

Four Questions (and sub-questions) to Pose to Your Syllabus

This tipsheet is adapted from a 2009 syllabus workshop in General Education. Its questions are designed to address issues of clarity of content, of expectations, and of learning objectives.

1.) Do the title and preamble clearly state what the course is about, orient and excite students?

- ε Does the preamble clearly identify the theme of the course, or pose questions that draw students in?
- ε Does it challenge or inspire your students? Is there a problem or puzzle to be solved?
- ε Does it introduce relevant vocabulary without being confusing?
- ε Does it require and mention prerequisites?
- ε Does the phrasing set a collaborative tone or sense of common purpose? *e.g.*, “*We will explore...*”
- ε Are learning objectives stated? *e.g.*, “*You will be able to...*” “*Students will learn...*”
- ε Does it refer students to the course website, or Internet sources for further detail?

2.) Does your syllabus establish a clear *contract* between you and your students?

- ε Does it provide a means of contact (phone; email etc.)
- ε Does it make clear promises regarding due dates, readings, and office hours?
- ε Does it establish clear expectations for course blogs, chat rooms or the course website?
- ε Does it make grading policies explicit? *e.g.*, *20% for X; 40% for Y (or something else)*
- ε Does your syllabus make provisions for writing and assignment preparation: pre-paper conferences, review sessions with you or TFs, etc?
- ε Are you prepared to eliminate material that cannot be covered (since adding is problematic)?

3.) Is your syllabus *coherent*? —In the simplest sense a syllabus is a “calendar,” but it should also have a logic, an order of argument or a story line.

- ε Is the logic or story best told in vignettes (one per week or month)? Or is it better divided into 3 or 4 Acts -- and if so, are they manageable *chunks*?
- ε Does that order or logic follow from your preamble?
- ε Are the sections or elements *linked* to one another, or *steps* that follow one another logically?
- ε Can the elements be posed as *questions* that follow in a coherent sequence (at least for you)?
- ε Is the pacing reasonable? Can your students really read X pages a week (or less during exams)?
- ε Are there built in moments of review?
- ε Have you checked due dates against the university calendar: vacations/days of religious observance?

4.) Does your syllabus *build* the appropriate skills or competencies? Does it clearly motivate stages of learning or have learning outcomes?

- ε Is the pitch and degree of difficulty right for the cohort (again, are prerequisites mentioned)?
- ε Is the sequencing of assignments laid out clearly with an eye to developing necessary skills?
- ε Do writing or other assignments coincide with the material they address?
- ε Do the assignments (reaction papers, exercises etc.) develop skills that build to a final, challenging written or other project or exam?

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