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Creating an Effective Online Syllabus

Whether working alone or as part of a team to develop a course, the syllabus is an important part of course development, regardless of delivery format—online, in blended format, or face-to-face. Defining syllabus broadly here, we assume the traditional syllabus should include not only a schedule of topics, readings, activities, and assignments, but also such elements as goals, objectives, or expected outcomes for the course, grading policies, procedures, and any other information necessary for students to succeed.

Some instructors separate these various elements and call them “Course Information,” “Course Requirements,” “Grading,” “Schedule,” and so on. For the purposes of this chapter, however, we’ll cover all these essentials with the term syllabus.

Although the details of course requirements, expected outcomes, schedule, grading, and procedures are staple elements of any course syllabus, they are perhaps even more important for an online class. Students tend to feel somewhat disoriented without the familiar first-day speeches from the instructor, and they may wonder if any of the same old rules will apply in this new online territory.

It’s typical for first-time online instructors to include too little detail in their syllabi. One instructor we know changed nothing in his regular on-the-ground course syllabus except to add the words, “This course is delivered completely online.” Unfortunately, students had a hard time even finding his syllabus, as he posted no welcome at the “entrance” to his online course, and then they were puzzled by his schedule, which still listed “class

sessions” as once a week. Some students reasonably thought this phrase referred to online, real-time chat. Others wondered if the phrase meant that their asynchronous communications should be posted only once a week, on the particular day named in the schedule. As a result of this lack of clarity, the first week’s discussion forum was dominated entirely by questions about where, when, and how to do the assignments, and the main topics for that week were nearly forgotten in the confusion.

Even after the instructor’s hurried explanations, students continued to experience confusion about dates and times, procedures and grading. They could refer back to the first week’s forum and search through the various discussion **threads** in which these questions had been raised, but they had no clear reference document to which they could turn. One student even had a grade dispute with the instructor that arose from an ambiguity in the syllabus. In the syllabus, the instructor had declared that all late assignments would be penalized at the rate of one-quarter grade point each day, but hadn’t clearly specified that the due dates for assignments were based on the instructor’s time zone, not the student’s. Thus, the student claimed that, when he posted an assignment at 11:00 P.M. Pacific time, on the due date, he was unfairly penalized because the server on which the course was housed, located (like the instructor) on the East Coast of the United States, had recorded the time as 2:00 A.M. the following day. These examples, both serious and trivial, illustrate some of the problems that can ensue if online syllabi (and, naturally, subsequent directions) aren’t thorough and detailed.

In blended courses clear directions are equally vital. It’s important, for instance, to explain to students how the mixture of different venues will be integrated. Which course activities will take place in the on-campus classroom, which in the online classroom, and what’s the sequence of procedures students should follow each week? Imagine that, before the face-to-face class meeting on Wednesday, you want students to read the online lecture and post a preliminary report, but you want them to wait until after the class meeting to take part in that week’s online discussion. In many cases, they won’t understand that sequence unless it’s carefully explained to them.

There are three aspects of an online syllabus we want to emphasize in particular: the contract, the map, and the schedule.



The Contract

Increasingly, the syllabus has come to be the contract between students and instructor, laying out the terms of the class interaction—the expected responsibilities and duties, the grading criteria, the musts and don'ts of behavior. Let's look at some features of the contract that are especially important for an online course.

Class Participation and Grading Criteria

What's meant by "participation" in the online setting won't be obvious to students. Participation should be defined. For example, is it posting, that is, sending messages to the classroom discussion board? Or is it just logging on and reading (an activity revealed to an instructor only when course management software has the capacity to track students' movements online)? Perhaps participation includes taking part in an online group presentation or showing up for a real-time chat.

 ***Important!*** *Whatever kind of participation you expect in your course, you should make that explicit in the syllabus.*

If you're going to count participation toward the final grade, you should define how that will be calculated. We recommend, in fact, that you always give a grade for active participation in the class, that is, for contributing to discussions and asking or answering questions. The plain fact is that if students aren't graded, the great majority won't actively participate. For a blended class, you will want to decide whether students are given participation grades for both face-to-face meetings as well as online participation, and how the grade for one, the other, or both should be divided up. Besides judging the quality of students' contributions in the class, you may want to set a minimum level for quantity of participation or require that a portion of postings be responses to classmates.

Another consideration in asynchronous courses is the degree of self-pacing allowed. Must students follow a chronological

order of topics in their participation, or can they go back and respond to previous weeks' topics?

Can they complete assignments at different times during the course? The answers to these questions really depend on the nature of your course. For example, if your course has a set number of tasks, which can be completed at any time or in any order within the twelve weeks of the course, then you may not be concerned about students' skipping about or restarting conversations about previous weeks' topics.

Managing Student Expectations

The task of managing student expectations is very important in the online classroom. Some students enroll in an online course expecting it to be much easier than a regular course. Others imagine that the course will be something like independent study. Still others think the instructor should be available for twenty-four real-time hours a day. Your syllabus as well as your introductory comments can help manage such expectations, correct false impressions, and set the stage for the smooth unfolding of your course.

It's also helpful if your institution has a general student orientation (or at least a student handbook or web tutorial) that explains how the online course will work, how much student-instructor interaction can be expected, and so forth. If your institution doesn't have such an orientation, or your class has a unique approach that goes beyond the typical online offerings at your institution, you may need to supply some of this information in your own syllabus. Michele Pacansky-Brock, now Director of Online and Hybrid Support with California State University East Bay, previously taught an online Art Appreciation class for Sierra College that was unusually rich in its use of technology and multimedia. In her syllabus she cautioned students about that fact, "Important!!! This online class is image intensive. Due to the visual nature of the content of this class, you will regularly download large files containing high resolution images and movies..."

A continuing-education instructor we know, who has a busy professional practice, complained after a few weeks of her online class that students had "unrealistic expectations." When

pressed to explain this remark, she commented that if she didn't reply to each and every student comment in the discussion forum or if she appeared not to be in the online classroom every day, she would receive plaintive email queries or even classroom postings inquiring about whether she had read a particular message. She further explained that she had expected students to work on their own during the first part of each week and only then to post their thoughts in the discussion forum. Unfortunately, neither her syllabus nor her introductory comments ever mentioned these teacher expectations.

This case shows that managing student expectations can also require an instructor to communicate his expectations for himself to the students. This type of problem can be handled by a simple statement in the syllabus to the effect that the instructor will look in frequently during the week but may not be in the classroom every day, or that students should work on the week's assignments during the first part of the week (say, Monday through Wednesday) and then post their responses later in the week (Thursday through Sunday).

For her blended class, Isabel Simões de Carvalho of Lisbon's Instituto Superior de Engenharia expressed her availability online in the following manner,

Your teacher will be online with all of you at least every two days and will provide feedback within 48 hours maximum. However, if you have an urgent subject that you need to discuss with your teacher ... then you should send an email to the instructor and in this case, do not forget to fill in the course name within the subject line.

Other information of a “contractual” nature that you might want to incorporate in your syllabus includes the following:

- your policy on late assignments;
- whether due dates are calculated by your time zone or the student's (or the server's, as that might actually be in a third time zone);
- your availability for real-time chat appointments (which some call “virtual office hours”);

- overall specifications for writing assignments (Formal essay? Informal journal? Of how many total words? MLA or APA style?);
- your institution's policy on plagiarism and cheating.



The Map

In this new territory of the online classroom, students will seize upon your syllabus as if it were a map. Students will want to know how to proceed and where everything is located. So, one of the first things you must do, whether through the syllabus or in an introductory message, is to explain the “geography” of the course.

In fact, if the syllabus isn't visible on the first level of the course, but instead can be arrived at only by one or two clicks of the mouse, then this introductory set of directions must be given in an announcement area or even delivered prior to the course, by email. For example, an announcement with explicit directions to the syllabus might say,

Welcome, please click on the Class Information tab at the upper left hand corner of this webpage to find the links labeled syllabus, and weekly schedule. These will guide your work in this course, so I recommend that you print these sections out for handy reference. If you have any questions about these documents, please post a question in the Q&A forum portion of the discussion area.

What else does “explaining the geography” mean? If your course consists of various web pages plus a discussion forum, you'll need to let the students know where to find the component parts of the course and under what headings: “Lectures will be on the page whose link says ‘Lectures,’ and these are arranged by weeks.” If the discussion forum, a blog, or other software is hosted on an outside site, students need to be told that this link will take them off the university server, or that they must use a password given to them, and so on. If you've created a discussion forum dedicated to casual communications and

socializing for students, let them know that the area you have imaginatively labeled “Café Truckstop” is intended to be the online equivalent of a student lounge.

This is particularly important when using course management software that has its own unique and not easily customizable category headings or when your institution or department does not have a common classroom template. Students will need to know what you have stored behind each of the online classroom headings or where a particular link might lead.

While not essential, a narrated guide to the syllabus can be created by an instructor to reinforce the importance of the syllabus and to draw attention to it from the very first day of the course. You can use a simple series of screen shots within a PowerPoint narration or use video capture software as you click about the syllabus to point out the various sections of the document.

In a blended course that combines face-to-face and online components, it's essential that you specify where to do each activity. For example, in Isabel Carvalho's blended Energy Production and Management syllabus she clearly stated, “Besides the weekly face-to-face sessions, this course has an online learning environment. The face-to-face and online components are not independent but instead are considered to be complementary.” She added,

We will be together face-to-face 4.5 hours per week and I will expect you all to spend at least 2 hours a week online using the discussion forum, viewing and downloading course resources and materials, and interacting with your peers.

Such general statements are then further detailed in the class schedule.

Other procedural and “geographical” issues you might want to cover in the syllabus include these:

- the URL for your home page, the companion web site for a text, or other resources;
- where to access and how additional technology tools will be used in the class;

- how emailed assignments are to be labeled in the subject line;
- which file types you'll accept for attached documents (for instance, Microsoft Word, Rich Text Format, PowerPoint, Excel);
- any contact information for technical and administrative support;
- the proper sequence for accomplishing weekly activities and assignments (for example, do the exercises before taking the quiz, post a message in discussion before emailing the assignment).



The Schedule

The course should be laid out by weeks for students, because this is commonly the unit by which students gauge their own participation and work. If your class starts on a Wednesday, then Tuesday will become the last day of your week unless you state otherwise.

We recommend that you think in terms of subdivisions of two- or three-day spreads. For example, if you post your lecture on Monday, allow students through Wednesday to read and comment on it rather than asking them to do so by Tuesday. Students can be told to log on every single day, but it is perhaps wiser to take advantage of the asynchronous flexibility of the online environment. Assume that some students will log on and read on Monday night, some on Tuesday morning, and others at midnight. The Monday reader may return on Tuesday night to reread and post. The Tuesday reader may respond with comments at once. This scheduling flexibility is even more important for those who have students in different time zones or in foreign countries.

It's also good to gauge your students' access to computers and their probable work schedules. This goes back to what we discussed in earlier chapters. If your students are accessing the course web site from a campus lab, the dorms, or branch campus libraries, then they'll follow a different pattern than will

typical working adults or continuing-education students, who may want to use the weekends to do most of the time-intensive assignments. A Monday or Tuesday due date for assignments will allow working adults to make the most of their study time out of the office.

A Checklist for Your Online Syllabus

Here, in summary form, is a checklist for creating your online syllabus. You needn't include all of these items (some may be more appropriate for your class than others), nor do you have to include them all in one document called a "syllabus." You can distribute this information among several documents if desired.

- course title, authors' and instructor's names, registration number, and term information; syllabus web pages should bear creation or "last revised" dates if the term date isn't included at the top;
- course instructor's contact information, indication of instructor availability in classroom, for "office hours" and private communications. Contact information for technical support;
- course description, perhaps the same as the description used for a course catalog listing, but probably more detailed; should list any prerequisites or special technical requirements for the course;
- course objectives or expected outcomes; what students can expect to learn by completion of the course;
- required texts or materials: any books or other materials, such as software, not made available in the course but required for the course;
- explanation of grading criteria and components of total grade: a list of all quizzes, exams, graded assignments, and forms of class participation, with grade percentages or points; criteria for a passing grade; policies on late assignments. More detailed instructions for assignments should be included elsewhere but at the very least, the outlines and due dates of each major assignment should be listed first in the syllabus;
- participation standard: minimum number of postings per week in discussion and any standards for quality of participation. If a rubric will be used to evaluate participation, reference to the rubric and where it may be found can be provided rather than including the whole rubric in the syllabus;

- explanation of course geography and procedures: how the online classroom is organized; how students should proceed each week for class activities; how to label assignments sent by email; where to post materials in the classroom; any special instructions;
- week-by-week schedule: topics, assignments, readings, quizzes, activities, and web resources for each week, with specific dates;
- any relevant institutional or program policies, procedures, or resources not mentioned above. These may be available as links to institutional web pages.

Sometimes it's difficult to anticipate every issue that may arise during the class and to include that in your syllabus. There's obviously a balance between readable brevity and a syllabus so voluminous as to be intimidating. Whatever you do not include in your initial documents can be referenced for further examination—for example, "Discussion Participation is worth 20% of the grade. See the rubric for participation posted in the Major Assignments section of the online classroom"—or may still be introduced by means of announcements, weekly emails sent to all students, or postings in an appropriate forum. You will also want to use these means to reinforce important elements of your syllabus as the course progresses.

Using Specific Dates

Instead of simply listing the course schedule for "Week One" and "Week Two," your schedule should include the specific dates for each unit, week, or topic area covered. This is particularly important for asynchronous courses in which students may be logging on at diverse times and days during the week. It's quite common for students to lose track of the weeks in the term when following an asynchronous online schedule. (And it's not unheard of for instructors to forget the dates, either!)

If you don't want to include dates on the main syllabus web pages because you want to reuse it for subsequent terms, and worry about making mistakes in updating it, then send students an email version of the syllabus or post a downloadable

document version with the relevant dates inserted. Some course management software includes a calendar feature that you may use to reinforce the dates for each segment of the course.

Supplying Information More Than Once

It's easy to lose track of where and when something was said in threaded discussions or by email. When you give directions, it may not be possible for students to simply link back to them at a later date. For that reason, you should provide important instructions in more than one location. However, to maintain consistency and accuracy, you will either need to *repeat that information in full* or *refer students back to the complete directions* in the syllabus or other central document. Be very careful not to truncate your instructions for an assignment—in posting reminders, always refer students back to the most detailed version. For example, an announcement can note an upcoming due date for an assignment mentioned elsewhere, “Remember, papers are due this week and must be a minimum of 1000 words and based on at least three scholarly resources. Please review the assignment details for this paper found in the syllabus and under Major Projects.” Or you may respond to a question in the discussion area, “John, your paper must be on one of the topics listed and Wikipedia may not be one of the three scholarly resources. Please refer to the Major Projects area for full details on topics and resources for this assignment.”

 **Important!** *In an online environment, redundancy is often better than elegant succinctness.*

Although students in some course management platforms may be able to use a search function to find your instructions, in most cases students will have to waste energy and time to sift through materials before they can locate that one crucial sentence of direction. Therefore, even if you intend to explain assignments and procedures later in the course, it's best to state them up front in the syllabus as well. Then, if your course is laid out entirely in web pages, make sure that each page permits students to link back easily to essential information in the syllabus.