

A SYLLABUS GUIDEBOOK

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THE SYLLABUS: SOME BASIC OBSERVATIONS

The purpose of this Guidebook is to compile some of the best recommendations about syllabus constructions and syllabus contents for the use of faculty at the University of North Florida. The UNF Faculty Association has adopted, and the Provost and President approved, the following University Policy:

"Students must be provided written information about the goals and requirements of each course, the nature of the course content, and the methods of evaluation to be employed."

The policy was adapted from requirements set forth during our last round of accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). At that time SACS required that in undergraduate courses, "Students must be provided written information about the goals and requirements of each course, the nature of the course content, and the methods of evaluation to be employed. Methods of instruction must be appropriate to the goals of each course and the capabilities of the students Experimentation with methods to improve instruction must be adequately supported and critically evaluated." (Section 4.2.4). SACS also required that in graduate courses: "Instructional methods and delivery systems must provide students with the opportunity to achieve the stated objectives of a course or program. Students must be informed of the goals and requirements of each course, the nature of course content, and the methods of evaluation to be employed. Methods of instruction must be appropriate for students at the specified level of graduate study." (Section 4.2.5). New SACS procedures will follow a different approach for our next accreditation visitation, but the expectation remains that good college and graduate school courses have syllabi. In addition to these expectations, some individual disciplines have syllabus requirements, as do some colleges or departments on this campus.

All this means, of course, that *each course at UNF should have a syllabus*. If you have to have one, it might as well be a good one. A badly or thoughtlessly constructed syllabus can invite all sorts of unnecessary problems, while a syllabus which presents explicit grading policies, guidelines for student performance, and other requirements and policies can save the teacher from a variety of troubles, such as:

- * endless debates with individual students over these matters,
- * having to repeat the same rules or explain the same course policy verbally to one student after another,
- * student complaints about lack of clarity or fairness on the instructor's part,
- * students believing that they have grounds for grieving their grades--or even suing you!

There are other reasons to have a good syllabus. There is some research evidence that excellent teachers and comprehensive, detailed syllabi are directly related. Lough (1997) studied faculty who won the Carnegie Professor of the Year awards and found

similarities in syllabi designed by these award-winning teachers. "Most obvious was the detailed precision of the syllabi. Each contained clearly stated course objectives; a day-by-day schedule identifying specific reading assignments and due dates; and clear statements regarding make-up dates, attendance, and grading standards. They also provided students with times when the professor would be available in the office, by e-mail, and by phone at home. Lough observed, 'One gets the very clear impression that the Carnegie award winners have extraordinary expectations for their own behavior in and out of the classroom. Perhaps it is not so surprising, therefore, that these professors might impose some of these same standards on the students with whom they share so much' These high standards are manifest by what they do in the classroom and also by what they say in their syllabi" (Grunert, 1997).

Furthermore, the syllabus is one of the few concrete connections between you and the students. Though teachers sometimes believe that students will absorb everything they say about the course on the first day, in fact students often don't remember anything other than what is in the syllabus. They need a written record of important features of the course. Also remember that even if the entire first day of class is spent systematically going over the syllabus as a whole document, students will likely thereafter refer to it in *piecemeal* fashion throughout the course, as specific information is needed. Therefore, it will probably be useful to have key components (grading schedule, exam dates, etc.) clearly marked with *subheadings* so that students can easily find the information without having to ask you about it.

Even though a syllabus is not legally considered a contract (the *UNF Catalog* is the official contract between the University and the student), the syllabus may be viewed as a kind of contract in which you can set forth the parameters for the course in which students are choosing to enroll. In fact, some experts assert:

"The syllabus is a contract between you and your students and should be treated much in the same way as a legal contract. It sets forth your responsibilities and those of your students. This does not mean that your calendar or your assignments are set in stone on the first day and that you have no flexibility. Those kinds of precautions can be written in (e.g., "this calendar is subject to change"). It means that both you and your students are agreeing to a certain course of action, with specific expectations on both parts, and you are all accountable for maintaining the agreed upon route. Major changes--like changes in the grading policy or additions of assignments--are not fair to students and should be avoided" (Sinor & Kaplan, 1998, 17).

Clearly, any discussion about the important things to include in a syllabus presumes that you have already done some important *curriculum design* work. This Guidebook is not intended to cover curriculum design, but there are some things which we all need to consider about the courses we teach *before* we can write syllabi to guide them. Among the curriculum design issues to be considered *prior* to writing a syllabus are:

1. **What are the overall purposes and specific goals of this course?** Check the

description in the UNF Catalog to see what this course is *supposed* to cover. Courses which differ significantly from the catalog description may result in student complaints. If there are bona fide reasons for updating/changing the course content, then that means the catalog copy probably needs revision.

2. **Where does this course fit in the larger curriculum? What is unique about what this course is supposed to cover or accomplish?** Presumably this course has some distinct purpose within the overall curriculum. Review the closely related courses to make sure you know what topics/issues you need to cover in this course which are distinct--or should be covered in greater depth--than are covered in closely related courses. Also, are there prior components of the discipline which might need to be reviewed briefly at the beginning of this course? Are there issues which are NOT treated adequately anywhere else? Are there cutting-edge topics or issues which need to be raised here? Students know when their professors have been thoughtful about the content of the course.
3. **What do you want students to know--or be able to do--at the end of the course?** It is very helpful to be clear about what tangible outcomes you expect of your students by the end of the course. Accreditation guidelines increasingly require demonstrable measures of outcomes, but good course design also requires this. For practice-oriented courses, it may be easy to identify skills or abilities students are expected to master by the end of the course. Even for courses which are primarily oriented toward ways of thinking, however, it should be possible to identify what you expect students to know or do by the end of the course. Never *promise* in the syllabus that students *will* know or be able to do these things--that is partly up to them! But you should be able to describe what you expect.
4. **What is the best format for this course in terms of its content?** There are many ways of presenting material, and some material is better learned through some strategies than others. The college classroom is not limited to the lecture anymore! What is the *best* way for students to effectively learn this course content? [If you want some assistance in thinking about the best way to help students learn, consult with the UNF Office of Faculty Enhancement].
5. **Is your preferred format for this course affected by the number of students expected to enroll in the course (e.g., 20 students versus 200)?** Clearly, the enrollment cap for your course may affect your choice of format, since some learning strategies are hard to do with 200 students while others are impossible with fewer than 20. Similarly, course components such as written assignments may need to be modified if you are dealing with a lot of students.
6. **Are there any other life realities (e.g., the rest of your workload this term, unusual events around which you must schedule, etc.) which affect your choices for written projects, testing formats, assignment deadlines, classroom formats, etc.?** Check the semester calendar each semester for

holidays, deadlines (such as the withdrawal date or the freshman midterm grade due date), and the final exam schedule. Check your own calendar for conferences or other events which might require you to be away so that you can plan appropriate classroom coverage for your absence. You may also want to make sure you don't schedule all your classes with exam dates at the same time or project due dates close together.

Having taken all these things into consideration, it is also advised that faculty consider the *tone* you would like to establish in your syllabus. If you are a formal person or you want to run the course in a formal way, then a formal tone in the syllabus will help to convey that. If you want a more conversational or interactional mode in the classroom, then a more informal tone in your syllabus might be warranted.

Please note that there is no magic formula for the *length* of a syllabus. A comprehensive, well-constructed syllabus might easily be four or five pages--or many more--if there are detailed requirements for written papers or other assignments. The inclusion of assignments, exercises, lecture outlines, articles to read or other resources may result in a syllabus which is 20 or 30 pages in length! Two considerations in this regard:

- a. The more you include in the syllabus, the less you have to improvise or decide spontaneously, and the fewer student questions you have to answer or debates you have to deal with during the semester. If students know everything that will be required of them, and the specifications for all assignments, the better their ability to plan their semester and the less they have to pester the instructor for clarifications.
- b. On the other hand, you don't want to overwhelm students on the first day with information which they might understand better later on in the semester. Many teachers believe that specific assignments, review sheets, exercises, etc., are better handed out later on, when they can be discussed separately or when students have some background for understanding them. We just have to acknowledge the fact that some students will lose separate syllabus components if they are not connected physically in the first place. However, making syllabi available electronically (through Blackboard, department websites, your own website, etc.) means students can access copies of the syllabus anytime they need it.

What follows are recommendations for syllabi contents from a variety of experts in the field. Not all things recommended below will be appropriate for all faculty or all courses. They are set forth here as ideas for you to consider in preparation of your syllabi.

POSSIBLE COMPONENTS OF A SYLLABUS

1. Complete course information:

- a. **course number and full title.** (Course numbers can change--make sure

you have the correct number, even if you have taught this course before)

- b. **the particular semester and year of this course** (e.g., Fall 2006)
- c. **days, hours and location of class meetings**
- d. **required or recommended course prerequisites, including permissions.** (For example: "Since all students in this course must have completed ECO 2023, 'Principles of Microeconomics,' the basic concepts from that course will be assumed. Please see me any time during the semester if you have difficulty with basic ideas.")
- e. **any required review sessions, and days/times and locations of these**
- f. **any required laboratories, recitation/discussion sessions, field trips, rehearsals or other additional meetings outside of the normal classroom meeting times, and their days/times and locations.** (For example: "All students will be required to attend at least two (2) performances this semester of the Beaches Jazz Group, which performs each weekend at the Lazy A Club in Jacksonville Beach. Any student with conflicts or other problems with this assignment must talk with the instructor in advance about alternate methods of fulfilling this assignment.")
- g. **any course materials, exercises, assignments or supplementary resources from the Internet and their URLs.**
- h. **requirements satisfied by this course, such as major core requirements, general education requirements, writing-across-the-curriculum requirements, or any other graduation requirements of the institution or department.** (For example: "This course is also a core requirement in the College of Arts and Sciences' Major in International Studies and Minor in International Studies programs at UNF. Note, however, that the course does NOT count as an upper-divisional elective for economic majors, who must take ECO 3703 instead. International Business majors may not take this course. Most other business majors are also better served in ECO 3703. This course may NOT be used as an upper-division economics course for any business major.")

2. Information about yourself:

- a. your name and title (so students know how to address you)
 - b. your office hours (days/times), office location and your phone number(s)
 - c. the departmental phone number(s), if different from yours
 - d. your e-mail address(es)
 - e. your home page URL (if you have one)
 - f. the e-mail address for any group e-mail for this class (if you have one)
 - g. your home phone (only if you want students to call you there), and any restrictions on its use (such as only during certain hours or in emergencies)
 - h. other optional information (such as your degrees, universities attended, other universities where you have taught and/or conducted research, areas of research expertise, or other expertise or practice which qualifies you for this course, etc.) which might personalize you to the students.
3. **The same information about any other course personnel, such as teaching assistants, technicians, lab managers, etc.**
 4. **General and specific instructional objectives for this course, including what students should know or be able to do--or do better--at the end of the term.** (For example: "There are three general objectives for this course: (1) To help the student to understand the **social context** of crime and of crime control efforts; (2) To give the student a broad understanding of the **basic facts and figures** which comprise the body of knowledge in the field of criminology/criminal justice; and (3) To help the student understand the importance of **critical thinking** in the study of criminology/criminal justice. The components of this course are designed to enhance your ability to achieve these objectives.")
 5. **Complete course description, including the organization of the course and its major topics.** (For example: "The course begins with an introduction to international economic terms, concepts, data sources and institutions. Then, the benefit of free trade are analyzed, paying careful attention to those small groups who are injured by trade. Will also examine global trade policies since World War II. Given the attempt by the World Trade Organization to launch a 'millennium round' of global trade talks, the course is built around an analysis of regional and global trade agreements. In addition, we will study other current international economic issues, such as the Asian currency crisis and the launching of the new European currency [the Euro]. We will also discuss other issues that arise during the term.")
- Note: You may also want to describe what the course will NOT cover, if**

your course has too much "popular appeal" or tends to attract students who are less than serious. You can also describe overall themes in the course, or in the discipline and how this course relates to theme. This can also be the place for describing your overall philosophical assumptions (e.g., "This course adopts the theoretical perspective of the social constructionists") or your pedagogical assumptions in this course (e.g., "It is assumed that all students enrolled in this course can view and interpret film clips which will be shown during the class. Any student who believes that his/her ability to view and/or interpret film clips may be compromised in some way should discuss this with the instructor immediately to determine if this course is appropriate for them.")

6. An annotated list of reading materials (textbooks, journal articles, class packs, Internet materials, supplementary readings, etc.) including:

- a. full citations, including edition
- b. availability location (bookstore, library, reserve status, URL, etc.)
- c. cost, if any
- d. clear identification as "required" or "recommended"
- e. brief reasons for selecting these, if there are similar others to avoid (e.g., "Be sure you get the new third edition of the textbook, as there are significant changes from the second edition.")

Note: If there are commercially available notes, lab notes, or other materials, you might say how useful--or harmful--you think these are for success in the course. If there are specific resources you do NOT want your students to use, identifying these and explaining why they are not useful might be a good idea.

7. Any other materials required for the course, such as:

- a. cleaning supplies and/or safety equipment for science labs
- b. expendable materials (such as film, brushes, paints, etc.) for art and photography classes
- c. calculators or computers, or other hardware equipment described in detail in terms of their required features for the work to be done in this course
- d. specific computer software, also described in detail

Note: Be sure to include: specific makes, models or brands which may be

required/recommended: estimated costs, and where any discounts might be found; and where to find them (university bookstore, specialty shops, etc.).

8. All student requirements and a complete breakdown of your grading scale relating to these requirements, preferably with a rationale. Detail the point assignments of all:

- a. written assignments
- b. peer group work
- c. class participation
- d. discussions
- e. tests and quizzes
- f. homework assignments
- g. other class projects

(For example, "Students will earn grades according to the following scheme:

First examination	15% of final grade
Second examination	15% of final grade
Class participation	15% of final grade
Quizzes	15% of final grade
Term Project	20% of final grade
Final examination	20% of final grade")

9. The criteria by which each written assignment will be evaluated, including your policies regarding extra credit, revision opportunities, etc. (For example: "Papers must have correct English composition and grammar, and any errors must be corrected. Clarity of writing style and depth of analysis will be rewarded--in short, you want to demonstrate to the instructor that you *understand* the course concept/issue/fact and can *discuss its connection* to the newspaper article you have selected.")

10. Other course requirements aside from those which will be computed into the students' grades, such as:

- a. **participation in class discussions** (For example: "One of the best ways for students to understand any topic is to participate actively in the learning process. Therefore, students must attend all classes and must participate *actively* in each session in order to receive full class participation scores.")
- b. **unannounced or ungraded quizzes which you might use to monitor**

comprehension ("There will be periodic unannounced quizzes at the beginning of some classes, for the purpose of evaluating student progress in the course. These quizzes will NOT count toward your grade in this course, but students are required to have completed at least four (4) of the six (6) expected quizzes in order to receive full credit for class attendance.")

- c. **ungraded but required proposals for class projects, term papers, etc.** (For example: "All students must submit a proposal for his/her experiment. The proposal will not be graded but will be reviewed and returned to you with either an indication that it is acceptable and you may proceed, or with questions or recommended changes which you will have to address in a revised version. Please note that no student may proceed with his/her experiment until the proposal has been approved, and no experiment which has NOT been approved by the instructor will be acceptable toward the final grade.")
- d. **permission or waiver signature slips for field trips, special assignments, etc.** (For example, "In order to participate in the ride-along with the police department, all students must complete and submit the required Waiver Form (see attached). The Waiver form is required by the police department for all citizen ride-alongs and no exceptions will be made.")
- e. **personal information for background checks for special assignments such as internships at government agencies, etc.**

11. **Your policies on attendance and tardiness.** Whether you require attendance and take the roll daily or completely ignore attendance issues, make your policy clear. Particularly if absences in any way affect a student's grade, make those standards explicit. It is also useful to tell students *how* you will be keeping attendance (e.g., passing a signature sheet around, calling roll, TA will check off assigned seats, etc.).

12. **Your policies on missed or late exams and assignments.** Students do sometimes have good reasons for missing assignment deadlines or exams. Make clear what the consequences will be for such events, such as:

- a. whether make-up exams will be given, and whether these will be different from the regular exams (e.g., oral make-up versus pencil and paper original version, additional chapters tested on the make-up, etc.)
- b. whether late work will be accepted at all or lateness equates to forfeiture
- c. whether penalties will be attached to late work, and exactly what such penalties might constitute for the student's grade.

- d. if there is a flat penalty for missed/late assignments or exams, or if there is a sliding scale for each day the assignment is late

13. Proper safety procedures and/or conduct for laboratories, field trips, internships, etc. Good habits for such events cannot be assumed nor may they be intuitive. Specify any strict rules for lab dress or other dress codes, as well as for lab or other procedures. Specify any penalties which might be invoked for violations of these rules.

14. A statement of your (and/or your institution's) policies on academic dishonesty and their application to this course. UNF's policy on academic integrity is very brief and somewhat vague. It states:

"UNF places high priority on and strives to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity while protecting the rights of students and faculty.

Should any instructor find evidence of cheating, plagiarism or other inappropriate assistance in work presented by a student, the instructor should inform the student of the action that will be taken. Any student who becomes aware of misconduct related to academic integrity should inform the instructor or other proper authority" (UNF 2005-06 Undergraduate Catalog, p. 36).

Unfortunately, this policy statement by itself leaves the possibility of penalties for dishonesty to be made up as you go. Without strong **up front** statements about cheating and plagiarism, students may assume that you are naive or that you don't care, and post facto application of unstated policies invite disputes. Also needed are clear policies about small-group work (e.g., if one member of the group cheats, are all members penalized? may students collaborate on take-home exams as well?).

Note: Some students, particularly freshmen/sophomores or other beginning students, just do not know when or how proper reference citations should be presented. You may want to include either specific information in the syllabus about, or have a class devoted to, how this is done in your discipline and what counts as plagiarism or cheating.

15. Identify relevant campus support services (and their locations, phone numbers, web sites, etc.) for assistance in mastering course software, doing computer assignments, writing papers or lab reports, learning study skills or other basic skills, solving homework problems, etc.

If you are not familiar with the resources available on this campus, make a point of calling or visiting the Academic Enrichment Center, the Computer Lab, and other campus resources to check them out in advance, and also to find out about their protocols for providing service to students.

16. Identify other available study or assignment aids, such as course study

guides, practice problems, or practice essay questions which you plan to distribute. If papers are assigned, suggestions about possible topics are helpful. Descriptions of topic *limitations*, if any, are also recommended to prevent debates about student choices (For example: "You may select from the books on the attached bibliography ONLY for your required book review. Failure to use an approved book from this list will result in a failing grade for the book review.")

Specific guidelines for writing papers in your discipline, or for this course, are always recommended (such as requirements for specific citation or bibliographic forms, other formatting specifications, required contents, etc.).

17. Provide a weekly or class-by-class course schedule with as much of the following as possible:

- . topics to be covered
- . class activities and formats (lectures, guest lectures, class discussions, cooperative group work, demonstrations, field trips, simulations, panel discussions, films or videos, computer exercises, review sessions, etc.)
- . dates of announced exams and/or quizzes
- . due dates of all reading assignments, homework assignments, required papers or projects, etc. (Be sure to note official holidays, religious holidays or term breaks.)

Note: It is recommended that due dates for papers, projects, reports, exams, scheduled quizzes, final exams and any other important components of the course be presented in **bold print**, underlined, or *otherwise highlighted*.

18. If you intend to use the products of the course (e.g., student papers or projects) for research or some other project of your own, you should establish up front who owns the products of this course.

In the absence of such a statement, copyright law presumes that the writer of a document automatically owns it. It is not necessary for the writer to file copyright papers for this legal right to exist from the moment of writing. If you want to claim ownership of something written for you by your students, you need to establish that right from the very beginning by having the students sign waivers to that effect.

Note: If the course you are teaching is a *required* course of some kind, it may be problematic to claim ownership of your students' work, since they cannot opt to take a different course in order to avoid relinquishing ownership of their work. Some student is bound to object to a course requirement which involves rights forfeitures.

19. It is advised to include a statement that students who need extra or special accommodations because of a physical or mental handicap must advise

you in a timely fashion.

The UNF Office of Student Affairs has recommended the following ADA Statement:

"Individuals who require reasonable accommodations must contact the Office of Disabled Services Program at Honors Hall, Building 10, Room 1201, 904-620-2769, as soon as possible."

- 20. A concluding legal caveat or disclaimer.** Some students have sued professors for failing to conform to the syllabus schedule or cover all the listed topics. For your own protection, therefore, you may wish to include a statement to the following effect:

"The above schedule, polices, and assignments in this course are subject to change in the event of extenuating circumstances or by mutual agreement between the instructor and the students."

Note: changing significant graded course requirements in midstream which may produce a hardship for some students is **never** recommended and, if significant changes are made, special accommodations for such students may wish to be considered.

Aside from the required minimums of the UNF Syllabus Policy or any syllabus requirements of your discipline, college or department, it is your choice as to which of the above suggested syllabus contents make sense for your course. In the final analysis, a main consideration as you decide what to include--or leave out--is to *minimize* problems for yourself by the way you construct your syllabus. This Guidebook is merely an introduction to the art of syllabus construction. If you need further assistance in constructing your syllabus, feel free to contact the UNF Faculty Enhancement Center at 620-1446 where there are many other resources there which can be used to increase your knowledge of syllabus construction, and you are encouraged to make use of these resources.

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