

# Distance Learning Systems

## Teaching Tips #19 — Creating an Effective Syllabus

Following up our recent CRA Faculty Development Roundtable<sup>1</sup>, this week we look at a variety of techniques for creating an engaging, learner-centered, outcomes-based syllabus. Revitalize this important tool! Please take note of the web resources page for this topic, which covers the basic material this list expands upon.

### Syllabus Techniques and Concepts From UAF Faculty

- *Decision Point* The syllabus is a primary source students use to decide if they are in the right class for their needs and experience. Provide enough information for them to make the right decision.
- *Firm Schedule* Although you must balance your approach with flexibility, the syllabus should be a largely unchanging roadmap to guide the students through the entire academic term.
- *The Contract* Keep in mind—and reinforce—the idea that the syllabus is a contract between yourself and your students that outlines expectations for both of you.
- *Formatting Matters* Particularly in a distance ed course, formatting of materials is important to make materials legible, accessible, and easy to refer to. Page numbers, headings, and colored paper can help.
- *Study Questions* Include a few study questions for each class session and have students submit answers in writing (one well-developed paragraph or so) to make up for times they must miss class.
- *Library and Resource Information* UAF offers a variety of useful information resources that many students are unaware of. Include pointers for students to library information, the Writing Center, etc.
- *Frequently Asked Questions* Try to anticipate common questions and answer them in the body of the syllabus, and perhaps have a section of really common FAQs at the end of the document.
- *Humanize and Personalize* Make the syllabus friendly by providing inspiration, quotations, and a personal perspective on the materials.
- *Examples and Rubrics* Provide examples of what constitutes satisfactory response, “good” participation, a credit-worthy bulletin board post, whatever kinds of interaction you expect from your students.
- *Academic Integrity* A personal statement of academic integrity and why it is important goes further towards establishing a positive environment than boilerplate on this topic from the catalog.
- *The Blackboard Syllabus* Make the location of syllabus information clear and unchanging by removing unnecessary buttons and links. Provide it in a readable format online and a printable version. Use the Announcements feature to document changes, but do so wisely so that it remains relevant.
- *Defer to Official Policy* Make clear that in case of question or dispute, the relevant official policies in that year’s academic catalog take precedence and are the final arbiter.
- *Talk it Over.* Talk about the syllabus, not just in the first class, but by setting some time aside each class period to go over class business details as needed.

### More Resources

Find a wealth of material not covered here (including model syllabi from fellow instructors, checklists and templates, and expanded resources, articles, and links), see: <http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/resources/tt/syllabi/>

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the new and enhanced Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at:  
<http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/>

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<sup>1</sup> Our thanks to all the Roundtable participants from whom these tips are derived, including: Keith Swarner, Jerah Chadwick, Jodi Bailey, Susan Andrews, John Creed, Anne Millbrooke, Randy Pfeuffer, and Rick Caulfield.