

Writing a Course Syllabus

Kam Jugdev
Athabasca University

A course syllabus provides a short overview of what a course will cover, helps students get a sense of the workload involved, and outlines what is expected of them. A good syllabus should be easy to understand and it should reflect current course content.

As a valuable communication tool between students and faculty, an effective syllabus is a learning contract because it outlines the accountabilities of students as well as of faculty. Here for example is an outline (based on the literature), of what a comprehensive syllabus should cover:

1. A short, personalized welcome note
2. Instructor information
3. Prerequisites
4. A brief course description and overview of instructional methods
5. Course goals and objectives
6. Textbook and course material details, including supplementary readings and Web links
7. Course grading expectations and feedback details
8. Schedule of lectures including key dates
9. Relevant academic and support policies and services (e.g., library and computer services and policies on academic misconduct including plagiarism, non-academic misconduct, accommodation policies that deal with disabilities, freedom of information)
10. Special course features
11. Miscellaneous topics
12. Caveats, such as the statement, "The University reserves the right to amend course outlines from time to time without notice."

Not only is a course syllabus a good roadmap to the course for students, but it can also serve as a good roadmap to writing a course for faculty. When I write courses, I draft a syllabus to help me carefully think through the learning objectives of the course and each lesson. A draft syllabus helps me think through the formative and summative assessment strategies and overall grading scheme that I want to use. For example, depending on the assessment strategy and whether the course is an undergraduate or graduate level course, I may consider multiple choice, short answer, essay, case study, group work, presentations, or simulation formats, to name a few. This outline then serves as a guide as I write the course.

No doubt, readers have experienced the same challenge and frustration that I have from time to time, in selecting the "right" textbook. By drafting a course syllabus and concurrently considering different textbooks and related resources for a course, this helps me evaluate the resources and find the ones that are aligned with the approach I want to take with the course. I inevitably go back and forth between the draft syllabus and course content so that I can ensure that both are synchronized. In doing so, I also cover the elements of the syllabus and can then finalize it. Although not all student questions can either be anticipated or covered in a syllabus, it does serve as a solid foundation to convey key materials clearly, set expectations, and open the door for discussions with students.

Readers interested reviewing a sample course syllabus can access one at this link <http://auspace.athabascau.ca:8080/dspace/handle/2149/2423>