategies for success

General tips regarding time management, study skills, writing, and note-taking. These kinds of tips can be especially helpful for younger students who might still be acclimating to the college classroom or to your field.

### Student readiness

Information to help students assess their readiness for the course (Grunert, 1997). Your syllabus can help students be aware of the challenges they might face in the course as well as what they should already know before taking your course.

### Campus resources

A list of available resources and support services within the class, department, or university. Most colleges offer a number of support services to their students, although many students may not be aware of them. Texas Tech, for instance, offers the [University Writing Center](#), the [Learning Center](#), the [TECHniques Center](#), the [Advanced Technology Learning Center \(ATLC\)](#), and the [University Library](#). Your syllabus can help students become acquainted with valuable resources and how to take advantage of them.

If you are wondering whether it is worth the time and effort to include these additional components in an already detailed syllabus, the answer is yes! Recent research (Palmer, Bach & Streifer, 2014; Palmer, Wheeler & Aneece, 2015) has indeed found that a learning-focused

syllabus does make a difference with students, and that instructors have little to gain by NOT creating one. Studies found that a learning-focused syllabus can influence positive motivation before a student even sets foot in the classroom, but that instructors should also take care to discuss its purpose with students and provide guidance on using it effectively. More specifically, the research found that students perceived a learning-focused syllabus to be more helpful and thorough than traditional content-focused syllabi, as well as more interesting, relevant to their lives, and focused on important concepts. Further, students perceived their respective instructors to be more positive, personal, approachable, and passionate.

## General Syllabus Tips for Faculty

If it is your first time to teach a particular course or in a particular department, or you would simply like to freshen up or revise some of your former syllabi and policies, it can be incredibly helpful to review examples from others. Reach out to your department to see if syllabus templates are available and ask your colleagues if they might be willing to share some of their ideas or entire syllabi with you. However, remember that syllabi are intellectual property and should be credited as such (Sinor, 2008). If you are looking for new ideas, many templates are available online. For instance, check out the learning-focused syllabi available through the [University of Virginia's Center for Teaching Excellence](#). If you would like additional support as you develop your syllabus at Texas Tech, please reach out to the TLPDC staff at [tlpdc@ttu.edu](mailto:tlpdc@ttu.edu).

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.

### Stay organized!

Obviously, you will be providing your students with a lot of important information in your syllabus, so good structure and organization is imperative. Something to keep in mind is that anything you can do to maximize your students' ability to locate information within the document efficiently will serve all of you well (Parkes & Harris, 2002). That means that perhaps pages of narrative might be less effective than clearly defined sections with bold headings, bulleted lists, and succinct tables.

## 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.

## Additional Resources

### General Syllabus Resources

Davis, B.G. (1993). *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<https://www.indiana.edu/~istr695/readingsfall2013/Tools%20For%20Teaching.pdf>

*Davis's book provides useful information about many aspects of preparing to teach. Several chapters are available online, including the chapter on creating a syllabus, which offers a general overview of what to include.*

“Syllabus Best Practices.” Iowa State University Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.



<https://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/preparing-to-teach/how-to-create-an-effective-syllabus/>

*This website presents additional information about preparing a learner-centered syllabus.*

“Sample Syllabi.” University of California, Merced’s Center for Research on Teaching Excellence.

[http://crte.ucmerced.edu/syllabus and course development resources](http://crte.ucmerced.edu/syllabus_and_course_development_resources)

*This website provides sample syllabi from a variety of disciplines, all of which include learning outcome statements.*

### Learning Outcomes Resources

Smith, T. Writing Measurable Learning Objectives. *TeachOnline*, Arizona State University.

<https://teachonline.asu.edu/2012/07/writing-measurable-learning-objiectives/>

*This site provides some additional details about how to write learning outcomes statements and utilizing Bloom’s taxonomy, with examples of course and unit level outcomes.*

Owen Wilson, L. “Anderson and Krathwohl - Bloom's Taxonomy Revised.”

<https://thesecondprinciple.com/essential-teaching-skills/blooms-taxonomy-revised/>

*This website provides a nice overview and comparison of Bloom’s original hierarchy of human learning with Anderson and Krathwohl’s updated version. Familiarizing yourself with this hierarchy can help you to incorporate learning objectives that push your students towards higher-order skills.*

“Bloom’s Taxonomy Guide to Writing Questions.” PennState Extension.

[https://extension.psu.edu/programs/4-h/projects/science-of-agriculture-challenge/for-volunteers/coaches/teaching-resources/copy\\_of\\_blooms-taxonomy-guide-to-writing-questions](https://extension.psu.edu/programs/4-h/projects/science-of-agriculture-challenge/for-volunteers/coaches/teaching-resources/copy_of_blooms-taxonomy-guide-to-writing-questions)

*This website takes a simple, practical approach to Bloom's Taxonomy, and provides some sample questions that might help you think through approaching your Learning Outcomes Statements.*

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