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Building Your Syllabus



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Building a Learner Centered Syllabus

by Kristina Kauffman

I was fortunate to have many wonderful professors during my undergraduate years, but I do not recall receiving a syllabus that contained much more than the name of the class, contact information for the professor, the text, reading assignments and lecture topics. These syllabi told me what the teacher planned to do and what I needed to read. They did not guide my learning or tell me what I needed to know in order to derive maximum benefit from the class. In short, they were not learner centered.

Research done by universities and my own experience with students indicate that a syllabus can serve to facilitate learning, communication, and provide a positive and exciting first impression.

Imagine your response to receiving this syllabus:

What message does this syllabus send to students? I suspect it says that the instructor took a good deal of time to think about reaching his students and that he is very well organized. In the "Apply" section the author of this syllabus, John Sullivan, will explain how you can create a syllabus like this for your class. John is also sensitive to the skill level of his students. For remedial classes he uses a less complex look, large type and simple terminology. In short, his syllabi are learner-centered. They engage the student and they provide detailed advice about how to succeed in the course.

In 1997, John Lough did a study of Carnegie Professor of the Year faculty. He found important similarities in their syllabi:

- Detailed precision
- Clearly stated course objectives
- A day-by-day schedule identifying specific reading assignments and due dates
- Clear statements regarding make-up dates, attendance and grading standards
- Faculty contact information, including office hours, e-mail, available hours in home office, etc.

Robert M. Diamond, of the Center for Instructional Development at Syracuse University writes that a learner-centered syllabus should accomplish certain basic goals:

- Define students' responsibilities
- Define instructor's role and responsibility to the students

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- Provide a clear statement of intended goals and student outcomes
- Establish standards and procedures for evaluation
- Acquaint students with course logistics (a particularly important element as we include more group work and out of class experiences)
- Establish a pattern of community between instructor and students
- Include difficult to obtain materials such as readings, complex charts, and graphs

Syllabus & Handouts
English 50A
Riverside Community College, City Campus
Summer Semester 2001

Tyro
An Introduction to Basic Writing

"We learn a great deal about grammar from reading—and not grammar books but newspapers, novels, poetry, magazines, even the labels on cereal boxes."

Starting Out: Course Description—

This course provides instruction that prepares students for Freshman Composition, and emphasizes an understanding and ability to use proper grammar and mechanics while writing paragraphs and short essays. To help you develop your skills, we will focus on the technical aspects of writing—thesis statements, topic sentences, paragraphing, and sentence diagramming—while writing short and medium length essays. We will also read extensively, because good readers make good writers, and we will do a variety of exercises, including textual and online exercises that review grammar and mechanics.

Our objectives are

- to develop your thoughts into organized, unified, and coherent paragraphs and essays;
- to develop your ability to communicate effectively by writing multiple drafts and refining your grammatical skills;
- to develop your ability to read actively, critically, and efficiently while processing and synthesizing what you've read.

By the end of the course, you must be able to write medium length academic papers of up to five to seven pages in length, read and analyze short works of non-fiction, and express yourself clearly through writing. In order to ensure that you achieve these objectives, we will go through each writing task carefully. We will discuss what each task asks you to do, learn how to complete each assignment, and explore what each one should look like. To help you remember our discussions, please use a notebook and pen to take notes during each class session.

If, at anytime, you have questions or concerns, or if you consider dropping the class, please contact me first. We can discuss your options and ways of successfully passing the course. Above all, don't give up. I am here to help you succeed, and I will do everything within my ability to help you do just that. 06

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Reminders:

- Bring your books, notebook, writing utensils, and anything else that's needed to every class.
- Manage your time; don't let it manage you!
- Turn in all work on the due date; don't give up. I am here to help you succeed, and I will do everything within my ability to help you do just that.
- Know what is expected before you come into class.

<http://www.ankerpub.com/books/roth.html>

6 Steps to Build an Effective Syllabus:

1. [Identify the purpose of the course.](#)
2. [Develop learner-centered objectives.](#)
3. [Structure the course to serve learner-centered objectives - The Course Outline.](#)
4. [Structure the course to serve learner-centered goals - Building Lessons.](#)
5. [Develop a calendar.](#)
6. [Add support pieces.](#)

Step One: Identify the purpose of the course.

Reflect upon the copy of the course outline you were given by your department chair, or if available, one you accessed through this site:



[Course Outlines](#)

Check with your department chair to learn if there are campus policies regarding how the course is to be taught. Some disciplines provide faculty broad flexibility within the broad limitations of the course outline. Other disciplines require extensive coordination among faculty to ensure that students are able to proceed to subsequent courses.

If you have broad discretion, spend a good deal of time reflecting upon what you think is most important for students to learn and be able to do by the end of the course. Do not limit yourself to reviewing materials from a course you took on the subject, or may have been a teaching assistant for in graduate school. Talk to others in your field, search the internet, e-mail faculty across the state who teach the course and ask for their syllabi, and when you realize that there are more options that you can possibly explore this semester, winnow down the ideas gained to those that you believe will best serve your students.

- Be careful to consider who your students are.
- What do they need from the course?
- What will they need to learn that will help them to continue learning in the discipline on their own or in formal classes?

At the conclusion of this step you should be able to produce:

1. A clearly written statement for you and your students defining the purpose of the course.
2. A list of your objectives for the course (This list is not for your students; it is to clarify your thinking. Ask yourself what you hope to accomplish.)



[Learner-Centered Course Goals](#)

Step Two: Develop learner-centered objectives.

It is critical to ask this question: **What do you want your students to be able to do as a result of taking this course?** The answer to this question will provide you with your learning objectives. As you will quickly realize, you are now beginning to shape the course and its lessons (or learning modules).

What is a learning objective?

Learning objectives often appear as a list of skills or abilities. They may also include the facts or skills that students should understand by the end of the course. Most faculty prepare learning objectives per lesson (or module) as follows:

Objectives - Upon completion of this lesson you should be able to:

1. Describe the _____;
2. Analyze _____;
3. Explain how _____;
4. Describe the different approaches to _____ and list some of the _____ that may be used to accomplish this goal.
5. Name the _____;
6. Identify a _____.

Many professors choose to use the list of learning objectives as a sort of study list for quizzes and tests. You may find it helpful to refer to "*Tests and Testing*" for a list of terms measuring various types of knowledge and/or skills.

You will most likely want to construct a broad set of objectives for the course and have more detailed sets for each lesson or learning module. If you plan to teach a hybrid or online course these objectives are even more important as you will not

have extended opportunities to reinforce the objectives during face-to-face interaction.

At the conclusion of this step you should be able to produce:

1. A set of broad learning objectives for the course that you will include in your syllabus.
2. A draft set of objectives for your lessons or learning modules.



[Learner-Centered Learning Objectives](#)

Step Three: Structure the course to serve learner-centered goals: Lesson Outline.

Now comes the real challenge: how to turn the class from a focus on what you want to teach and how you want to teach it, to **ensuring that your students learn?**

First, keep in mind that you will probably not retain or effectively communicate with all your students. This is a community college with diverse students, who lead complicated lives and often come to us under prepared for college work. With that caveat, however, I believe that we should hold our students to high standards, and that we often encourage success by expecting it. It is our job to figure out how to help them succeed and to encourage them to keep trying.

By now you probably have a rough sense of the lessons or learning modules that you would like to present to your students. You might have five lessons or fifteen. You might anticipate that each week is a lesson, or that each class day is a lesson. The number is not critical; what is critical is that:

- Each lesson has a coherent theme or purpose.
- There are not so many lessons that students (or you) feel overwhelmed.
- There are not so few lessons that it is impossible to distinguish one aspect of the course from another. Remember we often learn best in smaller chunks that give us the opportunity to experience success before we move to the next chunk.
- The set up is not so rigid in terms of timeframe that you cannot adapt it should you be asked to teach in a different calendar or hour structure. In other words, think flexibility. You might be ill and miss a day, you might be offered the opportunity to teach the same course in a six week rather than 16 week framework.

Take a careful look at your list of lessons. Can you fit it into the number of class hours (or online equivalent hours) assigned to the course? If you are a new faculty member, you should know that it is quite common to try to do too much. We want to teach our students everything we know about the subject in one semester. Keep your **focus on what your students can learn** in that semester, or at least should be able to learn in that semester if they are sufficiently skilled to be ready for your course. Another common concern is how one will fill all the class time. Remember that lecture is not the only way, and in fact is it often not the best way to reach students. You might lecture for 15 minutes on a topic and then have your students spend 30 minutes engaged in discussion, group work, or other activities that make that information real for them.

At the conclusion of this step you should be able to produce:

1. An outline of the course listing each lesson that you can use to build the schedule you will give to your students
2. Learning objectives for each lesson (or at least a good draft of those objectives).

Step Four: Structuring the course to serve learner-centered goals: Building Lessons.

In lesson 4 of this course you will find extensive information about how you can build lessons and learning modules to serve your objectives. If you have but a few days to design your course before it begins, you might wish to skim that lesson very briefly for ideas and then return to this page. If you have several weeks, I recommend reading that lesson before you continue planning your course and the syllabus that describes it.

At the conclusion of this step you should be able to produce:

1. A table or three part list for your use that contains lesson name, objectives and how you plan to approach the lesson, keeping in mind all that you know about how your students can best assimilate that material:

Lesson name	Learning Objectives	Approaches to the Material
Introduction to _____	1. Name 2. Explain	Lecture Video
Principles of _____	1. Explain 2. Demonstrate	Contextual Learning Experience

Step Five: Develop a calendar.

It is time now to be very, very practical.

- Examine the college calendar carefully.
- Remember the impact of holidays on student learning.
- Think about how frequently you plan to give exams (you may wish to reflect upon Lesson 8 in this course).
- Think about the need for breaks for classes of more than two hours.
- Remember to plan something that makes students move at least every twenty minutes, even if the movement is just laughter. (There is more than one reason people sing hymns in church, for example. It wakes people up and keeps them involved.)

Keep your schedule in mind:

- Plan for any conferences or other obligations that may take you away from class.
- Think about the impact of scheduling the due date for all writing assignments in your various courses on the same day. Will you be able to return them all in a timely fashion if you have five or more courses? You might wish to schedule the same courses at the same time and schedule other subjects a few days later, or earlier.

- Assume that you may be absent at least once and make a contingency plan. Nearly everyone is too ill to attend at some point every few years.
- If you are not a morning person, and this is a 7 AM course, plan an activity that opens each class that wakes you and your students up.

At the conclusion of this step you should be able to produce:

1. A course calendar with each lesson clearly identified and linked to a specific date or week. This calendar should include:
 - The name of the lesson
 - Learning objectives
 - Reading Assignments
 - Other Assignment due dates
 - Optional list of approaches that will be used (if you have had time to determine what they will be)

Step Six: Add the support pieces.

You have now built a basic description and outline for your course. Already you have much more information for your students and for yourself than the average faculty member may have thought necessary 20 years ago. Yet there is just a bit more that you can do to help ensure success for the largest possible number of your students.

Focusing On You: Think about and decide:

1. How your students will contact you
 - Provide office hours, e-mail, online discussion board, office phone, etc.
 - You may wish to include a statement of your philosophy regarding faculty-student contact, or the realities of the limitations of your availability if you are an adjunct faculty member.
 - Is a conference a required part of the course?
 - Will the students be required to post their questions to a class discussion board?
 - How quickly can they anticipate a response to phone, e-mail or discussion board inquiries? Be practical - it is important that you "have a life" and are refreshed and excited about teaching each week. Students appreciate knowing your boundaries. They also appreciate faculty who do what they say they will do in terms of responding to questions.
2. If you will publish a statement of educational philosophy, a description of your experience or reference your publications, community activities or other clues to who you are and what you value.
3. If you will give the students one big handout with everything they'll need for the course or if you will supplement the syllabus with handouts for each lesson.
4. If you will create a website for the course.

Focusing on Your Students:

It is extremely helpful to add syllabus content that describes student responsibilities and successful course work. You may wish to include a sample of successful work in the syllabus or post it to a course website.

Describe the skills they need to bring to the course to enable them to succeed. Be careful that these recommendations do not exceed what the college says is necessary for the course. You may wish to point out that students with certain skills will find the course easier and that those who lack those skills will need to plan additional study and preparation time. Offer references to support services (please see the module "*Student Support Services*" for more information.) Most commonly these include:

- Tutorial Services 
- Library Services 
- Writing and Learning Centers

You may wish to add information about how to take notes in the class, or how to read materials in the discipline. Study tips are also welcomed by students. For more on this topic see the module "Helping Your Students".

Be sure to include a statement about the services available to **disabled students** on your campus.  [Disabled Student Programs & Services](#). Be sure you are familiar with the legal protections for students who you might think will not succeed due to their disability (most can and do).

Describe their responsibilities:

- What assignments are required?
- What are the due dates?
- What is your policy on late work?
- Describe plagiarism as it applies to your field.  [Cheating and Plagiarism policies](#). Never assume they should know. Different cultures have different interpretations. Make yours clear.
- What is your attendance and participation policy. Is it linked to their grade? If it is, think about how you plan to justify the link.

Describe what you mean by **active learning** if you plan to engage your students. A learner-centered class does *not* center around your brilliant lecture. It may include your brilliant lecture, but it should also engage students. Passive students do not learn and retain material as effectively as those who are involved. Be clear about your expectations for student involvement.

Be explicit about technology requirements:

If you expect your students to search the internet, write e-mail, access a class website, or use a discussion board, **make those expectations clear in writing on the first day**. List them carefully and explain them. Review them orally, and check student understanding. Do not assume that your students have prior knowledge (although most will have some experience).

Describe where they can access computers and give them the hours for your campus. You may wish to include local library or other community services.

[View an example of a detailed learner-centered syllabus](#)

Download a Sample Syllabus Template with a few recommended phrases:

 [sylabussample.doc](#) or  [PDF version](#).

Some colleges have adopted recommended syllabus templates that provide wording required by that college. Check to see if your college has a required or optional template.

Remember there is a discussion of **how to build your syllabus using Microsoft Publisher** in the "Apply" Section.

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