

What is a Syllabus?

Functionally, a syllabus is a contract between the Department—for which you act as proxy—and your students. The Department makes decisions about how to best educate students in its discipline and subdisciplines. A curriculum is designed by the Department and qualified instructors (that's you) are hired to teach that curriculum using their best judgment about the specific content to be included in individual courses and best pedagogical approaches for each course. Each course syllabus constitutes an agreement between the instructor and her students as to course content, requirements, course policies including grading, and the course calendar. Each instructor enjoys academic freedom with regard to the design of the courses they teach. Attending academic freedom are certain rights as well as responsibilities. You have the right to design and teach courses as you see fit and the responsibility to design and teach those courses according to their titles and catalog descriptions as well as the most current knowledge and best pedagogical practices associated with your field or discipline. To the best of your ability, you should design your courses in ways that are responsive to your students' abilities, prior knowledge, and preparation.

There is plenty of room for variability between syllabi designed by different instructors within multiple sections of the same course as well as across different courses. There are, however, common elements that each syllabus really should include in some form, as well as some policy information that the University requires its instructors to include.

Syllabus Elements

1. General course information that tells students what the course is about, why the course is important, and, generally, what they can expect from the course. This section will include:
 - Course title, instruction name, contact information, office hours
 - Course description
 - Course learning outcomes or objectives
2. Specific course information that tells students exactly what will be required of them throughout the course, when in the term they will be required to do what, and how their work in the course will be evaluated. This section will include:
 - Required and recommended texts
 - Required assignments and assignment descriptions
 - Required examinations
 - Grading overview and criteria
 - Course calendar

3. Course and university policy information that tells students any rules by which they must abide and provides information about support systems on campus. This section will include:
 - Course policies on cell phone and laptop usage in class
 - Course policies on tardiness, as well as on participation and absences if those are not part of the grading system for the course
 - Information about tutorial support for students (e.g. the University Writing Centre about which information may be found here: <https://uwaterloo.ca/writing-centre/>)
 - University policies on academic integrity, appeals, and on support for students with disabilities

Designing a Syllabus

1. Look for models. The Department archives past syllabi and you may access these **by...** Look at how previous instructors have described their version of the course you will be teaching, the texts they have assigned, and the writing assignments they have designed. Examine how they have organized grading. Not every choice a previous instructor has made will be right for you, but looking at how others have approached teaching a course as well as differences between approaches will help you gain clarity about what you want to do and why.
2. Every syllabus must be accessible to all students. A good guide to designing and creating accessible text may be found here:
<http://webaccess.msu.edu/accessible-courses/text.html>
3. Draft a course description that reflects the course you are designing. You may choose to come back to this and revise after you have done more work on your syllabus, but get your first ideas out on paper before you proceed further. Aim for accessible language for your students. Remember you are describing the course you will teach and not concepts with which they are already familiar or texts they have already read. When you have written a draft, ask a friend or family member to read it and say back to you what they think the course is about. Ask them if there are places where they feel confused or if they find terms or jargon they don't understand. You may also send a draft to xxx for review and feedback.
4. Think about what you want students to have learned by the end of the term and write learning outcomes for your course. These should be active, concise, and clear. Here is a website with helpful information for crafting effective learning outcomes:
<http://www.teaching.utoronto.ca/topics/coursedesign/learning-outcomes/characteristics.htm>
5. Once you have learning outcomes for your course that seem to you to be responsible and accomplishable, you may use them to guide you as you choose texts, prepare lesson plans, design formative assignments for learning as well as forms of evaluation. Plan to test or evaluate students on material

you have taught to them (not material with which you assume they are or should be familiar).

6. Design assignments that you believe will best help students achieve the learning outcomes for the course as a whole. Develop learning goals for each assignment so that each assignment builds toward the course learning outcomes. In an ideal world, should anyone ask you why you are asking students to read, or write, or discuss, or do anything in your course and at the time you ask, you would have an answer immediately at hand and that answer would pertain to the learning outcomes for the course as a whole. You might think of this practice as “scaffolded learning.” Similarly, you can scaffold assignments by designing each in a sequence such that each new assignment builds on learning required and supported by the previous assignments.
7. Consider how you will evaluate students’ work on each assignment and what value you will assign to each piece of work students complete. Some basic principles for grading include:
 - The greater the weight attached to any single assignment, generally speaking, the more time and attention students will pay to its successful completion. If you assign too much weight to any one assignment or examination, however, students may well experience high degrees of stress or perceive your grading scheme to be unfair.
 - Design assignments that require smaller and greater amounts of labour and, accordingly, have smaller weights, medium weights, as well as one or, at most, two that are more highly weighted. These varying weights work well with scaffolded assignments. For example, you might assign a short written response to a scholarly essay, then a written summary of that essay, then an annotated bibliography entry while, in class, you discuss the essay itself, the practice of annotation, of citation, and principles for writing from research or the production of scholarly writing.
 - Writing assignments are some of the most powerful opportunities for learning that students will encounter. Recognize the value of writing to the quality and depth of learning and avoid using writing assignments merely for the purposes of evaluation. Design writing assignments so that students have opportunities to draft, receive feedback, and revise their work prior to grading. Remember to grade student writing using your course learning objectives as your guide.
8. Develop a course calendar. You may want to build in some flexibility so that you have not programmed every class period in advance. Generally speaking, you will want to avoid changing up the calendar once you have distributed the syllabus. If you much change your course calendar, you should never move up due dates or examination dates. Similarly, you should not add significant assignments to the course calendar. You may assign a short writing, for example, in order for students to prepare for an upcoming class

discussion or activity, but nothing should be added to your syllabus after the start of term that carries significant grading weight.

9. Be sure to include all University-required policy language in your syllabus. You may find that information here: <https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat-general-counsel/committees-and-councils/senate-undergraduate-council/course-outline-requirements>
10. Reread and revise your syllabus draft to ensure that you have represented as fully and fairly as possible what the course is about; what students will be expected to have learned and accomplished by the course completion date; what students will be asked to read, write, and do for the course during the term and by what dates, how students will be graded, any policies or rules by which students must abide in order to succeed in the course, and support systems available for students as they proceed through the course.