THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | CHICAGO CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Syllabus Guide

Introduction

The aim of this document is to provide guidance on how to construct a syllabus. It discusses seven possible sections of a syllabus, providing an explanation of what one might include in each and, where appropriate, considerations on how to frame that section based in key pedagogical principles. An individual instructor might choose different sections to include in their syllabus, combine them in various ways, or title and order them differently, which is as it should be. Sample language is included when it might be useful to illustrate how to frame this information in the syllabus, but this is only meant to provide illustrative examples, not to suggest required language.

Two central aims have shaped the guidance provided below:

- **Promoting student learning.** How can we provide essential information, set expectations, and convey the goals and work of a course in such a way that will help students learn?
- **Creating an inclusive learning environment.** How can we set the stage for a classroom where everyone feels welcome to participate and is supported in their learning?

As you will see, various pedagogical ideas are introduced throughout in support of these two central aims. We have attempted to provide clear, concise explanations with an eye always to how instructors can practically make use of these ideas when constructing a syllabus. We have included references where supplemental reading may help to explicate these further (the broader set of references that informed the construction of this guide is provided at the end). You are encouraged to meet with a colleague in the Chicago Center for Teaching (CCT) to discuss any of these ideas and to think through ways to translate them to your syllabus and teaching practice. Faculty and other instructors can schedule an appointment through our online booking portal, and graduate students and postdocs can schedule via Grad Gargoyle.

Sections

A Note on Language and Tone

To help foster a productive, learning-focused classroom environment, aim for a tone that is positive, respectful, and inviting (Palmer et al. 5). We want to articulate clear, high expectations for students, and to do so in a way that conveys enthusiasm about the material and students' engagement with it, and that fosters an atmosphere of trust, intellectual encounter, and scholarly inquiry. This means avoiding adversarial or scolding language, typing in all-caps, and the like (Gannon). Use first- and second-person pronouns (*we*, *you*, *I*, and so on) when possible, and aim to convey that you care about your students and their learning.

1. Basic Course Information

Providing a clear summary of basic course information is important for ensuring that all students are able to access the course. Making sure students have this information—and ensuring it is accurate—also sends the signal that you care about your students and their learning. Consider including:

- Course title and number; quarter and year.
- Class meeting times and location.
- Your name, perhaps including how you should be addressed.
- Your email address.
- Your office hours and location.

2. Course Description

Providing a brief, engaging description of the content, scope, and organizational logic helps to set the stage for the course. The idea here is not to replicate what is in the course catalog (though that may inform how you write it), but to explain to students what you take to be the central concepts, questions, skills, and so on of the course. There are many ways to write an effective course description. Here are a few considerations to help shape it:

- **Frame the course as focused on big questions, puzzles, or problems.**
  Students are more likely to be motivated to engage in a course when they understand why what they are learning matters—that is, its value (Ambrose et al. 74-76). As instructors, we are especially interested in fostering the intrinsic value students find in the course (as opposed to extrinsic values, such as grades), which means suggesting why our material is interesting or relevant (Bain 32-42). Framing the course around big questions, puzzles, or problems, rather than a list of topics or texts to be covered, helps to do this. It also helps to cultivate students' curiosity, a central factor in promoting student learning (Eyler 42-51).

- **Connect the central concepts of the course to students' prior understandings.**
  When posing those questions, puzzles, and problems, it is important to do so with an eye to how students tend to understand the central concepts of your course when they come into it—what Ken Bain and others have called mental models (26-30; see also Eyler

188-92). Learning always proceeds from a students' prior knowledge of the course material, regardless of how accurate or sufficient it is (Ambrose et al. 10-39). And rather than simply transmitting or depositing new knowledge into students' heads, teaching and learning is a matter of helping students change the way they understand the concepts and skills that form the basis of your course. Use the course description to begin to connect the new concepts and skills of your course with the mental models of those concepts and skills students tend to bring into your class.[1]

- **Explain the organizational logic of the course.**
  Having articulated the big questions, puzzles, or problems of the course, explain how the course is organized such that students will be able to explore them over the course of the term. Will the course be organized chronologically? Conceptually? According to some process? Laying out this arc helps students begin to identify how their conceptual understanding will develop over the 10 weeks of the course.

- **Use first-person plural ("we") rather than "the course" or "students."**
  Saying that "we" will be taking up the big questions, puzzles, and problems of the course is more inviting and helps to establish an intellectual community more than saying "the course" *covers, introduces*, or *examines* them. "The course" is an abstract construct; the students and instructor are the agents who will be examining, investigating, arguing, and so on (Palmer et al. 5). Similarly, framing the enterprise of the course as something "we" will do, rather than "students," suggests a spirit of collaborative inquiry, rather than the instructor merely transmitting information to students.

- **Provide a general description of your teaching methods for the course.**
  A brief explanation of how class will generally run—even, and especially, if you will use multiple teaching strategies over the course of the term—can help to set expectations. Articulating a pedagogical rationale for why you approach teaching in the way that you do—that is, connecting your teaching strategies to how they help your students learn—helps students understand how best to engage in the activities of the course. For example, explaining why discussion is important for how students learn the material and develop the analytical skills of the course can help them understand what you are looking for in a successful class discussion.

3. Learning Objectives

Sound course design begins with learning objectives, which describe the knowledge and skills that students should develop over the course of the term. Learning objectives articulate the specific kinds of understandings students will achieve and should be written from the perspective of the students using clear action verbs. A useful tool for developing learning

[1] If you are unsure about the prior knowledge students bring into your class, it may be useful to talk with colleagues who have previously taught the course (or similar material). You can also have students complete an ungraded pre-assessment task—a low-stakes writing assignment, diagnostic quiz, survey, in-class discussion, or other form of background knowledge probe—before or at the beginning of the term to assess and activate their prior knowledge.

objectives is Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, which lays out six categories of learning, arranged hierarchically:

- Create
- Evaluate
- Analyze
- Apply
- Understand
- Remember

Further Considerations
Clear, transparent learning objectives help to:

- Clarify your expectations for the class, which in turn promotes student motivation (Ambrose et al. 76-79).
- Scaffold the intellectual development of the course.
- Promote independent learning and metacognitive skills among students.

Finally, and crucially, a sound, learning-centered course design is based in the *alignment* among the learning objectives, the assessment plan (i.e. student work and grades, see Requirements below), and the teaching strategies we use during class. Therefore, thoughtfully constructed learning objectives suggest how we will teach and how we expect students to practice and demonstrate their understanding (Biggs; Wiggins and McTighe). Please see the Appendix below for examples of learning objectives from across the University.

4. Required Texts and Materials

Be clear about which editions are required, if necessary, and indicate how students can acquire the texts. Be mindful of how much required materials cost and seek out less expensive options to the degree that you can. Be sure to mention if readings will be available in Canvas—and be sure to upload those materials in a timely manner.

5. Requirements (Grades, Assignments, or Assessment)

While assignments, exams, and so on may be one of the last things we as instructors think about when designing a course, from the student perspective these tend to be central. Our assessment plan and how we talk about the standards of success in the course can significantly shape how students approach the course. Clarity and transparency here can help to mitigate student anxiety and confusion over the course of the term. Be sure to include a complete assignment list and provide a clear description of how course grades will be determined. Other important considerations for this part of the syllabus include:

- **Align assignments and grades with the learning objectives.**
  Aligning the work we ask students to engage in with the learning objectives we set for the course is central to promoting student motivation and learning (Ambrose et al. 85-88; Biggs; Wiggins and McTighe). If we want students to develop, say, close reading skills, then our assignments should provide students the opportunity to practice this skill

and get feedback on it—and student work should also provide us with useful information on how well students are developing this skill. As Ken Bain puts it, the fundamental assessment question is "What kind of intellectual and personal development do I want my students to enjoy in this class, and what evidence might I collect about the nature and progress of that development?" (152-53).

Alignment is also important to consider when giving weights to graded assignments. The percentage of the final grade accounted for by a paper or exam should reflect the importance of the learning objectives that it assesses.

- **Articulate clear, high standards for student work and project confidence that students can meet those standards.**
  While a fuller account of the expectations and standards for an assignment may be provided in the assignment prompt and/or rubric, it is important to explain briefly the kinds of intellectual achievements students should aim for in the assignments. Clarity and transparency about this helps to set up a system of feedback that promotes an inclusive learning environment (Cohen et al.; Yeager et al.).

- **Be clear about what excellent participation looks like.**
  For courses in which classroom participation is a significant expectation and is reflected in the grading scheme, it is important to explain specifically the characteristics of productive discussion and how students should engage in it. Students may interpret "active participation" quite differently than how you intend (Howard 79-104), so simply saying "actively participate" may not be enough. Consider providing examples of productive classroom interventions and how students can prepare (e.g. by coming in with a particular passage to discuss, with particular kinds of questions ready to go, and so on). Also, consider building in opportunities for participation that may take place outside the classroom, such as office hours, discussion posts on Canvas, and the like.

6. Class Policies (Guidelines or Norms)

With this section, the important consideration is just what kind of classroom environment you aim to create. Formulate policies (or, alternatively, guidelines, norms, and so on) that are driven by how they foster a structured, productive, and inclusive learning environment. Ideally, we should be able to provide reasoning for each policy that connects it to supporting student learning. When crafting the language, think about how word choice and tone shape how students will hear you. In many cases, the syllabus is the student's first interaction with you, and it plays an important role in establishing the relationship between student and teacher. While we want to provide structure and clear expectations, we also want to avoid adversarial language.

Below, you will find the more common categories of policy that appear on a course syllabus, along with at least one example of each (*in italics*). *None of these are mandatory*: they are intended only to be illustrative options, not requirements. You are welcome to use and adapt these as you like, or to formulate your own.

Inclusion, Diversity, and Class Climate
Make the connection between the values of inclusion and diversity and creating a productive learning environment. Consider personalizing it to foster a warmer tone.

> *In my experience, productive discussion and learning arise in an inclusive classroom that is welcoming of diverse perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds. I aim, then, to cultivate such an environment by structuring the course and activities in a manner that is respectful of diversity in all its forms and across all dimensions of identity, social location, and experience. I expect class discussion to proceed in the same spirit. I welcome suggestions on how to enhance the inclusivity of the class, so please do be in touch with any thoughts or questions about this.*

Accessibility and Accommodations
Aim to strike a welcoming tone while ensuring that students are aware of Student Disability Services (SDS), the accommodation process, and the need for timely notification. Here is a sample statement from SDS:

> *Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of academic accommodations by Student Disability Services (SDS) and need a reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS for using accommodations. Timely notifications are required in order to ensure that your accommodations can be implemented. Please meet with me to discuss your access needs in this class after you have completed the SDS procedures for requesting accommodations. For more information, visit disabilities.uchicago.edu.*

In addition to a syllabus policy, consider taking steps to enhance the accessibility of your course with this checklist from the SDS office.

Attendance and Late Work
Setting policies for attendance and late work helps to make expectations for students transparent. Rather than framing such policies as punitive measures, ground them in a pedagogical rationale by explaining just how regular attendance and timely submission of work contribute to your students' learning. While it is important to establish clear, high expectations in this area, we also want to recognize that unforeseen circumstances may arise and allow for flexibility (insofar as our learning goals allow for it). Note that the College has a policy not to require doctor's notes for students who miss class due to illness. Also, be sure to bear in mind the University's policy on religious accommodation for missed classes, assignments, and exams, which among other things holds that:

i. Absences [due to observance of a religious holiday] may not be counted as a missed class in any course in which attendance is a measure of academic performance
ii. reasonable extensions of time must be given, without academic penalty, for missed assignments; and
iii. exams must be reasonably rescheduled without academic penalty.

Because class discussion is at the heart of this course, you are required to be in class, and what we do in the course of our class meetings will determine a large portion of your grade. I understand that sometimes emergencies or other unexpected circumstances arise that make attendance that day impossible. If this is the case, please contact me as soon as possible so we can make arrangements to get you caught up. If you will be absent from a class for a university-sponsored activity, please make arrangements with me in advance regarding any work you might miss (adapted from Gannon).

Submitting assignments on time is essential for me to be able to provide feedback on your work. With that in mind, grades for late work will be reduced by one-third a letter grade (i.e. from a B+ to a B) for every day past the due date. If an emergency or other unexpected circumstance arises that prevents you from being able to meet a deadline, please be in touch with me as soon as possible.

Another approach is to grant a certain number of "grace days" that students can use to excuse an absence or allow for late work. The idea here to is to be accommodating and flexible without adjudicating particular requests or having students disclose personal matters they may not be comfortable disclosing:

> *Class discussion is foundational to understanding the big ideas of the course, and timely submission of assignments is essential for me to be able to provide feedback on your work. Of course, I understand that sometimes emergencies and other circumstances can arise that may warrant some flexibility. Accordingly, you will have two "grace days" which you can use to excuse an absence and/or submit late work over the course of the term. One missed class or one day past a due date equals one grace day. After you have used all your grace days for the term, your attendance grade will be negatively affected and a late penalty of one-third a letter grade will be assessed on assignments for each day past a due date (i.e. from a B+ to a B).*

Technology in Class

There is a spectrum of possibilities for how to think about laptops and other devices in class. Some instructors, understandably, want to limit or ban them out of concern for the distraction they can cause (both for the student using a device and those sitting nearby). On the other hand, some disability accommodations allow for students to use laptops or other devices in class; so allowing for this exception to a general ban calls attention to students with the accommodation, which can be stigmatizing. Consider, also, that there are ways to convey to students your expectations around devices in class without resorting to an outright ban. As usual, connecting the policy to a rationale based in student learning helps to establish a productive environment. James Lang provides a good overview of this issue and has also written about the broader pedagogical issue of the distracted classroom.

> *You are welcome to use a laptop or tablet in this class as long as it contributes to your learning. This class, once again, is discussion based. This means that all students are expected to actively listen to one another in order to participate in classroom activities. If you are unable to contribute to the discussion or are otherwise distracted by your*

computer, cell phone, or tablet, I will ask that you refrain from using it in class. There will be some class sessions where we will use technology together, and in those instances, all students should make arrangements to bring a laptop or tablet to class. If you have any questions or concerns, please be in touch with me.

Access to the Internet can be a valuable aid to the classroom learning environment. You may be encouraged to use a laptop, smart phone, or other device to explore concepts related to course discussions and in-class activities. Keep in mind, however, that these technologies can be distracting – not only for you, but to others in the class. Please avoid the temptation of Facebook, texting, or other off-topic diversions.

Our primary purpose in class is to talk with one another about our ideas after carefully reading and analyzing these texts, so any technology use should be in the service of that aim, and should not hinder or distract from it. So, if you use a laptop or tablet, please do so for course purposes only and consider turning off wi-fi.

Academic Integrity

Acting with academic integrity is essential for students' academic development and ability to achieve course goals. Our aim with this policy is to communicate this to students, along with the seriousness of academic dishonesty, without conveying the message that we expect that they *will* cheat, which can undermine trust.

Please note that an important element of academic integrity is fully and correctly attributing any materials taken from the work of others. Feel free to consult with me before completing assignments if you have concerns about the correct way to reference the work of others. More generally, please familiarize yourself with the University's policy on academic honesty, which applies to this course. Of course, I do not anticipate any problems with academic integrity. In the unlikely event that any concerns do arise regarding this matter, I will forward all related materials to the College for further review and action.

Acting with academic integrity means, in brief, not submitting the statements, work, or ideas of others as one's own. Students are expected to comply with University regulations regarding honest work. If you are in doubt about what constitutes academic dishonesty, speak with me before the assignment is due. Failure to maintain academic integrity on an assignment will result in a penalty befitting the violation, up to and including failing the course and further University sanctions. For more information, consult the student manual.

7. Course Schedule

Laying out a clear schedule of class activities, topics, readings, assignments, and other important dates is central to making the expectations of the course transparent. Moreover, topic or unit descriptions, "big" or guiding questions, or other similar signposts help students to

understand the conceptual organization or arc of the course (see Course Description above). Consider including the following in your course schedule:

- Readings or other assignments for each class meeting, including title, author, page and/or chapter numbers.
- The big questions or conceptual themes for each day or unit. This helps students read the texts in alignment with their intended purpose in the course and to prepare themselves for the day's discussion and activities.
- Guiding questions that suggest what students might focus on in their reading.
- Due dates for every graded assignment and exam.

Further considerations:

- **Consider scheduling issues related to retrieval practice and interleaving.**
  Providing students with regular retrieval practice—that is, opportunities to call up knowledge from memory—helps them to develop their ability retain the new knowledge you are teaching them. A similar effect can be achieved with interleaving, which means revisiting earlier ideas and skills throughout the term (Lang 19-40, 63-84). Regular, low-stakes quizzes can help with this, as well as building in the regular practice of having students remind you of previous content as a way to connect it to the new ideas on offer for the day.

- **Build in opportunities for students to practice and get feedback over the course of the term.**
  A central ingredient in a productive learning environment is for students to be allowed and encouraged to try out their (new, developing) ideas and skills, to come up short in some way(s), receive feedback, and try again (Ambrose et al.121-52; Bain 99-109).

  Consider, for example:
  - *Intentionally building in moments of feedback*—from you; from peers; from TAs, Writing Interns, or Writing Advisers. For example, can you build in peer review opportunities for essay drafts or thesis statements?
  - *Breaking more complex assignments or intellectual tasks into component parts over the course of the term*. For example, perhaps a first assignment asks students to produce *only* a close reading or reconstruction of an argument from the text; a second assignment asks them to articulate *only* an arguable claim or thesis (perhaps with an outline sketching the supporting argument); and a third assignment asks them to put these skills together with a full, argumentative essay supported by carefully analyzed textual evidence.

Appendix: Sample Learning Objectives

Below, please find sample learning objectives drawn from various courses across the University. These are not mandatory and are meant only as examples to illustrate how you might formulate your own learning objectives.

Classics of Social and Political Thought (Social Sciences Core)

Students will develop their ability to:

- Critically read and interpret central texts in the history of political thought.
- Reconstruct arguments from the text in order to make claims about how thinkers understand the nature of justice, freedom, equality, the political community, rights and obligations, and other political concepts.
- Draw on their engagement with the texts, and with each other, to reflect on the nature of political life.
- Use writing to think through and clearly communicate their analytical and interpretive engagement with the text and its ideas.

Foundations of Computer Networks (Computer Science)

In this course, students will learn how to:

- Implement multithreaded client/server applications using sockets.
- Interpret existing specifications of network protocols, and translate them into code.
- Design and combine network protocols that form the foundation of the Internet.
- Develop software collaboratively through the use of version control tools, code reviews, and project management.

In a nutshell, students will learn how the Internet works. By the end of this course, students should understand everything that happens “under the hood” when (for example) a web page is requested, from the moment you click on a link in your browser to the moment you get the requested page back.

Greece and Rome (Humanities Core)

Students will:

- Practice careful and critical textual analysis (what literary scholars often call “close reading”).
- Hone the art of academic discussion and deliberation.
- Use writing as a tool of textual analysis and critical inquiry, communicate their observations and interpretations of texts through expository writing, and become self-reflexive readers and editors of their own writing.
- Explore the main features of the genre of epic and its history from antiquity to early modern England.
- Examine how the textual legacy of antiquity shaped and was in turn re-shaped by the Western tradition.

Introduction to Software Development (Computer Science)

In this course, students will learn how to:

- Follow a software development process/methodology to manage the life cycle of a software system.
- Use tools that support the software development process (e.g., build systems, testing frameworks, debuggers, etc.)
- Develop software collaboratively through (a) the use of tools, systems, and best practices available to facilitate that collaboration (e.g., version control systems, code reviews, task tracking, etc.), and (b) exercising collaborative skills (communication, giving/accepting feedback, etc.)

Math 16110 Honors Calculus (IBL)
By the end of the quarter students should be able to:

- Construct a valid mathematical argument, using a variety of strategies.
- Critique the arguments of others.
- Distinguish and apply key topological concepts on the continuum.
- Describe the real numbers and the relationship between the rational numbers and the real numbers.

Math 20500 (Analysis in R^n III)
By the end of the quarter you should be able to:

- Analyze the integrability of functions of several variables.
- Explain and apply the connections between integrability over bounded regions, sets of content zero and sets of measure zero.
- Understand and distinguish between the various integral theorems relating line, surface and volume integrals.
- Apply the major theorems of integral calculus (Fubini's theorem, Green's theorem, Gauss's theorem and Stokes theorem) to evaluate integrals over lines, curves and surfaces.
- Create clear and concise but thorough written proofs of mathematical statements.

Reading Cultures (Humanities Core)
Students will be better able to:

- Analyze textual, auditory, and visual sources in a way that attempts to see these sources on their own terms and acknowledges their positionality as readers.
- Defend their written arguments in a way that is text-based, specific, and increases readers' understanding.
- Trust their curiosity, interpretations, excitement and interests.
- Respectfully be in community through discussion and thoughtfully listen.

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