What Students Hope For in a Syllabus

This is a list of suggestions compiled from student input. Students majoring in the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences contributed. Of course, student hopes vary, but this set of guidelines offers a glimpse into some students' thinking about syllabi.

1. What do you look/hope for in a syllabus?

<u>**Format**</u>: Use bullet points and lists; the syllabus needs to be accessible, clear, and concise.

<u>**Course Description/Rationale**</u>
- A course description and why the professor is teaching it. What is the rationale behind the topic, why are they interested in it, and why should we be interested in it? This doesn't have to be more than a paragraph or 2, but it's always nice to see on the front.
- Summary of the premise of the class & how it relates to current day/world events/why it's important to study
- General perennial questions the course seeks to address (and often not fully answer) - along the lines: of What are the effects of globalization on women's rights? - for a global feminist theory course or perhaps for a philosophy course How does the theory interact with practice?

<u>**Formal and Informal Expectations**</u>
- An objectives section: Clear class objectives including absence, late, and class participation policies gives me a feel for the professor and lets me know his/her expectations.
- What kind of work does the course involve (assignments, problem-sets, projects, readings, exams) and the work load (how much I'm expected to do every week).
- Expectations about participation, writing, etc. What are the goals of the professor, and what should our goals be?
- If there are general expectations that the prof has for weekly readings or participation, that is helpful. Maybe they want students to focus on a particular element of reading, or come up with a couple of focus questions on their own. This can be helpful guidance from week to week--a constant reminder.
- Professor preferences on citation style
- A note on flexibility. How flexible are due dates? What happens when you have an emergency? Even if it's as much as emailing before the day that an assignment is due, that can be helpful to see. Also, if there is no flexibility, that should be noted.

<u>**Semester-long Schedule**</u>
- A tentative course outline by date (the more specific, the better; the best syllabi have every class mapped out)
- A schedule of due dates of major assignments and explanation: 3 short papers spaced out evenly? 1 long paper due at the end? weekly response papers? I think that when figuring out a workload, students really appreciate this information.
- A schedule of each week, even if it's just "Week of September 5/7" or something like that--with a schedule of readings, articles, and a note that they may change. During the first class, some professors will always say, "This schedule may change and we may have to adjust." That creates an environment of flexibility and understanding in learning. Obviously some will hold themselves to very high expectations to remain on the predicted schedule for 3 months, but then when it's absolutely necessary to make an adjustment, everyone (prof and students) can get frustrated--never a good thing!

Assignments

- A basic outline of assignments that might be regular or weekly--perhaps the response paper is due on Thursday at noon. That can be stated once, though for the first couple of weeks it could be helpful to send an email reminder.
- Important assignments bolded: Distinguishes ahead of time what the big assignments are and lets me know what is important
- Subheadings for the assignments: These let me know what the professor was thinking when they were assigning the material.
- Not simply Essay Due, but Student Selected Topic, Essay on Machiavelli (or essay discussing a general theme of the class ... or research essay involving primary source documents)- alluding to the professor's particular expectations and goals (if they can somehow relate this to the learning goals for the class this also makes this a tight connection- and I am more likely to understand what they mean).

Guidelines for Reading

- Number of pages of the reading: Lets me know how much reading I will have each night
- Focusing questions for the subject matter or for the reading can also be very fruitful. I have used syllabi when reading assignments to ask questions, focus on given themes, generate essay prompts or to prepare for exams. Using syllabi to synthesize class material after I have been exposed to it in class makes me feel as if I am on the right track- developing my self and keeping up with the pace of the course.

Assessment and Evaluation:

- An outline for how I am to be assessed in the course (for example, what percentage each assignment is worth in my final grade), and an explanation of any special policies the professor may have (for example, guidelines on re-writes and such). Not having a good idea of how you are doing in a course can be very stressful, and it is very nice to be able to keep track of your grade.

Resources

- While this may seem obvious to some professors, posting a syllabus online is very helpful (some professors still don't do this!). The document handed out on the first day is easily lost or buried in other papers, and students may want to frequently check it throughout the semester.
- Citations for the readings: It lets me know the context and background of the reading and from where it came. This is helpful when analyzing the text.
- Office hours and contact information are also always helpful to include.
- A listing of teaching assistants, PLI's, and extra help sessions if they have been scheduled, etc.

Process of Introducing the Course and Syllabus

- It is helpful when the syllabus is introduced and gone over a bit in class as opposed to just being handed out as students leave on the first day. Helpful too when this is a document that is revisited as a class during the semester.
- It can be helpful and interesting for the professor to talk a bit about themselves--it develops the idea that they're human but also illustrates their approach and how they came to consider and do work in their field.
- Making a list of aspirations and expectations can also be helpful to do as a class exercise in relation to the syllabus and course introduction.

2. What should NOT go on a syllabus?

- I don't think there is ever too much that can be included, although a document nearing or over four pages can seem very overwhelming.
- A detailed outline of every assignment if they are different from each other. It can be overwhelming to see directions for each of the three large papers we have to do, or a page-long explanation of how papers will be graded. These can be noted (a short sentence about how this will be covered in class).
- An obvious lack of trust in students' ability to keep up, interest in the course, expectations for the class experience, knowledge of the subject, etc. Tone can be very obvious in a syllabus, and can create an important impression for students on the first day or during the first week of the semester. It's meaningful to see a classroom community growing right from the beginning--where it's not just a teacher/student relationship, but a collegial colleague-colleague relationship.
- "Office Hours TBA" - This happens quite frequently, and sometimes just a simple, by appointment only, or, will be announced from week to week, is especially helpful. In some courses, TBA has come to mean "rarely," which can dissuade students by the middle of the term. Also, it's great to put--if the door is open come in, or if you want to make an appointment, I am always available by email.
- When talking about communication with students, it's not necessary to include a story about the student who emailed at midnight the night before an exam. I think that the majority of students know that it's not appropriate (or it can be a part of the in class explanation run-through of the syllabus). If the professor has certain expectations about emailing, then they should definitely list them (will not respond after 9 pm, they check their email in the morning, etc. etc. if it's possible), but I remember one syllabus in particular where the teacher didn't seem to want to hear from students, or was much more accessible in office hours rather than email.

3. What kinds of larger contextual considerations faculty should be aware of in designing syllabi/courses and assignments (lull or crunch times during the semester; rhythms of the semester [when there should be what kind of work in a course and why]; etc.)

Consider how best to support the rhythm and the development of student learning
- I like when a professor uses assignment "scaffolding" — for instance when there are several due dates for different phases of a larger project. The most valuable projects come out of a process where a student can receive criticism and edit accordingly along the way.
- I think that consistency throughout the semester is also important. I remember one history course where the professor assigned one paper between the beginning of the spring semester and spring break (3-5 pg?), a midterm paper (5-7?), between spring break and the end of the semester (3-5?), a different sort of paper due the last day, and a final paper (8-10 pg?). It was wonderfully spaced out, and I saw the two shorter papers as practice runs--I think they were more focused on our readings. Nothing was too excessive, and there was a gradual development of assignments during the fourth month term. It functioned well in comparison to a long midterm paper (10-12 pg) and a long final paper (12-15)--when there wasn't as much guidance.
- If the professor chooses to have work due on the last day of classes, as well as the last day of finals, students should know what the differences are between the two assignments (paper and paper, paper and exam, etc.). Large papers are often due the last day of classes. Also, in the same way that thinking about working during breaks can be daunting, papers due in the middle of the finals period

can be daunting as well. However, having a paper due on Dec. 14 rather than the 18, or May 10 rather than the 17, can help students get it done and flesh things out earlier. Helpful explanations are that the prof needs to get started earlier b/c of senior work, they don't want the whole thing dragging on--students can really get caught up in one assignment. Having a rough draft or an outline due at the end of classes, perhaps, and then the final product due in the middle of finals, is a nice way to space things out.

Students have multiple/various needs and responsibilities
- Consider level of experience of the students, is the class mostly freshmen and sophomores or juniors and seniors, and if the students need more time to complete difficult readings or might be assisted with having rough drafts due or having a required trip the writing center.
- Remember that students have other commitments, classes, and work.
- Consider take home finals or a mix of finals or papers/ presentations.

Keep in mind campus and cultural events
- Halloween, May Day, Parents Weekend and other religious or celebratory holidays and events are important to consider.
- Faculty should be aware of the days that many other classes are canceled (usually the day before Thanksgiving), and campus-wide events/traditions. For instance, it would not be wise to hold a review session for the final on May Day, nor would be it a good idea to administer an exam during Hell Week.
- I think professors should definitely consider the traditions when creating syllabi.

Typical crunch times
- Faculty should always include guidelines of when is the latest or maximum amount of time they need if students have "crunch time" with other classes and might need extensions.
- Faculty should be aware of peak exam times (the weeks before fall break, thanksgiving, and spring break), although many courses have their exams at different times too.
- The bulk of assignments are usually due before or after breaks. Learning to add variety to the schedule can be very helpful (having things due two-three weeks after/before break) can help students ease the burden of too many assignments at the same time.
- I've noticed that most students don't like their exams or projects due directly after a break because studying can then consume what should be their time off.
  - I am not in school mode during breaks so I am not giving my best work but instead working or studying the day before class.
  - I personally hate having large assignments due immediately after vacations, especially Thanksgiving. While many assignments are due before breaks, it makes for a far more relaxing vacation if the majority of the work is due beforehand. In addition, our breaks and time with our families are so short, and it is sad when this time is made more stressful by assignments.
  - I really dislike exams or papers due after fall break or thanksgiving as I feel that is a waste of break.
  - Over breaks I think it is best to honor the fact that it is a break and students probably need it but I think it is sometimes nice extra prep time for a larger project and I wouldn't object to some reading or initial research during these times.
  - Although it can be difficult to think about during fall break, having a midterm or a paper due the week after fall break, or the last week in October, reduces the pre-break stress. This is especially true for a shorter paper that can be difficult to fit into a midterm study schedule. The same probably goes for spring break.

- The last day of classes is always a very difficult day. Many students have finals that day, or have to complete major assignments before the end of the semester. I would think it would be kind to have some of these assignments pushed forward, so that students do not feel all of that stress the last day (that day is always the worst of the semester for me).

Some narrative explanations for why these considerations are important:

There are certain classes that one really wants to take or has to take during a particular semester. In those courses, the syllabus doesn't affect my decision to enroll much at all. But, for the other courses/electives that will fill in the rest of my schedule, I look for the course structure to see if it fits with the other classes I'm taking. I want to make sure I don't have too many courses of the same kind so that all my homework involves papers and reading every week. I look for as much information as possible on the syllabus. The more I know ahead of time, the better I feel about taking a course. I don't like to be surprised when I hear that there is assignment coming up that wasn't listed. I always plan out my semester with a comprehensive semester-at-a-glance page for myself that includes all major test and project dates, campus events I'm involved in, and trips off of campus that I may have planned. I want enough information on the syllabus to be able to fill that out. I also like to see a general list of topics that will be covered weekly and a breakdown of the grading percentages. I'm a lot less likely to take a course where the entire grade rests on just a couple of exams/papers since I prefer to have lots of opportunities to contribute to my grade. There should be a description about what happens with late assignments (whether they are tolerated, by how much one's grade decreases every hour/day the assignment is late), if redos of assignments are allowed, what happens (if anything) when a student misses class, and how much participation in expected in class.

Sometimes syllabi can be so enormous that students do not have time to read it through completely, and the important information inside is never found. I'd advise professors to be concise in their syllabi, but also detailed in the information that students really want to know (like how they are assessed).

Syllabi should ideally include a detailed overview of class topics and possible assignments/reading (the latter is not always realistic). They should also always have dates specified for when major assignments or exams take place. (Sometimes faculty neglect to put this information in and do not announce them to the last minute). At the same time, faculty members have different styles. Some follow their syllabus to the mark, while others might go ahead or behind which could cause confusion for the students and render the syllabus useless. For faculty members who do not follow the syllabus exactly, they should design syllabi with estimates in mind of what the topics are and when they expect major projects, exams, papers to be due so students understand there is more flexibility.

Most students like myself, don't know if they are able to discuss the syllabus with the professor, and don't know if they have any agency in possibly altering things that they may find unfair or unreasonable. For example, I had several professors write on their syllabi that they would prefer students to not leave class during a discussion to go to the bathroom. I personally found those comments to be highly minuscule and elementary, and would've preferred for them to either not be on the syllabus or stated informally during class time. Reading it made me feel like I had almost regressed back to high school, and rather awkward around the professor. I would've liked to have raised my hand and asked the prof why they chose to list that on the syllabus, but I felt there was

no space to do so. So, it could be cool (probably not entirely possible) for profs to have some sort of discussion with students on syllabi.