

The Why's and How's of Designing your Syllabus

The keystone of the Liberal Arts classroom is the syllabus. It serves as a kind of roadmap for every course, listing practical information -- the schedule of class meetings, the professor's office hours -- as well as outlining the development of the course's themes and listing specific readings and assignments. Think of a syllabus as a contract between professor and students; it summarizes both expectations and outcomes, i.e., what the professor expects of the students and what the students can expect of the professor.

One shortcut for designing your syllabus is to *work backwards* from the course's learning outcomes -- that is, from what you want your students to learn in your course. Ask yourself, what question or constellation of questions focuses your choice of readings: *what question is this course asking?* Next, ask yourself what should students be able to do or understand by the end of the semester? How do the reading and writing assignments help students achieve these outcomes? What questions, in each assignment, do you want your students to consider? Which assignments, in particular, ask students to practice which modes of thinking -- analyzing, evaluating, comparing, etc. -- that are appropriate to their exploration of the afore-mentioned question(s)?

Designing Assignments

Begin by identifying the outcomes for each assignment. If, for instance, you want students to do some research and work with sources, provide them with a list of appropriate secondary works or library databases. You might require that they write summaries of each source and/or put sources in conversation with each another. (Keep in mind that students may need help with finding sources, evaluating them, incorporating them into their essays, and citing them. You might want to design an assignment that includes skills-building in each sequenced requirement.) If you want students to develop their analytical skills, include a schedule of drafts and revisions in the syllabus, and assign peer groups to offer feedback.

Students can flex their research/analytical/writing skills with assignments that piggyback one upon the other; this is called *scaffolding* or *sequencing* assignments. Sequenced assignments allow a student to work on the first assignment and get feedback from the instructor or from their peers before beginning the second assignment. In this way, they can more efficiently build and practice skills that prepare them for the final assignment. Happily, the evolution of these skills can be easily measured as a professor prepares midterm grades!

Practical Concerns

- Remember, the better your assignments convey learning goals, the better your students can meet the course aims. To that end, make sure you don't

- assign too much reading for each class, and think twice about scheduling a large reading assignment and a writing assignment on the same day.
- Give students enough time to complete one assignment before assigning another one.
 - Be clear about a writing assignment's specific criteria, i.e. how many pages or words or sources are required? When is the due date?
 - Go over each writing assignment with the class and invite their questions. This will help insure that you get the kind of essay that you are hoping for.
 - Break assignments that require research into smaller do-able assignments. You might, for instance, ask students to annotate a bibliography; then develop a thesis or an outline, or an introductory paragraph in the weeks before the final 15-page (for instance) essay is due. This insures that the students are working on the paper over a period of weeks rather than writing it in an all-nighter before it is due.
 - Return graded assignments promptly and provide the kind of feedback that outlines, specifically, how students can improve their performance in your class.
 - Consider including the components on the accompanying checklist: *Basic information; Course description; Materials; Policies; Schedule; Resources; and Assessment.*