Creating a Course Syllabus

Most likely, your syllabus will be one of the first substantial means of communication between you and your students.

Planning the Syllabus

The syllabus is a primary source of information to guide your students throughout the semester and should carefully explain course components. Think of the syllabus as a roadmap you and your students can follow as you navigate the course throughout the semester.

Most likely, your syllabus will be one of the first substantial means of communication between you and your students. The ultimate goal of a well-designed syllabus is to ensure students understand what is expected of them throughout the semester. Therefore, the syllabus should be easy to read, understand, and follow. Use welcoming and encouraging language and what you will do to help students throughout the semester.

Find out whether your department/school and/or college have policies that require specific information to be included on the syllabus. This might include policies on grading, attendance, make-up work, make-up exams and information related to standards and accreditation.

If you are preparing a syllabus for a course that has multiple sections, check with your department chair to see what content, books, and other course components should be consistently provided in all sections of the same course. If you are teaching a course for the first time, review the approved course proposal to adequately represent course goals, learning objectives and content.

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Goals and Learning Objectives

Goals and learning objectives are the heart of your instruction and should be carefully written. Course goals and learning objectives represent what students should be able to do after successfully completing course modules and the course; they should be observable and measurable and be stated in terms of student outcomes. Plan activities, assignments, and outcomes which help students achieve the goals and learning objectives. When planning assignments and class activities, consider listing with them which course goals and learning objectives will be achieved when these tasks are completed. By showing relevance of course requirements with related goals and learning objectives students will better understand why assignments and activities have been assigned.

Consider including in the syllabus a teaching philosophy that conveys your enthusiasm for teaching and the subject and respect for your students.

Methods and Activities

Select appropriate teaching methods, activities, assignments, and assessment strategies you plan to use throughout the semester and make sure they reflect the course goals and learning objectives. Also, consider how to present course content in different ways (visual, auditory, and hands-on) to meet the varied learning preferences of your students.

Consider including in the syllabus a teaching philosophy that conveys your enthusiasm for teaching and the subject and respect for your students. Explain the

importance and benefits of why students should take the course. Adding a positive and optimistic teaching philosophy statement to your syllabus can send an important message to your students of your love for the subject and that you are truly interested in students' success in the course.

Grading System

Decide upon a grading system and check with your department chair, if necessary, to make sure it is consistent with departmental standards. Choose a grading system that is suitable for the course and communicates to your students your expectations about what is important and what you expect from them. Grading criteria can be made available in the form of rubrics and can increase objectivity when grading students' work.

Textbooks

Adopt appropriate textbooks and resources and relate required readings to course goals, learning objectives, activities and outcomes. Ask your department chair if certain books are required for the course and contact your department secretary or the bookstore for book order deadlines.

Course Schedule

Many faculty provide a format that clearly lays out the course meeting dates, assignments, readings, exams, and due dates for each requirement which can be very useful to help students plan for the semester. Course schedules also help you stay on task, too! If you plan on developing a course calendar or schedule, refer to the NIU calendar to carefully sequence quizzes, exams, projects, and assignments to avoid overlapping due dates and other potential conflicts.

Developing the Course Syllabus

Now that you have planned the overall content of the syllabus, it's time to put it all together and develop it. You can customize your syllabus to match your subject and teaching style and making it personal does not mean it shouldn't be organized and thorough. The order in which the sections are presented here follows many syllabus models but can be arranged to fit your needs.

You can also provide a customized course description that provides students with a more personal perspective on the course and how taking the course will affect them in their studies and after they leave NIU.

Course Information. Include the course designator and number (e.g., ENGL 103), the section number, course title, total credit hours, classroom location, course day or days and meeting times, any related lab or recitation session locations and course Web site URL if you have one (e.g., http://webcourses.niu.edu which is the URL for accessing Blackboard).

Course Description. Include the complete catalog course description and the course prerequisites. You can also provide a customized description that provides students with a more personal perspective on the course and how being enrolled will affect them in their studies and after they leave NIU.

Instructor Information. Include your name, title, office location, phone number, email address, office hours (face-to-face and virtual) and other ways in which students can contact or interact with you.

Teaching Assistant information if One Has Been Assigned to You: Provide his or her name, office location, phone number, email address, office hours and the role the TA plays in the course.

Course Requirements. List all assignments, readings, and exams and describe the requirements for successful completion of these activities. Mention that samples of projects and assignment can be made available in your office or electronically through Blackboard. Also, to help minimize the number of pages in the syllabus, details and guidelines about assignments and projects can be made available in Blackboard.

Course Assessment. Provide a list of standards and criteria for each graded course component such as assignments, exams, and class participation so students know your expectations. State how much each graded course activity will count toward the final course grade. Include the course grading scale so students can keep track of their progress. State how students will be rewarded for effort and progress and if you will allow extra credit—state how these will be used toward a student's final grade. State specifically how final grades will be determined and provide information such as whether you weigh letter grades, use accumulated points, or if you will grade on a curve.

State how students will be rewarded for effort and progress and if you will allow extra credit—state how these will be used toward a student's final grade.

Course Resources (Required and Recommended). Provide full citation and edition number for textbooks and other course resources. Provide information where students can purchase these resources, their cost (if known), and if using e-books or alternative sources is acceptable. Include any course-related Websites and Blackboard links if applicable (e.g., http://webcourses.niu.edu which is the URL for accessing Blackboard). Provide information on support services such as the NIU Center for Access-Ability Resources, Writing Center, Learning Centers, and ways students can obtain peer tutoring (this is especially helpful for undergraduate students).

Course Policies and Accommodations. Provide clear and succinct information on attendance, late arrivals and early departures, late work, missed quizzes and exams, and make-up work. Also include information on use of copyrighted materials, individual and group work and classroom comportment such as mutual civility, respectfulness, use of cell phones or electronic devices, and eating and drinking in the classroom. Finally, list policies related to lab work such as safety, human subjects and university property.

Receiving Assistance. Include a statement requesting that students with disabilities contact you regarding accommodation needs. Visit the Center for Access-Ability Resources (CAAR) website at www.niu.edu/caar for further information on ways to provide this information to students who request such assistance. Also, you could include a statement that says something about how student success is important to you and that any student who has a disability or any other special circumstance that may have some impact on their work in the class, and for which they might require special accommodations, to contact you early in the semester so that accommodations can be made in a timely manner.

Academic Integrity. In a separate and prominent location of your syllabus, include statements on plagiarism, appropriate conduct and discipline regulations. Both of these statements can be found in the NIU Graduate and Undergraduate Catalogs in print form or online. Also, the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center has created the "Academic Integrity Tutorials for Students and Faculty which are available at http://www.ai.niu.edu/ai/

Course Calendar and Schedule. If you have planned to include course information in a calendar or schedule, provide a list of topics, chapter readings, assignments, exams and other requirements with their due dates. Providing this information in a table format will make it easy to read and reference. In a prominent location on the calendar or schedule, indicate that the schedule is subject to change to accommodate any necessary changes to the course schedule.

Instead of completely filling the page with dense text consider leaving some open areas of blank space or even some content-related visuals.

Layout of the Course Syllabus
The overall visual appeal of the course syllabus can help organize its content and make it easy to read. Use headings, short sentences, outlines, lists, charts and diagrams for organization and quick reference. Instead of completely filling the page with dense text consider leaving some open areas of blank space or even some content-related visuals.

After your syllabus has been created ask a colleague or your department chair to check it for accuracy and clarity. Then, file the syllabus with your department as a record of your course, for use for accreditation purposes and as a reference when students search for course information.

Course Syllabus Checklist
To accompany this guide, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center has created a checklist to help you get started and plan an effective course syllabus. That checklist is available online at http://www.niu.edu/facdev/_pdf/syllabus-checklist.pdf