

# Four Questions (and sub-questions) to Pose to Your Syllabus

This tipsheet is adapted from a 2009 syllabus workshop in General Education. Its questions are designed to address issues of clarity of content, of expectations, and of learning objectives.

## 1.) Do the title and preamble clearly state what the course is about, orient and excite students?

- Does the preamble clearly identify the theme of the course, or pose questions that draw students in?
- Does it challenge or inspire your students? Is there a problem or puzzle to be solved?
- Does it introduce relevant vocabulary without being confusing?
- Does it require and mention prerequisites?
- Does the phrasing set a collaborative tone or sense of common purpose? *e.g.*, “*We will explore...*”
- Are learning objectives stated? *e.g.*, “*You will be able to...*” “*Students will learn...*”
- Does it refer students to the course website, or Internet sources for further detail?

## 2.) Does your syllabus establish a clear *contract* between you and your students?

- Does it provide a means of contact (phone; email etc.)
- Does it make clear promises regarding due dates, readings, and office hours?
- Does it establish clear expectations for course blogs, chat rooms or the course website?
- Does it make grading policies explicit? *e.g.*, *20% for X; 40% for Y (or something else)*
- Does your syllabus make provisions for writing and assignment preparation: pre-paper conferences, review sessions with you or TAs, etc?
- Are you prepared to eliminate material that cannot be covered (since adding is problematic)?

## 3.) Is your syllabus *coherent*? —In the simplest sense a syllabus is a “calendar,” but it should also have a logic, an order of argument or a story line.

- Is the logic or story best told in vignettes (one per week or month)? Or is it better divided into 3 or 4 Acts -- and if so, are they manageable *chunks*?
- Does that order or logic follow from your preamble?
- Are the sections or elements *linked* to one another, or *steps* that follow one another logically?
- Can the elements be posed as *questions* that follow in a coherent sequence (at least for you)?
- Is the pacing reasonable? Can your students really read X pages a week (or less during exams)?
- Are there built in moments of review?
- Have you checked due dates against the university calendar: vacations/days of religious observance?

## 4.) Does your syllabus *build* the appropriate skills or competencies? Does it clearly motivate stages of learning or have learning outcomes?

- Is the pitch and degree of difficulty right for the cohort (again, are prerequisites mentioned)?
- Is the sequencing of assignments laid out clearly with an eye to developing necessary skills?

- Do writing or other assignments coincide with the material they address?
- Do the assignments (reaction papers, exercises etc.) develop skills that build to a final, challenging written or other project or exam?

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