Creating an Effective Syllabus
By Sandy Chapman

A search on the Web for the word syllabus will turn up more links to Web sites that give you more tips for creating a syllabus than you would ever need or want. Some excellent links are listed below that provide samples and tutorials on how to design a syllabus. The goal in this brief Teacher Tip is to provide the essentials.

Definition

Syllabus—what does that word actually mean? According to Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th Edition, The term derives from the Greek word meaning "label for a book." While the derivation is not very illuminating, the definition states that a syllabus is "a summary outline of a discourse, treatise, or course of study or of examination requirements."

Purpose

The typical university course syllabus is more than an outline, however. It serves multiple purposes. Generally, the syllabus describes the course for the students and tells them what to expect. While a syllabus might include many details, the overall purposes of the syllabus are to:

- Introduce the instructor and the subject to the class and provide contact information.
- Delineate the goals and the objectives for the course.
- Describe the scope of the course (what topics will be addressed).
- Lay out the sequence in which content will be addressed.
- State precisely how and when mastery of course content will be assessed (such as papers, exercises, field assignments, group work, homework and exams).
- Provide behavioral guidelines for the course and contingencies.

This last point is important because it lays out the ethical agreements for the course and creates the course culture. The instructor is bound to these agreements as well as the student.

Syllabus Content Checklist

Each syllabus will be unique to the course. But, below is a checklist of some of the most common parts of a syllabus. Though the list is simple, it represents hours of thoughtful course design time and research by the instructor.

Syllabus Item Checklist

- Name and number of course
- Instructor's name, contact information, and office hours
- Meeting time and place
- Lab meeting time and place
- Prerequisites for course

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• Course goals and objective
• Textbook
• Course readings
• Course materials and equipment
• Course calendar or schedule of assignments
• Behavioral expectations (participation, safety in lab guidelines)
• Course policies (attendance, make-up exams, academic dishonesty, etc.)
• Exam schedule
• Grading policy

Each instructor will, or course, personalize his/her syllabus to reflect his/her own aims and philosophy for the course, perhaps adding other useful material. Some course syllabi will be given to students in hard copy and some will be retrieved from course web sites.

For excellent information on how to design a syllabus, plus other related topics, such as how to create and assess course objectives, click the links below to see the tutorials and articles.

Writing a Syllabus

Howard B. Altman, University of Louisville and William E. Cashin, Kansas State University
http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip writesyl.htm

Syllabus Tutorial

Center for Teaching and Learning
University of Minnesota
http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/syllabus/what.html

Creating a Syllabus

Excerpt from Creating a Syllabus
from Tools for Teaching by Barbara Gross Davis
University of California at Berkeley
http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/syllabus.html

Constructing a Syllabus

The Harriet W. Sherman Center
Brown University
http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Sheridan_Center/publications/syllabus.html
About the Institute for Learning and Teaching and the Master Teacher Initiative: The Institute for Learning and Teaching (TILT) was established in 2006 to enhance teaching and learning at Colorado State University. We offer professional development programs and activities, provide funding and support for research on learning and teaching, offer colloquia on the scholarship of teaching and learning, and promote collaboration within and across disciplines. Visit us on the Web at http://tilt.colostate.edu, or contact us at (970) 491-3132 or TILT@ColoState.edu.

The Master Teacher Initiative (MTI) is a University-wide program to enhance the quality of teaching within CSU’s colleges and libraries. You can visit the MTI home page at http://tilt.colostate.edu/mti/.