

Teaching

A series of practical and innovative teaching tips for college faculty No. 17

The Top 10...

Create a Memorable AND Functional Syllabus

A syllabus has three purposes: it introduces the course (not the subject, which is your job in the first class), it tells students the “rules you both will live by,” and it protects you in the event there is a problem. However, as important as this document is, students often give it simply a passing glance at the beginning of the semester, and many forget that the document even exists by week three. Help students focus on and remember what is important, and be mindful of what your syllabus communicates to students.

- ✓ **Keep everything short.** Course description. Assignment listing. Students will invest in an experience; they will scan or skip a long paragraph. Convey the focus and importance of the course to them through experiences during the first class. Giving brief assignment descriptions initially gives you flexibility to adjust them based upon the students in that class (something you could mention to them).
- ✓ **Welcome** rather than scare students. Be personal and inviting. In fact, consider writing “Welcome” and signing your name on each syllabus. Consider whether the wording of your syllabus is defensive, presumptuous, or condescending.
- ✓ **What does your syllabus reflect about you?** Assume someone does not know you. What would a glance at your syllabus say about you, your personality, and the course? Is this what you mean to communicate?
- ✓ **Ask colleagues** if you can review their syllabi and pick out particularly useful ways of presenting information. Want examples of policies for attendance, giving tests, or papers? Ask colleagues.

- ✓ Consider developing a **creative syllabus**, particularly if you can use it to engage different learning styles. The internet offers many cool and creative ways to design and organize a syllabus.
- ✓ **State only those rules that you actually intend to follow** and then make sure you follow them. When in doubt, be a little stricter than you think necessary to give yourself a little room to adjust for **extraordinary** circumstances.
- ✓ Include **pictures and visuals**. A photo relevant to your discipline, perhaps? A funny cartoon that relates either to the course or an important point in your syllabus? A photo of you to make the syllabus personal without self-aggrandizing?
- ✓ Try **color**. Colored paper makes your syllabus stand out, but colored ink makes it memorable. Everyone likes color, and it makes your syllabus alive and memorable. Dark colors are easy to read, provided that you use colored type creatively and judiciously. When choosing a **font**, always consider the readability of the font for weaker readers and other language learners.
- ✓ **Give students the realistically best way to contact you**. Do you check your e-mail incessantly, but your voicemail once a week?
- ✓ **Ask students to review your syllabus**, picking out what they believe are the most important items and any that are confusing. Make this a small group exercise in the first class and you both get students to know each other a bit, and to really review the syllabus. If you think something is important and your students did not seem to notice it, make it more prominent next time. Revise anything students find confusing.

Bonus!

- ✓ Know all the rules and required information that your college or department require in syllabi. Include this on its own page.

(See the next page for a list of the full *Teaching Top 10* catalog!)

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