The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr College
What Students Hope For in a Syllabus (responses of graduates)

This is a list of suggestions compiled by a recent graduate of Bryn Mawr, who offers her own thoughts and also gathered input from other recent graduates.

1. **What you look/hope for in a syllabus (As a student in a course, what do you want a syllabus to include and why? What should it not include and why?)**

My response: I look for daily or weekly assignments, course policies (absences, late assignments), office hours, descriptions of papers or tests (these could be brief – with more complete responses when those assignments are coming up), grading breakdown (percentages), descriptions of any student presentations… I also like to get the larger themes of a course, as a window into what the professor sees as the connections between readings/papers. Ideally, a syllabus would also include room for student input – some professors allow students to choose the final text/topic in the course from among several selections. Another note - some professors just put the name of the text, and give specific page/chapter assignments in class – I prefer to have it mapped out on the original syllabus because then I can read ahead if I need to, based on my other work. If that seems too mapped out, it's not a problem to change the syllabus midway through a course, as long as you explain your rationale for doing it, and change it in a fair way that doesn't hurt the students in terms of their prior planning and preparation for the original syllabus.

Person A [Georgetown sophomore, male]: Explicit description of how grades are arrived at, and whether some random curve will be employed at the professor's discretion. If the professor knows the reading schedule of the course, put it on there. Clear attendance and participation policies. The required/recommended reading syllabi are annoying- if the recommended reading isn't mandatory, it shouldn't be held against students who make the judgment call to "only" read the required homework. If you want students to read something, tell them to read it.

Person B [graduated NYU, 2009, female]: I like syllabi to be as informative as possible. I particularly enjoy: specific discussion topic for every single class (sort of like a detailed course outline), the teacher's preference for essay format (MLA, whatever other style), the requirements for the class and what percentage each thing takes up for your grade (i.e. 2 essays = 20%, hw short answer = 40%, etc). I also enjoy reading what the goals/objectives for the course are.

Person C [graduated Columbia, 2009, male]: A kickass reading list. Something between a hint and an explicit detailing of the underlying question(s) that make the class worth taking; i.e., is there a semester's worth of material in the central idea/ideas/dynamics the class proposes to explore? Preferably, but not necessarily, an identifiable progression between sections of the syllabus, a progression which reflects the unfolding complexity of an issue. That's really it. The rest is just cosmetics.

Person D [graduated Barnard, 2009, female]: a teacher should include an into to course (themes to be discussed in what order/why...goals for course)...like when teachers have that

front page that is like a paragraph...it gives you a feel for what professor and course are like so you know if you want to take it. And I like when you know the succession of topics...not just like do this when but we are talking about/studying this then that etc. On the other hand, one of the best classes I ever took was an education class where the professor's syllabus briefly introduced class, said the reading and topic for that class and the next...but then she asked us what we wanted to talk about (course was on contemporary issues in education) and we brainstormed and then voted until we had the right number of topics (one for each seminar) and then next class she gave us new syllabus and she had ordered our topics and provided readings. I also think a teacher should include an explanation of how students
will be evaluated but that need not be a percentage breakdown. Also I am a fan of printing said syllabi on colorful neon paper!!!

2. **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.)**

My response: Crunch times have never seemed to be a problem, as long as the professor makes it clear what will be due when, so that students will know in advance and plan their work schedule accordingly. I don't think its necessary to move papers to an unusual time just to avoid conflicting with other work – one semester two of my professors did that, but moved it to the same time, so then I just had both papers at the same time anyway. From a humanities perspective, I appreciate classes that start off with larger themes, reading any introductory/overarching texts, and introducing any key theories/methods/ideas that we might need to go through the rest of the course. If possible, spending at least two days on any long texts is best – otherwise the work feels like busy work… why have us read a whole book if we only spend one day talking about it? I also appreciate when classes seem organized – moving chronologically, or thematically, through whatever subject we are tackling. This doesn't have to be a traditional kind of organization, but as long as the professor explains it, it's great. It just helps me as a student get a handle on why we are studying what we are and in what order, which helps for making connections between different texts and topics. These connections could also be made explicitly in paper or exam questions, where we are asked to link between these texts…

Person A [Georgetown sophomore, male]: If the due dates of a major paper and a major test are the same day or within 48 hours of each other, at least one of them won't yield a representative result. Also, if there are reading days, don't make a final paper due the last day of classes, give students those reading days to finish the paper, it feels like the professor just wants to be done with the class sooner no matter if it makes things difficult for the students. If readings are really dense or hard to understand, don't assign as much. That should be common sense, but not all 60 pages of reading are alike.

Person B [graduated NYU, 2009, female]: faculty should definitely be aware of holidays and final exam time. there's really no specific formula that a teacher can follow because each

student will have different classes and thus different schedules - but teachers need to understand that and be flexible if a student has an individual need. of course, sometimes things like this can't be avoided because teachers need to finalize grades before a certain point. I had one teacher who just scheduled her final exam a week and a half before final exam time to avoid the mess of students being unavailable or too busy. flexibility is key.

Person C [graduated Columbia, 2009, male]: This is a toss-up. In some ways, there is only *one* larger contextual consideration: what is it like to be a student? It is a pleasant surprise, as a student, to find that the requirements of a class neatly fit the work-rhythms of a semester, and, at least in my case, made me like the professor more. But this kind of issue is hardly the meat of what makes or breaks a syllabus, and I don't think it should interfere with a "natural" schedule of assignments, where "natural" means suggest by the structure of the course (and by extension, the relations between the material).

Person D [graduated Barnard, 2009, female]: there isn't really a way to avoid busy times. But I suppose the best policy in regards to essays, papers, projects is to make sure students know in advance, to break up deadlines (have drafts etc), and to be flexible in terms of pushing back etc depending on pace of course.