

# **THE BEST SYLLABUS EVER!**

## ***Checklist of Possible Elements in a Syllabus***

### **Introduction**

This is a detailed checklist of elements that could be included in a syllabus. You will communicate almost all of the items noted at some time during the course. So, pay now or pay later.

If you have all the information for the course included, you may go over an entry briefly on the first day of class and then focus on its details nearer to the time when students will be motivated to pay close attention. You can give a short version on paper on the first day of class and then store the whole syllabus with all sorts of appendices on your course management system.

Keep in mind the purpose of a syllabus. It's like a letter from you to your students to orient them to the course and to give them information that will help them learn and succeed. As such, write the syllabus using a friendly, supportive tone. Use words like "I will provide time for you to see me personally so that I may help you be successful..." rather than "the instructor's hours are from 2-3 on alternate Tuesdays." Use phrases like "When you arrive late, please seat yourself so that you minimize distraction of your classmates..." rather than "Lateness will not be tolerated."

A syllabus reflects the relationship between you and your students. By its contents and its tone ask yourself what relationship are you promoting? Harnish and others (2011) reported research evidence to show that you can begin to set a friendly tone and class climate by the wording in your syllabus.

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## Checklist

### 1. General Style

- a. Include information students must have at the start of the course.
- b. Include what you need to have documented in case of a conflict over requirements.  
Be sure you could adhere to the rules you set and you could administer the consequences.  
Are they fair?
- c. Write it in first and second person as if in a letter.
- d. Show that you want your students to succeed. Say in several ways directly and indirectly...  
I want you to learn this. Come see me if you are having a problem... Email any questions...  
I am interested in this subject matter  
I enjoy teaching and I have been looking forward to this course  
I am well prepared. Here are some of the things I have prepared so that you will learn well

### 2. Course Information

- a. Course name and number
- b. Location
- c. Time of meeting
- d. Course description from the catalogue  
Usually catalogue descriptions are rather broad. You can usually make a logical connection to your specific requirements.  
Do you have to teach every chapter? Do you have to adhere to someone else's interpretation of the course description? Not necessarily. You have to abide by the course description, but that usually leaves a lot of leeway. You can give priority to the topics you know best and you find most interesting.  
Note: If you are inheriting a course that has been taught, you may have to adapt certain aspects of the syllabus to make the course your own. If you are inclined to change some substance of the course, ask someone who has taught the course what the element means and why it is the way it is. Think of the ramifications of any changes.
- e. Your interpretation of what this course is about – “Here's how I think of this course...”
- f. Prerequisites – not just courses or program enrollment, but ideas, skills, experiences needed to begin to understand the material in this course  
“You should already know these ideas... These skills... Here are some review sources...”  
If you are concerned that you do not know these ideas, let's talk...
- g. Context of course – Where this course fits in a program or in a student's education

### 3. Instructor Information

- a. Instructor's name
- b. Office address and phone
- c. Email address
- d. Email response policy  
When, how and how fast you will respond  
(Will you consider having students text you?)
- e. Email courtesy with teacher and other students  
Tell students to use proper language, write full sentences and show respect, as you would if you were face-to-face.
- f. Office hours  
Consider hours face-to-face, email or text hours, maybe chat room. Consider group office hours.
- g. How easy it is to make an appointment
- h. Teacher's philosophy and role, and students' role  
What is a good college teacher in your view? What does a good teacher do?  
What is your philosophy of teaching?  
What is your role? What function does a college teacher serve?

What is a good college student and what is one supposed to do in regard to learning?

*Example – My responsibility is to set the conditions that will help you learn, to assess and report you how well you are learning and to assign to you the grade you earn. Your responsibility is to study, use the instructional materials, follow the syllabus, follow your own progress, pay attention to the feedback and earn the grade you want.*

\_\_\_ i. Instructor's bio and interest in class

Where are you from? What are your experiences and courses related to this course.

Why are you teaching this course? Why is it important to you?

#### 4. Course Outcomes and Structure

\_\_\_ a. Course goals - What will you be able to do at the end of this course?

How will you who finish this course be able to use what you have learned in the real world?

\_\_\_ b. Course objectives – Describe the tests, papers and projects specifically. This is an extremely critical and mandated element to communicate to students so as the help them learn.

Don't just say "multiple choice tests," or "application paper." Instead, for example,

##### **MC Tests:**

"Given a key term, you will choose the most precise definition or best example."

"Given a definition of a concept, you will choose the correct concept name."

"Given a new example of a concept, you will choose the correct concept name."

"Given a case example, you will choose the most likely outcome according to a specific principle."

"Given a problem to solve, you will choose the correct solution according to the formula appropriate to the desired result and the variables given."

##### **TF Tests:**

"Given a statement about \_\_\_\_\_, label it true or false according to empirical evidence or theoretical sources."

##### **Production Tests:**

"Given your choice of a principle, write a paper explaining the principle, its evidence & application."

"Given a case situation and a desired result, write a paragraph describing your action plan and the principles you are following."

"Given a description of an example of an event, label by writing the theoretical term used by psychologists to label that phenomenon."

\_\_\_ c. Course structure – How course goals/content relate to each other

Show in outline, prose or diagram form.

How do the facts, concepts, principles or skills relate?

How does the text organize them?

How do you see it differently?

#### 5. Motivation - Why take this course?

\_\_\_ a. Where and when will students use the knowledge, and what are the payoffs for use? Statements and stories.

Early in your syllabus, sell the course.

Why should a student learn from this class?

Where and when will they use the ideas? What will they get if they use the ideas well?

Give some examples and tell some stories of use.

\_\_\_ b. Quotes that capture the essence of the course and inspire

Use the Internet to find a quote that represents the essential idea of the course

\_\_\_ c. Quotes from past students about the course's quality and content

Find or ask for statements on the SIRS form that students made praising the course

\_\_\_ d. Questions to be answered by this course

What questions will students be able to answer if they know the essentials of this course?

*Example: What exactly is adolescence? How long does it last? What is learned? Is it always stormy? Are there stages within adolescence?*

## 6. Course Requirements

- \_\_\_ a. List of course requirements and percentages of final grade
  - Requirement weights, e.g., paper = 20%, Test 1 = 25%, Test 2 = 30%
  - Be sure they are proportional to relative importance and effort
  - Group related requirements to see how much of the course grade they account for, e.g., all three 20% tests = 60% total for tests.
  - All assignments 5 x 4 = 20% total for HW.
  - Ask yourself
    - Will students see the requirements as challenging but possible?
    - Are the weights of the requirements fair, considering how important the requirement is and how much time, effort and knowledge is used?
    - Will students see the proportioning of requirements as fair?
    - Could a student pass the course by fulfilling the least important and challenging requirements?
- \_\_\_ b. Each requirement spelled out with due dates and criteria
  - For example: For each reading assignment state
    - what ideas/skills to focus on,
    - what pages to concentrate on.
  - For each assignment, problem set, paper provide a checklist of criteria that you will use to score
  - To accompany a checklist, consider an annotated model assignments problem set, or paper
- \_\_\_ c. Relationship of requirements – How do the various requirements relate to each other?
  - What do the minor requirements have to do with the major ones?
  - How do assignments, quizzes and participation relate to papers and tests?
  - How are the quizzes the same or different in content and style from tests?
  - If they don't contribute directly, justify their existence?
  - How do the tests relate to each other? Do they build? Are they composed in the same way?
  - Do assignments provide practice for the test? How so?
  - Do assignments help build into a paper?
- \_\_\_ d. Participation
  - If you require participation,
    - state exactly what you mean by participation – what do they have to do, what counts?
    - how you will track it,
    - why you think it's important and
    - how it relates to major requirements like tests or papers.
- \_\_\_ e. How many requirements can you handle?
  - Consider the number of students and the course requirements
  - Calculate the amount of time it will take you
    - to teach it,
    - to give practice,
    - to give feedback on practice,
    - to make the assessment, and
    - to score the assessment.

## 7. Testing and Grading Process

- \_\_\_ a. How tests will be given. What arrangements to prevent cheating. What kind of seating?
  - Don't pretend it won't happen to you. Make sure it doesn't.
  - What are your rules for proper behavior on a test?
    - Hats off, no phones, no calculators, eyes on your own work, no talking about anything...
- \_\_\_ b. Academic integrity - Cheating policy, for tests, papers, and projects.
  - What do you consider plagiarism?
  - What do you consider cheating?
  - What are the consequences of cheating? (See Ombudsman's website)
    - Leave yourself an out, by saying "cheating could result in... grade of zero for the test, grade of zero for the course... redo of the test"

State that “every instance of cheating will be reported to the department chair and to the university at large”

If you will use Turnitin, explain the 5 rules noted on the site.

- \_\_\_ c. How to study and practice for tests, or prepare for papers and projects  
Give students the best study hints you know of.
- \_\_\_ d. Papers, problem sets, presentations, projects – How to develop & to do well  
When ready, full paper and project assignments, criteria by which they will be judged and scoring system
- \_\_\_ e. Policies for late or missed exams or assignments, make-up tests  
Be sure you could follow through if a student is late.  
“if late will not be accepted and score will be a zero”
- \_\_\_ f. How to access tests after they are given  
Will you spend class time on test review?  
If not how will students be able to check their work?  
How will you keep tests secure and prevent any tampering during a review or if they come in?
- \_\_\_ g. Purpose and style of feedback.  
“I will give you feedback on each test and assignment. I expect you to read the feedback and learn from it. If you do not understand the feedback you must ask me for further help. I want you to succeed.”

## 8. Class Operation

- \_\_\_ a. How class sessions will run and why?  
How does your class run? Lecture discussion? Why?
- \_\_\_ b. Class attendance, punctuality and reasons  
What do you expect  
about coming to any live classes?  
getting to any sessions on time?  
what to do if they are a little late?  
when to leave?  
how to behave near the end of class – no packing before the end, wait for final word?
- \_\_\_ c. Participation – what you expect – and reasons
- \_\_\_ d. Classroom behavior  
Explain MSU Student rights & responsibilities  
(See Spartan Life: <http://splife.studentlife.msu.edu/rights-and-responsibilities>)  
What are the ground rules for proper behavior in class?  
How to show mutual respect?  
What rules about use of computers and phones during class? What consequences?  
Consider having students sign a class contract or agreement to be sure they have read the rules and agree to them.
- \_\_\_ e. Labs and help rooms – what are procedures and proper behavior
- \_\_\_ e. If you require group or team work, how to behave as part of the group?
- \_\_\_ f. Generally how to prepare for each class?
- \_\_\_ g. Generally how much time to spend outside of class?
- \_\_\_ h. Do you allow commercialized lecture notes? (See Code of teaching responsibility)

## 9. Course Resources

- \_\_\_ a. Required texts –  
Describe this text. Is it a keeper? Why?  
Why did you choose it?  
What are its really good points? Clarity? Examples? Evidence? Format? Organization fits yours?  
How will you have students use the text? Preparation for class? Use after class? How else?  
How does text relate to tests and papers?
- \_\_\_ b. Online resources (URLs)

Website – how to, when, and why use the site?

State explicit numbered steps.

- \_\_\_ c. Purpose of and how to use in-class materials and supplies.  
What to bring each day? Why?

### 10. Schedule

- \_\_\_ a. Schedule of meetings, tests and other requirements with due dates  
Include readings with notes as to what pages and ideas to focus on.  
Subdivide the schedule by the course structure, i.e.,

Date	Readings with notes	Other prep	Items due
	<u>Unit I infancy</u>		
	Specific topic		
	Specific topic		
	Specific topic		
	<u>Unit II Early childhood</u>		
	Specific topic		
	Specific topic		
	Specific topic		
	<u>Unit III Middle childhood</u>		
	Specific topic		
	Specific topic		
	Specific topic		

- \_\_\_ b. Include preparation for each class on the schedule – how to be ready for that class

### 11. Special Needs

- \_\_\_ a. How to get help  
How to get questions answered?  
What if there is a problem?  
How and when to contact you?  
Remind that you are there to help them learn, but they must take responsibility for recognizing when they need help and to ask you to help them.  
Remind them not to wait until the end of the course. Act at the first sign of difficulty.
- \_\_\_ b. How students with disabilities are to make themselves known and how they are to register with the proper office before you can do anything for them..

### 12. Drops and Adds Period

- \_\_\_ a. Dates for drops and adds  
Check the dates for the semester in question
- \_\_\_ b. Drop and add rule for early attendance  
Check the rules for taking a student off a class list if they don't attend the first classes.  
Don't ignore students who are not present the first couple of classes. Find out why?  
Contact the Chairperson's office or the teacher of record.