

# Purposes of a Syllabus

Syllabi seem to vary in two fundamental areas—the apparent reason for writing the syllabus and the material that it contains. The purpose of the syllabus should drive the decision as to what content to include (Parkes & Harris, 2002).

Three major purposes that a syllabus should serve are described by Parkes and Harris:

- Syllabus as a contract
- Syllabus as a permanent record
- Syllabus as a learning tool

Syllabus as a contract—Makes clear what the rules are

- Sets forth what is expected to happen during the semester
- Delineates the responsibilities of students and of the instructor
- Describes appropriate procedures and course policies
- Content required for a syllabus to serve as a contract
  - Clear and accurate course calendar
  - Grading policies: components and weights
  - Attendance policy
  - Late assignment policy, policies on incompletes and revisions
  - Academic dishonesty and academic freedom policies
  - Accommodation of disabilities policy
  - Policy in the event of an extended campus closure
  - Cancelled classes policy

Syllabus as a permanent record—Serves accountability and documentation functions

- Contains information useful for evaluation of instructors, courses, and programs
- Documents what was covered in a course, at what level, and for what kind of credit (useful in course equivalency transfer situations, accreditation procedures, and articulation)
- Content required for a syllabus to be useful as a permanent record
  - Title and semester of course, department offering the course, credit hours earned, meeting time and place
  - Name, title, and rank of instructor(s)
  - Pre- or co-requisites
  - Required texts and other materials
  - Course objectives (linked to professional standards if appropriate)
  - Description of course content
  - Description of assessment procedures

Syllabus as a learning tool—Helps students become more effective learners in the course

- Inform students of the instructor’s beliefs about teaching, learning, and the content area
- Focuses on students and what they need to be effective learners
- Places the course in context (how it fits in the curriculum, how it relates to students’ lives)
- Content required for a syllabus that serves as a learning tool for students
  - Instructor’s philosophy about the course content, teaching and learning
  - Relevance and importance of the course to students
  - Information on how to plan for the semester including self-management skills, guidance on time to spend outside of class, tips on how to do well on assessments, common misconceptions or mistakes, and specific study strategies
  - Prerequisite courses or skills
  - Availability of instructor(s) and teaching assistants
  - Campus resources for assistance and offices that aid students with disabilities

A syllabus is often thought of as “that apparently benign document instructors assemble and distribute to students at the start of the semester.” Whether it is intended or not, the quality of the syllabus is a fairly reliable indicator of the quality of teaching and learning that will take place in a course (Woolcock, 2003). Therefore, it behooves instructors to make the effort to construct a high-quality syllabus. The results of that effort can benefit the instructor as well as his or her students.

The process of developing a syllabus can be a reflective exercise, leading the instructor to carefully consider his or her philosophy of teaching, why the course is important, how the course fits in the discipline, as well as what topics will be covered, when assignments will be due, and so on (Eberly, Newton, & Wiggins, 2001; Grunert, 1997). This can be an enlightening experience that results in an improved course. In addition, by making sure expectations are clearly communicated, instructors can circumvent a whole host of student grievances and misunderstandings during the semester.

The syllabus is, thus, both a professional document and a personal document, one that reflects the instructor’s feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about the subject matter, teaching, learning, and students, as well as setting out the “nuts and bolts” of the course. When so constructed, the syllabus can serve as a guide to the instructor as much as a guide to the class (Parkes & Harris, 2002).

A syllabus lets students know what the course is about, why the course is taught, where it is going, and what will be required for them to be successful in the course (Altman & Cashin, 2003). The well-designed syllabus provides a solid beginning to the semester, sets the tone for the course, provides a conceptual framework for the course, serves as a “virtual handshake” between the instructor and students, and becomes a resource that is referred to over the course of the semester. It also shows students that you take teaching seriously (Davis, 1993).

## References

Altman, H. B., & Cashin, W. E. (2003, May). [\*Writing a syllabus\*](#).

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Eberly, M. B., Newton, S. E., & Wiggins, R. (2001). [\*The syllabus as a tool for student-centered learning\*](#). *Journal of General Education* 50 (1), 56-74.

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