



COURSE OUTLINES

Introduction

The course outline is, on some level, a learning management tool for you and for students. It's also a textual trace of your teaching approach, a contract with your learners, and a survival guide. It is a vehicle for Departmental and University policies, and can range from minimalist to an integral part of an interactive pedagogical approach. There are several things to think about in designing a syllabus, including the formatting (we recommend a "Universal Instructional Design" approach; see resource page at the end), the content (we believe that getting the course objectives right will help the rest follow), and the in-class use of the syllabus (an administrative question that is also pedagogical). Whether you choose to go with "just the facts" or make a course outline that is longer and more complex, we hope you'll find this guide, the accompanying checklist, and listed resources to be useful.

A Learner-Centred Approach

To be learning-centred is "...to consider how each and every aspect of your course can most effectively support student learning.... Your syllabus can be an important point of interaction between you and your students, both in and out of class. The traditional syllabus is primarily a source of information for your students. While including basic information, the learning-centred syllabus can be an important learning tool that will reinforce the intentions roles, attitudes and strategies that you will use to promote active, purposeful, effective learning." (Grunert, 1997; 3).

The course syllabus is the first opportunity you have to introduce students to a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning. One of the four "pillars" of learner-centredness identified in Guelph's 1995 Strategic plan is "self-reliant learning." To what degree can a course outline prepare a student for this? One suggestion might be a "syllabus quiz" – using part of your first lecture to conduct an activity for students to do that forces them to interact with each other, with you, and with the syllabus itself as a resource. You could even consider using a quiz approach that reflects how you'll be testing content later in the course, and being explicit about that with students. This gives them a dry run without the sweat of an exam situation but still keyed directly to your course through the successful digestion of the syllabus.

An effective learner-centred syllabus should accomplish the following basic goals:
(Diamond, as cited in Grunert, 1997)

- √ define student responsibilities
- √ define instructor role(s) and responsibilities to students
- √ provide a clear statement of intended goals and student outcomes
- √ establish standards and procedures for evaluation
- √ acquaint students with course logistics
- √ establish a pattern of communication between instructor and students

Outline Functions: A Learner-Centred Approach

A learner-centred outline also serves several key functions (adapted from Grunert, 1997; 14-19)

- Establishes an early point of contact and connection between the student and instructor.
- Helps set the tone for the course.
- Describes your beliefs about educational purposes.
- Acquaints students with the logistics of the course.
- Helps students to assess their readiness for your course.
- Sets the course in a broader context for learning.
- Describes available learning resources.
- Communicates the role of technology in the course.
- Can include material that supports learning outside of the classroom.
- Serves as a learning contract. Details of the Guelph context are as follows:

Resolution 4

Part A

That, by the start of the course selection period for the semester in which the course will be offered, instructors will provide a course description for posting to the department web site. This course description shall include a brief summary of the course topics and requirements, the general format of the course, and the methods of evaluation.

Part B

That, by the first class meeting of the course (by the end of the first week of classes for distance education courses), the instructor must provide students with a written course outline that is a detailed description of course requirements, the methods of evaluation, and the timing of the evaluations.

Resolution 5

That the methods and/or timing of evaluation as indicated on the course outline should not be changed after the first class meeting except under strictly adhered to conditions. Notice of proposed change and of the class at which consent is to be sought, must be given at a previously scheduled class. Where the change is supported by the instructor and is consistent with University policies and procedures such change may be enacted with the unanimous consent of students. If unanimous consent of the students has not been obtained, the change may be enacted only with the approval of the chair of the department and only if alternative and equitable accommodation is available to students opposed to the change.

Planning Your Syllabus

As you draft your syllabus, consider the following design elements.

- Convey a well-grounded rationale for your course.
- Decide what you want students to be able to do, know, and/or appreciate as a result of taking your course AND how their work will be appropriately assessed.
- Define and delimit course content (key concepts, ideas, theories).
- Identify and develop resources.
- Compose your syllabus with a focus on active student learning.

RESOURCES

Davis, G. B. (1993). *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Garavalia, L., Hummer, J., Wiley, L. & Huit, W. (1999). "Constructing the course syllabus. Faculty and student perceptions of important syllabus components." *Journal of Excellence in College Teaching*, 10 (1) 5-21.

Gronlund, N. E. (1995). *How to Write and Use Instructional Objectives*. (5th edition). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.

Grunert, J. (1997). *The Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centred Approach*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

Leeds, J. (1993). "The Course Syllabus as Seen by the Undergraduate Student." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association. Washington, DC. August 14-18, 1992. (ED356747)

Matejka, K. & Kurke, L. (1994). "Designing a Great Syllabus." *College Teaching*, 42 (3), 115-117.

Online Syllabus Example with Commentary

<http://www.hcc.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/syllab-4.htm>

Prégent, R. (1994). *Charting Your Course: How to Prepare to Teach More Effectively*. Madison, WI: Magna Publications, Inc.

Woodcock, Michael J.V. "Constructing a Syllabus."

http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Sheridan_Center/publications/syllabus.html

See also:

<http://www.polsci.wvu.edu/facdis/exemplarylist.htm>

<http://speech.ipfw.edu/diversity/syllabi.html>

<http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/uid/guides/syllabusUIDprinc.html>