

Resource Guide

The Syllabus as a Communication Tool

The syllabus serves as the first impression students will have for course content and assessment. A clear, well-written syllabus can be an invaluable resource for students, while an abstract, incomplete syllabus will often lead to confusion. Svinicki and McKeachie (2014) recommend constructing a syllabus to clearly outline the role of both the student and the teacher. While short and simple might seem more effective in welcoming students and not overwhelming them, Davis (2009) recommends a long and thorough syllabus that is comprehensive but not unnecessarily detailed to the point that it loses intellectual focus. Here are some general strategies Davis suggests keeping in mind while developing a syllabus.

- Understand the multiple roles a syllabus plays.
 - Source of course information, guide to expectations/prerequisites, statement of relevant university policies, contract, etc.
- Consider the syllabi of other faculty
 - Other syllabi within your department can help to clarify how your class relates to others in the department. It can also help inspire new ways to format/organize your syllabus
- Anticipate general questions that will be in the minds of students
 - Questions like “will I be able to do the work” and “why should I take this course” are likely to be on the minds of students as they enter your class
- Keep the syllabus flexible
 - Anticipate offering a revised schedule at midterm or shifting topics forward/back depending on how quickly the class moves. Be sure to inform students of your approach to flexibility (e.g., lecture topics may shift but quizzes/exam dates will never change).
- Provide the syllabus as early as possible
 - This may help students decide if your class is a good fit for them before the semester starts, possibly freeing up slots for more interested students. It also helps to accommodate students with disabilities who may need time to convert the syllabus

Resources

Davis, B. G. (2009). *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

McKeachie, W. & Svinicki, M. (14th eds.). (2014). *McKeachie's teaching tips*. Cengage Learning

Slattery, J. M., & Carlson, J. F. (2005). Preparing an effective syllabus: Current best practices. *College Teaching*, 53(4), 159-164

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at ctl@slu.edu.