
Course Syllabi

See page 11 for Senate Policy on Syllabus Design.

Although the word syllabus (Latin for “list”) can be traced to ancient Greek words meaning “table of contents,” modern universities such as SDSU now depend on syllabi to fulfill many functions both within and beyond the boundaries of particular courses and/or classes.

Institutional Functions of the Syllabus

San Diego State University currently maintains no compendium of course descriptions beyond the 40-word (maximum) catalog description although, in recent years, it has begun to archive course proposals. This means that for the vast majority of our courses, the individual class syllabus is the only institutional record of the purpose or conduct of instruction. Syllabi thus constitute an important part of SDSU’s institutional memory which is accessed by diverse entities, including:

- Discipline-specific accrediting agencies as well as WASC, the Western Association for Schools and Colleges;
- Curriculum committees at various levels that are attempting to understand how the course fits into the curriculum as a whole or how to articulate courses with other departments or institutions;
- Technicians at other institutions who need to determine what kind of credit to assign to transfer students;
- Other instructors who will teach the course, perhaps after a primary instructor of record has retired or moved away;
- Advisers who are attempting to match student needs and interests with available courses or to help students address recency requirements for degrees;
- Personnel committees that are evaluating an instructor’s teaching effectiveness; and
- Students who want to make informed enrollment decisions.

Teaching and Learning Functions of the Syllabus

Although many syllabi are the product of collegial collaboration and consultation, maintenance and development of an effective syllabus is probably the single most important responsibility of an individual instructor.

Why? Because, by university policy, a class syllabus describes the purpose and scope of the course, outlines expected learning outcomes, describes the structure and sequence of activities and assignments, and explains grading policies. Thus, a syllabus reflects the organizing framework for most other course materials and learning resources.

Many instructors underestimate the powerful payoffs of a thoughtful and well-organized syllabus, which include:

More motivated students who are able to focus on expected student learning outcomes, required assignments, and grading standards because these are clearly explained—and more students who understand the overall purpose of the course and who “get” how individual assignments and activities are part of the “big picture.”

More organized and thoughtful students who can build on the syllabus document by adding their own notes and comments. Providing important instructions only as verbal announcements increases the likelihood they will be misunderstood, remain buried in lecture notes, or be missed entirely by students who come late or miss a class.

More students who plan ahead in preparing deliverables and meeting deadlines. Most SDSU students work and/or commute to campus and appreciate clear scheduling of dates for major deliverables and exams. But there are other reasons for emphasizing the scheduling functions of syllabi: Psychologists now understand that the brains of young adults continue to develop into their mid-twenties and among the last cognitive functions to mature are those concerned with planning and predicting consequences. Well-organized syllabi help students to plan ahead as they work on projects and other major assignments by suggesting intermediate milestones and recommended study plans. Although some instructors feel such planning should be left to students, reviews of explicit timelines can serve as scaffolding for maturation of student planning capacities.

Reduced instructor workload concerned with ad hoc clarifications and explanations of confusing expectations ranging from classroom etiquette, to access to learning resources, to due dates and exam content, to policies on contacting the instructor. Time savings to students and instructors from clear and well-organized syllabi are likely to increase as a function of class size. It only takes a few misunderstandings with a large number of students to cancel out any time saved by a cursory syllabus.

Reduced “hassles” and disputes resulting from incomplete information about due dates and grading methods and policies. The Office of the University Ombudsman has identified poor syllabi as the single most important cause of student grievances.

Syllabi as Living Documents

Students are often frustrated and confused by ad hoc changes in course scheduling and requirements. Indeed, University policy forbids major departures from a class syllabus, once it has been issued, except for compelling reasons. Yet, viewed across semesters, syllabi can be seen as “living documents” (to be revised repeatedly over many offerings of a course and benefiting over time from incremental improvements and iterative design). It is often difficult for instructors to develop a mature and robust syllabus without experimentation and some trial-and-error; it may take several iterations of a course to sort through the best ways to implement requirements and recommendations summarized on the following pages. Outstanding syllabi often evolve from humble beginnings as cursory documents.

For these reasons, instructors may find it useful to treat their own copy of the syllabus as a framework (or notebook) for capturing data about problems and opportunities as the semester unfolds. Evidence of student confusion, options for improved organization and mechanics, and possibilities for enhanced teaching and learning strategies can be noted and recorded for future, improved versions.