

Constructing Your Course Syllabus: Requirements & Recommendations for Building Dynamic and Functional Syllabi

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Abstract

The Course Syllabus is easily the most important document that you will prepare for a course: it sets the tone of the course, determines the depth, scope and sequence of the content, explicates boundaries and expectations for student and instructor behaviors and interaction, establishes the procedures and norms of assessment, and provides resources for additional information and context. This document will guide you to prepare a syllabus that not only meets the legal and accreditation standards for UNC Charlotte, but also serves as a dynamic curricular resource for both your students and yourself. This document serves as a textual companion to the accompanying syllabus templates for Microsoft Word and Moodle.

What's the big deal about writing a syllabus?

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What is a syllabus?

Naturally, the study of “Syllabus” has to begin with a misunderstanding. In the original Greek the word *sittuba* meant a “title slip” or “label”, such as one might use beneath a painting or sculpture. Of course the Romans stole the word (along with the artwork above it) for their *sittybas*, and, inevitably, a 19th century academic misspelled it “syllabus” and furthermore misused it to mean a “concise table of headings of a text.” Faculty being the same then as now, his colleagues intended to mention it to him (right after lunch), but soon Newton’s first law took over and now we’re stuck with the error.

Today, a syllabus serves four main purposes:

- **A course planning tool for the instructor.**

Carefully constructing or editing an existing syllabus helps the instructor prepare and organize the course. Building a detailed syllabus will help you define and prioritize course goals and learning objectives, structure and sequence assignments, exams, review sessions, and other activities, and determine how much time you should devote to each topic.

- **A course prospectus for the student.**

The syllabus is a *prospectus* that answers, “why should I take this course?” or “how does this fit into my degree?”. The syllabus communicates to students a clear idea of the course content, your approach to teaching it, and what they can expect to do and to learn while completing course requirements, as well as the reason they are doing them.

- **A contract between the instructor and student**

The syllabus is very much a *contract*, and should be treated just that carefully. It is a contract between the instructor and student that sets out course requirements and policies regarding grading, academic integrity, student conduct, attendance, late work, and many other common issues. [University policy](#) dictates that students are responsible for reading and understanding the syllabus, the terms to which they implicitly agree when they take the course.

One of your colleagues who has served on a Grade Review Committee over the course of many years relates that the vast majority of student complaints and grade appeals stem from a poorly written syllabus or one where the standards were capriciously applied (often the case when the instructors were using an “inherited” syllabus).

A quality syllabus, with reasonable standards that are consistently applied, that is also repeatedly referenced throughout the semester, is your best defense against student complaints.

- **A reference guide**

The syllabus provides students with a compendium of information that they will consult throughout the course, including logistical information (e.g., course name, number and section, prerequisites and expected prior knowledge, instructor’s name and contact information), a

course calendar (including due dates, exam times, etc.) and course requirements, grading, and policies.

What goes into a syllabus?

A syllabus can take as many forms as there are teachers – it can be a single, lengthy document containing everything, a collection of inter-referenced documents with each serving a specialized purpose, a web page embedded into the Moodle course page, or any combination thereof.

While the format may be variable, there are commonalities among all of them – each contains content that is **REQUIRED** by law, policy, or accreditation, content that is **STRONGLY RECOMMENDED** by best practices, and content that is **NICE TO HAVE**. We will talk more specifically about each of these in a later section.

Can't I just recycle someone else's?

Sadly, no, for three reasons:

The first reason is practical. A syllabus must reflect the teaching style and strengths of the instructor, or implementing it will be difficult and inconsistent. While some departments on campus will insist that you use their assigned syllabus, you will still have to thoroughly edit and revise the document to make it relevant for the methods and style of *your* classroom, using your background and abilities as a teacher. Syllabi acquired from any other, external sources are highly problematic in that they will almost certainly contain language and policies that may not mesh with the regulations and culture here at UNC Charlotte. Finally, the creation (or heavy editing) of a syllabus is an essential intellectual exercise that helps you to focus and narrow the

vast field of your expertise into the small, discrete chunks of information that undergraduates are able to digest during this one course.

The second reason is legal. At the end of the day, you – individually - are legally responsible for the content and conduct of your class. If there is a student complaint about the policies, procedures, or grading in your class, it is you who will be standing in front of the review board, not the department, or that guy from Bemidji State from whom you inherited the syllabus. *You* will be required to defend the inclusion (or omission) of any component of your syllabus, or explain how it was applied. If you are going to be held responsible for it, shouldn't you own it?

If that isn't sufficient, it is one of the few overtly stated requirements for faculty here at UNC Charlotte:

Faculty members are expected to prepare a syllabus for their classes. Faculty should consult relevant university, college, and department policies when preparing course syllabi.¹

And further:

[F]aculty members have the responsibility to specify in each of their courses at the beginning of the academic term: a) course requirements and expectations for academic performance; and b) procedures for evaluating performance (method(s) of evaluation and grading scales). Faculty members must also communicate clearly to all students in the course any subsequent additions to or changes in these requirements, standards, and procedures. Finally, faculty members have the responsibility to

¹ *Job Responsibilities and Essential Functions for Tenured and Tenure-Track Faculty*. UNC Charlotte, 2013. Available from [http://provost.uncc.edu/sites/provost.uncc.edu/files/media/epa/Job Responsibilities and Essential Functions for Tenured and Tenure-Track Faculty.4.25.13.doc](http://provost.uncc.edu/sites/provost.uncc.edu/files/media/epa/Job%20Responsibilities%20and%20Essential%20Functions%20for%20Tenured%20and%20Tenure-Track%20Faculty.4.25.13.doc)

apply the specified grading criteria equitably to the academic performance of all students in the course...²

The third reason is ethical. Creating a syllabus is part and parcel of accepting the position as a college teacher. People pay tuition in trust that the instructor is fully prepared to deliver the academic content in a meaningful, well-planned structure; the work the instructor places in preparing the syllabus is the largest single component of that earned trust. To simply appropriate someone else's work would not be intellectually honest.

Writing your syllabus

This section of the document assumes you will be writing a syllabus yourself. If you have inherited a syllabus from the department this section will still be useful in helping you understand and evaluate the sections of the existing syllabus, and perhaps even suggest improvements to the existing document.

Regardless if you are creating a new or editing an existing syllabus, put the kettle on, because this is going to take quite some time to accomplish. We'll start with the hard part...

Preparatory work

Before you can write the syllabus, you will need to assemble a whole slew of information:

- Which students enroll in this course? (year in school, class size, prior knowledge and experience, motivation, etc.)
- Most of a new teacher's frustration stems from miss-answering this question. That is, teachers' may often assume that their students will hold previous knowledge and have a

² [http://legal.uncc.edu/policies/up-410 - _ftnref1](http://legal.uncc.edu/policies/up-410_-_ftnref1)

disposition that in actuality doesn't reflect the reality of the students sitting in front of them. Disappointment and conflict inevitably ensues.

- What role does this course play in the overall educational experience of the students who take it? (LBST, elective, required, majors-only, lower or upper division, prerequisite for other classes, etc.)
- In what kind of curriculum is this course embedded? (How does it relate to other courses? What courses does it build on? What courses follow it?)
- What external professional standards need to be met? ([University College requirements](#), accrediting bodies, etc.)
- What kind of learning space will you have? (Classroom, lab, or other? Fixed desks? Movable chairs? Media equipment?)
- What is the [Academic Calendar](#) for this semester?
- Which texts or materials have been adopted/ordered for the course?
- What is the [official catalog copy](#) for the course? The *course outline*?³

Each of these answers will have a profound impact on the choices you will make for the syllabus. You will still want to have a firm grasp on all of these factors even if you are using an inherited syllabus, as it will still apply to how you interpret the course objectives.

Now that we have a great start going and have gathered all the information we need to proceed, it is time for a digression.

³ The Course Outline is a required component of the *Course and Curriculum Proposal Long Form* that was approved through the Course & Curriculum Committee. It should be on file in your Department office. Somewhere.

Writing Observable, Measurable Learning Outcomes: Goals vs. Objectives

Despite the arcane title, this section is not only the heart of your syllabus, but also the lungs and spleen. Your tea should be ready by this time, take a deep draught and we'll progress through it step-by-step.

First, we have to understand that there is much confusion about this section, even among veteran teachers and experts in education – the terms “Learning Outcomes,” “Goals,” and “Objectives”⁴ are sometimes employed interchangeably in the research literature. For the purposes of this document (and sanity), we will employ the definitions that the College of Education and NCATE favors, to wit:

“Course Objectives” are the measurable, observable behaviors, knowledge or skills that can be directly observed and assessed for a grade during this present semester, “Course Goals” are the larger, more amorphous dispositional phrases that help to place this course in context within a discipline or society, and “Learning Outcomes” is the macro designation that encompasses both of the other two terms. Some find utility in comparing Course Goals to “Strategy” and Course Objectives to “Tactics,” or perhaps “Ideas” to “Behaviors”.

These terms were presented to you in that particular order because every syllabus must have the “Course Objectives” explicitly stated (REQUIRED by SACS accreditation and the University), should also have the “Course Goals” (STRONGLY RECOMMENDED), and occasionally must reference the Student “Learning Outcomes” if you are in the [College of Education](#).

⁴ Or, “Learning Objectives,” “Objective Outcomes,” or, most confusingly, “Objective Goals.”

A great deal has been published⁵ about how to write clear Course Objectives; below is a quick summary of the main points:

- Course objectives describe the core knowledge and skills that the student should derive from the course. In this capacity, Course Objectives could serve as a neat preparation for a comprehensive final exam.
- All readings, lectures, discussions, assignments and exams should derive from and reinforce the Course Objectives. If it happens in your class, it should be referenced in/to the objectives.
- Course Objectives must be observable and measurable. Normally, they will be written something similar to, “At the end of this course, the student will be (should be) able to...”
- Rather than use broad, vague verbs such as “know” or “understand” (e.g., “...the student will be able to understand...”), Course Objectives are written using verbs that signify an observable, measurable behavior (e.g., “...the student will be able to define...”)

Table 1 contains a representative list of these kinds of “observable & measurable” verbs to get you started.⁶

⁵ Please see the included References for the literature that most closely relates to your own field.

⁶ These are derived from Bloom’s Taxonomy. Much more information is available [here](#).

Table 1 : Action Verbs to use in Course Objectives

Knowledge	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate	Create
copy	ask	act	advertise	appraise	adapt
define	associate	administer	analyze	argue	anticipate
describe	cite	apply	appraise	assess	arrange
discover	classify	articulate	break	choose	assemble
duplicate	compare	calculate	calculate	compare	collaborate
enumerate	contrast	change	categorize	conclude	collect
examine	convert	chart	classify	consider	combine
identify	demonstrate	choose	compare	convince	compile
label	describe	collect	conclude	criticize	compose
list	differentiate	complete	connect	critique	create
listen	discover	compute	contrast	debate	design
locate	discuss	construct	correlate	decide	develop
match	distinguish	demonstrate	criticize	defend	devise
memorize	estimate	determine	deduce	discriminate	express
name	examples	develop	devise	distinguish	facilitate
observe	explain	discover	diagram	editorialize	formulate
omit	express	dramatize	differentiate	errors	generalize
quote	extend	employ	discriminate	estimate	hypothesize
read	generalize	establish	dissect	evaluate	imagine
recall	give	examine	distinguish	find	infer
recite	group	experiment	divide	grade	integrate
recognize	identify	explain	down	judge	intervene
record	illustrate	illustrate	estimate	justify	invent
repeat	indicate	interpret	evaluate	measure	justify
reproduce	infer	interview	experiment	order	make
retell	interpret	judge	explain	persuade	manage
select	judge	list	focus	predict	modify
state	observe	manipulate	illustrate	rank	negotiate
tabulate	order	modify	infer	rate	organize
tell	paraphrase	operate	order	recommend	originate
visualize	predict	paint	organize	reframe	plan
	relate	practice	out	score	prepare
	report	predict	outline	select	produce
	represent	prepare	plan	summarize	propose
	research	produce	point	support	rearrange
	restate	record	prioritize	test	reorganize
	review	relate	question	weigh	report
	rewrite	report	select		revise
	select	schedule	separate		rewrite
	show	show	subdivide		role-play
	summarize	simulate	survey		schematize
	trace	sketch	test		simulate
	transform	solve			speculate
	translate	teach			structure
		transfer			substitute
		use			support
		write			validate
					write

Table 2 : Examples of Course Objectives in STEM subjects

Weakly written	Well written
Know how to use t-tests and chi-square tests in data analysis	Describe the assumptions underlying t-tests and chi-square tests and use these tests to statistically compare two samples
Understand how to measure the association between a given risk factor and a disease	Define and calculate measures of association between a given risk factor and a disease
Basic strategies for assessing environmental health hazards	List, describe, and compare the advantages and disadvantages of the basic strategies for assessing environmental health hazards
Know about Medicare and Medicaid	Compare and contrast Medicare and Medicaid with respect to political history, governmental roles, client eligibility, financing, benefits, and cost-sharing

The following is summarized from "Writing Learning Objectives," a publication of the American College Of Occupational and Environmental Medicine:

How Should Course Objectives Be Written?

Start with the phrase: "At the conclusion of this course, students should be able to:" and then state the things students will be able to do. Be sure to use specific action verbs (behavioral terms) in these statements - verbs such as "identify," "cite," "describe," or "assess." If you follow this simple format and keep the list of verbs by your side, it is almost impossible to write a bad set of objectives!

Common Mistakes

Verbs such as "know" and "understand" are vague, and are best used for Course Goals (strategy) rather than Objectives (tactics). Avoid these words and use action verbs such as

those from the list provided. “Understanding” can have a myriad of meanings and it can be difficult to evaluate whether a learner “understands” a concept. However, a course objective that states that a physician “will be able to cite the risk factors for breast cancer” can be evaluated consistently whether it has been achieved.

Often syllabi list **teaching objectives** rather than **learning objectives**. For example, “To acquaint the clinician with the key clinical features necessary for the diagnosis of common rheumatic diseases.” “To update, reinforce, and provide new information regarding the etiology, pathogenesis, diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis of herniated thoracic disc.” These objectives focus on what the **instructor** plans to do, rather than what the **student outcome** will be.

Some faculty find the following grid a useful way of lining up Course Objectives and course activities, and then include a version on the syllabus:

	At the end of this course, students should be able to: Start Course Objective with an action verb	This objective will be evaluated primarily by [assignment or activity]:	Course topics (& dates) that advance these Objectives (build up to this assignment or activity) are:
Course Objective 1	e.g., Demonstrate... _____	_____ _____	_____ _____
Course Objective 2	Complete... _____	_____ _____	_____ _____
Course Objective 3	Evaluate... _____	_____ _____	_____ _____

These questions might help you flesh out the grid:

- What kinds of skills do the students need to have in order to be successful in the course, and how will assignments and feedback help develop them?
- Will students have any choice in assignments, to develop existing interests or increase engagement?

- How can you give students multiple opportunities to practice the skills and develop the behaviors and abilities identified in the outcomes, allowing them to develop and refine skills?
- What kinds of instructional approaches are most conducive to engage students in the course concepts and help students accomplish these course objectives?
- Can you vary approaches to engage different learners? Will students discuss, solve problems, work in teams, develop projects, keep journals? Will students be expected to participate in discussions, to contribute ideas and/or resources?
- How do assignments and activities capitalize on what students bring to the class – their skills, experience, knowledge? How can students collaborate, to draw on their own and their peers' existing knowledge and skills and to refine what they already know and generate new awareness, knowledge, and skills?
- What kind of interactions will help students develop their understanding and skills, and critically explore core concepts in your course? (Teacher-student, student-student, student-peer tutor, student -community?) How will classroom interactions be facilitated? How will interaction occur outside the classroom?
- How and when will students get (and give peers) timely feedback on activities and assignments, with opportunities to revise or adjust their learning?

Sections of the Syllabus

Now that you have your Course Goals, Objectives, and Activities – it is time to put them into order...

Note that you can choose to put some information on Moodle rather than including it on the written document. It is always a good idea, however, to put the “essential information” listed below on the printed syllabus, even if it also appears online.

REQUIRED

- **Course Information**

Title, number, section, time, days, and location; URL for course Web site, if applicable.

- **Contact Information**

Name and contact information of instructor(s) and, if applicable, TA(s)

In addition, indicate how students should contact you, whether by e-mail or by phone, for example; include the appropriate contact information. If the course has TAs, be sure to include their contact information, as well. Include times, days, and locations of office hours, as well as study groups and help sessions.

- **Prerequisites**

Course prerequisites communicate your assumptions about your students and help the students determine whether they have completed the necessary academic preparation for the course.

- **Topics outline/General Course Content**

The outline may be detailed or not, depending on your expectations for students’ preparation and learning. For example, if you want students to come to class ready to discuss particular chapters or articles, your outline will be detailed, listing the specific reading assignment for each day of class; in this case, the topic outline will be equivalent to the course schedule (see below). If you are using a lecture format, on the other hand, you may prefer to list the number

of days you expect to spend on each topic and the portion of the required texts that are related to the lectures during those days.

- **Assignments and exams**

Briefly describe the nature and format of assignments; add a note indicating that detailed assignments will be distributed and posted on the course Web page, if applicable, at a later date. Include due dates for major assignments such as papers, presentations, and projects, as well as any initial drafts or other preliminary work. Indicate the nature, date, and length of any exam.

- **Methods of Evaluation, Grading scale and policies**

Explain the grading scale, indicating the weight of each component, such as homework, papers, quizzes, exams, reports, and participation, within the course grade. Indicate whether the grade is determined on a “curve” or an absolute scale. Note whether any graded assignment can be dropped and how that dropped grade will affect the final grade. Indicate policy on re-grades, if applicable. Direct students to find applicable grading rubrics that you can provide both on paper and on Moodle. Some teachers find utility from a Final Grade Checklist that enumerates the methods of evaluation and which the students maintain and must turn in at the end of the semester. This helps insure they are monitoring their own progress and keeps them actively engaged with the syllabus (see below).

- **Required Materials (e.g., texts, materials, and supplies)**

Information about each text should include the title, author, edition, publisher, and where the text can be purchased, borrowed or accessed (if placing material on the library reserve-system, or on Moodle). If students will need additional materials such as a calculator, safety equipment,

or art supplies, provide a detailed list and indicate where the materials can be acquired. For each text or other material, specify whether it is “required” or “optional, but recommended.”

- **Course description/Course Outline**

The description should be consistent with that which appears in the University catalog; it may be even more detailed, providing a clear idea of the specific course topic and its significance.

STRONGLY RECOMMENDED

- **Statement of Disability Accommodations**

If you have a disability that qualifies you for academic accommodations, contact the Office of Disability Services in Fretwell 230 or call 704-687-4355 at the beginning of the semester. Some requests for accommodations cannot be honored without supporting documentation from the Office of Disability Services. All information shared with the instructor concerning a disability will remain strictly confidential unless otherwise specified by the instructor.

- **Caveat**

Indicate that the University specifically expresses your right to make reasonable adjustments or changes to the Syllabus throughout the semester. Remind students that they are responsible to learn of these changes if they miss any class time.

I may modify the standards and requirements set forth in this syllabus at any time. Notice of such changes will be by announcement in class [or by written or email notice], or by changes to this syllabus posted on the course website in Moodle.

- **A Related-Documents Clause**

If your syllabus is divided among several documents (e.g., a Course Calendar, a Final Grade Checklist, and an Assignments page), or both in paper and on Moodle, you will need a clause in your master document that binds them all together:

Included with the distribution of this syllabus is the most up-to-date course calendar, an explanation of grading criterion and rationale, and the Final Grade Checklist (or Moodle). They are considered an integral part of this syllabus and are part and parcel of the requirements and guidelines contained herein.

- **Course Goals**

This section helps the students to place meaning on this course beyond the immediate utility of progress towards a degree. This is the spot where you may make the case that this course helps to improve their lives and society at large (expressly called for in our University Mission) and that it also may be applicable to their careers. Students will not make these inferences on their own, you must lead them to it.

- **Additional course requirements**

Include dates and descriptions of required events such as field trips, seminars, additional sessions, or study groups.

- **Additional course policies**

Explain in detail policies concerning attendance; class participation; late work; missed exams; academic integrity; requests for extensions and for rescheduling of exams; and expectations for student conduct in the classroom, laboratory, or studio. Keep in mind that incidents of academic integrity are on the rise, and instructors need to take a proactive approach in preventing and responding to these incidents. Please include a specific reference to the [*Code of Student Academic Integrity*](#).

All students are required to read and abide by the Code of Student Academic Integrity. Violations of the Code of Student Academic Integrity, including plagiarism, will result in disciplinary action as provided in the Code. Definitions and examples of plagiarism are set forth in the Code. The Code is available from the Dean of Students Office or online at: <http://www.legal.uncc.edu/policies/ps-105.html>

Faculty may ask students to produce identification at examinations and may require students to demonstrate that graded assignments completed outside of class are their own work.

- **Course schedule**

Include on the course schedule the dates that you will be covering specific topics, the due dates for major assignments, and the date of the final exam. The more detailed the course schedule, the more useful it will be for the students. When preparing the schedule, consult the relevant [academic calendars](#) and keep in mind religious holidays and significant campus events (for example, Homecoming and Midterm).

NICE TO HAVE

- **Student resources**

List information about relevant resources that might be helpful to students in your course, such as those found at academic mentoring, tutoring, and disability resources, and the [University Library](#). Include information about any available lecture notes or videotapes of lectures.

- **Supplementary material**

Include a note about any relevant supplementary materials such as study hints, safety guidelines, information about exam preparation, and online resources; the note might, for example, direct students to find these materials on the course Web site.

- **Final Exam date and time** (often not the regular class time or day)
- [Inclement weather policy](#)
- **Diversity Commitment statement**

UNC Charlotte is committed to social justice and respect for all individuals, and it seeks to create a culture of inclusion that actively

supports all who live, work, and serve in a diverse nation and world. Attaining justice and respect involves all members of our community in recognizing that multi-dimensional diversity contributes to the university learning environments, thereby enriching the community and improving opportunities for human understanding. While the term “diversity” is often used to refer to differences, this class’s intention is for inclusiveness, an inclusiveness of individuals who are diverse in ability/disability, age, economic status, ethnicity, gender, language, national origin, race, religion, and sexual orientation. Therefore, this class aspires to become a more diverse community in order to extend its enriching benefits to all participants. An essential feature of our community is an environment that supports exploration, learning, and work free from bias and harassment, thereby improving the growth and development of each member of the community.

- **Religious accommodation policy**

UNC Charlotte provides reasonable accommodations, including a minimum of two excused absences each academic year, for religious observances required by a student’s religious practice or belief. Such reasonable accommodations must be requested in accordance with the procedures in this Policy, and include the opportunity for the student to make up any tests or other work missed due to an excused absence for a religious observance. Students wishing to request a religious accommodation may refer to the information found at <http://legal.uncc.edu/policies/ps-134.html>. It is the obligation of students to provide faculty with reasonable notice of the dates of religious observances on which they will be absent by submitting a Request for Religious Accommodation Form to their instructor prior to the census date for enrollment for a given semester (typically the 10th day of enrollment).

- **Student course evaluation process and confidentiality**

Courses at UNC Charlotte are evaluated through an online evaluation survey process. Student course evaluations provide an important source of feedback for faculty regarding course design and instructional effectiveness. The online course evaluations are administered at the end of the term, during the final two week (prior to final exams). You will receive an email announcement alerting you when the survey period opens. Periodic reminders will be sent during the time the survey is open. Please be advised that this process is secure and confidential. The technology used ensures

anonymity of participants as well as confidentiality. The University is committed to excellent instruction and student support. Please help in continuing this commitment by participating in the course evaluation process.

- **Credit hour statement**

This 3-credit course requires three hours of classroom or direct faculty instruction and six hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately 15 weeks. Out-of-class work may include but is not limited to: required reading, library research, written assignments, and studying for quizzes and exams.

- **Brief Bio of the Instructor**

Several recent investigations seem to indicate that student perceptions of teacher competence and over-all student satisfaction with instruction increases when the instructor is formally introduced to the class on the first day. It appears that modern college students don't know that they should be impressed with your accomplishments (they don't know what they don't know, it may simply be a reflection of a societal trend to devalue formal expertise). Unless you are fortunate enough to have a colleague who can introduce you each semester, the next-best solution is to have a brief bio in the syllabus:

Professor Noah Dìà earned the BS in Curriculum and Instruction from Bemidji State University (*suma cum laude*), the MS in Urban Education from Northwestern University, and the PhD in Post-Secondary Education from The Florida State University. Dr. Dìà lectures extensively across the US and in 11 countries on the development of syllabi and course objectives. To date he has more than 40 publications in this field, and his book *A Shorter History of Syllabi* is forthcoming through American Research Publications. In his spare time, he enjoys correcting the grammar of newspapers.

Resources for Constructing your Syllabus

We have prepared several resources to help you structure your syllabus. The first is a standard-paper format (saved as a Microsoft Word template) that includes all of the **REQUIRED**, **STRONGLY RECOMMENDED** and **NICE TO HAVE** components – just amend and delete.

A second version of the syllabus has been created in Moodle, and then archived here. You may simply “restore” this archive to your current course, and then amend as necessary. Thereafter, each new semester you may simply import your old course setup into the current one, and all your changes will be saved!

Additionally, the Moodle course archive contains a section of links to our UNC Charlotte’s policies and guidelines on creating syllabi, as well as links to other sample syllabi.

Using your new syllabus

Having developed the greatest syllabus in the world will do absolutely no good if your students don’t interact with it. Here are some suggestions to help students to keep coming back to your masterpiece of instructional material.

On the first day of class, provide each student with your syllabus and review the sections. Do not rely upon students reading and understanding the document on their own – for some it may be the first syllabus they have encountered. Make sure to answer all of your

student's questions, and that areas of potential misunderstanding are cleared up. Once the course has started, reinforce syllabus content by referring to it in class daily. If a student asks a question in class that is covered by the syllabus – ask a student who has the syllabus to find the answer (or make it a class “race” for extra-credit!).

Another tact may be to introduce the syllabus in class as an official, graded learning activity: Divide your students into groups corresponding to the number of groups of content in your syllabus. Give each group a different section of the syllabus for review (expert groups), have each group design quiz questions for their content. Re-form the class so that each group includes a member from each of the previous expert groups. Have the experts teach their section of the syllabus to their new groups. Administer the quiz.

Moodle provides yet another excellent resource for insuring that students study the syllabus – you may designate an online syllabus quiz that must be passed prior to the remaining course content becoming available to view. The archived Moodle class has this option enabled by default – you may edit the quiz or eliminate it all together as you deem appropriate.

The following tips on making your syllabus useful and student-friendly come from The [Florida State University Instructional Handbook](#):

- Be as brief as possible. Use short sentences or lists or outlines. Don't overwhelm your students with lengthy prose – the syllabus should merely serve as a reference document and reminder to students.
- Organize the information. Outlines, tree charts, and various diagrams can help you plan before you actually write the text of your syllabus. A logical structure of the syllabus can help you make sure you have covered every important topic and help ensure that

students will be able to identify important information more easily.

- Be friendly. Use everyday words and address the student in the syllabus. For example, use “you,” “we,” and “I,” rather than “the student,” “your professor,” or “the instructor.”

- Consider the visual organization of your information as it appears on the sheet of paper.

Graphic design is not only a matter of aesthetic appeal; it has a strong bearing on the readability of any document.

- Use headings so students can easily scan it to find pertinent information.
- Highlight important information. Use capital letters, italics, and bold type or underlining.

However, use them sparingly or the purpose will be lost (the student will ignore it). Also, long strings of capitalized text are less legible than using upper and lower case. The logical structure of the syllabus helps ensure that you have covered every important topic and, in the end, helps ensure that students will be able to identify important information more easily.

- Use plenty of white space. Do not put too much text on one page.
- Be neat. Avoid messiness, typos, etc. (particularly when you do not accept messiness and typos from your students).

Assessing your syllabus

Now that you’ve completed your syllabus, it is time for a reality check. While you make a fresh pot of tea have a trusted colleague in your discipline read your syllabus for content and errors, or run it by the friendly folks here at [CTL](#). Another possibility is to use the excellent rubric developed by Cornell University’s Center for Teaching Excellence which is available [here](#).

Most importantly, at the end of every semester review and revise your syllabus – don't wait until the day before classes begin. Student feedback on your course evaluations will provide plenty of opportunities for you to reconsider your choices, as will the wisdom of a semester's more experience.

Good luck in your courses, and please remember that you are not alone in this task - you have a legion of supporters who are willing to help with any aspect of your journey.

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