

The Syllabus as a Teaching Tool

A large part of the rationale for clear syllabi lies in the need for our courses to reflect our teaching and learning goals--departmental and institutional--so that we can demonstrate to accrediting bodies our systematic assessment of students.

But this isn't the only reason to create good syllabi. A good syllabus--one that is well constructed and then referred to repeatedly throughout the semester--can be an essential teaching tool. We have gone beyond the days when a syllabus was merely a calendar or a list of texts or chapters to read, problems to do, or assignments to hand in. To help students get a coherent and comprehensive education, it's necessary that we explain to them the rationale for our courses and what they should expect to get out of them.

Your UMBC course is unfamiliar territory to students. Indeed, your entire discipline may be unfamiliar territory. What you take for granted as signposts, connections, obvious landmarks, and "the big picture" may not exist for students, who experience the information and concepts in your discipline as one large jungle, or a meandering maze of details without point or purpose. A syllabus is an excellent tool for providing a necessary overview, which, like a good map, can be referred to again and again.

A syllabus, of course, can only be as good as the design of the class itself. For many faculty, explicitly articulating our learning goals for students is the most difficult aspect of course design. But without this articulation, the direction of our course can become extremely confusing to students, and our grading can become haphazard or even unfair, since assessing what students have learned must be carefully tied to the learning goals we have announced to them. Dee Fink, author of *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*, has several useful resources on the web that can help walk you through the process of outlining learning goals (see resources below).

One of the key points Fink makes about goals is that we need to move beyond the "understand and remember" kind to ones that are longer lasting: "What would I like the impact of this course to be on students, 2-3 years after the course is over? What would distinguish students who have taken this course from students who have not?" As Fink explains: "When students and teachers think about what students can learn that is truly significant, their answers usually include, but do not focus on, 'understand and remember' kinds of learning. More often they emphasize such things as critical thinking, learning how to creatively use knowledge from the course, learning to solve real-world problems, changing the way students think about themselves and others, realizing the importance of life-long learning, etc." (Self-Directed Guide, p. 8).

A good first step to improving a syllabus is to share it with colleagues for feedback. Students who have previously taken the course might also be able to identify what was useful or confusing in your syllabus. And the Faculty Development Center has resources on course and syllabus design that might provide you with new ideas for clarifying your learning goals. The following list emphasizes the items that good syllabi contain--a list you might use to re-examine the syllabi you are currently using.

1. **Basic course information** (course title, meeting location and time)
2. **Instructor information** (office, office hours, phone, email, website)
3. **Course description and rationale** (what is the course about and why does it exist; how does it fit in with the rest of the university's or department's curriculum?)
4. **Course goals/objectives** (what will the students learn from this course? list specific learning outcomes the course is intended to produce. "By the end of this course, students will be able to. . .")
5. **Format and procedures** (how will the course be structured and how will classes be taught? will there be discussion? an opportunity to ask questions?)
6. **Course requirements** (readings, homework, participation, tests, papers, projects)
7. **Grading procedures** (what will be graded? how will the grading percentages be distributed among assignments?)
8. **Academic integrity information** (please quote the UMBC academic integrity statement at http://www.umbc.edu/undergrad_ed/ai/overview.html or the SGA statement on academic integrity and add information particular to the course)
9. **Information for students with disabilities** (suggested language from Student Support Services may be found at <http://my.umbc.edu/groups/sss/documents/838>)
10. **Course schedule** (dates of class meetings, topics covered, readings/problems/assignments due, test or presentation dates)
11. **Suggestions for achieving course goals and meeting academic expectations** (what have students done in the past to help them perform well? what academic resources exist to help students?)

Resources:

Davis, B. G. (2009). *Tools for Teaching* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

IDEA Papers (Kansas): <http://www.theideacenter.org/research-and-papers/idea-papers>
(Especially No. 27, "Writing a Syllabus" and No. 42, "Integrated Course Design")

Fink, Dee. (2005). Self-Directed Guide to Designing Significant Courses
<http://www.deefinkandassociates.com/GuidetoCourseDesignAug05.pdf>

Fink, L. Dee (2003). *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

O'Brien, J. Grunert, Millis, B., & Cohen, M. W. (2008). *The Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centered Approach* (2nd ed.). Bolton, MA: Anker.

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<http://www.umbc.edu/fdc/> Engineering Suite 101B, phone 410-455-1829.