

Best Practices in Syllabus Construction

from the UNCW Center for Teaching Excellence

Your syllabus represents a learning contract with your students. In the syllabus, you set your expectations for student learning via specification of class assignments and behavioral comportment. You also articulate what students should expect to learn by specifying learning outcomes for the course.

The information you include on your syllabus depends on many factors, including course level and size as well as your personal preferences in communication. Lab courses, for example, have very different formats than non-lab sections. Because of this, it is impossible to create a template for a syllabus that would be appropriate for all courses across UNCW disciplines.

With that in mind, there are a few required elements to the UNCW syllabus, as well as a larger set which are simply good practice. I have included examples of both. I anticipate that this will be a working document and encourage you to send CTE best practice examples of your own as well as any thoughts you may have about this document.

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UNCW's Required Elements

UNCW Faculty Senate policy requires the following elements in every course syllabus:

In every course, undergraduate and graduate, students must be given an opening handout that spells out the following (clearly and specifically):

- i. the basis for grading, including the relative weightings, in determining the final grade, of such factors as exams, papers, quizzes, and projects. See also grading.
- ii. the attendance policy (if the faculty member has one)
- iii. penalties, if any, for absences, late arrivals, missed examinations, and late or missed assignments
- iv. office hours

For online classes, course policies must be posted online. For other classes, either a hard-copy opening handout must be distributed or the information must be posted on a course website or emailed to the class.

Modifications to the opening handout should also be communicated to students in writing. Faculty are free to create their own policies in these matters, but these policies must be

communicated to the students at the beginning of the course. (Faculty Senate Handbook, Chapter V: Faculty Responsibilities, A.1.c. Course Policies and Syllabus)

What Else to Include

Course demographics and requirements. What is the course name and section? When and where does the class meet? What are your office hours, your office location, your phone number and email address? It is a good idea to include your communication preferences in this section (e.g., I prefer students to contact me via e-mail) and your preferences regarding out-of-class contact (e.g., my preference is that students discuss class issues with me during office hours but I am available for appointments as needed). Required textbooks and classroom equipment should be included in this section. Class prerequisites should also be carefully articulated. Your policy toward students who do not have the appropriate prerequisites should be clearly spelled out. It is helpful for students to know whether the required textbooks and materials will be available on reserve.

Course readings and assignments. Although this section may seem self-explanatory, it is important to be very clear about your expectations for course assignments. Many faculty members include this information under a heading such as “Course Topics” or Class Schedule.” It is very helpful for students to know the dates on which course topics will be covered and the assigned reading associated with each of these dates. Your policy regarding deviation from the assigned topic dates should be included in this section. Please alert students to prerequisites for each topic or any unusual circumstances surrounding class assignments (e.g., “Students will be required to attend two field trips in this class. Field trips will be scheduled on March 9 and April 10.”)

Methods of evaluation. Students should know what methods of evaluation will be used in the class. Test and assignment dates should be specified at the start of the semester. How much each assignment or test counts toward the final grade should be specified, as should whether or not those dates are subject to change. It is a good idea to clearly state your class policy toward make-up assignments and examinations in this section of the syllabus as well as your policies regarding late or incomplete work. Many faculty members include their attendance policy in this section, while others do so in a separate section. However this is done, it is important to specify whether attendance will impact final grades. It is also important to state your policy toward tardiness or early departures from class and whether such behavior will negatively impact grades.

Learning outcomes for the course. These are the skills and knowledge sets you expect students to acquire as a result of their participation in your course. They may align closely with your department’s learning outcomes for the major, particularly for upper division courses. Other courses’ learning outcomes may reflect only a subset of those for the major. Please refer to your curriculum and/or assessment committee if you are unsure of your department’s learning goals for the major. If the course you are teaching falls under University Studies, be sure that your learning outcomes fit the expectations for the course here: <http://uncw.edu/universitystudies/faculty/index.html>.

Important academic calendar dates: It is helpful to include drop-add, holiday and Break days in your syllabus. Many instructors include a statement regarding attendance expectations at classes just prior to or after breaks.

Statement on academic integrity. UNCW has worked in community to review its Honor Code in the past few years. Every syllabus should include a reference to the Honor Code and a statement about every member of the academic community's responsibility to adhere to that code.

An example of such a statement, taken directly from the UNCW Academic Honor Code document, would be:

All students enrolled at UNCW are subject to the UNCW Student Academic Honor Code, which is intended to help every member of the UNCW community appreciate the high value placed on academic integrity and the means that will be employed to ensure its preservation. Students are expected to perpetuate a campus culture in which each student does his or her own work while relying on appropriate resources for assistance. In such a climate, students enjoy a special trust that they are members of a unique community in which one's thoughts and words are attributed correctly and with proper ownership, and in which there is little need for systems to sanction those who cheat. As such, all UNCW students shall commit to the principles and spirit of the Honor Code by adhering to the following pledge:

As a student at The University of North Carolina Wilmington, I am committed to honesty and truthfulness in academic inquiry and in the pursuit of knowledge.

I pledge to uphold and promote the UNCW Student Academic Honor Code.

A much abbreviated version might look like this:

All members of UNCW's community are expected to follow the academic Honor Code. Please read the UNCW Honor Code carefully (as covered in the UNCW Student Handbook and available here: <http://www.uncw.edu/odos/honorcode/>). Academic dishonesty in any form will not be tolerated in this class.

Statement regarding plagiarism (which many individuals combine with the Honor Code statement). This statement should briefly address the issue of plagiarism as a specific violation of the Honor Code.

An example of such a statement would be:

Please be especially familiar with UNCW's position on plagiarism as outlined in the UNCW Student Handbook. Plagiarism is a form of academic dishonesty in which you take someone else's ideas and represent them as your own. Here are some examples of plagiarism:

1. You write about someone else's work in your paper and do not give them credit for it by referencing them.
2. You give a presentation and use someone else's ideas and do not state that the ideas are the other person's.
3. You get facts from your textbook or some other reference material and do not reference that material.

Statement on services for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities should know the appropriate mechanism for addressing those disabilities in your course. An example of such a statement would be:

Students with diagnosed disabilities should contact the Office of Disability Services (962-7555). Please give me a copy of the letter you receive from Office of Disability Services detailing class accommodations you may need. If you require accommodation for test-taking, please make sure I have the referral letter no fewer than three days before the test.

Statement regarding violence and harassment. UNCW practices zero tolerance toward violence and harassment. Students should be directed to appropriate campus resources should they experience such behavior.

An example of such a statement would be:

UNCW practices a zero tolerance policy for any kind of violent or harassing behavior. If you are experiencing an emergency of this type contact the police at 911 or UNCW CARE at 962-2273. Resources for individuals concerned with a violent or harassing situation can be located at <http://uncw.edu/noharm/resources/index.html>.

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Course description and teaching philosophy. Students do better when they know what type of course to expect. It is helpful to them to include a statement or two about your teaching philosophy and your course management style. They need to learn what your academic goals are for them during the semester. Such goals may include your learning outcomes but may extend beyond those outcomes. What are your goals for students as learners in your classroom and what are your expectations for their participation? Some courses are heavily dependent on interaction, while others are not. This is a good place to discuss classroom conduct and respect for others.

Campus Respect Compact. UNCW has recently instituted a Seahawk Respect Compact to affirm our commitment to a civil community characterized by mutual respect. That Compact will soon be affixed to the wall of each classroom and can be accessed at <http://uncw.edu/diversity/src.html>. Individuals wanting more information about the Seahawk Respect Compact can contact the Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion.

Statement regarding the use of personal electronics. Students' use of technology in class has become widespread. Many faculty members find it helpful to include a statement about the use of electronic devices in the classroom. Contingencies governing such behavior should be clearly delineated. Your policy regarding students who abuse these contingencies should be clear. Many faculty ban cell phone use and texting during class. Some allow laptops contingent upon appropriate use (e.g., "no surfing" rules). Your policy is up to you; just be sure to explain it clearly on the syllabus.

Statement regarding the purchase of ancillary materials for the course. Many publishers offer ancillary materials for student use (e.g., study guides, websites etc.) Some professors find that ancillary materials are useful to their students, although they typically carry an additional cost. If you want your students to make use of ancillary materials, you should state their likely benefit, as well as cost.

Other information that could be useful. My preference is to include any information relevant to the course in my syllabus. In a writing class, for example, I might include the name and phone number for the Writing Center, information on Randall library and other support services. UNCW has an abundance of resources available to help students in just about any conceivable academic or personal situation. Think of those that might be relevant in your course and do your students the favor of pointing them in the right direction. Here, for example, is the suggested language from the University Learning Center for inclusion in syllabi:

The University Learning Center's (ULC) mission is to help students become successful, independent learners. Tutoring at the ULC is NOT remediation: the ULC offers a different type of learning opportunity for those students who want to increase the quality of their education. ULC services are free to all UNCW students and include the following:

- Learning Services (University Learning Center) <http://uncw.edu/ulc/learning/>
- Math Services <http://www.uncw.edu/ulc/math/index.html>
- Supplemental Instruction <http://www.uncw.edu/ulc/si/index.html>
- Writing Services <http://www.uncw.edu/ulc/writing/index.html>

At the end of the day... Your syllabus is the first learning material students encounter in your course. Because of this, it is important to consider the tone of your class in addition to its form. Beyond its contractual nature, the syllabus represents your initial attempt to form a relationship with your students, to begin the process of community the class will take. Take advantage of that opportunity. Include a favorite quote or two, especially from sites that may surprise them (like RateMyProfessor.com).

I hope this document helps you as you prepare for the semester. CTE maintains a list of websites and a library of materials to help as you are constructing your syllabi. A particularly good syllabus toolkit can be found at <http://www.cordonline.net/ncnet-toolkit/syllabus.php>. Feel free to contact us at ashed@uncw.edu (Diana) or tenhuisenm@uncw.edu (Matt) with comments or concerns.