

Crafting a Syllabus

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Your syllabus sets the tone and framework for your class and is your first communication with the students. Spend the time and effort to create a really good syllabus rather than just a minimal one. The first step is the hardest; design your course with a moderate amount of detail. The syllabus can now be divided into types of information: descriptive paragraphs that need to be written, basic information that needs to be included (and may take some time to assemble but won't be hard to write), and finally the course schedule.

Paragraphs to write:

Course Description or Course Goals: This section should include a general description of what will be covered in the course. A well done syllabus should also include a few sentences on why this course is important or exciting or why you are enamored with the material (not just a prerequisite for another course). An excellent syllabus will include a description of the skills and knowledge the student should have developed by the end of the course.

Grading: In addition to the basic information it is useful to write a few sentences describing your general grading philosophy.

Absences – Late work – Missed tests: Save yourself grief later in endless negotiations and set up some policy by putting it in writing now. Is attendance required in class, lab, and section? Can work be turned in late and with what penalty? Can a missed exam be made up? What is the procedure for advance notification of missing an exam (university trip, two exams at the same time, etc.)? What is the procedure if you were having an emergency appendectomy at the time of the exam or other equally serious and unpredictable emergency?

Assignments: Write a few sentences about the types of assignments you will give and why they are valuable to the students. Write a few sentences about how you want these assignments accomplished. Include any rules that you want followed such as “Put your name, net ID, and assignment number in the upper right hand corner.” Be clear whether students can work together on assignments. Be clear how much detail is needed in problem solutions.

Academic Integrity: Require academic integrity. Refer to the student handbook. While students should know basic academic integrity rules, take the attitude that you are teaching them the expectations in your field. Set the tone that integrity is an important part of an engineering career and you expect students to be displaying that integrity with respect to your course. If students feel that you care about them and are treating them fairly and with respect, they are more likely to respond in kind.

Optional: Write a paragraph on your teaching philosophy for the class.

Active learning/innovative class components: If you are including active learning components during class or doing something innovative during class meetings, it is usually a good idea to put in a few sentences of explanation of what you will be doing and why it is valuable to the students. Students are used to lectures and they are the path of least resistance though not the most learning. Don't be afraid to experiment with some new approaches to teaching; just let the students know the "what" and the "why".

Basic Information (required):

Course information

Course name, number, credit hours, days and times, room and building
Information on sections or labs that everyone needs to know (individual lab and section syllabi can be handed out in labs and sections)

Your information

Name, office hours, office, preferred method of contact (if email: when do you typically reply and to what types of questions),

TA/grader information

Name(s), roles in course, office hours and office location, contact information (email?)

Grading: Students really care about this. Give enough information that students can tell what goes into computing their grade and how much each component is weighted. (If you don't put this in the syllabus you will be answering the question all semester and opening yourself up to arguments on grades).

Lab and Safety Information: as needed

Textbook, calculators and any other required materials: If any of these materials will be in the library or online let the students know.

Course website: Give information on how to access the website, what kinds of information will be there and how often or when it will be updated.

Exams: How many, dates (if known), times (in class, evening (check info on evening prelims))
When is the final exam or when is a final project due?

Course Schedule (the hardest part):

You need to provide some sort of schedule for the class. That is why you filled out the content grid and mapped your course onto a calendar. Now you need to make a less detailed version for the students. Make sure you label the schedule tentative and subject to change. You

want to give the students a tool to help plan ahead but you don't want to lock yourself into too much detail for every lecture. Three possible approaches are shown below:

Tentative schedule

Week 1: Introduction, chapter 1, start chapter 2

Week 2: finish chapter 2

Week 3-4: chapter 3

Week 5: start chapter 4, exam

Musical Acoustics: Tentative schedule subject to change

Week 1	Jan 21	Introduction, slinky activity measuring waves	
	Jan 23	Types of sounds, creation, propagation, detection	
Week 2	Jan 26	Frequency, pendulum activity, vibrations and waves	
	Jan 28	$V = \lambda f$, units, force	
	Jan 30	Conservation of energy	Hw 1 due

Approximate schedule

Introduction to sounds and waves: 2 weeks

Classes of instruments, sound production, wave propagation: 2 week

Properties of sound, decibels: 1 week

Physics of hearing: 1 week

Study of each instrument class: 5 weeks

Voice: 1 week

Room acoustics: 1 week

The middle format takes the most work. I recommend creating something with this much detail for yourself as it will help you to pace the course. It allows you to drop a section here and there across the course if you run out of time rather than having to drop an entire chapter at the end. You can also deliberately plan in some less critical topics that you can remove if needed. This level of detail will also keep you on track across the semester when you need to focus your attention elsewhere (research, family, etc.). You will then be able to look at the master schedule and just plan one lecture and know that the course flow is on track without spending time worrying about the big picture right then. As you go through the semester make notes by your schedule for future reference. Especially if you are teaching a course for the first time, I would recommend using the first or last format to give students a sense of how the course will progress without locking yourself in. You can give them more detailed information a week or a month or "till the next exam" at a time. That might be good information to post on the website if you have one. You don't want to have to repeatedly correct the schedule you give the students so if you do give them a detailed schedule and you get significantly off from it, just hand out an updated version that resets the rest of the course (pull some later material and fit from where you are at the change), don't change the schedule day by day or as that gives a poor impression.

Assemble the syllabus:

Now that you have written all the pieces, assemble the syllabus. Think about what goes on the front page, what you want the students to see for sure.

Proofread several times across several days. Get someone in your department to read the syllabus. Send it to TEI for reading if you want (klc78@cornell.edu). You don't want a mistake on the syllabus.

Possible Content Order and Checklist:

Basic Course information

Course description

Your information

TA/grader information

Required materials

Exam dates (if known)

Course philosophy (if you wrote one)

Class meetings/innovation/active learning (if included this section)

Assignment description

Academic Integrity

Grading Policies

Late/missed assignments, exams

Students with disabilities

Tentative Schedule