

The ToolBox

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A Teaching and Learning Resource for the Faculty of Indiana Wesleyan University



Building a Syllabus

A perpetual part of teaching in higher education is the creation of course syllabi. As routine as this process may sound, or even become, the development of thorough, complete, and well-conceived course syllabi can provide the groundwork for a successful semester of learning. According to Slattery and Carlson (2005), citing the work of Littlefield (1999), there are seven major functions of the course syllabus.

A high quality syllabus:

1. Sets the tone for the course A well-developed course syllabus sends the important message that the faculty member has given serious thought to course organization and delivery. A syllabus that is attractive, is well-organized, and captures the interest of students from the first day of class will pay benefits throughout the entire semester.

2. Motivates students to set high goals for themselves If students sense your excitement, passion, and commitment to the content of the course, they are more likely to be willing to stretch themselves to achieve and produce. Consider your syllabus as an invitation to your students—an invitation to give their best efforts and to get your best efforts. Expect great things from your students—and give them great teaching in exchange.



3. Serves as a planning tool A high quality syllabus sets forth the teacher's game plan for the semester. As you go through the process of developing your syllabus, you are additionally afforded the opportunity to plan your instructional strategies for the semester.

Littlefield V.M.(1999). *My syllabus? It's fine. Why do you ask? Or the syllabus: A tool for improving teaching and learning.* Paper presented at the Society for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.
Slattery, J.M. & Carlson, J.F. (2005). Preparing an effective syllabus. *College Teaching*, 53, 159-165.

4. Provides a structure for student work You are competing for the time, interest, and energies of your students. A well-conceived syllabus communicates your expectation that students will invest themselves in meeting the learning requirements of your course. This provision also encourages students to look ahead and plan effective ways to complete assigned tasks.



5. Helps faculty plan and meet course requirements and expectations Planning time spent in advance of the semester (e.g., order of approaching topics, timing of assignments, planning in regard to instructional activities) will pay dividends in the quality of your teaching. You have a sense of where you are headed and can lead your students learning in that clear direction.

6. Provides a contractual arrangement between faculty and students Any disagreements that may arise in regard to grading practices, due dates, and attendance policies can be referred back to the stated course policies and procedures.

7. Becomes a portfolio artifact for tenure and promotion portfolios As time passes and you prepare for promotion and the preparation of a portfolio, course syllabi serve as a means for documenting the quality of your teaching and the ways in which you addressed the learning needs of your students.

Help Students Rely on Your Syllabi

General Information: This introductory section of the syllabus provides such basic information as the course title, section number(s), classroom location, dates and times of class meetings, and faculty contact information (e.g., telephone numbers, email addresses), required texts and course materials, and your office hours.

Course Rationale: This is your opportunity to share the reasons why this course is critically important and how the content connects with the life and learning experiences of your students.

Your Passion and Purpose in Teaching This Course:

In this section of the syllabus, you have an opportunity to share your personal and professional passion for this course and the things that will be taught and learned. Share your heart and your faith with your students.



Course Objectives: Articulate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that you believe are important for your students to master over the course of this semester.

Topical Schedule: How do you plan to approach the breadth and depth of the topics that comprise this area of study? In this section of the syllabus, provide your students a dated schedule of the topics that you will be sharing and they will be learning about on this semester long adventure.

Course Reading: As we have discussed in a previous issue of *The ToolBox* (November/December, 2005), students are not genetically or naturally inclined to read required course materials. Through your prompting and systematic planning, however, they can be encouraged to see the value of reading along as they are learning.

Course Products: Students need to know in detail what it is that you will expect them to produce this semester, the parameters of those assignments, and when they are due to be completed. Although some may choose to procrastinate, for others it gives an important target date for task completion.

Assessment Scheme: "Will this be on the test?" is a common refrain of the college classroom. Prepare in advance for the assessment strategies that you will use (e.g., quizzes and examinations, research papers, group projects, presentations, online activities). Provide your students with information on these tasks and their relative levels of importance (e.g., point values).

Course/University Policies: What are the policies and procedures that your students need to understand as they enter this course? Examples include attendance procedures, reasonable and acceptable absences, and cheating/academic dishonesty. Spell these out in your syllabus or give reference points so that students can remain well informed.

Motivational Thoughts: As an added touch, consider the use of graphics or text boxes with quotes that connect with your course and your teaching.

Additional Resources and Assistance: Provide students with resources or information on how get additional assistance they may need, appropriate internet links, and campus resources that will assist in their learning.



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