# Developing an Effective Course Syllabus

A syllabus is most effective when it welcomes students to class, affirms students' ability to master course content, indicates the instructor's support for student success, and demystifies the course for students. The language of the syllabus should be encouraging and welcoming instead of punishing and unwelcoming. This guide will provide an overview of syllabus components, link you to additional resources and examples, and provide examples of language use for creating a welcoming syllabus.

## Components of a Syllabus

### Introductory Material

The syllabus opens with basic course information including the course prefix and title, meeting location and time, and instructor contact information. The introductory material will also include information about when and where students can get help.

*Office Hours vs Student Hours*: We typically indicate a time and place for office hours, but most students do not know what this means. Consider cutting jargon and calling these student hours, indicating clearly that it is a time and place that centers students.

### Welcome Statement

The welcome statement sets the tone for course. How will you introduce yourself and your course to students? It is important that your syllabus conveys your excitement about the course and that you want students to succeed. Avoid creating a syllabus that reads like a legal contract. Here is some example language for a welcome statement:

> Welcome to **COURSE #: TITLE OF COURSE**! We're going to have a great time this semester exploring **SHORT COURSE DESCRIPTION** together. My name is **NAME** and I'll be your professor. You can call me (*What would you like to be called?*). I've been teaching this course for (*X number of semesters/years. If this is your first time, you can reveal your excitement there too!*). I always enjoy teaching **TITLE OF COURSE** because (*What excites you here? Something about the students perhaps? Something about your own continued learning? Something about connections to the discipline or community?*).

> Here's a little about me and how I got into **YOUR FIELD** (*You can be as personal or as professional here as you like. The important thing is to infuse your humanity into the syllabus and the course as a whole. In this way, students will realize that you're a real person with interests and a life. This goes a long way in creating a sense of community, trust, and mutual responsibility in the course community*). I'm looking forward to working with all of you this semester. Please do note that this

syllabus reflects a plan for the semester.  Changes may become necessary as the semester progresses.

## Course Overview

The course overview gives students a general sense of the course. It provides information about the method of delivery and when the course will meet; for example, is there 2 days of lecture and a lab or 2 days of lecture and a discussion section? Will students meet in person and do work in Canvas? Let students know this information before they read the rest of the syllabus. Provide a brief overview of what students can expect in terms of assessment, homework, and time commitment.

## Course Purpose

The course purpose outlines the course learning outcomes and how student learning connects to the major, career, and life. The learning outcomes should be observable and measurable (See Developing Course Student Learning Outcomes). Here is some sample language for the course purpose section:

> Have you ever thought about how **CONNECT TO COURSE CONTENT?** Did you ever wonder about **CONNECT TO COURSE CONTENT**? This course will give you **DESCRIBE LEARNING**. After finishing this course, you should be able to:
>
> - Observable Course-Level Outcome #1
> - Observable Course-Level Outcome #2
> - Observable Course-Level Outcome #3
> - Observable Course-Level Outcome #4
>
> Your new skills should help you in the following ways:
>
> - Connection to major (next course, certificate, etc.), career, or life.
> - Connection to major (next course, certificate, etc.), career, or life.
> - Connection to major (next course, certificate, etc.), career, or life.

This section is also where you can connect the course learning outcomes to your program outcomes, UNC's Institutional Learning Outcomes, and any LAC learning outcomes if this is a course in the LAC course. The LAC has specific syllabus requirements.

## Course Materials

The course materials section provides information on the course textbook, costs, and other materials such as lab manuals, study guides, supplemental readings, and materials such as notebooks or special equipment. It is a good idea to break this section up using images and colors. (See UNC's BIO 110 syllabus for a good example of this section).

## Canvas

If you are using Canvas as a supplement to your in-person class discuss that here. If this is a fully online or mixed face-to-face course you should discuss this in the Course Overview section. Give detailed information about how students will use Canvas during your course.
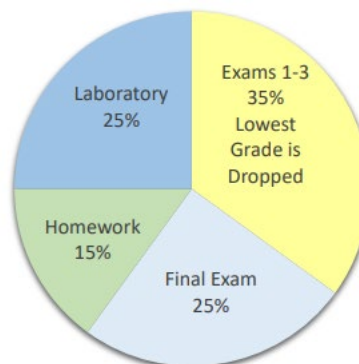
If you are not using Canvas you will not include this section.

## Assignments

Provide an overview of the exams, quizzes, written assignments, labs, etc. for students. This is not specific details of each assignment but general information such as what is covered in the exams, late policies, grading policies, etc. Break this section down by the type of assignment (i.e. Exams, Research Paper, Journal Assignments). This is where you can indicate if students will need to dedicate time to library research and other activities.

## Grading

Provide a breakdown of the grading scale used in the course and provide detailed information about grading policies and course percentages. Consider using an image so that students can visualize the grade distribution.



## Course Support/Help

Course support/help provides students with tips for class success. Provide students with tips for how they will be successful in the course and your recommendations for how they should engage in the course before, during, and after class. Provide students with information about how to get help from you and campus resources related to your course such as lab help and tutoring. If you know the frequently asked questions related to your course such as accessing Canvas, getting started with the first assignment, or fee questions answer those here.

## Policies

The policies section provides an overview of class and campus policies.
- *Class Policies* are specific to you and your course such as use of electronic devices. This also includes class etiquette (or netiquette in the case of an online course).  Do not forget a discussion of class etiquette and classroom norms. This is especially important for an online course.

- *Campus Policies* are general policies related to academic integrity and student support. These may include Academic Integrity, Disability statement, Preferred name policy, Student Code of Conduct, Title IX. A list of policies and syllabus statements can be found on the Registrar's website.

## Course Schedule

The course schedule outlines the course with specific dates, topics, and due dates. Provide information about how the course is organized. For example, if you are teaching an online course discuss the number of modules and how students will work through the course. If you are teaching a mixed face-to-face course describe how students will work in-person and online. Below are example templates. You can download an editable schedule template for online and face to face courses.

Online Course. This schedule is broken down by online module.

| Date | Topic | Assignments | Due Dates |
|---|---|---|---|
| Week 1: Dates | Module 1: Welcome | | |
| Week 2: Dates | | | |
| Week 3: Dates | | | |
| Week 4: Dates | | | |

Mixed Face-to-Face/In-Person. This schedule is broken down by date not week. The weeks are color coded.

| Date | Topic | Assignments Due Today | Homework |
|---|---|---|---|
| M 9/24 | | | |
| W 9/26 | | | |
| F 9/28 | | | |
| M Date | | | |
| W Date | | | |
| F Date | | | |

# The Importance of Language and Tone

The syllabus should use welcoming language that makes the student feel welcome in the course. Here are some examples of welcoming and unwelcoming language.

| | ✔ Welcoming Language | ✘ Unwelcoming Language |
|---|---|---|
| **Office Hours** | Office Hours: 233 Jones Hall MWF 10:00-10:50 AM; TR 9:30-10:30 AM jsmith@hotmail.com<br><br>I welcome you to contact me outside of class and student hours. You may email me, call my office, or contact the department and leave a message. | Office Hours: 233 Jones Hall MWF 10:00-10:50 AM; TR 9:30-10:30 AM jsmith@hotmail.com<br><br>If you need to contact me outside of office hours, you may email me, call my office, or contact the department and leave a message. |
| **Course Goals** | Some of the specific skills I hope you will obtain in this course are listed below. Being a critical consumer of information about mental processes and behavior is important; all of these activities will help you become one, and it is my hope that you will use the skills in your daily life. | Some of the specific skills you should obtain in this course are listed below. Because you are not yet a critical consumer of information about mental processes and behavior, all of these activities will help you become one, and if you are motivated enough, use the skills in your daily life. |
| **Attendance** | You should attend every class, but extenuating circumstances arise that can make this difficult. If you cannot attend a class, please let me know. If circumstances make you miss more than 3 classes during the semester, you may be overextended. I ask that you come see me to discuss your options. | I expect you to attend every class. If you cannot attend a class, please let me know. If circumstances make you miss more than 3 classes during the semester, I will drop you from the class roster in accordance with the college's attendance policy. |
| **Late Work** | If for some substantial reason you cannot turn in your papers or take an exam at the scheduled time you should contact me prior to the due date, or test date, or you will only be eligible for 80% of the total points. | If for some substantial reason you cannot turn in your papers or take an exam at the scheduled time you must contact me prior to the due date, or test date, or you will be graded down 20%. |

Adapted from USC's Center for Urban Education Syllabus Review Guide

Document created by Dr. Lyda McCartin, July 3, 2020

Materials adapted from:

UNC's Instructional Design and Development
Fisher, G. & Keenan, M. (2020). Tips for creating a more inclusive syllabus. The Teaching Professor.
Center for Urban Education, Syllabus Review Guide
Dr. Ginger Fisher's BIO 110 syllabus example (UNC course)
Georgia State Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning