

## ***THE FUNCTIONS OF THE COURSE SYLLABUS***

### **Syllabus Functions**

Your syllabus can serve a wide variety of functions that will support and challenge students as they engage in their educational activities.

#### ***1) Establishes an Early Point of Contact and Connection Between Student and Instructor***

Research has shown that students want more frequent interaction with faculty. You can begin to communicate your availability by including basic information such as your name, address, telephone numbers, e-mail address, office hours, how to arrange for a conference. [See Examples, Part II] You can also include a page soliciting biographical information (also address, phone #, e-mail, etc.) that will help you to learn students' names, their interests, and why they are in the course. To encourage interaction with other students in the course, you might use this information to develop a student roster (including name, address, phone #, e-mail, etc.) that is particularly useful for group work and work time out of class. You can include similar information about other important student contacts, such as TAs, technicians, main office staff, and librarians, when appropriate. This contact information will be useful in case plans change during the course of the term or semester.

#### ***2) Helps Set the Tone for Your Course***

Your syllabus communicates much about your attitudes toward students and learning. The way in which you communicate your views helps students to understand whether your class will be conducted in a formal or informal manner. Communicating an openness to questions, concerns, and dialogue begins with the syllabus.

#### ***3) Describes Your Beliefs About Educational Purposes***

You can explain whether your course has a product or a process orientation and how that determines your expectations of students. Explain how you have set your agenda for the course, how the course structure reinforces goals and objectives, how the activities and assignments will help them to meet both product and process goals. You may describe learning strategies and techniques you will use and your rationale for using them. You can make explicit how your criteria and standards for both their work process and products are aligned with course goals.

#### ***4) Acquaints Students with the Logistics of the Course***

Courses vary in terms of the days classes meet, the instructors for each class, and the type of sessions which occur (i.e., guest lecturer, teamwork sessions, simulations, films, etc.). Your syllabus can detail this information so that students will know what to expect and can be prepared for each class meeting. Providing students with a course calendar helps them to plan their work. Noting holidays and any days on which class will be canceled or rescheduled allows students to plan ahead and prevent misunderstandings. It also shows that you respect the value of students' time. [See Examples, Part II]

#### ***5) Contains Collected Handouts***

Faculty often distribute handouts as they become appropriate to the topics covered. Often students put them into whatever notebook is at hand and then find it difficult to retrieve them. By planning your course, preparing the necessary handouts, and including them in your syllabus, you help students, among other things, to keep all course material together and accessible. These items, among other things, might include biographical information forms, detailed information on assignments, various evaluation forms, or diagrams and other visual representations.

### ***6) Defines Student Responsibilities for Successful Course Work***

Your syllabus can help students to achieve some personal control over their learning, to plan their semester, and to manage their time effectively. If your students have a clear idea of what they are expected to accomplish, when, and even why, they will be more likely to finish assignments within a reasonable time and be appropriately prepared for classes and exams.

### ***7) Describes Active Learning***

Students often conceive of learning as the acquisition of correct information, but they may not know what it means to take an active role in the process, beyond rote memorization and recall. You can include a description of your expectations for student initiative in your syllabus. If critical thinking, problem solving, and inquiry are part of your course, it is helpful to tell students that they will be asked to consider multiple viewpoints and conflicting values and to imagine, analyze, and evaluate alternate positions on issues or solutions to problems.

It is also important to describe what students can expect from you in your role as teacher: content expert, formal authority, socializing agent, facilitator, role model, experienced learner, resource consultant, coach, counselor.

### ***8) Helps Students to Assess Their Readiness for Your Course***

What are the prerequisites for your course? In addition to specific course prerequisites, students should be given some idea about what they should already know and what skills they should already have before taking your course so they can realistically assess their readiness. Your syllabus can provide information about the challenges students will face, the assumed skill level, the skills they will build upon, and the skills they will learn during your course. You may also include information about institutional or other sources for academic support. Some faculty include self-assessment tools and learning contracts to assist students with this process.

### ***9) Sets the Course in a Broader Context for Learning***

Your syllabus can provide a perspective that allows students to see instructors in your discipline as active and experienced learners engaged in inquiry in their professional fields or disciplines. Many students are unaware that their instructors are involved in research and creative professional activity beyond the classroom, that they are not simply transmitters of knowledge and skills.

You can encourage your students to approach the learning situation as apprentice learners in a community of scholars. You can help them to see you and other faculty as experienced active learners who can provide expert guidance about general and specialized knowledge of content and practice in your field.

Your syllabus can provide information that shows students how your course fits within the discipline or profession, the general program of study, and their own educational plans. You can make students aware that every discipline or field has its unique way of knowing. You can encourage students to approach the field actively as ethnographic fieldworkers who want to understand the social and intellectual practices of the field. Assure them that you will guide them while they learn how to use the characteristic tools and modes of inquiry, patterns of explanation, discourse practices, and the types of artifacts that are valued and produced in their field.

### ***10) Provides a Conceptual Framework***

Your syllabus can support major ideas, topics, and factual information. Include in it questions or issues for students to think about that range from major issues or key questions in the discipline to the meaning of a significant passage in a course reading (Bean, 1996). Such a framework will help students organize information and focus their learning.

### ***11) Describes Available Learning Resources***

You can list campus resources such as libraries, reserve desks, reading rooms, laboratories, computer clusters, and studios that students may use (including their locations, availability, and policies) as well as any information concerning the location and use of aids such as tape recordings, copy services, CD ROMs or videos. You may also note the locations of specific books, videos, and sites on computer networks. [See Examples, Part II]

### ***12) Communicates the Role of Technology in the Course***

Computers and computer networks have increased our ability to access information and communicate with each other. Computers are working tools that students use for their own learning: to enhance their thinking; plan and revise learning goals; monitor and reflect on their progress; set up and access their own personal knowledge files; share a common database; build their own database; use a spreadsheet; run statistical software; keep a journal; write, illustrate, and revise texts; and build up a portfolio. You can use computers as a resource tool to provide direct instruction of new content, tutorials, and interactive simulations; to model extremely small or large phenomena (Brown, 1993; Davis, 1993a).

E-mail is a practical way to interact with your students. Assignments, comments on their work, important class information, and questions to you and to other students, and extended classroom discussions are all possible uses and allow documents to be prepared, sent, received, and read by the recipient at convenient times.

Institutions, individual faculty, and students are creating their own home pages on the Web or using information servers to share course materials on-line, such as your learning-centered syllabus, reading lists, lecture outlines or notes, collaborative software, and other course information. When you use servers and the World Wide Web, you can control the information you want to access by navigating through the system to explore any topic of interest at your preferred pace and level of detail.

Studies have shown that students derive much benefit from environments which encourage collaborative/cooperative learning. The Web and groupware (such as Lotus Notes) provide opportunities for asynchronous collaboration (participants can share work that may be done at different times and places). Networked writing environments encourage students to write more and to learn from each other. On-line discussion groups can lead to fuller participation in class discussions by students who may not participate in face-to-face classroom environments (Polyson, S., Saltzberg, S., & Goodwin-Jones, R., 1996).

### ***13) Can Expand to Provide Difficult-to-Obtain Reading Materials***

There are times when courses are developed before comprehensive literature is available on the topic. The syllabus can include copies of articles you want your students to read, as well as supplemental information not found in course texts. You can include materials that expand on, synthesize, and facilitate critical reflection on issues presented during formal instruction. You might include materials that fill in the gaps not covered by class presentations, or present questions raised by other points of view. When you use the syllabus in this way, be certain that you obtain necessary copyright clearances for reading selections.

### ***14) Can Improve the Effectiveness of Student Note Taking***

Good, carefully written notes are a significant resource for active learning. Active thinkers keep notebooks and journals of ideas from readings, lectures, presentations, and their own ruminations about topics. It is important to make every effort to help students improve the quality of this form of writing. As a model, you may want to include outlines that provide an orientation to topics for lectures and presentations, making it clear what you want students to remember, and providing room for their own interpretations and elaborations of the material. You can use notetaking pairs (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991) intermittently during or at the end of a lecture. (In this case, two students work together to review major concepts and

pertinent information, to clarify unresolved issues or concerns.) It is also helpful to include any detailed formulas and diagrams that students will be required to use. You may want to include study techniques that are specific to your course. In this way, the contents of the syllabus will help to organize and focus student notetaking and learning. [See Learning Tools, Part II]

### **15) Can Include Material that Supports Learning Outside the Classroom**

Much learning takes place outside of the classroom. You can transform student study time outside of class by providing strategies in your syllabus that help students to interact more critically with the textbook, supplemental readings, or other work, so that they will be better prepared for class. For example, along with the readings you might give students a short (one page or less) writing assignment that asks them to support, reject, or modify the thesis or claims in the reading. You might include a guide for troubleshooting a story or a drawing. You can also provide self-check assignments that allow students to monitor their progress.

### **16) Can Serve as a Learning Contract**

As an agreement or contract defining mutual obligations between instructor and students, your syllabus also speaks for the college and university. "You should realize that this fact gives you responsibilities but also gives you protection against complaints or challenges to your teaching. For example, the conditions, goals, and requirements you state enable (department chairs and academic administrators) to support your decisions on grades, teaching methods, readings, and topics of inquiry. That is only possible, of course, if you and the administration (and the students) have a record of what you promised and planned, and if your syllabus conforms broadly to program goals and policies" (SU Project Advance, 1995). You will need to be familiar with institutional policies regarding attendance, examinations, drop/adds, course withdrawals, learning disabilities, and academic integrity.

Equipped with an understanding of the myriad ways a learning-centered syllabus can function, you can begin to use it in your course.

#### **Reference:**

TOMORROW'S PROFESSOR(S) MAILING LIST

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<http://ctl.stanford.edu>

Posting taken from Part 1: Focus on Learning: Composing a Learning-Centered Syllabus in *The Course Syllabus, A Learning-Centered Approach* by Judith Grunert, Anker Publishing Company, Inc., Bolton, MA.

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