Designing a Course: A Two-Page Primer[1]

Getting started:
- Start early (if you can) to make sure you have time to revise
- Consult with others who have designed courses the same or similar courses
    - Are there certain topics/texts that are standardly taught in this course?
    - Which students typically take this course (background knowledge, majors, etc.)?
    - What are the typical challenges in teaching this course?
- Define your course goals to identify what you want the students to gain from the course
    - This helps you make decisions about content, teaching methods, assignments
    - You can find more information about starting with course goals here.
    - Make your goals specific, measurable, and focused on student learning.
    - Consider the following questions when developing course goals:
        - How should taking your course change students? What skills should students gain in this course? How does this course relate to other courses in the discipline? How, then, might you define the course goals accordingly (e.g., for an introductory, fundamental, or advanced course)?
    - You can also use Bloom's taxonomy to help clarify your course goals.

Determining course content:
- Select the main topics you want to cover. Try to figure out if there's any consensus regarding necessary topics for courses like the one you're designing.
    - Look at a variety of syllabi for similar courses, look through the relevant literature, ask for advice from others who have taught the course, or ask in a FB group
- Think about your course goals, the students who will be taking the course, etc, and refine your list of topics. Then pare down as needed.
- Determine a logical structure for the course and arrange the topics accordingly.
- Think about how the course structure will contribute to student learning. Ask yourself:
    - Do I need to teach certain skills initially and then discuss applications? Do I want to introduce a particular theory before illustrating it with examples?

Developing teaching methods:
- Select and develop teaching methods/tools that are 1) appropriate for the size of the class and 2) consistent with your course goals. Ask yourself:
    - What is my teaching style? How will I apply/adapt my style to suit the course goals, size of the class, and types of students who are likely to enroll?
- Whenever possible, use a variety of approaches, taking into account that students use a diverse range of learning preferences.
- Plan to use teaching methods that will require and measure active student learning.

[1] This handout was made by Gillian Gray. The content is largely taken directly from Washington University at St Louis' Center for Teaching and Learning resource on course design. You can find the full resource here. For further resources, see UM's CRLT resources for preparing to teach; Carleton College's "TeachtheEarth" Course Design Tutorial; course planning resources on TeachPhilosophy101; and our very own Elise Woodard and Josh Hunt's notion page on teaching a summer course (also referenced throughout this primer).

Evaluating student learning:
- Your assignments should contribute to your course goals. Make sure the students have the opportunity to acquire and practice skills required for major assignments.
- Josh and Elise have compiled a bunch of assignment ideas [on this page](#); for more ideas, check out the [Teaching Philosophy FB group](#) and blogs like [The Philosophers' Cocoon](#), or just ask faculty and other grad students.
- If you are including easy assignments (eg, discussion posts, reflections, etc), make sure that they don't add up to more than 20% of the course grade; otherwise, you'll have inflated grades or you'll need to be very harsh on the other assignments. See Josh and Elise's [sample excel spreadsheet](#) to test out possible grade outcomes.
- For summer courses, keep in mind that the semester goes by very quickly; plan your assignments accordingly (for your sake and for the students' sake!).

Select text(s) and other materials:
- If you are using books, take into account the cost and consider placing some of the material on reserve at the library so that students can borrow, photocopy, or download the material themselves.
- If you are using Canvas to post readings, make sure you have access to all of the texts and upload them well in advance.
- If you are using movies, TV, etc make sure to plan for how students will view these texts.

- Determine how you will grade all required work for the course.
  - It's good to have rubrics for every assignment; you don't need to have rubrics done before the class starts, just before students work on the assignments.
- Decide on policies for tardiness, attendance, technology in the classroom, late work, extensions, grade disputes, and exam rescheduling. Learn the Policy on Academic Integrity and develop strategies for preventing/responding to plagiarism and cheating.

Develop the course schedule:
- Be wary of the tendency to try to accomplish too much during each class period. Allow time for active learning and for students to prepare for major assignments and exams.
- Consult the relevant academic calendars and keep in mind major religious holidays.

Write the course syllabus:
- At a minimum, the syllabus should contain the following: course title, time, and location; prerequisites; required texts and other materials; course topics; major assignments and exams; course policies; and contact information for you and any other instructors.
- Remember that the syllabus doesn't need to have every bit of information for the course. You'll send out more detailed assignment descriptions, rubrics, etc throughout the term.

Refine and revise!
- Each of the steps above is necessarily undertaken with the others in mind, and each will necessarily undergo revision each time you teach a particular course.