

What this is

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Preparing an Effective Syllabus

Richard Shingles, Lecturer, Biology Department

What it is

A course syllabus can be more than a list of class topics and readings. It can give students an immediate sense of what the course will be about, what they will learn, and how they will be evaluated. A syllabus can provide students with a clear understanding of expectations, course support, and proper conduct in class. It is a students' "first impression" of your course, which will resonate through the semester and excite them about the course content they will soon learn.



Why does it matter

Students on the first day of class are highly observant of the tone you set for the course. The syllabus is a great tool for listing assignments and readings, but it can also provide students with a clear set of expectations about other elements of the course. These can be an attendance policy, the grading protocol, and even behavioral considerations. Think of the syllabus as an implicit teaching-learning contract to help the students avoid any misunderstandings as the semester progresses.

At the beginning of the semester students often visit multiple classes to decide which courses will best fit their schedule, seem to be the most exciting, and may be the easiest fit for their class schedule. The syllabus works well as vehicle to excite your students and convince them that your course will be well worth their time. The more attention you put into your syllabus, the more your students will acknowledge your own passion for the subject.

How to do it

The following are ideas that have come from conversations with faculty about their syllabi and from other resources:

I. General strategies

- **Try to anticipate and answer student questions** with information provided in the syllabus. This will help reduce confusion and lessen its impact on your inbox and office hours.
- **Keep the schedule flexible** when possible by listing broad topics for the week versus specific topics per class.
- **Consider putting more content in your syllabus rather than less.** Whatever is not covered can be useful as supplemental material.

II. Topics overview

- **Provide basic information and brief background for a topic.** This can help orient the students to what will be involved when you begin the topic.
- **Restate the course prerequisites.** Prior courses' content help frame the new content of your course.
- **Give an overview** of the purpose of your course.
- **State general learning goals or objectives.** These are important to include as they give insight on what students need to know and how they will be assessed.

III. Course structure/materials

- **Describe your course format** - e.g., lecture-based, active learning, writing intensive, etc. You can also consider listing percentages of how much one format will be used over others.
- **Specify textbook(s) and readings.** These could be divided between mandatory and further reading sections.
- **List supplementary materials for course**, which can include information resources, tools, blogs, etc.
- **Provide a course calendar**, listing due dates for assignments and papers and exam dates. This will help students anticipate the workflow for your class.

IV. Policy

- **Describe grading, grade distributions and evaluation.** You can state the method of grading that you will use, whether you plan to use a bell curve, clumping, quota system, or criterion-referenced grading method. For more information on these methods, refer to the “To Curve, or Not to Curve” linked below.
- **Stipulate course policies.** Here is where to state your attendance policies, late submission grade adjustments, methods for extra credit, etc. To avoid confusion and arguments with students, your policies should be clearly stated.
- **Consider including a formal covenant or code of conduct** for your students to sign. A formal commitment from the students fosters mutual understanding and respect between the students and you concerning chatting, emailing, and other disruptive activities. For more information, refer to the “Creating a Covenant with Your Students” article listed below.
- **List any departmental or university policies**, such as ethics policies, classroom accommodations for students with disabilities, and a statement of diversity accommodation and inclusion.

V. Additional support info

- **Provide a list of university support offices**, such as the Counseling Center, the Office of Student Disability Services, the Writing Center, the Library’s Research Librarians, etc.
- **List important dates for the academic year**, such as add and drop dates and grade appeal deadlines. This is convenient for both you and the students to be aware of.
- **Indicate supplementary study aids**, such as mentors, online resources, tools, etc.
- **Don’t forget to include your office hours.**

Using the syllabus

For the instructor, use of the syllabus doesn’t end with distributing it to your students. Keep a copy handy and annotate it as the semester progresses. Perhaps you find you need to spend more time on a particular topic, or that the first assignment might work better if it came a week later. It’s good to have a copy on hand to remind students that yes, you did state that you have a no make-up policy for quizzes. You should also post the syllabus online to your Blackboard (or other LMS) course site.

Syllabus design

How your syllabus looks can have an effect on how your students perceive your passion for teaching this class. Since a bulleted list can be uninspiring, consider adding meaningful images to your syllabus to intrigue your students and make it more visually appealing. Also, most word processing programs have built-in design templates that can not only enhance the appearance of your syllabus, but also help structure/layout your content. Thinking about a syllabus as a brochure for your class can help you break free from the typical bulleted list and persuade students to choose your class over others. Being thoughtful about how you present your syllabus is a great opportunity to show your students how much you care for the subject. Give them confidence in your professorial professionalism.

Additional Resources

- *Syllabus*, An online, peer-reviewed journal that displays syllabi <http://www.syllabusjournal.org>
- *Open Syllabus Project*, An online database of university syllabi <http://opensyllabusproject.org>
- Article on grading methods, *To Curve, or Not to Curve*: http://www.cer.jhu.edu/ii/InnovInstruct-BP_toCurveOrNotToCurve.pdf
- Article on formal student agreements, *Creating a Covenant with your Students*: http://www.cer.jhu.edu/ii/InnovInstruct-BP_pforni1.pdf
- Related Innovative Instructor blog post <http://ii.library.jhu.edu/2013/11/01/rebooting-your-syllabus>

Final thoughts

Looking at related course syllabi may help provide insight into what content to include and how to structure your own syllabus. Check with other faculty in your department who might share their syllabi. There is no harm in using other instructors’ ideas to improve the educational experience of the students in your class.

Author’s Background

Richard Shingles,
Lecturer, Biology Department, JHU



Dr. Richard Shingles is a faculty lecturer in biology and teaches undergraduate and graduate courses at JHU. Dr. Shingles also works as a Senior Instructional Designer and Pedagogy Specialist with the Center for Teaching Excellence and Innovation. He supports and counsels faculty, graduate students, and course developers. Dr. Shingles has been the director of the TA Training Institute at Johns Hopkins University since October 2006 and he also instructs in the Preparing Future Faculty Teaching Academy (PFF TA) program at JHU.