

## What Does Your Syllabus Say about You?

Developing stellar syllabi – a key to student success

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## What's the Big Deal?

- *“Since I’ve begun distributing a detailed syllabus and lots of handouts explaining criteria for assignments, students have improved both in attitude and performance.”*  
(Kilmer, 1998)
- *“Students decide to resist and misbehave depending largely on how they interpret two interrelated kinds of teacher behaviors. One is a matter of whether the teacher employs mostly pro-social motivators (‘Do you understand?’ and ‘You can do better’) or antisocial motivators (e.g., threats and guilt induction).”*  
(Boice, 1996)

## What's the Big Deal?

- *“The second [behavior] is about immediacy—the extent to which the teacher gives off verbal and nonverbal signals of warmth, friendliness, and liking . . . without [immediacy], teachers are seen as cold, uncaring, and incompetent by their students—as deserving targets of incivilities.”*  
(Boice, 1996)

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## What Should a Syllabus Contain?

- Basic Course Information
  - Faculty information, office hours, required texts, etc.
- Course Goals and Objectives
- Methodology
- Course Calendar and Schedule
- Course Requirements
- Course Policies
- Course Resources

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## Faculty Senate Policies for Students

**Penn State requires that a written syllabus be distributed during the first ten calendar days of a semester or its equivalent.**

Faculty Senate Policy also requires:

- Basis for Grades, as detailed as possible
- Examination Policies
  - Evening Examinations if any
- Academic Integrity Statement

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## Look and Feel

Rules of Thumb:

- Use clear 12 point type
- **San serif** fonts for headings, **serif** for text
- Bullets for clarity
- Bolding and italics for emphasis
- Two fonts maximum

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## How can a syllabus set the tone in your classroom?

- Think of your syllabus as the answer to that eternal question:

*How can I get an “A” in this course?*

- Phrase expectations in positive terms.
- Help students understand the benefits (goals and objectives) of your course.

*Why do I need to know this?*

- Use discretion when including classroom behavior policies.

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## Learning objectives should:

- Reflect essential knowledge, skills or attitudes
- Focus on results of the learning experiences
- Reflect the desired end of the learning experience.
- Answer the questions:
  - \* If I’m a student in this course, what should I know and be able to do when I leave?
  - \* If I’m a student in this course, how will I demonstrate my learning?

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## Avoid “weasel” words:

Students will ...

- **Learn**
- **Know**
- **Be aware of**
- **Be familiar with**
- **Have a firm grasp of**
- **Understand**
- **Appreciate**



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## Avoid weasel words:

Students will ...

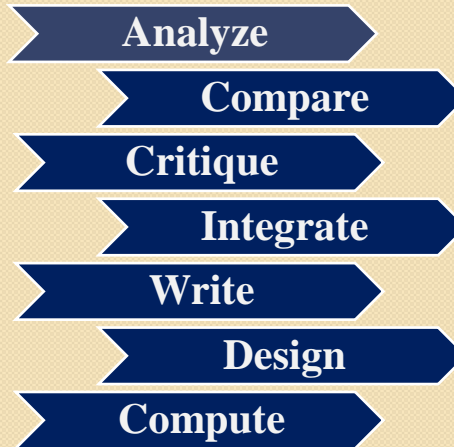
- **Learn**
- **Know**
- **Be aware of**
- **Be familiar with**
- **Have a firm grasp of**
- **Understand**
- **Appreciate**

← THESE CRITERIA  
ARE VAGUE AND  
DIFFICULT TO  
OBSERVE OR  
MEASURE

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## Better choices are observable & measurable.

“Students will be able to”....



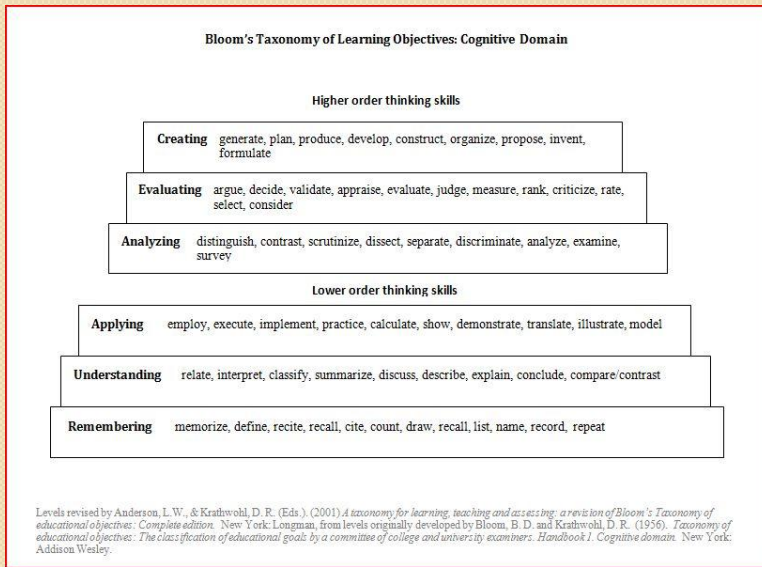
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Students will:

- Practice developing and performing speeches in front of the class on a variety of topics.
- Demonstrate a variety of speech preparation processes, including research, rehearsal and delivery, using appropriate citations.
- Describe and successfully demonstrate a variety of current technology mediums for delivery of speeches.
- Participate on a panel to demonstrate the “art of argument” and its relationship to public speaking.

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## Examples of specific and measurable learning objectives with different levels of cognitive complexity.



**Objective/Outcomes Worksheet**

This worksheet is intended to help you synthesize the exercises in the Planning a Class Session guide, and it will provide a quick reference as you teach this session of your course. We strongly recommend that you duplicate this worksheet and give it thoughtful attention while creating various units of your course so that you can refer to it throughout the duration of your course, noting changes and suggestions (i.e., what worked and what could be improved).

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Learning Objectives Write specific and measurable objectives.	Taxonomy Match the objective to its closest equivalent on Bloom's Taxonomy	Teaching Methods/Learning Activities Explain in detail what teaching method or learning activity you plan to use to accomplish your objectives.	Assessment Explain in detail (provide examples where appropriate) how you will assess the student on this objective.
Gain an appreciation of German language and culture.			
Students will learn all the muscles and bones in the upper body.			
Students will understand the plot of "Romeo and Juliet" and appreciate the differences in the main characters.			
Students will become familiar with methods to control chemical reactions in food by altering process conditions and formulations.			

## Crafting a Tone

### How a syllabus can set the tone in your classroom.

- Be careful and accurate in using pronouns.
- Be very clear in how grades will be determined.
  - “Negative” grading, which puts students in a defensive position, is not conducive to a positive climate.
  - “Participation”/”Attendance” grading should be clearly described (and administered carefully!)
  - Avoid describing grading in percentages [only] whenever possible.

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## Crafting a Tone

### How a syllabus can set the tone in your classroom.

- Keep the language respectful.
- Find alternative approaches to encourage, and reward, desired behavior, for example, “attendance”.
  - Instead of “nickel and diming” students with points, consider a randomly administered one minute paper at the beginning or end of class, pop quizzes, or short activities throughout the class.
- Ask for the behavior you want.

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## What is this really saying?

- *Be on time and remain for the entire period or do not come at all.*
- Please plan to arrive a few minutes early and to remain until class is dismissed to help avoid disrupting class discussions or your classmates' concentration.

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## Who am I?

- *We will take 5 quizzes over the course of the semester.*
- Students will take 5 quizzes over the course of the semester. They are intended to help you determine which topics you will need to study in more detail.

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## What could go wrong?

- *Your grade will be based on several tests, quizzes and assignments. You begin the course with 500 points, losing points for mistakes you make on graded work throughout the semester.*
- The course includes four exams composed of 25 multiple-choice and true/false questions, with each exam worth 100 points. Two 2-page papers will ask you to take a position on an issue and defend it with evidence from class readings and from your experience, each worth 50 points. If you follow the advice I give you on how to do well on these graded experiences, you can earn up to 500 points (and an A in the course!).

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## Same Content Different Approach

- *The course includes four exams composed of 25 multiple-choice and true/false questions, with each exam worth 100 points. Two 2-page papers will ask you to take a position on an issue and defend it with evidence from class readings and from your experience, each worth 50 points. If you follow the advice I give you on how to do well on these graded experiences, you can earn up to 500 points (and an A in the course!).*
- Four exams = 400
- Two 2-page papers = 100
- **Total points = 500**

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## What is this really saying?

- *Class activities and participation points are part of your grade. Lack of attendance detracts from those potential points. You cannot make-up missed class activities. Attendance sheets will be passed around prior to each class. Failure to sign-in will result in an unexcused absence. You are allowed one absence throughout the semester. After one absence, either excused or unexcused, 10 points will automatically be deducted from your participation points for each class missed.*
- Students will earn participation points by taking part in daily classroom activities. There will be, at least, one learning activity in each class session, and these activities must be completed during the class period in order to receive credit.
- Activities may include:
  - Quizzes
  - Short essays
  - Problem solutions
  - Mid-semester evaluations
  - Etc.

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## Food for thought...

*Because the main purpose of grades is to communicate the extent to which students have learned the course material, grades should be based primarily on the students' performance on exams, quizzes, papers and other measures of learning specified at the beginning of the course (i.e., learning objectives – my note) ...*

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...Writers in the measurement field (Gronlund, 1990; Mehrens and Lehmann, 1991) advise against including student behavior factors (e.g., students' effort, interest, attitudes, improvement, class participation, and attendance) because they contaminate the grade as a measure of achievement of the course objectives.

(Jacobs, & Chase, 1992)

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- Bean, John, & Peterson, Dean. (1998). Grading classroom participation. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning*, 74, 33-40.
- Boice, B. (1996). Classroom incivilities. *Research in Higher Education*, 37(4), 453-486. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>

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- Jacobs, L. C., & Chase, C. I. (1992). *Developing and using tests effectively*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kilmer, P. D. (1998). When a few disruptive students challenge an instructor's plan. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 53(2), 81. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- Milton, O., Pollio, H. R., & Eison, J. A. (1986). *Making sense of college grades : why the grading system does not work and what can be done about it* . San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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## Resources

- <http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/EventResources/TeachingProfessor2011-SyllabusPPT>
- <http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/EventResources/TeachingProfessor2011-BloomPyramid>
- <http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu>



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