

Syllabus Functions and Components — Motivating Students to Read It

Every scheduled academic course, regardless of delivery method (e.g., on campus, online), must have a written syllabus distributed to students enrolled in the course. The syllabus must be posted electronically in Canvas (USA's learning management system) **by the first day of class.**

Functions of the Course Syllabus

- A syllabus is both a course-planning tool and an academic agreement that establishes the educational relationship between instructors and students. It serves as a foundation for communication, transparency, and accountability throughout the course.
- The syllabus organizes essential information, establishes the tone of the learning environment, and maps the pathway for student learning.
- A carefully constructed syllabus clarifies learning outcomes, assessment and evaluation methods, grading policies, and expectations for student and instructor conduct, promoting consistency and reducing misunderstandings.
- It also serves as a prospectus, explaining the value and relevance of the course, the instructor's approach, and what students can expect to learn and accomplish.
- Beyond providing information, the syllabus should stimulate interest in the course and communicate its contribution to broader educational goals.
- In many respects, the syllabus is akin to a contract because it outlines course requirements and policies related to grading, academic integrity, attendance, student conduct, and late work. Students are responsible for reading and understanding its contents.
- The syllabus should also state that the instructor reserves the right to make reasonable changes to course content, schedules, assignments, or policies, with any changes communicated to students in a timely manner. However, the instructors should avoid making major changes to a syllabus once classes have begun, particularly changes affecting attendance standards, grading standards, or performance measures. Any changes to the syllabus should be for compelling reasons and follow the following guidelines:
 - Fair and adequate notice is given to enrolled students either by email, in writing, or through the learning management system.
 - Modifications to the syllabus are not arbitrary or capricious.
 - Students are not unfairly disadvantaged by mid-semester changes to grading standards, attendance standards, or performance measures. Efforts should be made to avoid penalizing students as a result of any necessary changes.

The components of a syllabus can be sorted under four categories:

1. **Instructor:** name, contact info, office hours...
2. **Content:** name and number, credit hours, description, objectives, outcomes, textbook, calendar
3. **Assessment:** Assignments and grading scale
4. **Policies** (attendance, technology, ADA, holidays, dishonesty, civility, etc.)

In detail, all syllabi must include the following items:

1. Course prefix and number, section number, and title
2. Semester term and credit hours
3. Class meeting days/times/location (if applicable)
4. Instructor name, contact information, and office hours
5. University course description (required to be verbatim from catalog)
6. Course prerequisites
7. Student learning outcomes
8. Required texts and/or course materials
9. Course requirements such as exams, assignments, and projected due dates, if any
10. Final exam date and time (if applicable)
11. Grading scale
12. Grade categories and weights
13. Course schedule
14. General Education statement (undergraduate only; only required if a Gen Ed course)
15. Course-specific grading policies (e.g., late work, extra credit, etc.), if any
16. Course-specific attendance and punctuality policies, if any
17. Course-specific technology and media policies (e.g., recording class, expected email response time, etc.), if any
18. Core Syllabus Policy Statements which cover information about academic integrity, accessibility services, operational disruptions, etc.

How to Motivate Students to Read the Syllabus

A well-designed syllabus communicates important messages to students. It demonstrates that the instructor is organized, respects students' need for clarity and advance planning, and values both the learners and the subject matter. Nevertheless, even the most carefully crafted syllabus is unlikely to be studied thoroughly unless students are actively engaged with it.

Throughout the semester, instructors often receive questions that are already answered in the syllabus. The challenge, therefore, is not simply providing the document but encouraging students to become familiar with it and to know where to find information when questions arise. Reading the syllabus aloud on the first day of class is rarely effective and consumes valuable class time. Instead, consider the following strategies.

1. Engage Students with Interactive Syllabus Activities

If the syllabus is relatively short, allow students time to read it during class and then engage them in small-group activities. Students might discuss the document, answer one another's questions, or reflect on prompts such as:

- How does this course compare with others you have taken in terms of expected workload or difficulty?
- Which aspects of the course seem most interesting or challenging?

Other activities include creating a list of questions students should never ask because the answers are already in the syllabus or conducting a syllabus scavenger hunt to locate key information. Small incentives can increase participation and make the activity more engaging.

2. Use a Syllabus Acknowledgment Agreement

Assign the syllabus as homework before the second-class meeting. After addressing any questions, ask students to sign an acknowledgment statement such as:

“I have read and understand the course syllabus, including the course requirements, grading policies, attendance expectations, and other course procedures.”

This approach encourages accountability and emphasizes the importance of understanding course expectations.

3. Give a Syllabus Quiz

For longer or more detailed syllabi, assign the document as homework and administer a graded quiz during the second-class session. The quiz should include more than factual questions about assignments and grading policies. Thought-provoking questions can encourage students to reflect on the course and their own goals, such as:

- Which course learning outcome is most important to you, and why?
- Which assignment are you most or least looking forward to completing, and why?
- Which presentation or assessment criteria best align with your strengths as a learner?

Students’ responses can provide valuable insights into their interests, motivations, concerns, and expectations while encouraging them to consider the personal and professional relevance of the course.

4. Introduce the Syllabus When Students Need It Most

Another approach is to distribute the syllabus on the first day but postpone a detailed review until several weeks into the semester, when enrollment has stabilized and students become more concerned about assignments, grading, and course requirements. This “just-in-time” strategy often results in greater student interest and attention.

However, essential information that students need immediately—such as prerequisites, instructor contact information, office hours, accommodation procedures, safety guidelines, classroom conduct expectations, and initial reading assignments—should still be discussed at the beginning of the course.

Key Principle

Students are most likely to read and remember the syllabus when they actively interact with it. Whether through discussion, quizzes, scavenger hunts, acknowledgment agreements, or timely review, the goal is

to transform the syllabus from a static document into a practical resource that students will consult throughout the semester.

Sources:

The Course Syllabus: A Learning Centered Approach (2008, 2nd Ed.) Judith Grunert O'Brien, Barbara J. Millis and Margaret W. Cohen
Syllabus Construction, Jessica Riviere, Danielle Picard, and Richard Coble. Vanderbilt University Gross Davis, Barbara. (2009). "The Comprehensive Course Syllabus." Tools for Teaching, 2nd Ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 21-36.
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