

Course Syllabus: A Guide

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**Prepared by a subcommittee of the
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WHAT IS A SYLLABUS?

A course syllabus is both a professional document and a personal one that should reflect your approach to teaching. It also provides the basis for interaction between you and your students, both in and outside the classroom. According to Parkes & Harris, 2002, a syllabus can be seen as a document that serves three main roles: as a contract, a permanent record, and a learning tool. Singham (2005) feels that the syllabus of many faculty members does little to promote learning. “The typical syllabus gives little indication that the students and teacher are embarking on an exciting learning adventure together, and its tone is more akin to something that might be handed to a prisoner on the first day of incarceration.” A well-constructed syllabus helps students plan at the beginning of term and helps to create a better learning atmosphere in the classroom. You may wish to share your teaching philosophy with students. Take time to reflect on what, who, why, and how you teach. How does your course connect with other courses? Why have you organized your course in a particular way? How will your course help students to work in a particular field? What stimulates your enthusiasm and how do you convey it to your students? What will be required of your students to pass the course? Even if you are teaching a course you have taught before, you have the opportunity to “rethink” what you have done in the past and rewrite your syllabus.

Priority 4 of the Academic Plan 2008-2011 emphasizes the need to maintain quality teaching and learning at Saint Mary’s. The responsibilities of the instructor and the student should be clearly identified and class policies should be written so that a student knows what steps will be followed in a particular situation (e.g., a missed exam). The syllabus sets out the evaluation procedures for a course and if the instructor makes changes (e.g., by assigning additional work) a student may be able to challenge the grade. However, a well-written syllabus should not be just an authoritarian list of rules and regulations. It should reflect the instructor’s enthusiasm for the material and the desire to share the learning experience with students in the classroom. Instructors may include their teaching philosophy, and provide information about how students can best manage their time to complete the requirements of the course, evaluate their own performance, and make use of university resources if difficulties are experienced. Furthermore, you may also advise students about how much time they should devote to the course each week, provide advice on how they can do well on assignments, tests, etc., and inform them on common mistakes that students make in the course.

The syllabus can also help to promote transparency with respect to the curriculum by indicating how a particular course contributes to overall program objectives. The *Final Report of the Working Group on Student Success at Saint Mary’s*, (2006) states that this goal may be, in part, achieved by “the adoption of an explicit syllabus at the program level”.

WHY YOU SHOULD KEEP A COPY OF YOUR SYLLABUS

Always keep a copy of your syllabus. This documentation allows you to keep track of what was taught in a particular year. Frequently, this information is required if a student applies for transfer credits or graduate recognition for completion of a credit in a particular area. In programs that undergo accreditation reviews, a well-written comprehensive syllabus is essential. The inclusion of a syllabus in your annual report or teaching dossier provides a measure of accountability, and on a departmental level, the syllabus may help identify the gaps or duplications in courses. A good syllabus also helps to protect the rights of both the instructor and student, reducing the incidence of academic appeals.

STANDARD ELEMENTS OF A COURSE SYLLABUS

Individual approaches to creating course outlines differ and it is strongly recommended that you personalize your syllabus. Your writing style sets the tone for capturing students and getting them excited about your field of study. Here are some considerations when writing your syllabus:

- Personalize it – Use “you” to address students
 - Share your teaching philosophy.
 - Grab their attention - highlight the benefits, perks, unique opportunities, like guest speakers, field trips, virtual worlds, social networking, group work
 - Persuade students that your experience and research is important to their life
 - Focus on learner-centered course goals
- Disseminate information, such as syllabus, course content, labs, etc in small chunks at appropriate times during the course.

Not all of these elements listed in the following table are required, but they are strongly recommended. The information that you do provide must tell students what they need to know at the beginning of the course, and document the aspects that must be set out in writing. *However, you must provide students with the complete grading system on the first day of class.*

Refer to the links for further explanations.

STANDARD ELEMENTS OF A COURSE SYLLABUS*

Basic course information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Course number, title and credit hours b) Time and location of classes, labs, and/or seminars c) Technology requirements - Course website d) Required or recommended prerequisites, including permission of instructor
Information about course content and objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Course description and course format b) Student learning objectives/outcomes
Information about yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Name and title (so that students know how to address you) b) Contact information - office location, and phone number and/or e-mail address c) Office hours d) Relevant professional information
Extra help information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Required or optional tutorial, lab, recitation b) Location and times c) Teaching Assistants contact information for TAs who interact directly with students in the lab, in tutorials, etc.
Grading system for determining the final grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Refer to grading system guidelines. b) Refer to points of caution concerning required feedback, course sections, multiple grading schemes, number/letter grades, and participation marks.
Required Readings	Refer to the guidelines for required readings .
Other required course materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Calculators, lab coats, safety goggles b) Where they can be purchased c) Approximate costs d) When and why they will be needed
Course policies and expected student behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Submission of late assignments or the absence of students at scheduled tests/exams b) Attendance, lateness, class participation, and class behaviour c) Sick notes (e.g., when it will be accepted, notification before class, time frame after) d) Cell phones, laptops, and email usage e) Accommodations (e.g. students from the Atlantic Centre) f) Academic Conduct and Plagiarism as outlined in the <i>Academic Calendar</i> (see the section on academic Integrity and Student Responsibility, and Academic Regulation 19). Refer to plagiarism points of caution. g) Class cancellations other than in the case of a university-wide closure.

ADDITIONAL ELEMENTS THAT COULD BE INCLUDED IN A COURSE SYLLABUS

Additional reading resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) An optional/supplementary reading list b) A bibliography
Tentative schedules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Tentative schedule of class, lab, and/or seminar topics b) Grid format is often easier to read. c) Tentative schedule of test dates and assignment due dates d) Refer to points of caution concerning the scheduling of in-class tests and exams.
Course format, procedures, and grading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Brief statement describing the format of the course and/or how classes, labs, and/or seminars are structured. 2. Lab use and/or safety procedures 3. More information on grading policies evaluation criteria, and types of exams (multiple choice, essay format, etc.) for assigned grades, either on quantitative or qualitative scales
Student success	<p>Include any other information that that would promote student success and that could help students learn more about the nature of the course, its content, and the basis of evaluation.</p>
Withdrawal dates from courses	<p>It is often a good idea to include the following dates.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Last day for withdrawal with a full refund b) Last day for withdrawal without academic penalty

APPENDIX 1: POINTS OF CAUTION

Course sections	It is strongly encouraged that all sections of a given course should employ a common grading scheme. Student complaints arise when they perceive that their grade is a function of which section they happen to end up in, rather than their performance.
In-class tests and exams	<p>Ensure that you do not schedule any tests and/or exams that, together, are worth more than 10% of the grade in the last 14 calendar days of classes, as per Academic Regulation 8.b in the Academic Calendar. Note that this regulation sets limits on the weight of any exam during regularly-scheduled classroom and laboratory time.</p> <p>This regulation helps protect students from work overload near the end of term. Many students are required to submit major papers, lab reports, and assignments at this time</p>
Multiple grading schemes	Make grading schemes clear and consistent. If you allow for multiple grading schemes (e.g. including or ignoring the midterm grade, based on the best outcome for the student), the same options must be available to all students.
Number grades and letter grades	It is not advisable in undergraduate courses to detail how number grades equate to letter grades because, although this is discussed in the Undergraduate Academic Calendar under Academic Regulation 5, it does change from time to time. An incorrect conversion system on syllabi represents a common mistake leading to student complaints/appeals.
Plagiarism	Refer to the Handbook on Academic Integrity . Be very clear what your intentions are regarding plagiarism, especially with respect to homework, papers, and reports. You should do this in class as well as on the syllabus. Students get confused, so make sure they know when collaboration is allowed and when it is forbidden. If you are clear on the syllabus, the responsibilities also become clear. This is another frequent source of student appeals.
Required Feedback	For most undergraduate courses, you must provide feedback (a minimum of 15% of the final grade) prior to the date that a student can withdraw from a course without academic penalty, as per Regulation 4.d in the Academic Calendar .

Participation marks	<p>Be careful not to assign grades simply for attendance. At university, students must take personal responsibility for their courses. If your intent is to evaluate participation and interaction in the classroom, make that clear. Be sure to detail how you will evaluate participation and interaction. If you do choose to grade students on class participation, you need to let students know how you will be evaluating their participation as well as how it will figure into their course or section grade. You need to keep written notes and records in case of appeals by students. Be specific, as illustrated in the following example.</p> <p>A range:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Regularly makes valuable, relevant contributions to discussion by:<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ discussing new ideas or encouraging others to think about the material in new ways▪ expanding on issues being discussed▪ redirecting attention to the text or to the topic▪ actively participated in small-group discussions. <p>B-range:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Occasionally makes valuable, relevant contributions to discussion.▪ Actively participates in small-group discussions. <p>C-range:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Attends regularly and actively pays attention to discussion.▪ Occasionally contributes to small-group discussions. <p>D or F range:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Does not attend regularly.▪ Does not pay attention to discussion.▪ Does not contribute to small-group discussions.
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APPENDIX 2: HELPFUL GUIDELINES

Course description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) A brief statement about the content of the course b) The bare minimum would be to include a copy of the course description in the Academic Calendar (if you feel that the Calendar course description adequately describes the content and/or overall objectives of the course).
Course policy on email usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) State the instructor’s policy on receiving and responding to email. Students will find this helpful and it should make your dealing with course queries from students more efficient b) Include in your syllabus, such as: “Your email message must include in the Subject line the course identifier and a concise and clear statement of purpose [e.g., BIOL1200: I have a conflict with next test]. Otherwise it is likely that the message could be deleted, along with spam messages and messages potentially containing viruses.
Course website	<p>Provide detailed instructions for accessing the course site if you have one (Blackboard or Course Tools). Many students claim that: they cannot find class information; documents won’t open: and they do not receive course announcements.</p>
Discussion guidelines/ rubric	<p>Construct a discussion rubric for students. This should be applicable for both classroom and online. Examples of poor and exemplary discussions and/or peer reviewed discussions are useful.</p>
Grading system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Give a detailed explanation of the grading system, including relative weight for all graded course elements and stating the number of tests and assignments. b) State description and expectations for each assignment. c) State how, when, and where assignments are to be submitted. d) If students have to complete several assignments, will the first assignment be graded or evaluated before subsequent assignments are due? e) If assignments are late, state your policy. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ e.g., Assignments received later than the due date will be penalized by x % each day that they are late. The instructor may grant exceptions to the lateness penalty for valid reasons such as illness, compassionate grounds, etc. f) Dates and locations of tests g) Test format and content h) What to do if a student misses a test: who to contact and when i) Inform students about how to find out where and when the final examination takes place. Make grading schemes clear and consistent. If you allow for multiple grading schemes (e.g. including or ignoring the midterm grade, based on the best outcome for the student), the same options must be available to all students.

<p>Learning objectives/outcomes</p>	<p>A learning objective states what a student should be able to do after completing your course.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Before writing them, make sure that you find out if your course has mandated learning objectives (i.e., required by an accrediting agency). a) Find out how your course fits into the curriculum, who your students are and, if the course has been taught previously, try to find out what worked and didn't work well. a) If your course is a prerequisite for other courses, talk to the instructors who are teaching the higher level courses. It is important to ensure that your students are well-prepared for the ensuing courses in your discipline. a) If your course is an optional one, keep in mind that your students will come from more than one discipline and their background knowledge can vary enormously. a) See Appendix 3 and 4 for verbs and objectives commonly used for student performance (based on Bloom's (1965) taxonomy of educational objectives).
<p>Learning styles</p>	<p>Students have different learning styles. By designing your curriculum with student centered activities with engaging different learning styles, students should have a better chance at succeeding in your course.</p>
<p>Professional information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) e.g., degrees, the universities you attended or worked at, teaching experience, research areas b) How will your experience and research enable you to be enthusiastic with your students?
<p>Required readings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) List of required textbooks, course packs, and/or other supplementary materials with complete citations. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Author, title, date, edition, publisher, journal, etc. b) Provide the price and where the material can be purchased. c) Why you chose the readings d) Reserve readings and where to find them e) Class notes if provided on Blackboard or Course Tools
<p>Student success</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Additional support services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the Writing Centre ▪ tutoring availability ▪ computer labs ▪ library hours and library assistance ▪ Atlantic Centre ▪ ITSS Helpdesk ▪ media production centre b) Strategies for success in your class <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Number of hours/ week recommended to complete course requirements ▪ participation and attentiveness ▪ examples of exemplary and poor assignments, papers, and reports ▪ student contracts ▪ understanding of learning styles ▪ how to take good notes ▪ guidelines for completing assignments, papers, and reports ▪ discussion rubric

Teaching Assistants	In addition to naming a TA, the Teaching Assistant duties should be briefly explained in the syllabus. This aids the student in identifying the person responsible for specific course requirements. The days and times this person is available and expectations to both students and instructor.
Technology Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Provide clear instructions on how to access course material if you are using Course Tools or Blackboard, Elluminate, Clickers, or computer programs, like Minitab. b) Many students claim they cannot find class information; documents won't open: and they do not receive course announcements. c) Include computer requirements, like lab software programs <p>If using CPS clickers in the classroom or Elluminate Live, provide detailed instructions or access to a manual for students to review.</p>
Tentative Schedules	Be sure that your schedule is clearly labelled as tentative to avoid potential problems. For example, if the date of a test is changed, and a student has not been attending class regularly, he/she may not be aware of the change. If the student misses the test and you refuse to accommodate the student by allowing him/her to write the exam at a later date, there may be grounds for an appeal.

APPENDIX 3: STUDENT PERFORMANCE VERBS BY LEVEL OF COGNITIVE OPERATION BASED ON BLOOM'S TAXONOMY

1. Knowledge

arrange
define
duplicate
label
list
memorize
name

order
recall
recite
recognize
relate
repeat
reproduce

2. Comprehension

classify
describe
discuss
explain
express
identify
indicate

locate
recognize
report
restate
review
select
translate

3. Application

apply
choose
demonstrate
dramatize
employ
give examples
illustrate

interpret
operate
practice
schedule
sketch
solve
use

4. Analysis

analyze
appraise
calculate
categorize
compare
contrast
criticize

differentiate
discriminate
distinguish
examine
experiment
question
test

5. Synthesis

arrange
assemble
collect
compose
construct
create
design
formulate

integrate
manage
organize
plan
predict
prepare
propose
set up

6. Evaluation

appraise
argue
assess
challenge
choose
defend
dispute

evaluate
judge
rate
score
select
support
value

Taken from Nilson, 2003

APPENDIX 4: EXAMPLES OF SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES BASED ON BLOOM'S TAXONOMY

<u>Level</u>	<u>The student should be able to...</u>
Knowledge	define iambic pentameter state Newton's laws of motion identify the major surrealist painters
Comprehension	describe the trends in the graph in his/her own words summarize the passage from Socrates' <i>Apology</i> properly translate into English the paragraph from Voltaire's <i>Candide</i>
Application	describe an experiment to test the influence of light and light quality on the hill reaction of photosynthesis scan a poem for metric foot and rhyme scheme use the Archimedes principle to determine the volume of an irregularly shaped object
Analysis	list arguments for and against human cloning determine the variables to be controlled for an experiment discuss the rationale and efficacy of isolationism in the global economy
Synthesis	write a short story in Hemmingway's style compose a logical argument on assisted suicide in opposition to your personal opinion construct a helium-neon laser
Evaluation	assess the validity of certain conclusions based on the data and statistical analysis give a critical analysis of a novel with evidence to support the analysis recommend stock investments based on recent company performance and projected value

Taken from Nilson, 2003

The following resources were used in the preparation of this document.

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