

## Developing a Course Syllabus: *Steps for Syllabus Design*

This list of steps breaks down the process of drafting a syllabus. Following these steps in this order will foster an instructor's own critical thinking about the goals for student learning he or she hopes to meet over the course of the term (as opposed to thinking of a course only from an instructor's point of view and focusing on "coverage").

### 1) Course Description

Drafting a course description is typically the first step an instructor takes to define the ideas a course will address and to articulate its scope. This paragraph- to page-long description of the course may describe:

- the intellectual context of the class (with enough background about the discipline to explain the location of the class within that context)
- the ideas and questions that will drive discussion and inquiry in the class
- the general course objectives (see below)
- the nature of the kind of work the instructor expects of the students
- the kind of relationship the instructor expects the students to have with other students, the instructor, and the class time
- the location of this class in the student's curriculum (does this satisfy a requirement? does it have or satisfy a prerequisite?)
- the instructor's pedagogical philosophy
- other key forces that define a course

### 2) General Course Objectives

The course description normally includes the general course objectives, though these are often not expressed as explicitly as they should be. To make sure you have written down all of the general course objectives, complete the following sentence: "This course aims to..." Keep in mind the following kinds of general objectives:

- increase a student's knowledge base (through exposure to new ideas, learning of facts, rules, dates and formulas, etc.). EX: "This course aims to expose students to several economic theories and to anchor them in the political and historical moments that gave rise to them."
- provoke a student's interest in a field (by cultivating a student's sense of inquiry and giving students opportunities to investigate the topic on their own). EX: "This course aims to provide students with the opportunity to identify and explore (through performing research) questions that emerge from their readings."
- foster critical thinking and a host of related skills: critical reading, comparative thinking, analytical thinking, the ability to evaluate and judge (through engaging exercises such as experiments, well-guided reading and writing assignments, etc.). EX: "This course aims to teach students how to read academic prose in this discipline and to give students practice with these critical reading skills throughout the semester."
- establish a classroom environment that supports student learning and engages students in each other's progress (through group interactions and projects intended to stimulate trust and collaboration). EX: "This course aims to foster collaborative student learning through group presentations and research assignments."

### 3) Specific Learning Objectives

While general objectives express the goals of the course from the perspective of the teacher or course, specific course objectives state the goals of the course from the perspective of student learning. To articulate specific learning objectives, take your general objectives, and using Bloom's Taxonomy (Prégent, *Charting Your Course*, p. 26), finish the following statement in as many ways as are relevant: "By the end of this course (or course segment) Students should be able to..." (Note that as you go down the list, you use verbs that reflect higher orders of thinking and learning.)

- verbs of knowledge (remember, identify, define, list, name, classify, show, recognize, recall). EX: "Students should be able to identify the artists of the major paintings we examined this semester."
- verbs of comprehension (explain, differentiate, predict, describe, compare, state in your own words, interpret, demonstrate). EX: "Students should be able to explain some of the economic reasons for the implementation of the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression."
- verbs of application (formulate, derive, find, apply, use, calculate, solve, produce, manipulate, state, classify, modify, put into practice). EX: "Students should be able to solve a range of chemical equations by applying the models presented in class."
- verbs of analysis (analyze, organize, deduce, choose). EX: "Students should be able to analyze a poem to determine its underlying metrical structures."
- verbs of synthesis (develop, plan, design, simulate, devise, write, support, report, discuss). EX: "Students should be able to develop their own problem-solving algorithms when presented with a system that is currently flawed."
- verbs of evaluation (evaluate, judge, defend, criticize, justify). EX: "Students should be able to evaluate the arguments of academic articles and prepare written assessments that defend their opinions."

These specific objectives for student learning should be used to guide your choice of readings, assignments, projects, methods of assessing student learning, etc. These specific objectives should also be drafted for each unit of the course you are teaching. Tests, midterms, finals, and other assignments should be designed to measure the extent to which students have attained these objectives.

### 4) Readings

Often, syllabus designers focus on identifying and selecting the readings for a class rather than thinking about the pedagogical payoff of the readings. The readings should serve the course objectives and therefore should be a natural extension of those objectives.

Consider the following:

- What texts will students read? Choose texts and LOCATE them. Check for books in print, check on available copies in the library. Review texts for style and audience; will your students be able to read these, and/or will you be able to teach them how to read these?
- MOST IMPORTANT: make sure the course objectives determine the readings, not the other way around. *Put each text to a litmus test: what specific learning objectives are served by this reading? If you cannot find a fit, the text should probably be dropped;* also, if you find that several texts address a single goal, you may be hitting one of your many goals too hard and shortchanging others.
- Start breaking down the texts according to the broad units of the course and plot the readings out based on those units. Keep in mind that most instructors, due to their love of the subject, often want to assign much more than students can process. Be

- When considering the amount of reading per week, keep in mind that students should be doing three hours of work per week for every credit hour. This includes in-class time. A four-credit course should result therefore in twelve hours of work for the student per week during the 15-week semester. Make sure to consider all aspects of the course (reading, homework, research, writing, and exam preparation.)

### 5) Assignments

Assignments, too, should flow naturally from the objectives. They can be seen both as a way to move the students toward the objectives you have set for their learning and as a way to measure the extent to which they have achieved the learning objectives.

Remember you have more latitude than you think (you are not limited to lab reports, formal essays, problem sets, midterms and finals!). Questions below prompt thinking about assignment goals and forms:

- **Written work:** Should they write papers, short paragraphs, essays? Should they do research projects? How many? What length? How can you break the assignments down so that they are done step-by-step over the semester? (This will help prevent procrastination and plagiarism.) What is the relationship of each written assignment to the course objectives? **Outside research:** How might inquiry-based learning help students accomplish course objectives? Should students make trips to the library, use online resources, conduct field/lab work? Etc.?
- **In-class speaking:** What role will speaking activities play in helping students accomplish course objectives? Do you want your students to give presentations? Lead class discussion? Contribute to conversation? Etc.
- **“Mix it up”:** choose a variety of assignment types. This allows students to think and respond in different ways and gives students with a range of learning styles a chance to flourish. Also, allow students the opportunity to make choices when feasible in determining the content or format of their work so that they can pursue their interests (this has the nice consequence of giving you variety as you’re grading as well).
- **MOST IMPORTANT:** make sure the course objectives determine the assignments, not the other way around.

### 6) Methods of assessing student learning

Which of the following methods will you use to check in on your teaching and your students’ learning, so you can keep your course on track?

#### Student work

- The primary way that you can assess student learning is by considering the work they produce on the various assignments (see above) that you have designed for the course. Carefully consider which of the specific learning objectives in the course students should accomplish with each assignment. When grading, you should determine whether the student has accomplished that objective.
- **Exams:** Ask yourself what kinds of learning you want to test, and what sorts of questions/exam formats will draw out this kind of learning? Are exams the best way to test this knowledge? Perhaps you would like to use a combination of exams and papers. How will you use the results of exams to further student knowledge? Do you want students to write a follow-up summary of what the tests indicate they have learned and what they still need to work on? Consider whether or not you want students to do a take-home exam.

### Grading

- What will you use to determine grades: assignments, participation, attendance? What weight will each of these have in the final grade?
- What consistent standards will you apply to your grading (i.e., do you have a rubric or a statement explaining your grading philosophy)? (For assistance in creating grading rubrics, visit the GSI Teaching and Resource Center's website: <http://gsi.berkeley.edu>.)
- Will you share this information, on the syllabus or in some other form?

### Classroom Assessment Techniques

- At what intervals would you like to gather feedback from your students on an informal basis?
- How much time will this take, and have you planned for this in the syllabus design?

### Teacher Evaluations

- At what intervals would you like to have your students evaluate the class more formally, e.g., mid-term evaluation? What kinds of questions would you like the students to answer for you?

## **7) Course Policies**

Finally, now that you have the bulk of the class designed, it's time to articulate the policies that will help your students succeed in the course and make your life a little easier later in the semester:

- Office hours and location
- Attendance
- Grade percentages
- Missed exams and other work
- Late work
- Expectations for out-of-class work
- Statement on plagiarism
- Expectations for homework/essay format
- Inclusion (gender, ethnicity and race, disability, belief systems, etc.)
- Accommodations for students with disabilities
- Contact information for instructor
- Policy about responding to email messages
- First week's readings
- Availability of readings (give name and location of copy shop preparing the reader and the bookstore through which the books were ordered)
- Other?

## Syllabus and Course Design

### *Checklist for Course Policies*

#### \_\_\_ *Office hours.*

- \_\_\_ Are they at a place and time that is convenient to both you and your students?
- \_\_\_ Have you met the department's expectations for number of office hours per week?
- \_\_\_ Are you able to be flexible, according to student need (ex: a big assignment is coming due; a student can't make your regular hours)?

#### \_\_\_ *Information about instructor/student availability.*

- \_\_\_ When and how may the students contact you? When and how may you contact them? (Options: email, phone, instant messaging/online office hours)
- \_\_\_ When do you generally read email, and how fast will your response time be?
- \_\_\_ Will you read drafts of materials over the computer?

#### \_\_\_ *Attendance.*

- \_\_\_ Will you grade for attendance?
- \_\_\_ How will you keep records?
- \_\_\_ Will students be able to make up missed days?
- \_\_\_ How late may a student come and still be counted?
- \_\_\_ Have you made a policy about medical absences (number permitted, types of documentation required)?

#### \_\_\_ *Accommodations for students with disabilities.*

- \_\_\_ Do your assignments and activities permit all students to participate? And/or are you able to adapt assignments to accommodate special needs, as per the recommendation of the Disabled Students' Program?
- \_\_\_ Have you stated in your syllabus that students with disabilities should contact you about any approved accommodations that may be needed?

#### \_\_\_ *Missed exams and other work.*

- \_\_\_ (How) will students be able to make up missed work? Will the students perform alternate assignments?

#### \_\_\_ *Late work.*

- \_\_\_ Will there be penalties for late work? How severe, and how administered?

#### \_\_\_ *Expectations for out-of-class work.*

- \_\_\_ Have you estimated the time it will take for students to do the reading (taking into account that they probably read a lot more slowly than you)?
- \_\_\_ Have you estimated the time it will take for students to do the assignments?

\_\_\_\_\_ Have you told the students your expectations for the ways in which they will use out of class time to prepare for class and do the required work?

\_\_\_\_\_ ***Statements on plagiarism.***

\_\_\_\_\_ Have you stated your / the department's policy on your syllabus?

\_\_\_\_\_ Have you broken lengthier assignments down into steps to minimize plagiarism?

\_\_\_\_\_ ***Expectations for homework/essay format.***

\_\_\_\_\_ Have you stated preferences for word count per page, font size, margin size?

\_\_\_\_\_ Will you accept work over email? In your mailbox?

\_\_\_\_\_ ***Expectations for student behavior.***

\_\_\_\_\_ Will you and/or your students be setting ground rules for discussion?

\_\_\_\_\_ Will you have policies on interruptions, e.g., ringing cell phones, late arrivals?

\_\_\_\_\_ What do you want students to call you?

\_\_\_\_\_ ***First week's readings.***

\_\_\_\_\_ Will the readings for the first week of class be in the students' hands on the first day? Should you put on reserve, or make copies of, readings you'll want them to read for the second day (and so forth) of class?

\_\_\_\_\_ ***Availability of readings.***

\_\_\_\_\_ Where should students buy the class texts? Are there enough copies on the shelf?

\_\_\_\_\_ Where should students pick up the course reader?

\_\_\_\_\_ At which libraries have you placed materials on reserve?

\_\_\_\_\_ ***Grade Determination***

\_\_\_\_\_ Have you indicated on your syllabus how the final grade for your course will be determined either in percentages or accumulation of points?

## BLOOM'S TAXONOMY

### Learning Objective Verbs at Each Bloom Taxonomy Level

Cognitive Level	Illustrative Verbs	Definitions
Knowledge	arrange, define, describe, duplicate, identify, label, list, match, memorize, name, order, outline, recognize, relate, recall, repeat, reproduce, select, state	remembering previously learned information
Comprehension	classify, convert, defend, discuss, distinguish, estimate, explain, express, extend, generalize, give example(s), identify, indicate, infer, locate, paraphrase, predict, recognize, rewrite, report, restate, review, select, summarize, translate	grasping the meaning of information
Application	apply, change, choose, compute, demonstrate, discover, dramatize, employ, illustrate, interpret, manipulate, modify, operate, practice, predict, prepare, produce, relate, schedule, show, sketch, solve, use, write	applying knowledge to actual situations
Analysis	analyze, appraise, breakdown, calculate, categorize, classify, compare, contrast, criticize, derive, diagram, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, experiment, identify, illustrate, infer, interpret, model, outline, point out, question, relate, select, separate, subdivide, test	breaking down objects or ideas into simpler parts and seeing how the parts relate and are organized
Synthesis	arrange, assemble, categorize, collect, combine, comply, compose, construct, create, design, develop, devise, explain, formulate, generate, plan, prepare, propose, rearrange, reconstruct, relate, reorganize, revise, rewrite, set up, summarize, synthesize, tell, write	rearranging component ideas into a new whole
Evaluation	appraise, argue, assess, attach, choose, compare, conclude, contrast, defend, describe, discriminate, estimate, evaluate, explain, judge, justify, interpret, relate, predict, rate, select, summarize, support, value	making judgments based on internal evidence or external criteria

## Syllabus and Course Design Workshop

Course Segment or Topic	Using the verbs from Bloom's taxonomy, sketch out the specific outcomes for student learning for this course segment.	What learning activities or assignments will be used to help students reach these outcomes? (readings, projects, writing, research, presentations, etc.)	How will you assess whether students have achieved the outcome? (assignments, papers, portfolios, exams, etc.)
	At the end of this course segment, students should be able to...		
	At the end of this course segment, students should be able to...		