Syllabus Design

The course syllabus is the primary document through which you communicate to students your course goals, expectations of students, and assessment/evaluation criteria. Research on teaching and learning has consistently shown that communicating in detail about these aspects of your course helps students succeed.

Course Design: Planning Backward

Syllabus design is interconnected with course design. Below is a brief overview of how you might plan your course “backward.” First, plan with the “end in mind” by establishing broad learning goals and specific learning objectives; then, plan course assessments and activities to align with the goals and objectives. (The concept of “Planning Backward” comes from Understanding by Design, by Grant Wiggins & Jay McTighe).

1. Identify desired results: What do I want my students to learn?
2. Determine acceptable evidence: How will I know if they have learned it?
3. Plan learning experiences and instruction: What learning activities will help them learn it?

Syllabus Design: As You Draft Your Syllabus

Think about the language you use:

- **Use accessible, inclusive language.**
  Students may not yet be versed in your field, so avoid unnecessary jargon and technical terms. Make sure your syllabus/course is accessible to students from diverse backgrounds and does not inadvertently make some feel excluded.

- **Set the right tone.**
  Think about the learning environment you want to create in your course and use your syllabus to help you do this.

- **Make sure your course title is easy to understand.**
  Students may choose courses by skimming a list of course titles and are likely to skip over a course if they do not understand its title.

Consider what to include and how:

- **Present the syllabus sections in a logical order.**
  Sections tend to appear in syllabi in a certain general order. See the Syllabus Headings handout or check with colleagues in your discipline.

- **Include basic information about the course and the instructor.**
  Syllabi typically include the course title, course number, meeting times, classroom location and URL for the course website. They also include the instructor’s name, office location, office hours, phone number and email address.

- **Use the course description to provide a brief introduction to the course**
  Clarify the scope, purpose and relevance of the topic. Introduce the course format and organization.

- **Clarify the broad appeal of your course to students.**
  Think about why your course might be broadly appealing (e.g. for introductory or interdisciplinary courses) and make that clear to students. Some instructors do this by beginning their course descriptions with big questions.
• Specify the audience for your course.
  Specify any prerequisites. Describe the kinds of students who might be interested in the course.

• Articulate the course goals and communicate what students can expect to learn.
  Communicate to students what they will know, understand and be able to do upon completion of the course.

• Let students know - in detail - what you expect of them.
  Have explicit course policies that communicate – ideally positively - what you expect in terms of attendance, lateness, class participation, missed exams, academic honesty, etc. This will save you time later in the semester.

• Let students know what materials are required and where they can buy or access them.
  Beyond these required materials, you may also wish to provide students with recommendations of additional resources for those who are interested.

• Explain how students will be evaluated.
  Build in multiple opportunities for formative feedback and scaffold assignments carefully. Explain how final grades will be determined. Clarify how grades will be weighted or if you grade on a curve.

• Include a section on Academic Integrity
  Include a statement about academic honesty and link to Brown’s Academic Code, on the Dean of the College and/or Graduate School website, as appropriate.

• Clarify the kinds of academic support available.
  Make sure students know about campus resources that support their learning. The Office of Student Life provides additional support for students.

• Include a statement about disabilities.
  At Brown, Students and Employee Accessibility Services recommends including: “Please inform me if you have a disability or other condition that might require some modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during office hours. For more information, contact Students and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588 or SEAS@brown.edu.”

• Include a calendar/schedule for the semester, with exam dates and due dates for assignments.
  If you wish to allow for some flexibility, note that on your course outline, but remember that later altering assignment due dates and exam dates can prove problematic for some students.

Syllabus Design: As You Review Your Syllabus

• Make sure the syllabus is visually appealing.
  Make it easy for students to skim the syllabus and find key information. White space, indenting, bold, italics, underline and large/small caps can help make your syllabus easy to read.

• Think about questions and concerns students might have about your course.
  Use the syllabus to answer as many of these as you think appropriate.

• Consider how you will use it.
  How will you get students to read your syllabus? Will you review it with them the first day of class? How will you know what questions students have about the course?

Syllabus Consultations

Humanities & Social Sciences
  Sheridan Center Associate Director Laura Hess (Laura_Hess@brown.edu)

Life & Physical Sciences
  Sheridan Center Associate Director Carie Cardamone (Carie_Cardamone@brown.edu)
**Online Resources**

**Planning Backward (Backward Design)**

“Understanding by Design”
This page from the website of Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching gives an excellent overview of Backward Design
http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-guides/pedagogical/understanding-by-design/

*Understanding by Design*, by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe
An electronic version of the book is available online through Brown’s library
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/brown/docDetail.action?docID=10081770

**Syllabus Design**

*Constructing a Syllabus*, by Michael J. Woolcock
This Sheridan Center handbook reviews the fundamentals of course construction and
http://brown.edu/Administration/Sheridan_Center/docs/syllabus.pdf

*Write the Syllabus*
This page from the website of Carnegie Mellon University’s *Enhancing Education* website covers what goes in a syllabus and includes helpful advice.
http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/design/teach/design/syllabus/index.html

*Writing a Syllabus*
This paper from the IDEA Center contains an excellent overview of the major areas of a syllabus.

*Designing a Learning-Centered Syllabus*
The webpage from the University of Delaware’s Center for Teaching and Learning contains useful resources for designing syllabi that help students learn.
http://cte.udel.edu/instructional-topics/designing-courses/designing-learning-centered-syllabus.html

*Syllabus Rubric*
This rubric from Cornell’s Center for Teaching Excellence can help you consider the effectiveness of your own syllabus and identify areas for further development.

**Tutorials**

*Cutting Edge Course Design Tutorial*
This tutorial from the Science Education Resource Center at Carleton College is relevant across disciplines.
http://serc.carleton.edu/NAGTWorkshops/coursedesign/tutorial/index.html

*Syllabus Development Tutorial*
This tutorial from the University of Minnesota’s Center for Teaching and Learning includes examples from across disciplines.
http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/syllabus/index.html