

# Planning a Course and Constructing a Course Syllabus (A Guide from the Teaching Center at Washington University in St. Louis)

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Online document source: <http://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/preparing-syllabus>

## Planning a Course

**Begin the process early, giving yourself at least six months to plan a new course.** Successful courses require careful planning and continual revision. Consult with colleagues who have taught the same or similar courses to learn from their strategies and their general impressions of the students who typically take the course. *If you are team-teaching, you and your teaching partner(s) should begin meeting at least six months in advance to discuss course goals, teaching philosophies, course content, teaching methods, and course policies, as well as specific responsibilities for each instructor.*

### Define course goals.

Determining the goals for the course will clarify what you want the students to learn and accomplish. Having these course goals in mind will then help you make decisions about which content to include, which teaching methods to use, and what kinds of assignments and exams are appropriate. For a useful introduction to curriculum planning that begins with defining goals for student learning, rather than with course content, see Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's *Understanding by Design* (1998).

When you define the course goals, focus on student learning. One way to formulate these goals is to determine what students should be learning in terms of content, cognitive development, and personal development. Be as specific as you can and make sure that the goals define learning in ways that can be measured. Consider the following questions:

- What do you want your students to remember from your course in 5-10 years?
- How should taking your course change students?
- What skills should students gain in this course?
- How does this course relate to other courses in the discipline? How, then, might you define the course goals accordingly (e.g. for an introductory, fundamental, or advanced course in the discipline)?

In addition, you should learn about the students who typically take the course (their level of preparation, their majors or academic interests, etc.) in order to think about how your course will help this group of students build their knowledge and understanding of the topic.

Benjamin Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956) provides a helpful framework for identifying the observable and measurable skills you would like your students to learn. As the following table shows, Bloom identified six types of cognitive processes and ordered these according to the increasing level of complexity involved: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This table links these processes to representative skills, as well as verbs you might use when defining course goals, developing teaching methods, designing assignments and exams, and composing questions to use in class.

Category	Representative Skills	Sample Verbs to Use
1. Knowledge (memorization)	Recall, remember, or recognize information.	Define, identify, recall, recognize.
2. Comprehension (understanding)	Relate discrete facts, summarize or rephrase ideas.	Describe, compare, contrast (in your own words).
3. Application (problem-solving)	Apply rules, laws, concepts, principles, and theories to answer or solve a problem. Apply material to a new and concrete situation.	Apply, classify, illustrate with an example.
4. Analysis (dissection)	Identify the component parts of a complex whole (e.g., a phenomenon or problem). Identify the relationships between the parts.	Analyze, support, draw conclusions.
5. Synthesis (creation)	Combine two or more elements into a new (for the students) combination or set of relationships.	Predict, develop, design.
6. Evaluation (judgment)	Critically assess the quality or judge the work based on internal consistency and external criteria.	Evaluate, assess, judge.

Below is an example of a list of course goals, as developed for a General Chemistry course. (At Washington University, General Chemistry is a foundational course for several scientific disciplines; it attracts mainly first-year students who were in the top one percent of their high-school classes and whose academic interests represent a variety of disciplines.)

#### *General Chemistry: Course Goals*

- Teach chemistry topics that must be covered to help students prepare for other courses and for standardized exams.
- Teach study skills that students need to succeed in university-level science courses; these skills are distinct from those required to succeed in high-school science courses. For example, teach students how to study effectively in a group.
- Teach students problem-solving and critical-thinking skills.
- Demonstrate how chemistry is used in other fields and in everyday situations.
- Teach students the beauty of chemistry.

#### **Determine course content.**

Select the major topics and determine the order in which you will teach them.

- *Select the main topics to be covered.* To obtain an initial list of course topics, look in current textbooks or the current literature (for a special-topics course). Determine whether there is a consensus concerning the necessary topics by obtaining previous course syllabi and discussing potential topics with colleagues. Refine your list by considering your course goals and the characteristics of your students. At the same time, use the desired content to refine the course goals.
- *Pare down and refine your initial list of topics.* Instructors often plan initially to teach more material than they can cover in the allotted time.
- *Determine the structure of the course; arrange the topics in a logical order.* Developing a rationale that guides the structure of the course can help you explain the material more clearly to the students. In other words, you can discuss how and why you have organized the material in a particular way, helping them to see, for example, how one topic builds on, illustrates, or offers a different perspective on another. Articulating the rationale behind the course structure also increases and maintains the students' interest in the course content. Determining the course structure can help you decide which texts are most appropriate.

You can choose to organize the topics in a variety of ways, whether chronological, topical, conceptual, survey-oriented, or process-oriented. Think about how the structure of the course will contribute to student learning. Ask questions such as the following:

- Can I organize the topics according to a theme or storyline?
- Do I need to teach certain skills initially and then discuss applications?
- Do I want to introduce a particular theory before illustrating it with specific examples or problems?

### **Develop teaching methods and tools.**

Once you have determined the course goals and content, think about how you will present the content. Select and develop teaching methods and tools that are 1) appropriate for the size of the class and 2) consistent with the course goals. Consider the following questions and suggestions:

- What is your teaching style? How will you apply or adapt your style to suit the course goals, the size of the class, and the types of students who are likely to enroll?
- Which types of teaching methods will best fulfill your course goals? (See [Teaching with Lectures](#) and [Teaching with Discussions](#)).
- When deciding whether or not you will use technology in your teaching, identify specific goals that technology will help you reach. Plan carefully to determine how you will integrate technology with more traditional teaching tools, such as the chalkboard.
- Whenever possible, use a variety of approaches, taking into account that students use a diverse range of learning preferences.
- Plan to use teaching methods that will require and measure active student learning.

### **Determine how you will evaluate student learning: Plan assignments and exams.**

Evaluation must go hand-in-hand with course goals. For example, if one course goal is to improve problem-solving skills, the exam should not contain only questions that ask students to recall facts; it should contain questions that ask students to solve specific and well-chosen problems. By the same token, homework and class activities leading up to the exam must include some questions that require problem-solving skills. Consider the following questions:

- Do assignments reflect and help achieve course goals? For example, are the papers required for the course an appropriate genre and length? How much time will you give students to complete these papers?
- Do exams and quizzes reflect course goals? Do they measure the extent to which students are achieving the learning objectives you have set out for the course?
- Will the students have an opportunity to acquire and practice the skills that are required for exams and major assignments?

### **Select text(s) and other materials.**

If you are using texts, decide whether the course goals will be best met by using a published text or a course reader that compiles material published elsewhere (and unpublished material, if applicable). Take into account the cost of all materials. Consider placing some of the material on reserve at the library so that students can borrow, photocopy, or download the material themselves. *Order texts early and call the bookstore about a month before the course starts to ask if the texts have arrived.*

If you are compiling a course reader, consider copyright issues (see the University's guideline on [copyright and fair use](#)). If you need to obtain permission to reprint or otherwise use published material, allow *at least 3 months* to complete the process. Keep in mind that some publishers now offer faculty the option of creating custom readers, for which the publisher has already obtained the necessary permissions. You can also use commercial copyright clearance services.

**At least three months in advance, order text(s) and other materials, including films, videos, or software; contact guest speakers; and arrange field trips.**

### **If you plan to use instructional technology or multimedia equipment, ensure that you will have the necessary equipment, software, and training.**

Reserve a classroom that has all the necessary components. Classroom reservations are handled by the [Office of the University Registrar \(OUR\)](#), formerly the Office of Student Records. Typically, requests to register classrooms for a course are forwarded to OUR by departmental administrative assistants. To learn about the process in your department, ask the department chair or administrative assistant. Contact The Teaching Center at 935-6810 to schedule training on how to use the classroom multimedia or to arrange for additional, licensed software to be installed on the classroom PC. If you would like to reserve a classroom to practice using the multimedia before the semester starts, or when classes are not in session, please contact John Pingree in the Office of Student Records by [email](#), or by phone at 935-4145.

### **Define course policies.**

Determine how you will grade all required work, including all assignments, papers, exams, and, if applicable, class participation. Decide ahead of time how you will deal with such issues as tardiness, attendance problems, work turned in late, and requests for extensions or the rescheduling of exams. Learn the [Policy on Academic Integrity](#) and develop strategies for preventing and responding to plagiarism and cheating. Include all course policies on the syllabus and plan to review them with students on the first day of class.

### Develop the course schedule.

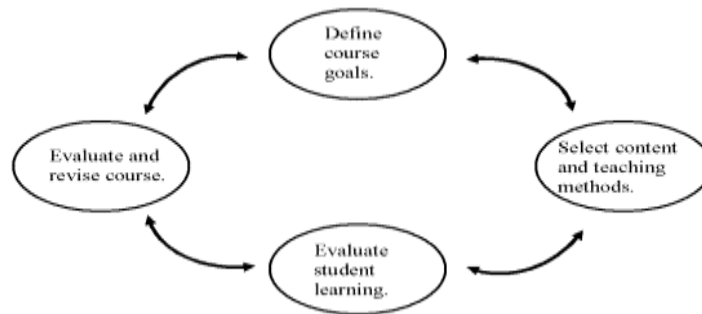
The tendency is nearly always to try to accomplish too much during each class period. Allow time for active learning to occur during class (see [Teaching with Lectures](#) and [Teaching with Discussions](#)) and for students to complete major assignments and prepare for exams. When preparing the schedule, consult the relevant [academic calendars](#), and keep in mind major religious holidays and significant campus events (for example, Homecoming and Thurgood Marshall Carnival).

### Write the course syllabus.

At a minimum, the syllabus should contain the following: course title, time, and location; prerequisites; required texts and other materials; course topics; major assignments and exams; course policies on grading, academic integrity, attendance, and late work; and contact information for instructor and TA (if applicable). (See [Preparing a Syllabus](#) and [Preparing a Syllabus: A Checklist](#).)

### Refine the Course Design.

Course planning is a continual process, as illustrated by the diagram below. Each of the steps is necessarily undertaken with the others in mind, and each will necessarily undergo revision each time you teach a particular course.



*As you plan and revise courses, remember the importance of teaching core concepts and critical-thinking skills. Focusing only on content can quickly lead you to over-emphasize knowledge-based skills and to ignore the teaching of the higher-level thinking skills in Bloom's Taxonomy.*

## Preparing a Syllabus

Construct your syllabus well in advance, as part of the process of planning the course (see [Planning a Course](#) and [Course-Planning Timeline](#)).

The course syllabus has multiple functions:

- 1) The syllabus is a *course-planning tool*. It helps the instructor prepare and organize the course. Taking the time to construct a detailed syllabus will help you define the course goals; plan the course structure and assignments, exams, review sessions, and other activities; and determine how much time you should devote to particular topics.
- 2) The syllabus is a *prospectus* that answers a question on the minds of many students on the first day of class: “why should I take this course?” 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 in completing the course requirements. The syllabus should also stimulate interest in the course topic by indicating why the topic is important or intriguing. Keep in mind that colleagues, administrators, and others interested in the course will read your syllabus. Thus, the syllabus provides an opportunity for you to communicate with a larger audience about the course and its significance to broad educational goals.
- 3) The syllabus is a *reference guide*. It provides students with a compendium of information that they will consult throughout the course, including logistical information such as course name and number, prerequisites, and instructor's name and contact information, as well as due dates, exam times, and course requirements and policies.
- 4) The syllabus is akin to a *contract*, in that it sets out course requirements and policies regarding grading, academic integrity, student conduct, attendance, late work, and other issues. Students are responsible for reading and understanding the syllabus, the terms of which they implicitly agree to abide by when they take the course; encourage students to ask questions to ensure that they understand the course

policies and requirements. *You should include a caveat, however, indicating that you may make changes and adjustments to the document throughout the course, as needed.*

### ***Additional considerations***

- When preparing the syllabus, pay attention to organization, layout, and typography to ensure that the document is easy to read.
- Date the syllabus before you distribute it to students.
- Consider putting your syllabus online as well as on paper. As part of a course Web site, the syllabus will be easy for you to modify throughout the semester and will be accessible for students who misplace their first copy. *If you modify the syllabus during the semester, inform students that a change has been made, highlight the change in a visible way (for example, with a font of a different color), and add an updated date in the “footer” of the document.*
- *On the first day of class*, have plenty of copies available—especially if the course is likely to be popular and students are “comparison shopping”—and go over the syllabus carefully to reduce the risk of future surprises. Depending on the size of the class, consider requiring each student to submit a question about the syllabus during class or on an online discussion board. Finally, record student questions so that the next syllabus can be even clearer and more complete.

### **What information should appear on the syllabus?**

Note that you can choose to put some information on a course Web site or on [Blackboard](#) 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.

### ***Essential Information***

- **Course title, number, time, days, and location; URL for course Web site, if applicable**
- **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**  
*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.
- **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 [ares](#), the library reserve-system, or on [Blackboard](#)). 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.”
- **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.
- **Additional course requirements**  
Include dates and descriptions of required events such as field trips, seminars, additional sessions, or study groups.
- **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 applicable grading rubrics, which you can provide both on paper and on the course Web site.

- **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. Express your willingness to help students understand the [Academic Integrity Policy](#) and how they can avoid plagiarism and its serious consequences by learning to cite sources correctly and leaving plenty of time to complete assignments.

### *Recommended Information*

- **Caveat**

Indicate that you reserve the right to make adjustments or changes throughout the semester. Remind students that they are responsible to learn about these changes if they miss any class time.

- **Course goals**

The course goals describe what each student should know or be able to do by the end of the course. Including these goals in the syllabus can help you articulate the rationale behind assignments, exams, and the organization of the course. (See [Planning a Course](#).)

- **Subsection information**

If the course contains subsections, list their respective start dates, and the time and place that they will be held. Explain their purposes and indicate whether any quizzes or homework will be due during these sections.

### *Helpful Additions*

- **Course description**

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

- **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 Thurtene Carnival).

- **Student resources**

List information about relevant resources that might be helpful to students in your course, such as those found at [The Writing Center](#), [Cornerstone](#) (academic mentoring, tutoring, and disability resources), and the [University Libraries](#). 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.

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