

# DESIGNING COURSE POLICIES FOR PLEASURE AND PROFIT

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Few things are, in my mind, as much a staple of college education as sitting in a classroom on the first day of classes and being handed out a neatly typed up document outlining the topics that will be covered as well as various course policies in a class that one is hoping to take. This handout will focus on the second part of this document, the part that collects information about the class as well as the course policies students will be expected to follow, and the process of putting these in writing in a document that, for lack of a more precise term, we will call a syllabus.

Since there are few better things to do to occupy the sometimes awkward first meeting of a section, a syllabus is often presented to students on the first day of classes, when they still have the opportunity to drop the class if they deem the course policies unacceptable to them. Although preparing a well thought out syllabus before the beginning of the semester might seem like a daunting task, articulating clear and consistent demands of your students will help you establish your role as a TA, as well as prevent some of the complaining students might do later in the semester. To achieve these goals, a syllabus should create a fair and impartial understanding between you and the students of what will be expected of them and how they will be evaluated in your course. Having such an understanding in writing is invaluable for at least three reasons: First, reading through this document along with the students presents a good opportunity to tell students the rationale behind the various policies, which will in turn help them accept these policies and follow them. Secondly, in the unfortunate case of an argument with a student, pointing to the syllabus allows you to cite a seemingly objective rule, which presumably the student had agreed to follow by remaining in your section. Finally, and this may seem silly but it is too often overlooked, students cannot meet course expectations of which they are unaware or that they do not understand, and the syllabus helps ensure that students and TA are on the same page as far as such things are concerned.

The sort of information that might be found on a syllabus can be broadly divided in three types:

I. “Objective information”

These are all the facts that students should know about the class, and in this case the syllabus is a convenient reference. Putting this together might involve your contacting the course lecturer to obtain this information. It might include:

- Lecture information (classroom, name of Professor, etc.)
- Required and recommended texts
- Material required and recommended, as well as material that is prohibited (for example a calculator in a math class)
- Course website and discussion section website
- Your contact information
- Your office hours (location and time)
- Pre-requisites and co-requisites
- Grading scheme
- Where the homework, quizzes, readings, etc. can be found
- Dates of exams (including final exam)

- Safety rules
- Relevant laboratory information such as where to obtain equipment, etc.

## II. “Policy information”

This will typically be more personal to you and reflect your teaching style. It outlines what students should expect from you, as well as what you expect from them. Ideally all expectations should be supported by a rationale furthering the students success.

- All of the homework and assignment policies: when, where and how homework will be collected, whether late homework will be accepted, and how it will be graded (for example on completeness or accuracy)
- Conflict policies: what students should do if they must be absent on the day a homework or assignment is due, on the day of a quiz, or on the day of an exam. You might want to include a word about contacting you at the beginning of any long-term absence rather than after.
- Quiz policies if applicable
- Participation and attendance policies: importantly, exactly what counts as participation or attendance and how they will be graded, and a word about preparedness and tardiness
- How extra credit may be earned if at all
- Re-grade policies: whether students will have the opportunity to submit their graded exams for re-grades and what is the proper procedure to do so

## III. Tips to succeed:

Finally, some TAs like to include a list of resources for their students, such as websites where tutors advertize their services, free tutoring centers, or online materials. You might also include an estimate of how much time should be spent on each of the various assignments, a guide on how to study for exams, a remark on the importance of completing the homework before the exam, writing techniques, or any other tip that might help students develop good learning habits in your class.

Finally, I would say that the most important reason I put so much effort writing a syllabus is out of respect for my students. I consider the syllabus as a contract between my students and me, with the underlying assumption that they are free to make the decision to stay in my class. They should enter the contract in full awareness of the demands that will be put on them, and the rationale behind these demands. I hold my end of the contract by enacting the policies written in the syllabus in a fair and consistent manner, and by sincerely attempting to put their learning success first in all of my actions. I have found that such an understanding of the classroom dynamics has made me consider my teaching for pleasure much more than for profit.