

CNDLS Syllabus Design Workshop

The CNDLS Syllabus Design Workshop is designed to improve the organization and clarity of syllabi.

Goal of workshop:

Learn the fundamental components of a good syllabus and apply these components to your own syllabus. The goal will be to leave the workshop with 2-3 revisions in mind for your syllabi in the fall.

Workshop Schedule and Goals:

- **Discuss:** What is your process for putting a syllabus together? What do you think your syllabus communicates to students?
- **Consider:** Fundamentals of syllabus design, intention and use of syllabi, how do we know students are using it?
- **Critique:** Four sample syllabi
- **Apply:** Take the fundamentals of syllabus design and apply them to your own syllabus.

In thinking about putting your syllabus together, it is helpful to think in terms of the graphic below. Start with your goals descriptions of the course, consider your assignments in the course and their clarity and prominence in the syllabus, and finally list your logistics in one area at the end of the syllabus.



Goals:

- Use the description portion of your syllabus to communicate:
 - Rationale for the course: where is this course in the department curriculum?
 - Disciplinary questions or themes
 - Problems/challenges that will be tackled throughout the course
- Think in terms of these questions:
 - *What would you like to hear your students say when they leave your course?*
 - *What should students walk away with in terms of knowledge and skills?*
- Write a clear instructional goal:
 - Focus on the learner.
 - Ask yourself what students will get out of the course.
 - Ask what students will do to demonstrate that they've reached the goal.
 - State the goal in concrete and accurate terms using the most appropriate verbs for your context

Assignments:

- What do you expect students to do as they work towards achieving the goals you set out for them?
- Review assignments to determine their connection to course goals
- Approach assignments from the student perspective to understand steps/components involved in the assignment
- Communicate grading criteria clearly

Logistics:

- Instructor Name, Email, Office, office hours, course name, course number
- Course calendar/table
- Books and readings associated with each class session
- Course requirements and grading procedures

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From the most recent workshop, Georgetown faculty identified positive and negative aspects of four syllabi:

Positive Aspects of Sample Syllabi

- Informal tone
- Explicit statement of assignments, goals,
- Repetition
- Questions/Themes to define weeks/units in addition to the readings
- Syllabus could serve as contract between students and instructor

Negative Aspects of Sample Syllabi

- Too much description
- Format/layout seems unorganized
- Syllabus does not seem complete if there are typos, run-on sentences, etc. (What does that really communicate to students if it is in draft form?)
- Too many goals, not enough assignments
- Descriptions of major assignments of course are not aligned with grade percentages or criteria

Important Recommendations for Designing Syllabi:

- **Intention and Use**
Consider these questions when considering how you will use the syllabus:
 - When and how often will you refer to the syllabus only at the beginning of the semester?
 - Is it a visible organizing framework for you and your students?
 - Is your syllabus a tool to help students navigate the course?
 - If you decide to make changes to the schedule mid-course, how will you communicate that to students?
- **Length of Description: Are our students reading our syllabi?**
 - **Less is More:** In thinking about the amount of upfront description we generally include in syllabi, less is more. If you need to write a lengthy abstract about the purpose of the course, ask yourself if this is more for you or the student. If you still need some of that verbiage, consider distributing pithy statements with each calendar date to describe how the readings are connected to the topic or how this topic relates to the overall goal of the course.
 - **Survey students about the syllabus:**
Asking a few students to give you feedback about your syllabus at the end of the course could be useful for you and them. Asking them to reflect on what they have learned over the course of the semester by reviewing the syllabus will yield information about not only the syllabus, but about your course as well.

Possible strategies for getting student feedback about your syllabus:
 - Quick, anonymous survey at the end of the course
 - Include a question on an exam about the syllabus
 - For an additional assignment, ask students to review the syllabus in response to some questions: Did the syllabus correspond to what we did in class? What would have been helpful to include? Do you feel you achieved the stated goals?
- **Organization**
 - Allow for white space—visual breaks between paragraphs or lists
 - Indentations
 - Pagination
 - Graphical elements that could suggest time or progression: tables, timelines, maps
- **Finally, get feedback from a colleague about your syllabus. How would it read to someone browsing through explore.georgetown.edu?**

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