Preparing a Course Syllabus: A Guide for Faculty*

In the suggestions for preparing a course syllabus that follow, you'll find a mix of University policy, CSU contract requirements, and generally accepted good practice combined in a single set of guidelines. Not all sections in this guide will apply to all courses. Prior to preparing your syllabus, it is recommended that you also consult with your program area chair, the director of faculty development, and/or experienced Channel Islands faculty.

As part of their professional responsibilities, all CSU instructors are required to provide a syllabus for all of their students. The syllabus should be distributed at the first class meeting, and it is recommended that it be available online, via your website or the course Blackboard site, throughout the semester.

In the guidelines that follow, you'll find required elements in bold letters. You may use any language provided here or use the wording and formatting that you prefer. Although no University policy requires that you include items presented here as suggestions, these items reflect common student concerns and questions. Your students will probably find this information helpful.

If you would like additional references on syllabi and course design, please drop by the Faculty Resource Room (1837A Bell Tower West). Publications available there for faculty to borrow address a broad range of issues and concerns related to course preparation. For an electronic (Word) copy of this handout, contact Carol Holder, ext. 8948 or carolHOLDER@csuci.edu.

What to Include in Your Course Syllabus

The top of the syllabus usually states the following:

Syllabus for [Course Name and Number]
California State University Channel Islands
[Semester 200X]

Instructor Information:
  [Instructor Name]
  [Office Location]
  [Email; Instructor Website]
  [Telephone]
  Office Hours: [Meeting office hours is a required professional responsibility of all CSU instructors; schedule at times convenient for your students]

Course Information:
  Meeting Days and Times:
  Location:
  Website/Blackboard:
  Units:
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Course Description

Offer a brief course description and explain how the course fits into the curriculum (general education, major, minor, certificate, prerequisite for other courses, etc.). You may wish to consult the course description in the University Catalog and any expanded course description available from the chair as you prepare this section, to ensure your description is aligned with the University’s.

You may want to expand on the official course description to offer comments on why students should take the course, how you have organized the course, and what special or unique emphasis, if any, this section of the course will have.

Also in this section, list the major course goals, what students can expect to learn and be able to do upon completion of this course. Aim for specific language (analyze, compare, describe, formulate, derive, solve, etc.) rather than terms such as “know” and “understand” which may have different meanings for students and instructors. One approach to generating the list of learning outcomes is to think about questions that you might include on a comprehensive essay final or about abilities that are reinforced by major course assignments.

Prerequisites

List any and all prerequisites for the course (other courses, class standing, placement exams, permission of instructor, etc.) and explain how this course will build on those prerequisites. You may want to refer students to resources such as the Writing Center or the Math Lab to ensure their greatest success in your course and to access additional instruction that your course will not be providing.

What to Purchase for This Course

List textbooks (required and recommended), handouts, additional materials or equipment, course fees, etc. that students will be responsible for obtaining in order to participate in your course. Also, explain if the course requires use of computers, special software, email, Blackboard, and/or other internet sources either that you will provide or that you expect them to access independently.

ALERT: Students and Email

For Fall 2003 CSU Channel Islands is not providing email accounts to students. Students needing email accounts to participate in Blackboard or to meet course requirements will have to set up email accounts with off-campus providers. The email addresses listed automatically for them in Blackboard have no accounts behind them and will have to be changed.

Instructional Approaches, Major Assignments, and Examinations

Students will want to know how class meetings will be structured and what their responsibilities are for preparing for and participating in class sessions. Also, they will want to know what the major assignments (papers, presentations, field trips, community service, projects, etc) will be like. Explain what these major assignments and activities are, how they will help students achieve the learning goals for the course, when they will be due, etc.
In addition to explaining major assignments and activities, your syllabus should say something about examinations in the course – what they will be like, when they will be scheduled, how they will be structured, whether students can expect exam questions based on reading assignments, whether exams are comprehensive, etc.

**Note:** The final examination time assigned to your course is a scheduled meeting day. If you don’t use that day to give an examination, use it for other course activities.

**Grading**

The Senate Policy on Grades (38-01) makes ABCDF the default grading system, but faculty are given the option of adding "+" or "-" to any grade except “F.” Further, *Course syllabi are required to state clearly whether ‘+/-’ grading is used* and *Course syllabi shall include a discussion of the instructor's grading policy.* If cheating, plagiarism, or other forms of academic dishonesty will affect grades, or if you have other policies that affect grades, such as attendance and on-time arrival and departure, include this in your grading policy discussion in your syllabus.

Whether you make attendance mandatory, you may want to remind students "If you are absent from class, it is your responsibility to check on announcements made while you were away.” If you intend to grade on participation or tardiness, be explicit in explaining how you will do so. Disagreement over class participation and a lack of clarity in the grading standards or grading scale have been the bases for grade protests in the CSU.

Explain how you will calculate the final grades in your course. What will be the point values or weightings for assignments, activities, and examinations? Do you have set cut-off points for each grade? An "Assignment and Examination Schedule" with point values may be an efficient way to transmit some of this information.

It is advisable to include in your syllabus a statement such as:

Subject to Change

This syllabus and schedule are subject to change in the event of extenuating circumstances. If you are absent from class, it is your responsibility to check on announcements made while you were absent.

**Cheating, Plagiarism, and Other Forms of Academic Dishonesty**

The CSUCI policy on academic dishonesty, developed by the Academic Senate and approved by the President, gives you the initial responsibility for detecting and dealing with cheating, plagiarism, and other acts of academic dishonesty in your class. From this policy: “Instructors who believe that an act of academic dishonesty has occurred are obligated to discuss the matter with the student(s) involved. Instructors should possess reasonable evidence of academic dishonesty.”

The policy also describes academic penalties you may assign, if you are convinced that a student is guilty of academic dishonesty. “If the instructors believe that the academic dishonesty reflects on the student's academic performance or the academic integrity in a course, the student's grade should be adversely affected.”
What to Include in Your Course Syllabus

Suggested guidelines for appropriate actions are: *an oral reprimand* in cases where there is reasonable doubt that the student knew his/her action constituted academic dishonesty; *a failing grade on the particular paper, project, or examination* where the act of dishonesty was unpremeditated, or where there were significant mitigating circumstances; *a failing grade in the course* where the dishonesty was premeditated or planned.”

If you assign any academic penalty you are further obligated to file incident reports with the Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, describing the incident, presenting copies of relevant documentation, and recommending appropriate action. The campus policy allows and describes a process for student appeals of any action taken or penalties assigned, so it is important that you retain relevant original documents.

Students have a right to know that plagiarism, cheating, helping another student cheat, or committing other acts of academic dishonesty could affect their grade in a course, and you should put in your syllabus language to that effect, both to inform and to warn. In fact, students could conceivably appeal a grade penalty assigned for cheating or plagiarism if they hadn’t received notice at the start that such penalties would be assigned. Here’s sample language for adaptation and insertion in course syllabi, distributed at the beginning of the course (electronic copy available on request from Carol.Holder@csuci.edu). Modify this language to reflect the kinds of student work that will be graded in your course, and what your own policies and penalties will be:

**Sample Instructions for Students on Academic Honesty**

All work that students submit as their own work must, in fact, be their own work. For example, if a paper presents ideas of others, it must clearly indicate the source. Word-for-word language taken from other sources – books, papers, web sites, people, etc. – must be placed in quotation marks and the source identified. Likewise, work on tests and exams must be the student’s own work, not copied or taken from other students’ work, and students must comply with instructions regarding use of books, notes, and other materials.

In accordance with the CSU Channel Islands policy on academic dishonesty, students in this course who submit the work of others as their own (plagiarize), cheat on tests and examinations, help other students cheat or plagiarize, or commit other acts of academic dishonesty will receive appropriate academic penalties, up to and including failing the course.

Papers with plagiarized ideas or language will be graded “F” and must be rewritten with proper use of quotations and referencing. The grade of “F” will remain the recorded grade on that assignment.

Plagiarism or cheating on tests and exams will result in an “F” on the test or exam, very likely resulting in a lower or possibly a failing final grade in the course. To complete course requirements, students must retake the test or exam during the instructor’s scheduled office hours.

In cases where the cheating or plagiarism was premeditated or planned, students may receive an “F” for the course.
Students are encouraged to consult with the instructor on when and how to document sources if they have questions about what might constitute an act of plagiarism or cheating.

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Other Course Policies for the Syllabus

Clearly state your concerns or prohibitions, if any (talking in class, using cell phones, chewing gum, eating or drinking, tape recording class meetings, bringing visitors or guests, engaging in distracting or disruptive behavior, etc.). As much as possible, use the positive (“Do such and such”) instead of the negative (“Don’t do such and such”), provided you are still very clear about your expectations and requirements.

You may want to include a statement describing appropriate behavior in your classroom, especially if your course includes student discussion of sensitive or difficult issues. Modify the following to suit your course and policies:

Classroom Behavior:

The classroom is a special environment in which students and faculty come together to promote learning and growth. It is essential to this learning environment that respect for the rights of others seeking to learn, respect for the professionalism of the instructor, and the general goals of academic freedom are maintained. Differences of viewpoint or concerns should be expressed in terms which are supportive of the learning process, creating an environment in which students and faculty may learn to reason with clarity and compassion, to share of themselves without losing their identities, and to develop an understanding of the community in which they live. Student conduct which disrupts the learning process shall not be tolerated and may lead to disciplinary action and/or removal from class.

If collaborative or cooperative learning is part of your course, you may want to state explicitly when you expect students to work independently and when you encourage them to work collaboratively. Also, address any health and safety issues, if relevant (labs, community service, field trips, etc.).

Students with Disabilities

Please state in your syllabus that upon identifying themselves to the instructor and the University, students with disabilities will receive reasonable accommodation for learning and evaluation. For more information, contact Terri Goldstein, Disability Accommodation Coordinator, ext. 8528.

Tentative Course Schedule

One of the most important features of the syllabus is the tentative schedule, or calendar, of topics covered, a schedule of assigned readings, assignment due dates, and examination dates, including the day and time of the final exam.

As noted above, schedule a class activity during the final exam time, even if you do not give a final exam on that date. That time is part of the scheduled course hours and part of your assignment as an instructor for the semester.
The Course Syllabus

The course syllabus has historically been viewed as a somewhat tentative plan that a professor provides students to help them better understand the mission and goals of a particular course. In recent years however, an increasingly consumer-oriented and litigious society has markedly influenced the evolution of a course syllabus into nothing less than a binding contract between professor and student.

Since your major goal is to facilitate student mastery of your course material, the syllabus should eliminate . . . barriers to learning by anticipating nearly any reasonable question that a student might develop about the course. Especially important are those questions that occur as the course approaches its conclusion and students become increasingly conscious of their final grade. These include weights of graded assignments and penalties for such behavior as faulty attendance and late submission of assignments. Penalties imposed on students that are not clearly stated in the syllabus, e.g. lowering a grade for [absences], will generally not be defended by instructional leaders.

Lastly, your course syllabus should recognize its . . . critical marketing role. With an increasingly visually conditioned student clientele, judgments of a professor’s competence are made very quickly from the visual cues communicated. Unappealing layout and font selection, as well as misspelling and other typographical errors, can discount the students’ perceptions of the course and your teaching competence. Therefore, be sure to invest a few moments in having a skilled reader review your final draft before duplication.

*Portions of this guide were adapted from the Syllabus Template 2003, developed for Cal State University faculty on the Fresno campus.  This CSUCI guide for preparing a course syllabus, drafted August 2003, will be modified as new University policies are developed.*