

## Optimizing Your Syllabus for Online Students

For further reading, please see: **Ch. 4, *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide* by Susan Ko and Steve Rossen**

Online course syllabi serve as platforms upon which to stage, manage, or enhance your course and function as a kind of contract between you and your students. Students will most likely download, print-out and follow your syllabus like a map, using it to chart their progress in your course. It's a good idea to post a downloadable version of your syllabus, preferably in rtf format, in addition to the online version so your students can print it out easily.

The syllabus is most often stored within the **Course Information** area in your **Blackboard** classroom. Below is a checklist of what should be included in your online course syllabus and why:

---

### The Rationale

Students in online classes often feel disoriented without the familiar initial face-to-face introductory explanations during the first day of class and need clear, concise instructions on how to get started and proceed through the class.

**Details are Essential** - Your online syllabus should be more detailed than its traditional classroom counterpart and all information needs to be clearly articulated and easy to follow to avoid confusion and misinterpretations.

**Who, What and Where** - It should identify the expected roles and responsibilities of students and instructor in the online environment as well as all special resources, procedures and issues relevant to the online class.

**Redundancy, Redundancy, Redundancy!** - Information you may choose to post in your course Announcements area or in your Classroom Calendar regarding due dates, assignments or procedures should also be incorporated into your syllabus. In online classes, it is important to repeat important information in more than one location in order to ensure that all students will see and remember these important details.

---

### The Classics

As in a traditional syllabus for a face-to-face course, your online course syllabus should list:

**Course Description** - This can be same as the catalog description, but probably more detailed listing any prerequisites or other requirements.

**Course Instructor's Name and Contact Information** - Usually an email address is sufficient, and if you list your phone number, you should also include your preferred times to be contacted via telephone.

**Course Objectives or Expected Outcomes- What** can students expect to learn by the end of the course?

**Texts and Materials** - Textbooks and other materials such as software both required and optional, should be included as well as a reminder that these materials can be purchased online via a link on the students' Personal Start pages.

**Grading Criteria and Components of Total Grade** - List all quizzes, exams, graded assignments and participation as grade percentages or points, establish

passing grade.

**Course Agenda** - This is usually a schedule listing topics, assignments, quizzes, activities and web resources for each week of course including dates for each week and due dates of all assignments.

---

## The Map

Your students will need to know how to proceed and where everything is located in the online classroom, so your syllabus should include information about:

**The Course Geography** - Since your students will most likely use your syllabus as a map or guide to the course, a thorough description of the course layout or "geography" and what your students can expect to find in each area of the course is essential. It is also a good idea to repeat this same information in your first welcoming announcement on the course homepage so your students will know where to go to find the syllabus and other information as soon as they log into your course. Even though your students will have gone through our BlackBoard orientation, they will still need special directions on how to find each area of the course.

**Online Course Procedures** - Your students will need to understand special procedures and processes in the online classroom - i.e. how they should proceed each week for class activities, how to label assignments sent by email or via student drop box, or any other special instructions.

**Preferred Methods for Delivering Assignments** - Your syllabus should include instructions for posting and delivering assignments – will they be emailed to you, posted publicly in the discussion forum, submitted via the student drop box, etc.?

---

## The Contract

Your syllabus can be used to define your expectations for student responsibilities, participation, and duties as well as your own intentions for participating and giving feedback. This will help students know how to approach the course, and how to budget their time. It will also give them a clear idea of what to expect from you.

**Participation Standard**- Assign points to class participation and make it a substantial percentage of the course grade (30-40%). Give a clear description of what constitutes expected participation in the class. It should include active participation in online discussions in addition to completing required readings, weekly assignments, quizzes and homework (i.e. "students should participate in weekly class discussion by posting their discussion responses and responding to at least one other classmate"). Set a minimum number of postings per week. Grade on quality as well as quantity of discussion contributions, and clearly explain what you consider to be a quality posting or contribution.

**Feedback Schedule** - Indicate your schedule for returning graded work and providing feedback to students as well as how often you plan to log on to the course discussion forum. Let your students know your availability for real-time chat sessions. This will help your students know what to expect from you.

**Policies on Late Assignments** - Since students who enroll in online classes often do so because of the flexibility asynchronous online courses provide for those with busy schedules - often trying to fit their education in with a full-time job, family and other responsibilities consider building some flexibility into the course regarding due

dates and exam schedules. Can students post in past weeks' discussion forums and still receive credit for participation? Consider making quizzes available over a period of time (i.e. one week) so students can fit them comfortably into their schedules. Will you accept late assignments such as homework and projects?

**Detailed Instructions for Assignments** - Clarify your expectations, for example, do you want a formal essay, informal outline, how many total words? What format - rtf, html, or other. Specify any special formatting issues you might require.

**Policies on Plagiarism or Cheating** - Your institution's policies on plagiarism and cheating for traditional classes should apply to your online course as well. Often this information is available online, so you can include a hyperlink for your students to reference.

---

## The Schedule

Whether you choose to teach your course according to subjects, chapters in the textbook, units or other logical division of content, you should design your course in weekly modules to help your students pace themselves through the content. The course schedule should provide the following information:

**Inclusive Weekly Dates** – It is important to list the start and stop date of each weekly module of your course in addition to labeling each module, "Week One," "Week Two," etc. This information can also be coordinated with the Blackboard classroom calendar feature. If your students are able to visualize your course in terms of units of time, this can help them better budget their time and stay on track.

**List Due Dates of a Assignments and Exams** - Students will expect to find specific dates of all weekly assignments, as well as projects, essays, quizzes, and exams on your syllabus. Even if you plan to release more information about these assignments later or if you include this information in your Assignments area of the classroom, it should be listed on your syllabus as part of the course schedule. Students will be taking your course from all over the United States and abroad, so you will need to specify the time zone to which specific due dates apply (i.e. midnight, PST). Again, knowing important due dates in advance can help your students budget their time, and this information can also be coordinated with the Blackboard classroom calendar feature.

**Stagger Due Dates** - Assignments requiring peer comments should not be due on the last day of the week. If you have more than one assignment due during the week, staggering the due dates will build time into the course for more student interaction. If you make the discussion questions due on or before day 4 of the week, your students will have at least three days to read and respond to their classmates' contributions. If you don't specify a date by which they should submit their contributions, most students tend to submit their work on the last day of the week, and others won't have enough time to comment before the next module begins. If everything is due on the last day of the module, students will be focusing on getting their own work done and not have time to interact with their classmates.

**Build Feedback into the Course** - Indicate your schedule for returning graded work and providing feedback to your students as well as how often you are planning to log on to the course discussion forum. This will help your students know what to expect from you, and it will also help you to stay on a consistent schedule.

**Weekly Overview** - Provide your students with a description of what they should

do each week. For example, for Week One they should go to the Course Documents area to read your lecture for Week One, then go to the Assignments area to find the corresponding assignments for Week One, and finally go to the Discussion Forum to post their replies to the Week One discussion questions. This step-by-step will help your students quickly find their way around and orient themselves to the classroom environment so they can focus on the course materials and discussions instead of spending energy stressing over figuring out where to find everything and what they should be doing and where.

---

**Related Resources:**

- OnlineLearning.net [Instructor Expectations Document](#)
- [Syllabus 101](#) - Online workshop for Online Instructors, Penn State University
- *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide*, (Ch. 4) by Susan Ko and Steve Rossen



[Home](#) | [Course Catalog](#) | [How OLN Works](#) | [Student Services](#) | [Instructors](#) | [Special Offers](#) | [About Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Copyright © 2007 OnlineLearning.net All rights reserved.  
12975 Coral Tree Place, Los Angeles, CA 90066  
phone 800.784.8436 | fax 310.301.7510