

Your Course Syllabi: Principles, Requirements, and Possibilities

The syllabus is usually your first opportunity to convey to students that a course has a clear and coherent set of educational purposes and an equally clear and coherent plan for accomplishing those purposes. To the extent that the syllabus explains mutual requirements established between Calvin College, you, and your students, it serves as a **contractual document**. And to the extent that it communicates your expertise and commitment to students—and *aligns* learning objectives, assignments, classroom practices, etc.—it is a **pedagogical document**.

Syllabus Requirements and Student Expectations

Calvin requires that a syllabus be provided for students in every course. Common practice leads students to expect that a set of common elements appear in all syllabi.

1. **Identity and role** of a course (e.g., “Philosophy 153 satisfies the ‘Philosophical Foundations’ requirement for the core curriculum”; “Biology 395 satisfies a course requirement for the Biology major and the ‘Integrative Studies’ core category”)
2. **Purposes and processes** of a course
 - a. The student learning outcomes (SLOs); normally these are found in the expanded course description.
 - b. Assessment measures for learning outcomes (for example, a syllabus might use a table with SLOs in a left column and measures [e.g., numbers of assignments listed on an outline] in a right column.)
 - c. Outline of topics, readings, assignments, including important dates
 - d. Grading (percentages given for the various assignments and tests)
3. **Policies and mutual responsibilities**
 - a. Academic dishonesty¹
 - b. Students with disabilities²
 - c. Technology (indicate what uses of portable devices will and will not be allowed)
 - d. Attendance (include specific expectations and penalties)
 - e. Tardiness or missed classes, assignments, exams, conferences, etc.
 - f. (Optional) Class participation (some Calvin instructors have been using the term “class investment,” to indicate the variety of ways students can be credited for contributing to a class other than speaking in class)
4. **Materials** (required texts, tools, etc.)
5. **Resources** (e.g., library, Rhetoric Center, Digital Studio, SAS tutors)
6. **Instructor’s name and contact information** (e.g., e-mail, office phone, office location, office hours)

¹ The faculty adopted a requirement to include a statement on academic dishonesty but no specific language. Many colleagues refer students to the student handbook: “You are responsible for the information on plagiarism contained in the *Student Conduct Code* (Article IV. B)”); others add a reference to the English Department’s statement on plagiarism: (<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/engl/101/tresources/plagiarism.htm>); still others compose their own statements about cheating.

² The faculty adopted the following language for inclusion in all syllabi: “Calvin will make reasonable accommodations for persons with documented disabilities. Students should notify the Coordinator of Services to Students with Disabilities located in Student Academic Services, HH 446. Students should notify their instructors within the first two weeks of class.”

Optional Syllabus Items

It is wise to let students know if there are other things that you expect of them.

1. Communications (e.g., do you expect students to check Calvin e-mail or their Moodle course every day?)
2. Health and safety practices (e.g., in lab courses)
3. Emergency evacuation procedures
4. Classroom practices (e.g., Should your students expect to be called on or to participate in regular active learning exercises?)

Options for Distributing a Syllabus

Instructors typically distribute a paper copy of the syllabus, but students are also used to receiving electronic copies, and it is fast becoming the expectation that the syllabus will be posted in Moodle (an electronic copy has the advantage of being easy to modify; just be sure to notify students when you change anything on a syllabus).

Composing a Syllabus

Students are adept at scanning web-based documents that take advantage of simple headings, bullet-point lists, and other means of making content visually accessible. As a demonstration of your expertise in contemporary rhetoric, you will want to take advantage of formatting options to improve the readability of your syllabus.

Options for Ensuring That Students Read, Understand, and Regularly Consult the Syllabus

Instructors sometimes express frustration that students seem to ignore the content of a syllabus. To help overcome that problem you might:

1. Make regular reference to your syllabus (e.g., in PowerPoint presentations, refer to specific topic headings from the outline in the syllabus)
2. After distributing the syllabus, talk with students about how to interpret it. A conversation about the syllabus, especially if it leads to your making revisions in your syllabus, can persuade students that you expect and respect their input.
3. Give a syllabus quiz (e.g., possibly using clickers, ask students questions about the syllabus—to find out: Have they read it? Is it readable, i.e., effectively written and formatted? Does it answer their questions?).

Sharing the Reasons for Your Choices

As one overarching principle for composing and talking about a syllabus, remember that students respond extremely well when instructors explain *why* they have made the choices that appear on a syllabus. You should realize that students have four or five different professors who may have made different choices about policies (e.g., about missing or late work) so it is good to explain how the choices that you have made contribute to their learning.

For More Help

Your department chair or the Calvin Teaching and Learning Network Fellow from your division can provide you with additional assistance.