

## CREATING EFFECTIVE SYLLABI

### WHAT IS A SYLLABUS?

A syllabus outlines or describes all of the pertinent information needed by a student to successfully complete your course.

Additionally, a syllabus is contract between the teacher and the student; and, in some sense, the syllabus may be considered a legal contract between the teacher and the student (similar to any contract between a consumer who pays for services rendered from a particular individual). Therefore, constructing an effective syllabus is vital for an instructor (not only because an effective syllabus helps students, but an effective syllabus also protects an instructor from any potential problems with students and/or administration).

Remember: Students pay to learn (and they pay to take classes). And, although most of their contributions to the college/university (as a whole) may be minimal, when compared to private donations, national/state/local governmental contributions, and other money provided to the university, student contributions to the college/university still ends up providing jobs and security to most instructors/teachers, as well as providing the facilities in which they work. Therefore, ensuring the quality of work you provide to a student is extremely important.

With a syllabus, you should essentially accomplish four things:

1. You should provide any necessary information about the course and the instructor.
2. You should explain the work that you (the instructor) will do for the students.
3. You should explain the work that students must do for you (the instructor).
4. You should explain how students can “pass” the course or “not pass” the course.

Note: Most of the grading information provided in a syllabus is necessary but somewhat arbitrary. As you may realize, grading (depending on the subject) is either subjective or objective. However, with a syllabus, you must attempt to clarify what kinds of “subjective” criteria will help to improve a student’s grade while explaining what kinds of work ethic will help students to be successful in the course.

### WHAT SHOULD I PLACE IN MY SYLLABUS?

Syllabi, when ethical, purposeful, and well-conceived, have a few different facets, which must be observed. EX: information about the instructor, information about the course (including grading policies, materials needed for instruction, attendance policies, etc.), information for students with special needs or learning differences, and information in regards to the schedule of the course.

Note: A schedule is an optional component to the course; however, information in regards to grading and materials needed to complete the course is not optional.

Here are some topics which an effective syllabus should include:

**Contact Information** (for the instructor and any assistants)

**Course Time** (What time is class?)

**Course Location** (Where will the class meet?)

**Course Description** (What is the course about? What kinds of topics are covered?)

**Course Objectives** (What is the objective of the course? What are the learning outcomes of the course?)

**Course Materials** (What does the student need? Books? Internet Access? Notebooks? Binders?)

**Course Procedure** (What are the day-to-day practices/learning rituals expected of the student? Explain this. EX: "We will meet in the classroom M-TH and in a computer lab F... You will write informally everyday in the classroom, and you will be expected to create word processing documents in the computer lab.")

**Course Components** (Do you intend to use papers, quizzes, journals, participation, online activities, etc? Explain the length and value of each component).

**Graded Materials** (What is the point value for each exercise, assignment, activity, or exam? EX: Paper 1 = 100 points, Paper 2 = 100 points, Quiz 1 = 20 points, Quiz 2 = 20 points, and Online Responses = 10 points each. What is the total amount of points possible for the course?)

**Grading Criteria/Rubric** (How do you grade the assignments? What are the characteristics of "A" work, "B" work, and so forth? How do you fail the course? How do you pass the course?)

**Grading Standards** (What are the points needed to attain an "A"? What are the points needed to attain a "B"? EX: 100-95 = A, 94-90 = A-, 89-85= B. Additionally, answer the question: Do you have +/- or not?)

**Extra Credit Policy** (Will you allow extra credit? You might refer to one assignment or a series of assignments which allow the student to receive extra credit.)

**Learning Assistance** (Is there a place/service for students to receive learning assistance, such as a writing center or a learning center?)

**Academic Integrity Policy** (What constitutes cheating in your course? What evidence is needed to automatically fail a student?)

**Plagiarism Policy** (Explain what plagiarism is and how it might adversely affect a student -> leading to failure of the assignment, failure of the course, and expulsion/suspension from the college/university).

**Withdrawal Dates** (What is the deadline for official student withdrawal? Indicate to students when they can receive a "W" versus when will they fail the course.)

**Computer Lab Policy/Lab Policy** (If you are working in a lab, what code of conduct should be observed? What rules should the students follow?)

**Attendance Policy** (Do you require attendance? If so, how many absences are students allowed to have before they fail or have their graded adversely affected?)

**Late Work Policy** (Do you accepted late work? What might be the circumstances of accepting late work? Can students make prior arrangements to turn in the work early?)

**Disabilities/Accessibility Policy** (How should students handle receiving accommodations for learning disabilities in your class? What kinds of adjustments can you provide to them? What is the procedure needed to receive accommodations, while maintaining the confidentiality of their learning disability or learning difference?)

**Portable Electronic Device Policy** (Are cellular phones allowed in class? Under what circumstances? Are laptops allowed in class? Under what circumstances? Can these devices be used during a quiz or exam?)

**Detailed Schedule or General Schedule** (Provide a detailed schedule to students, where you provide the topic studied for the particular day, or provide a very general schedule which describes what is to be discussed for the week).

**Copy of Assignments** (You might provide copies of all assignments and tell students: I will let you have a copy of all of your assignments with the understanding that you may begin the assignment in advance; however, because I do this, I will not accept late work. No exceptions!)

#### ADDITIONAL IDEAS/MATERIALS FOR SYLLABI

##### **Lifelines/Peer Help**

Have students write the name and contact information for at least 2-3 peers on their syllabus in case of absence. For security reasons, you might try to ask male students to solicit information from male students and vice versa. Explain that if such information is misused, you may fail the student upon complaint from another student (as a repercussion of un-collegiate behavior). If you allow for lifelines or peer help, make sure to include a sexual harassment/anti-discrimination policy on your syllabus.

##### **Sexual Harassment Policy**

You may have a sexual harassment policy in place, particularly if you decide to have students talk openly in class, contact each other, or work together.

##### **Anti-Discrimination Policy**

You may have an anti-discrimination policy, particularly if you decide to have students talk openly in class, contact each other, or work together.

##### **Peer-Review Partner**

If students write papers, then you might assign a peer-review partner for a set time period or for the duration of the course.

##### **Instructor Pet-Peeve Clause**

Let students know what you really dislike in terms of their performance/work ethic; let them know what might land them in trouble academically and personally with you. EX: I will automatically fail a student who consistently sleeps in my course (based on their lack of participation).

##### **Anti-Censorship Clause**

Let students know that you will not tolerate any form of censorship in your class, unless it is used to silence students who are working with malice as their intent.

## **Pre-Professionalism/Professionalism Clause**

Let students know that you expect them to be professional in their demeanor, behavior, and even dress. You might let them know if there are any particular concerns which might not be favorable in your eyes... (You may discuss dress code – particularly if it is related to proper collegiate behavior, pre-professional behavior, or professional behavior).

## **Criminal Code**

Sound over the edge? Well, with all of the things happening in higher education in the last twenty years, you might consider it. Letting students know that you know the law (and your rights) is a good thing.

EX:

### **UTAH STATE CRIMINAL CODE**

#### *76-5-102. Assault.*

- (1) Assault is:
  - (a) an attempt, with unlawful force or violence, to do bodily injury to another;
  - (b) a threat, accompanied by a show of immediate force or violence, to do bodily injury to another; or
  - (c) an act, committed with unlawful force or violence, that causes bodily injury to another or creates a substantial risk of bodily injury to another.
- (2) Assault is a class B misdemeanor.
- (3) Assault is a class A misdemeanor if:
  - (a) the person causes substantial bodily injury to another; or
  - (b) the victim is pregnant and the person has knowledge of the pregnancy.
- (4) It is not a defense against assault, that the accused caused serious bodily injury to another.

#### *76-5-102.3. Assault against school employees.*

- (1) Any person who assaults an employee of a public or private school, with knowledge that the individual is an employee, and when the employee is acting within the scope of his authority as an employee, is guilty of a class A misdemeanor.
- (2) As used in this section, "employee" includes a volunteer.

#### *76-9-102. Disorderly conduct.*

- (1) A person is guilty of disorderly conduct if:
  - (a) he refuses to comply with the lawful order of the police to move from a public place, or knowingly creates a hazardous or physically offensive condition, by any act which serves no legitimate purpose; or
  - (b) intending to cause public inconvenience, annoyance, or alarm, or recklessly creating a risk thereof, he:
    - (i) engages in fighting or in violent, tumultuous, or threatening behavior;
    - (ii) makes unreasonable noises in a public place;
    - (iii) makes unreasonable noises in a private place which can be heard in a public place; or
    - (iv) obstructs vehicular or pedestrian traffic.
- (2) "Public place," for the purpose of this section, means any place to which the public or a substantial group of the public has access and includes but is not limited to streets, highways, and the common areas of schools, hospitals, apartment houses, office buildings, transport facilities, and shops.
- (3) Disorderly conduct is a class C misdemeanor if the offense continues after a request by a person to desist. Otherwise it is an infraction.

76-9-106. *Disrupting the operation of a school.*

(1) A person is guilty of disrupting the operation of a school if the person, after being asked to leave by a school official, remains on school property for the purpose of encouraging or creating an unreasonable and substantial disruption or risk of disruption of a class, activity, program, or other function of a public or private school.

(2) For purposes of this section, "school property" includes property being used by a public or private school for a school function.

(3) Disrupting the operation of a school is a class B misdemeanor.

### **Signature Page**

Back to the idea of contracts, some instructors literally make a syllabus a "signed" contract. You may have a signature page on the back of your syllabus to help students to recognize that you are making them fully responsible for knowledge of the information in the syllabus. They sign the signature page and return it to you.

### **HOW LONG SHOULD MY SYLLABUS BE?**

The answer is: As long as the syllabus needs to be.... Some instructors are specific and place every detail of their course into their syllabi. Conversely, some instructors like to be very general and are intentionally vague about the content of their course. Whatever your disposition, try to include pertinent information which students need to be successful.

### **THE "ALTER" CLAUSE**

Regardless of your syllabus (whether specific or general, long or short, liberal or conservative, etc.), you should always place the following clause or statement on the end of your syllabus (to protect yourself):

*I reserve the right to alter this course (at any time) to better serve the needs of this course and my students.*

By including this clause/statement, you allow yourself greater flexibility to alter or change something about the course on a moment's notice (without the approval of the students). Of course, be wary: Use the power behind this statement ethically and wisely.