

PLANNING AND REVISING YOUR COURSE SYLLABUS

An effective syllabus sets the tone for your entire course. It is a promise that having attended your course students will develop skills, abilities and qualities that they could not have developed otherwise. So, the central questions that guides the creation of your course syllabus is: What do you want to communicate to the students about the course that you teach? How will you encourage students' curiosity to develop the necessary skills and qualities?

As you are planning your course syllabus, consider the following:

- I. **Start planning early.** Developing a course requires time, careful planning and continuous revision. Consult with the program chair and colleagues who have taught similar courses; review similar courses taught in universities. Allow time to refine your reflections of your teaching philosophies, course goals and content, specific teaching methods, as well as to draw the trajectory of your course. Ask yourself: What are the key learnings that are mapped out on your course? What must the students take away from your course?
- II. **Determine what you want the course to achieve.**
 - a. Define course goals. Well-defined and achievable goals will convey you and the students the purpose of the course journey and its destination. These questions may be helpful at the initial point:
 - i. How does this course relate to other courses in the discipline?
 - ii. What do you want your students to remember from your course in 5-10 years?
 - iii. What skills should students gain in your course?
 - iv. How should taking your course change students?
 - b. Define measurable student learning outcomes that demonstrate fulfillment of the broad course goals. A helpful framework for organizing the course goals and outcomes is [Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives](#) (revised in 2001 by Anderson et al.).
- III. **Determine your course content.**
 - a. Select the major topics and determine the sequence in which you will teach them.
 - b. A common mistake instructors make is to plan more than they can cover. Sometimes, less is more effective. Avoid packing too much content and try paring it down by focusing on the important topics, spacing them out throughout the course and allocating time for practice and review.
 - c. Determine the structure of the course. Topics can be organized in a variety of ways¹:
 - i. **Topic by topic** – There are no set relationships amongst the topics, so the ordering is not critical. This works well for courses that revolve around current issues, for example.
 - ii. **Chronological** – Moving from past to present is a very common and easy to implement organizational pattern.
 - iii. **Causal** – The course presents a number of events or issues that culminate in some final effect or solution.
 - iv. **Cumulative** – Each concept builds on the previous one(s).
 - v. **Problem-centered** – Problems, questions, or cases represent the principal organizing features of the course.

¹ Taken from the University of Waterloo's [Center for Teaching and Learning](#) webpage.

- vi. **Spiral** – Key topics or concepts are revisited throughout the course, with new information or insight developing each time.

IV. Develop your instructional methods and tools.

- a. Once you have determined the goals and the content of the course, consider how you will promote the learning experiences of your students.
- b. Consider the size and your course goals to ensure they are consistent with your instructional methods.
- c. Reflect on your teaching style. How does it align with your course goals and content, as well as the students you teach? A statement on your teaching philosophy may be a good way to signal to your students about your pedagogical and professional approaches (for example, if your syllabus says that learning happens best through class discussions, then the students would know what to expect in the course).
- d. Select a variety of teaching approaches and methods that will require active learning and student engagement.

V. Decide on the assessment of student learning.

- a. Consider what evidence of learning is for you. How do you define successful learning in your course? Communicating this to students will give them a tangible idea of what learning looks like in your course.
- b. Assessment in your course would be the section that students turn to first, so ensure it is well planned, clear and aligned with your course goals and content. It may be helpful to briefly state the purposes of the assigned tasks, e.g. this assignment/task will help you achieve this outcome/goal.
- c. Consider the following questions:
 - i. Are assignments aligned with the course goals and outcomes?
 - ii. How much do the students have to complete them?
 - iii. Is formative assessment embedded, i.e., do the students have a chance for low-stakes, non-graded tasks to show evidence of their learning throughout the course?

References and Useful Resources

An insightful and practical article on course syllabus creation is accessible here

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-create-a-syllabus/>

A Self-Directed Guide for Designing Courses for Significant Learning:

https://www.bu.edu/sph/files/2014/03/www.deefinkandassociates.com_GuidetoCourseDesignAug05.pdf

University of Waterloo Center for Teaching and Learning: Course Design:

<https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/planning-courses/course-design/course-content-selection-and>