

# Designing Your Course *and* Syllabus

Although courses may vary in size, subject matter, or level, a systematic process will help you plan and structure your course and syllabus to effectively reach desired instructional goals. This page provides a wealth of information that will guide you from the initial design phases of your course to polishing and distributing your syllabus.

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## Course Design

Effective course design begins with understanding who your students are, deciding what you want them to learn; determining how you will measure student learning; and planning activities, assignments, and materials that support student learning. For all interactions with students plan ahead by ask yourself:

1. Who are the students?
2. What do I want students to be able to do?
3. How will I measure students' abilities?

By asking yourself these questions at the onset of your course design process you will be able to focus more concretely on learning outcomes, which has proven to increase student learning substantially as opposed to merely shoehorning large quantities of content into a quarters worth of class meetings.

### 1. Who are the students?

Before the class begins, find out as much as you can about the students. Consider the level of your course and the type and level of student that typically enrolls in this course. If you are new to teaching the course you may want to consult with colleagues who have previously taught the course to gather some of this information. It is also helpful to review your class roster before the quarter starts. Are your students new to the university? Are they new to the topic of the course, or the department?

- What are students' motivations for taking the course?
- What might you expect students to know before the first class? Consider previous courses they may or may not have taken. Are the students majors in your department or are they fulfilling a distribution credit?
- What range of backgrounds and previous experience is typically represented among students in this class?
- What problems do students typically have with this material, at this level?

## 2. What do I want students to be able to do?

Once you have considered who the students in your course are, ask yourself what they should be able to do at the end of the course. Try to answer this question as specifically as you can by using terms that emphasize student abilities you can measure or easily recognize. For example, it can be more challenging to measure students abilities based on what they may “know” or “understand” as opposed to measuring their abilities to perform tasks such as “identify,” “differentiate,” “apply,” or “produce.” This process will help you solidify your course goals.

### Tools that can help you design course objectives:

- Understanding by Design (Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt): Describes the Backward Design process as outlined in Understanding By Design by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe
- Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives
- Course Design Tutorial although this tool draws examples from geoscience, its basic principles can be applied to a wide range of fields

## 3. How will I measure students’ abilities?

Designing your course around activities that are most likely to lead students towards the goals you have defined will help them acquire and retain skills longer. Some goals can be achieved through listening to lecture or reading assigned texts. Others may require more active experimentation, practice, or discussion. For example, writing, discussions, field work, service learning, problem solving, small group collaboration. No matter what combination of activities you choose always keep in mind how the core activity, as opposed to subject content, will progress students’ abilities.

What will provide you with reliable evidence *during the course* that your students are learning and, *at the end of the course*, that they have obtained/mastered the abilities you envisioned at the beginning of the course? This is the part where you choose assignments, activities, and other methods of assessment. For example, will you have weekly quizzes? Objective tests? Original research papers? presentations? performances? group or individual projects? Assessment is an important aspect of student learning. Make sure to think carefully when pairing assessment to with learning objectives. For more on assessment design see our [Assessing Student Learning](#) page.

## Syllabus Design

The syllabus provides the instructor and students with a contract, a common reference point that sets the stage for learning throughout the course. Make sure that your students have easy access to the course syllabus by handing out hard copies on the first day of class and (if applicable) posting a digital copy on the course website.

## Common Components Included in a Syllabus

The form and content of a syllabus vary widely by discipline, department, course, and instructor. However, there are common components that most successful syllabi contain. These components communicate to your students an accurate description of the course including the topics that will be covered, assignments and assessments students will be responsible for, as well as a clear source for policies and expectations.

### Course Description

- *Course Content:* What is the basic content of the course, and what makes it important or interesting? How does the course fit into the context of the discipline?
- *Learning Objectives:* What should students be able to do by the end of the course? Objectives are most helpful when they are expressed in terms of knowledge and skills that can be readily identified and assessed. For example, the ability to recognize, differentiate, apply, or produce is much more readily identifiable than the ability to appreciate or understand.
- *Characteristics of Class Meetings:* What types of activities should students be prepared for? Discussion? Lecture? Small groups? Student presentations?
- *Logistics:* What are the instructor's and TAs' names? How can they be contacted? How are course materials obtained? When and where does the class meet?

### Course Topics and Assignments

- *Schedule of Topics and Readings:* What will the main topics of the course be and when will they be addressed? What will students need to do to prepare for each class? Most instructors include a weekly or daily schedule of topics they intend to address, along with a list of assigned readings and other course materials.
- *Assignments, Projects, and Exams:* How will students demonstrate their learning? Include learning goals, estimated scope or length, assessment criteria, and dates. Instructors typically include a breakdown, in point values or percentages, of how much each assignment or test contributes to a student's final grade.

### Course Policies and Values

What values will shape your teaching in the course and what policies will guide you? Policies and values that you might want to communicate through your syllabus include:

- *Inclusiveness:* How can your syllabus help you create an inclusive atmosphere that welcomes all students? Some instructors include statements inviting participation from all students, honoring student diversity and differing points of view, or inviting requests for disability accommodations.
- *Integrity:* What are policies and procedures regarding academic integrity and misconduct in relation to materials and assignment for this course? For example, considering the types of work you are asking students to do, what do you want to communicate about

working with data? representing original sources? accountability for contributions to group projects?

- *Responsibility*: What do students need to know about your expectations regarding assignments, attendance, online participation, or classroom interactions? Other possibilities include policies regarding late work, make-up exams, and preparation for class participation.
- *Expectations for Success*: How can students learn most successfully in your course? In your syllabus, you can express confidence that all students are capable of doing well, and you can suggest strategies for success. For example, what strategies for learning are particularly important for this material? What resources – such as study centers, web tutorials, or writing centers – are available to help students succeed in your course?

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## Information for TAs: Syllabus Design

As a TA your responsibilities regarding course design will vary. However, it is always a good idea whether you're planning a ten-week course, a 50 min section meeting, or a 20 min office hour, to think about your teaching and learning goals. Plan ahead by asking yourself:

- What do I want students to learn?
- What challenges to learning are students likely to face?
- How can I help students meet those challenges?
- How will I be able to tell what they have learned?

### Have a Syllabus:

It is a good idea for TAs to provide students with a syllabus. Use the syllabus to answer questions about your expectations, your role in the course, and students' responsibilities. If you are teaching a quiz section or lab, you may not be involved in the development of the course syllabus. However, your students will appreciate receiving a syllabus providing information regarding the section or lab policies and procedures (info. on participation, email policies, grading details, etc...). Also make sure to include your office location and hours so students know where and when to find you.

### Helpful Resource:

[The Course Proposal: A How-To Guide for Grads](#), gradhacker

# Additional Resources

## External links

- [Course-based Assessment](#). A PDF handbook designed to help you develop strategies that will help your students learn. From the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.
- [Designing Effective and Innovative Courses](#). Online tutorial, Carleton College

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