

# Syllabus 101

This is a basic introduction to the course syllabus as it is commonly used in North American higher education.

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## What's a Syllabus Anyway?

A syllabus serves as a teaching tool focusing on organization and communication, as a component of your department's degree curriculum, as a legal document in the administrative domain, and as a document on your teaching portfolio. As such, it is interpreted and evaluated by students, colleagues, administrators, and particularly search and promotion committees. Therefore, it is a pedagogy tool that documents your teaching scholarship. (Eberly, Newton & Wiggins, 2001)

The nature and function of syllabi keep changing. Historically, a syllabus was a list of contents or an index. In the 18th century, it found its way into higher education as a list of topics in a course. In the age of mass printing and photocopy, rules, and behaviors were added to the lists of topics, and by the end of the 20th century, the syllabi became longer and longer due to a growing number of policies and rules. It is often seen as an enculturation tool (behavioral rules) and contract (legal protection) by instructors and as a set of rules for a hierarchical, competitive game for points by the students. In contrast, many faculty have begun re-envisioning their syllabi as communication and learning tools and as a starting point for an ongoing conversation about learning.

Before writing a syllabus, ask yourself: What are my goals for my syllabi? What do I want them to accomplish, and how do I envision my students, colleagues, and administrators engage with them?

## Who Owns Your Syllabi?

Ownership of syllabi is a gray zone; both the institution and the instructor have claims to a syllabus. According to the [UA Intellectual Property Policy](#), syllabi are excluded from intellectual property (i.e., individually owned), but the ideas embodied in a syllabus are ABOR-owned intellectual property. Like any other scholarly document, the ethics and rules of intellectual property rights apply. While colleges or departments may have practices of syllabus sharing, this should not lead to unreflected plagiarism. Please identify and cite original text from individual or departmental sources as such. For application and promotion purposes, please craft your original syllabi.

## Who Can See Your Syllabi?

The UArizona administration needs access to key information in your syllabi for accreditation and assessment purposes. Moreover, federal policy requires that students learn about course requirements

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and policies before registration via UAccess. If instructors have published their syllabi via D2L, students can see prior syllabi for courses they browse in UAccess before enrolling.

## What are Required Components?

Please carefully review institutional, college-specific, and departmental requirements in your syllabi. Since not all resources may be listed here, please check with your administrators about other possible resources.

UA Resources:

- [Course Syllabus Policy: Undergraduate](#)
- [Course Syllabus Policy: Graduate](#)
- [Undergraduate and Graduate Syllabus Template Updates](#) (April 1, 2020)
- [General Education Syllabus Resources](#)

Please note that by placing this URL on your syllabus, you no longer need to list the individual university policies, <https://catalog.arizona.edu/syllabus-policies>.

## What are the Key Elements of a Syllabus?

Syllabi are manifestations of your course design, meaning that the planning and decision-making for your course take place before the syllabus is written. The syllabus then articulates your informed and intentional teaching strategies and instructional decisions to students and other readers. Consciously or not, here are some questions readers will try to find answered in your syllabi:

*Why should students take this course?* - Readers will ask:

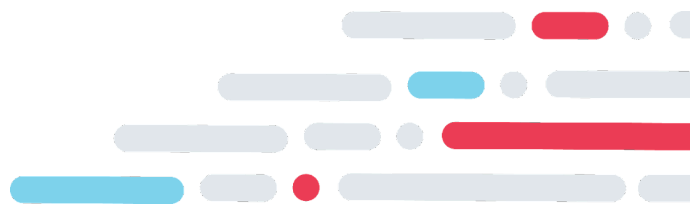
- Does the tone of the syllabus affect learners positively (warm language: inclusion, motivation, personal relevance)?
- Does the course advance the students' learning toward the desired outcomes of their degree?
- Does the course prepare students for doing the work in the discipline?

*What are the goals (a.k.a. objectives, outcomes, results) of this course? What will your students be able to know and do?* - Readers will ask:

- How do the goals align with prescribed frameworks, e.g., outcomes of the degree-specific curriculum, defined outcomes for General Education courses, etc.?
- Do the goals address both lower and higher thinking levels ([Bloom's taxonomy](#))?
- Are the goals achievable and measurable within one semester?

*What are the assessments in this course, and do they address the stated goals?* - Readers will ask:

- Are different assessment methods used to practice a variety of skills?
- Do the assessment types reflect the work in the discipline?
- Do the assessments produce measurable results that illustrate achieving the stated goals?



*Do the teaching and learning activities indicate guided practice toward the stated goals?* - Readers will ask:

- Are the teaching formats and strategies supportive of student learning?
- Are the activities accessible and inclusive for diverse students?
- Are the course materials relevant for achieving the stated goals?
- Are the technological components appropriate for the intended teaching and learning activities?

Recommended resources:

- Gannon, K. (2020). "[How to Create a Syllabus: Advice Guide](#)." The Chronicle of Higher Education.
- Fink, L. D. (2013). Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses. Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, M. S., Bach, D. J., & Streifer, A. C. (2014). Measuring the promise: A learning-focused syllabus rubric. To improve the academy: A journal of educational development, 33 (1), 14-36. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tia2.20004> . (Direct access to the syllabus rubric guide and scoring sheet: <https://cte.virginia.edu/resources/syllabus-rubric> )
- [UDL Syllabus](#). (2021). UDL on Campus: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education. Web.

Works Cited:

- Bain, K. (2004). What the best college teachers do. Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press.
- Eberly, M.B., Newton, S.E., Wiggins, R.A. 2001. "The syllabus as a tool for student-centered learning." The Journal of General Education 50(1): 56-74. JSTOR. 21 June 2015.
- Lang, James M. (2006) "The Promising Syllabus." The Chronicle of Higher Education. 28 Aug 2006.

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Please contact this guide's current curator, [Mascha Gemein](#), with any questions about writing an effective syllabus.

The [D2L instructional technologies team](#) is available for individual or group-based labs to help use the diverse functions and tools within D2L to effectively present an interactive syllabus and use it as a recurring tool for learning throughout the semester.