

Syllabus Construction Ideas

Modesto Junior College

Why a Syllabus is an Important Part of Your Course?

Etymologically, syllabus means a “label” or “table of contents.” The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines syllabus as an outline of a course of study. We agree that a syllabus should contain an outline, and a schedule of topics and many more items of information. However, we suggest that the primary purpose of a syllabus is to communicate to one’s students what the course is about, why the course is taught, where it is going, and what will be required of the students for them to complete the course with a passing grade.

Most of this paper will list suggestions from literature about what information might be included in your course syllabus. It is extremely unlikely that you will include every-thing listed. We suggest two criteria in deciding what information to include. First, include all information students need to have *at the beginning of the course*; second, include all information that students need to have *in writing*. We believe that any really important information about the course should be in writing. However, it may be better to introduce some information later in the semester, e.g., the details of a required project.

To attempt to include every single item of importance in your syllabus is to insure that the students will not read much of it. If your syllabus is long, include a table of contents. (*1)

Some of the benefits faculty has noted for having a syllabus are as follows:

- A well written syllabus sets a professional tone in the classroom and lets students know the instructor is ready to work and has given the class some careful thought.
- A well written syllabus helps instructors organize their semester and keeps them accountable to cover material as scheduled.
- A well written syllabus also helps to make sure that assignments and readings are reasonably spaced so that you and your students can successfully complete all work.
- A well written syllabus protects instructors against student complaints (or excuses) since it serves as a written document that clearly lays out all policies and requirements in advance.
- A well written syllabus facilitates student success since it allows students to better manage their time and prepare for upcoming quizzes, exams, essays, homework, etc.
- A well written syllabus establishes a clear line of communication between you and your students, letting them know what your expectations are and also how they can contact you to get the help they need to better succeed in your course.
- A well written syllabus also gives students a clear feel for your course, which helps them make an informed decision as to whether or not they can successfully complete the course.

Construction Ideas:

1. **Name of class including the class section number(s) and units.** This will make it clear which class they are in and they will not have to ask for the section number if adding the class.
2. **Day(s) and times that the class will meet,** building and room number.
3. **Instructor Information**
 - a. Office hours and office location
 - b. Office phone # or #'s
 - c. E-mail address
 - d. Instructor web page address
4. **Prerequisites**
 - a. Required
 - b. Recommended for success
5. **Books and materials needed for the class** which campus will the supplies be at?
 - a. Required and or recommended.
 - b. Textbook(s)
 - c. Scantron type(s)
 - d. Specific supplies needed ie safety glasses, special writing utensils etc.
6. **Course description**
 - a. This should be based on the course description that was approved by the curriculum committee. This can be found from the dean of your department. It is imperative for the integrity of the college that the courses of like types cover very similar materials.
 - b. This is a succinct paragraph that lets the reader obtain an overview of the course.
7. **Objectives**
 - a. What the instructor expects the student to accomplish in their class.
 - b. Could be in a list form and/or a general statement about the outcomes desired.
 - c. Possible inclusion of student learning outcomes.
8. **Content**
 - a. What exactly is the instructor going to cover
 - b. Could list the general areas in the order and or exact days that they will be covered and the corresponding readings required from the textbook
 - c. This could have an exact timeline that shows what will be covered each week or every day with the assignments that they are responsible for.
9. **Field trips or special out of class activities** they must attend or could attend to help their grade.
 - a. Include the dates and times of the activity
 - b. Arranged hours, how will you organize this and what does the student have to do to verify this activity
 - c. On this fieldtrip can students drive?? How does a student obtain permission to satisfy the instructor and college of potential liability?
10. **Evaluation**
 - a. Using a point system and then taking the straight percentage for the class grade.
 - b. Will you be weighting the evaluations ie unit tests are 40%, homework is 15% etc.
 - c. Bell curve adjusting the scale to reflect a desired number of A's, B's etc.

Evaluation Continued:

- d. Include the grading scale you will be using example:
A = 90% or greater, B = 80% or greater, C = 70% or greater, D = 60% or greater and be low 60% is an F.
- e. When are the papers due beginning of class, end of class or anytime that day?
- f. Will late papers be accepted? What accommodations will be made if any?
 - i. Illness
 - ii. School related absence
 - iii. Class fieldtrip
- g. Is class participation graded?
 - i. How will this be accomplished?

11. General class management

- a. Will attendance be taken and graded? Perhaps a rationalization and students understanding on why this important to your class is a great way to introduce this idea to the students.
- b. Tardiness? What is your policy?
- c. Talking, what is allowed?
- d. Discussion, how does one participate correctly in your class?
- f. Behavior Expectations: It is expect that each student will treat other classmates and the instructor with dignity and respect at all times while in this class.
- e. Class Etiquette
 - i. Student Conduct information can be located at:
<http://www.gomjc.org/studentsuccess/OfficeofStudentsuccess.asp>
 - ii. What is expected to happen in the instructor's class
 - iii. Keeping distractions to a minimum as to not hinder a fellow classmate from learning.
 - iv. Is packing up class materials prior to the completion of the class acceptable behavior?
 - v. Cell phone policy?
 - vi. Food in the classroom?
 - vii. Organizing of the classroom after class is over
 - 1. picking up their own mess before leaving
 - 2. putting chairs back after a group activity

12. Special needs

- a. Do they know about the colleges assistance programs?
- b. How will the instructor facilitate this need?

13. Academic dishonesty: (As approved by academic senate)

“Cheating-Intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, or study aids in any academic exercise; misrepresenting or non-reporting of pertinent information in all forms of work submitted for credit.

Facilitating Academic Dishonesty-Intentionally or knowingly helping, or attempting to help, another to violate a provision of the institutional code of academic integrity.

Plagiarism-The deliberate adoption or reproduction of ideas, words or statements of another person, s one's own, without acknowledgement. This includes all group work and written assignments.”

“Plagiarism is misrepresenting someone else's words or ideas as your own. The wording or ideas of others, when used in a written composition, oral presentation, or other assignments, must be properly attributed. This means using proper citation style to give credit to the source in a paper, or

verbally acknowledging the source in a speech. Borrowed ideas may include facts, opinions, statistics, graphs, drawings, and physical models.

Use of another person's wording requires quotation marks and a proper citation in a written presentation, or clear spoken attribution of the quotation in an oral presentation. Paraphrasing or summarizing-any form of restating the ideas of others in your own words-also requires attribution. When you paraphrase, you must use your own words and sentence structure; changing or re-arranging a few words is not sufficient and is considered plagiarism.

Ignorance is not an excuse. Students are expected to understand what plagiarism is and that it is unacceptable. Whenever in doubt, students should ask their instructor.”*(2)

It is very important to clearly outline the importance of academic integrity.

14. Ideas for success

- a. What are a few things that will help new students to be successful in this class?
- b. Where are the resources for getting help? Do the students in the class know what is available to them?
 - i. Writing center
 - ii. Tutoring center
 - iii. Library
 - iv. Disability services
 - v. Computer Labs

15. Miscellaneous areas

- a. Class final date and time
- b. Last day to add, withdraw and drop a class.
- c. Special activities of the department or community that relate strongly to this class
- d. New drop policy
- e. Why the ‘W’ in a class twice can make it difficult to take a class again?
- f.

*(1) Quote from: Altman, H.B. (1989, May). Syllabus share “What the teacher wants.” *The Teaching Professor*, 3, 1-2.

*(2) from a correspondence from the President of MJC as possible wording for syllabi inclusion.

This information is designed to facilitate Student and Instructor success. IF this is truly an important tool for the class then the instructor needs to spend the time with the class and discuss the importance of this document. The very best time to have this lesson is the first class session of the semester.

The lesson on the syllabus will stress those important areas for student success. If after the class a student might decide that this is not the class for them and they will still have time to take another class before it is too late. More likely the student will appreciate the well prepared syllabus and clear expectations and be more motivated to take the class. Either way the class will be more successful.

Additionally, a well written syllabus will evolve over time, as new scenarios are brought to your attention then inclusion into your syllabus will help to avoid behavior (deemed detrimental to the class) or encourage behavior (where there was greater student success) in the future.