

THE SYLLABUS TOOLBOX: A Handbook for Constructing a Learning- Centered Syllabus

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Introduction

As an institution committed to serving a large Hispanic population, the University of Texas, San Antonio is committed to educating and motivating young people to become citizens of the world. The Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) supports the UTSA mission and vision by providing resources and support that enhance and recognize excellent and innovative teaching by both faculty and graduate students. Ultimately, our goal is to promote active and engaged learning by UTSA students. Despite the University's different disciplines, research agendas, and departmental or administrative concerns, the practice of teaching—essential to the mission of this institution—mutually inspires, commits, and unites us. We believe that teaching and scholarship complement each other.

Yet teaching remains at the heart of our professional lives, ultimately defining all aspects of the University's mission, including our outreach efforts. The art and science of teaching can be developed and refined if departments, colleges, and the university as a whole recognize—and reward—it. Supporting and recognizing all efforts by faculty and teaching assistants to grow and develop in this part of their professional lives is a major TLC commitment. We encourage innovations that reflect various approaches and techniques, such as mentoring, creative use of technology, active and cooperative learning, peer observations, syllabus revisions, and course redesign. Additionally, we actively seek to collaborate with other University units to support and disseminate innovative and effective teaching and learning strategies based on solid research and practice. We want to ensure that these innovations are shared within our community and throughout the greater academic environment.

A current, clear, and comprehensive course syllabus contributes a great deal to an effective learning process. Students need clearly defined course guidelines to help them meet faculty expectations, to help them master the course material, and to help them balance their own simultaneous commitments. Clearly articulated student learning outcomes and appropriate implementation strategies and evaluation metrics are important components of our teaching responsibilities. Detailed explanations and personalized assignments can “humanize” a syllabus and make it more learning-centered. This handbook is designed to assist you in achieving this goal.

Warmly,

Barbara J. Millis, Ph.D.
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I—Syllabus Components

The term “syllabus” can refer to a variety of material. A syllabus may typically include separately distributed handout sheets, such as assignment explanations or term paper guidelines. All material related to your course policies and procedures, including University of Texas, San Antonio policies about sexual harassment, nondiscrimination, students with disabilities, and plagiarism, should be considered part of a comprehensive syllabus. An effective course syllabus is far more than just an information sheet. It is also an informal contract between instructor and student, providing everyone with the objectives and expectations that shape the learning environment. A well thought-out syllabus reflects careful course design with attention to clearly articulated student learning outcomes, activities that promote significant learning, and meaningful assessment. It should also reveal learning-centered approaches, which may be defined as approaches that make your expectations transparent but also intended to allow students to meet your high standards. Learning-centered places the emphasis on what students will take-away—how your course will shape their knowledge, skills, and beliefs.

General Information

A complete syllabus will generally include:

- Course Name, Number, Section, and Location
- Date or Semester
- Your Name, Home and Office Telephone Numbers, E-Mail, and Office Hours
- Titles, Authors, and Editions of Text(s)—Required and Recommended

Other key components of a syllabus are:

- Course Description and Objectives
- Tentative Schedule of Assignments and Activities
- Course Requirements
- Testing, Grading, and Evaluation Policies
- Attendance and Participation Policies
- Academic Integrity Policy
- Disabilities Policy

Course Description and Course Objectives

A strong course description early in the syllabus can often generate student interest by providing a stimulating overview of the course, including its content, value, and the philosophical assumptions behind it. You can increase students’ enthusiasm and motivation by emphasizing the relevance of the course to their lives and to their professions. You will also want the description to reflect your values and attitudes.

You may sometimes combine course objectives with the course description, depending on their complexity and the nature of the course and discipline. Course objectives describing what students should be able to do at the end of the semester usually appear either as a succinct statement or as an outline. They are ideally characterized by action verbs. Clear objectives can foster a sense of partnership and an awareness that you and your students are working toward the same goals. Objectives provide both a focus and a motivation for learning.

Asking yourself basic questions can help you formulate and communicate your objectives or goals:

- What are the student learning outcomes of the course in relation to the overall major or minor degree program?
- What do you want your students to learn, whether the learning focuses on knowledge (ideally, key concepts), skills, or values?
- How will you determine that students have accomplished what you set out to help them learn?

In other words, how will you evaluate their progress and achievements? What assignments, classroom activities, e-learning assignments, and pedagogical approaches will help them master the specified knowledge, skills, or attitude changes?

Tentative Schedule of Assignments and Activities

Students often turn first to the schedule which lists topics, assignments, projects, and exams with their due dates. They want to know what will be happening and when. Probably the most difficult planning decisions concern the structuring of course material. Ask yourself:

- How much can students cover in a typical semester?
- How can I structure these responsibilities so that they can be met despite other demands on students' time?
- What points should I emphasize? What are the key concepts students *must* take-away to be successful in the next articulated course or in the profession?
- What textbook material can I omit or condense so I will have opportunities to “go deep” to help students internalize the key concepts?
- How can I promote online learning or technology-enhanced learning?

When planning assignments, it is helpful to think of them as a sequence of learning activities. Consider those things you expect students to learn or do on their own and be certain that you have provided essential prior knowledge for them to work problems or complete homework assignments prior to class. Then, *use* those problems and homework assignments to help them “process” the information during classroom time. Ideally, you should conclude this sequence with feedback about learning. You can provide feedback in the classroom or by your comments on out-of-class assignments and in-class written activities.

You can govern the amount of work you expect from students by a general expectation of two hours of outside work for each contact (classroom) hour. For the average course, this

usually means ten hours of homework per week. Some classes may require students to invest more than ten hours; sometimes the work load will vary from week to week. Most instructors, particularly those teaching upper-division or graduate courses, include writing requirements so that students improve their communication skills and research techniques.

In preparing the course schedule, keep in mind that your students must often balance academics, work, and family obligations. These concerns should not lead to a reduction of course expectations. Your assignment schedule, however, should be organized to allow students time to meet your expectations. Consider placing heavy reading requirements or assignment due dates at the beginning of the week, giving students weekends to complete assignments. To help students organize their time, your syllabus could also reflect a step-by-step approach to major assignments. For a research paper that counts significantly toward the final grade, you can assign due dates for a working bibliography, an outline, and a rough draft. Be sure your schedule emphasizes, perhaps through bold type face, the dates of exams and specific assignments. If possible, try to avoid scheduling major projects and exams during peak times when other instructors have also made heavy demands on students.

Your list of assignments should allow adjustments if your class should suddenly get involved in a spirited discussion that seems more worthwhile than a scheduled quiz or if you unexpectedly need to spend more time on a particular topic. Emphasize that the syllabus is subject to change depending on the needs of the class while reminding the students that they are also responsible for the material covered because of an adjustment.

Course Requirements

Include course requirements in your objectives and assignment schedule. Explicitly detail your expectations in a separate section of the syllabus or combine them with your grading policies. Many instructors prepare handouts during the term to aid students with specific assignments, but these should not replace a written explanation of the course requirements. Consider attaching extra material—explanations of the assigned case study, book review, paper, or class project, or helpful handouts with titles such as “Writing a Scientific Paper,” “Guidelines for a Psychology Bullet Paper,” or “Anatomy of a Book Review”—to the syllabus. Explain your attendance and assignment make-up policies in this section of the syllabus.

It might be helpful in this section to explain how your course fits into department curriculum requirements for degree programs or with professional examination requirements.

Evaluation Policies and Procedures

Students are always concerned about how they will be evaluated. You can greatly alleviate this concern by specifically describing how you test and how you assign grades. You should discuss how you evaluate written essays, homework assignments, oral presentations, lab work, and lab reports in this section. It should also include the type and number of tests, their point value, and the proportion each test counts toward the final grade. Lastly, you should discuss how you determine the final grade. Reassure anxious students that your expectations are

reasonable, fair, and attainable. You also need to protect yourself from undue pressure from the over-achievers by clearly articulated standards.

Problems concerning grades tend to prompt most student complaints. Typical concerns include either changes in announced grading policies or differences arising from a vaguely or never-stated grading policy. A carefully thought-out policy, described in your syllabus and consistently and fairly applied, will alleviate anxiety about grades and protect you from one of the most stressful situations in the teaching profession.

Students are eager to know not only the course requirements, but also how much each of these will weigh in the final evaluation. It is important to spell out exactly how you will determine final grades. Because learning research indicates that students prepare differently for essays than for so-called “objective” exams, you must indicate the nature, as well as the subject matter, of the exams. Be as specific as possible about what you will cover (e.g., “Chapters 1-10, plus the lecture material”) and how you will test (multiple choice, short answer, essay, etc.), so that students can prepare efficiently. Tests should be part of the learning process, reinforcing your objectives, assignments, classroom activities, and most importantly, students’ progress.

Your make-up policy is also critical. Inflexible policies can create ill-will among students juggling many demands on their time. Policies that are too lenient or not specified can sometimes result in inappropriate or inconvenient student requests. Spell out the procedures for make-up exams.

It is also helpful, in this section to explain your grading rubrics and departmental expectations. University policies on incomplete grades and withdrawals should also appear in this section of your syllabus.

Attendance and Participation

We recommend that you maintain attendance records. You may decide whether or not to count attendance or class participation toward the final grade. Ideally, every class session should be so important that students will be eager to attend. Because some of your students will miss classes—often because of athletic, academic, illness, or family obligations—clarify your policies in writing.

As with your make-up policy, your attendance and participation policy must be flexible but not overly permissive. If you count class participation toward the final grade, be sure you define this sometimes elusive phenomenon and emphasize its significance for the students. Are you looking for the number of times students speak up or for the quality of their commentary? If the latter, how will you determine the weight of a particular contribution? Will you let students know during the term how they are doing? Will active class participation substantively affect the final grade or will you consider this only in borderline cases? Will lack of participation—especially by shy or insecure students or by those from cultures encouraging passive respect—adversely affect the final grade?

Academic Integrity

Discuss academic integrity with your students. Share your personal views about cheating on exams or about plagiarism. Students are often naïve about the latter, all-too-frequent occurrence, associating it merely with copying and not with the use of ideas paraphrased without proper citation. In courses that encourage cooperation, you will want to clearly specify the ground rules and perimeters for these collaborative learning experiences.

Miscellaneous Information

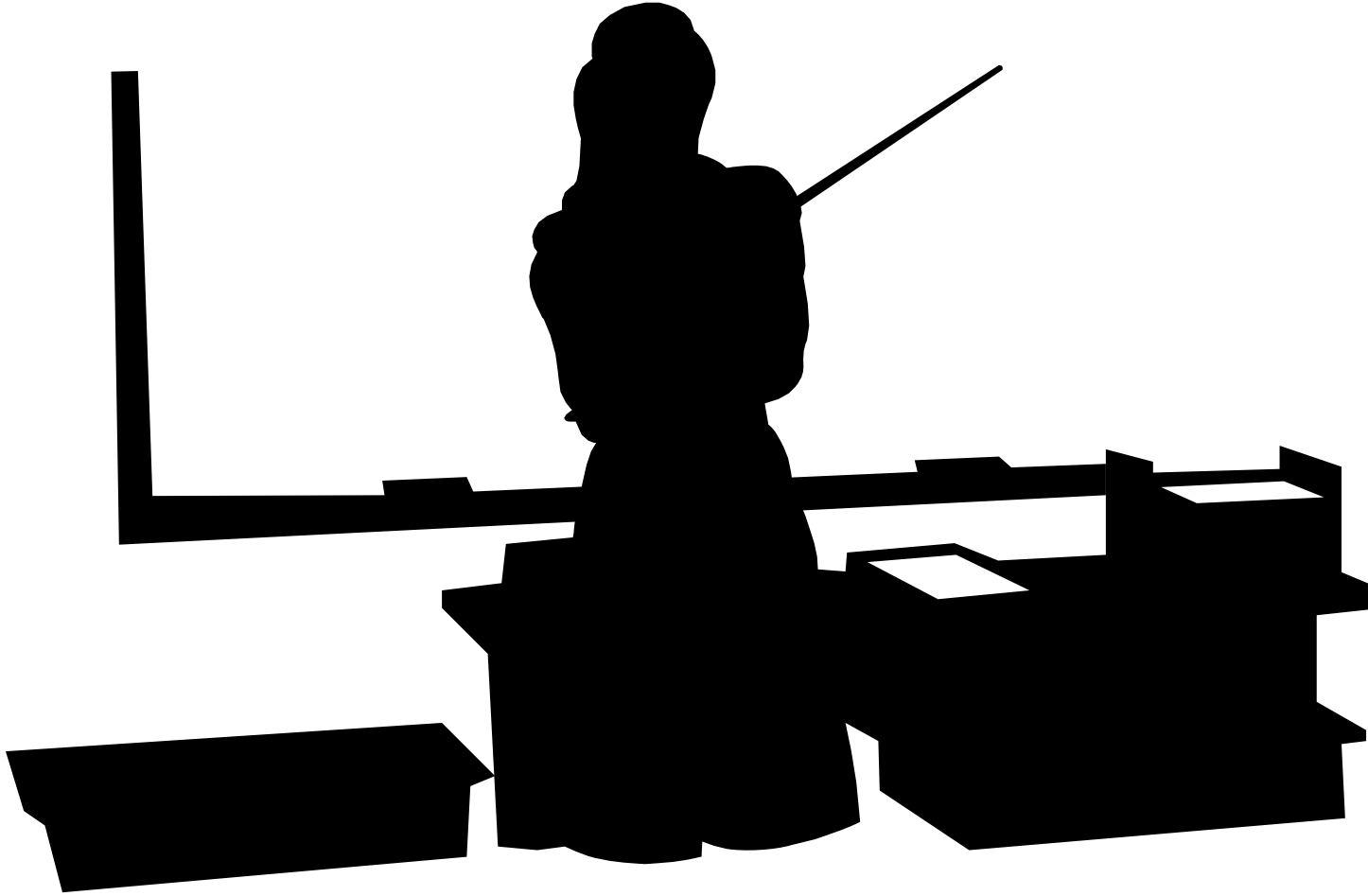
Emphasize your availability to students. Your syllabus should show you are available to provide help, but you will also want to encourage students to use each other as resources within your guidelines. Inform your students of the resources, including counseling services, tutoring, and the University Writing Center, that are available to students. If you use any unusual class procedures, such as cooperative small group learning, panel presentations, or class journals, you should discuss them in your syllabus at least briefly. You can provide supplementary written explanations later in the term.

Some Final Advice

Generally, it is important to be as specific as possible in your syllabus. Being specific, however, does not mean subscribing to the “scare 'em-to-death-let-the-students-fall-where-they-may” school of teaching. A syllabus, like your course, should encourage rather than intimidate students. Details of a 20-page research paper, warnings of frequent pop quizzes, and threats about excessive absences can be frightening. Your actual phrasing (e.g., “Students will attend every class session” or “Make-up exams are extremely difficult to prepare and will not be utilized except under the most extenuating of circumstances”) can be a turn-off. Effective word choice can get your message across with a touch of humanity, besides setting a positive example of jargon-free prose.

During the first class meeting, you should discuss the syllabus. Even though your policies may be carefully stated, they will often need clarification, and students appreciate your openness in discussing the rationale behind them. Sometimes their questions will lead to a profitable exchange of teaching and learning philosophies. Probably the key thing to remember about a syllabus is that it is a reflection of your educational philosophy. It should flow naturally from your assumptions about teaching and your commitment to learning. It should indicate your values and attitudes. In short, it should be an extension of you.

II—Appendices: Resources for Designing a Positive Learning Experience



Appendix A: Seven Principles (and Reflective Questions) for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson

The following is a brief summary of the “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” compiled in a study supported by the American Association of Higher Education, the Education Commission of the States, and the Johnson Foundation.

Good Practice Encourages Student-Faculty Contact

Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of classes is the most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Faculty concern helps students get through rough times and keep on working. Knowing a few faculty members well enhances students' intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans.

Good Practice Encourages Cooperation Among Students

Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions improves thinking and deepens understanding.

Good Practice Encourages Active Learning

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.

Good Practice Gives Prompt Feedback

Knowing what you know and don't know focuses learning. Students need appropriate feedback on performance to benefit from courses. In getting started, students need help in assessing existing knowledge and competence. In classes, students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive suggestions for improvement. At various points during college, and at the end, students need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to know, and how to assess themselves.

Good Practice Emphasizes Time on Task

Time plus energy equals learning. There is no substitute for time on task. Learning to use one's time well is critical for students and professionals alike. Students need help in learning effective time management. Allocating realistic amounts of time means effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty. How an institution defines time expectations for

students, faculty, administrators, and other professional staff can establish the basis for high performance for all.

Good Practice Communicates High Expectations

Expect more and you will get it. High expectations are important for everyone for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves, and for the bright and well motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when teachers and institutions hold high expectations of themselves and make extra efforts.

Good Practice Respects Diverse-Talents and Ways of Learning

There are many roads to learning. People bring different talents and styles of learning to college. Brilliant students in the seminar room may be all thumbs in the lab or art studio. Students rich in hands-on experience may not do so well with theory. Students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them. Then they can be pushed to learning in new ways that do not come so easily.

Seven Reflective Questions:

- In what ways does the course design encourage contact between the students and the instructor?
- How does the learning environment foster reciprocity and cooperation among students?
- In what ways is active involvement of students facilitated throughout the course?
- How are students given prompt feedback for learning activities?

Appendix B: Faculty Syllabus Checklist (Some Possible Components)

Syllabi Preparation Guide
Gregg Elliott, UTSA Department Chair, Art and Art History

Course Information

Course number, title, section, meeting days and times, room and building

Course website

Your name, title, phone, office hours, where and how to leave messages

Required texts and other materials

Instructor Contact Information

Instructor's name

Instructor's office location

Instructor's office hours

Instructor's phone number

Instructor's email

TA's contact information and office hours, if relevant.

Instructor Introduction

Include a brief introductory bio about yourself, including, if relevant, your teaching philosophy.

Course Description

Clear description—what will course cover?

How does it fit into the curriculum? Who should take the course?

Why should students take this course? What will they get out of it other than that its required credit?

What is the nature of the teaching/learning situation (primarily lecture, discussion, a mixture...and why you teach this way?)

Course Prerequisite Information

List all course prerequisites here.

Course Goals and Objectives

Please enter your course goals and objectives here.

They should be explicit, clear and detailed.

Course Outcomes

Stated in terms of skills, what will students be able to do by the end of class?

Here are some examples:

Example 1: Students who complete this course will be able to analyze a work of art using basic design concepts including style, the elements of art and composition.

Example 2: Students who complete this course will be able to demonstrate and utilize the fundamental material and process skills of lithography in the studio discipline of printmaking.

Course Requirements

Exams and/or critiques: number, type, due dates

Assignments: description, due dates

Grading standards and criteria

Course Policies

Attendance and Participation

Late assignments, make-up work and exams

Policy on incompletes, withdrawals, pass/fail

Statement about civility and expectations regarding professional behavior

Materials and Personal Equipment

List all materials and equipment required for this class

Graduate Credit

Is this course available for graduate credit?

If **Not** include a statement:

This course is not available for Graduate level credit.

If the course **is** available for graduate level credit, include a statement that defines the requirement for additional course work.

Example:

*Students taking this course for **Graduate Credit** are required to complete additional course-work beyond the requirements of the undergraduate students enrolled in the course. This work may include additional assignments, presentations and or written/research work. The additional required course work will be established and communicated to the student by the instructor at the beginning of the semester.*

University Policy Statements

PLAGIARISM/ACADEMIC DISHONESTY STATEMENT

Scholastic dishonesty is a serious offense at the University (UTSA Student Code of Conduct, Sections 202 and 203 -- <http://www.utsa.edu/infoguide/appendices/b.cfm>). Any assignments that show evidence that they have not been completed directly by the student, any act designed to give unfair advantage to a student or the attempt to commit such acts will not be accepted and could result in automatic failure in the course. Scholastic dishonesty also includes but is not limited to cheating, plagiarism, and collusion. Academic misconduct makes the student subject to possible consequences from the University. Behavior that is not consistent with the guidelines presented in the SCC will be addressed by the instructors and referred to Student Judicial Affairs for review. Additional information and resources area available for students and faculty at <http://www.utsa.edu/osja/scholastic.cfm>

DISABILITIES STATEMENT

If you need accommodation related to a disability, please make an appointment during my office hours to discuss your needs. Students requesting accommodation must be registered with Disability Services (www.utsa.edu/disability) and provide me with an accommodation letter.

Appendix C: Essential Elements in a Course Syllabus

Margaret W. Cohen, Director
Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Missouri - St. Louis

This template is offered as an aid to faculty. A syllabus is an agreement between instructor and students. A well constructed syllabus conveys instructor expectations and course requirements to students, stimulates student interest in the course, and clearly outlines student responsibilities during the semester. When these details are included in writing in the syllabus and attention is called to them as the semester begins, faculty are likely to avoid problems later in the semester. The basic elements may be expanded. When questions arise about the course or syllabus, the department chair, course coordinator, and others who regularly teach the course are available as consultants. Submit a copy of the syllabus for each course to the department office.

Course Identifiers: Bulletin Title, Curricular Designation and Number, Semester and Year

Instructor Identifiers: Name, office location and office hours, phone number(s), e-mail and web addresses

Course description: as printed in the Bulletin including course prerequisites

Course Objectives, Goals or Learning Outcomes: What will students know and be able to do at the end of the semester? How does the course support knowledge in general education or the major, the program, or other requirements?

Materials Required and Recommended: texts, workbooks, supplements, equipment, software and hardware, reserved readings. Note where materials can be rented or purchased and which libraries house the reserve materials. Guide students to understand which purchases are essential and which are recommended.

Semester Schedule of Topics (*always indicate the schedule is “subject to modification”*): Identify the semester, year, and reference number for the course. Indicate for each week (or class) of the semester which readings and assignments are due. Include when labs are scheduled, reports are due, when films will be shown, when tests and exams will be given.

Important Dates for the Semester: In the semester schedule insert dates students can use as benchmarks to assess their enrollment decision and progress: mid-semester, last day to enroll, last day to withdraw from a course of the University without receiving a grade, last day to withdraw from a course or withdraw from the University.

Instructional Strategies: indicate the instructional formats (lecture, discussion, demonstration, seminar, etc.) and supports you plan to use in class so that students can plan to participate, work in groups, schedule practica, labs, and projects.

- Indicate how technology will support the course. Explain your intention to use and expect students to use e-mail, listservs, video, interactive video, the campus course management system (e.g. BlackBoard, WebCT), web links, DVDs, CD-ROMs.

- Encourage students who experience initial academic difficulty on the first graded assignment to meet with you to discuss the work so that you can help identify strategies to help improve their performance.

Evaluation Criteria and Grading: List the value of all requirements, assignments and projects, tests and exams, attendance and participation relative to the course total. Include a grading scale showing how points earned during the semester will be assigned letter grades.

- Indicate how and whether incremental (plus/minus) grading applies to this course.
- Indicate how tardiness, attendance, and class participation affect semester grades.
- Indicate, when applicable, the minimum grade required for degree or certificate programs.

Faculty Expectations and Policies: Send clear messages to students about your expectations, requirements and standards for coursework and behavior. Consider developing common policies regarding academic honesty, civility, and disability access that appear in all the syllabi of a multi-section course or that appear in all syllabi from a department. Create your own or modify, adapt, or use the messages below:

Expectations:

1. Enumerate policies about attendance, late work, missed deadlines and tests, make-up opportunities, delayed grades. Examples are:

- “Late papers will not be accepted. Delayed grades will not be assigned. Please speak with me to resolve problems you encounter.”
- “Make-up tests must be taken within a week. Arrangements will be made for the Office of _____ to administer the test”.
- “Lab reports are due on Fridays. Five points will be deducted for each day that the report is overdue”.
- “Class attendance and participation is essential for success. It is your responsibility to clarify missed assignments with classmates or with me prior to the next class.”
- “Requests for exceptions to these policies must be discussed with me in advance”.

2. Enumerate expectations for submitting required work:

- Submitted work will be typed, double-spaced and submitted on disk, electronically, etc.
- Written work must adhere to the style of the discipline: MLA, APA, Chicago Style, etc.
- Written work will be evaluated for composition and grammar.
- When students’ work conveys that they require additional help in _____, students will be referred to campus services that offer supports with writing, math, or tutors specific to this course, etc.

Academic Honesty:

- Plagiarism is the use of another person’s words or ideas without crediting that person. Plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated and may lead to failure on an assignment, in the class, and dismissal from the University (insert relevant campus or University URLs).
- You are responsible for being attentive to and observant of campus policies about academic honesty as stated in the University’s Student Conduct Code (insert the URL).

Civility:

- Turn off beepers and cell phones during class. Adherence to the Student Conduct Code is expected.
- My commitment is to create a climate for learning characterized by respect for each other and the contributions each person makes to class. I ask that you make a similar commitment.

Access, Disability, Communication:

- Students requiring special accommodations should meet with me during office hours so that we can discuss how to meet your needs this semester. Prior to our meeting be sure you have met with someone in the campus offices that supports student with disabilities (insert the campus location).
- If you have difficulty communicating in English with the instructor of this course, contact the chairperson of the _____ Department in _____ Hall, room xxx, Professor _____ or call this person at (insert office telephone numbers).

The Center for Teaching and Learning's website includes sample statements of civility and academic honesty. Access them at www.umsl.edu/services/ctl.

III—REFERENCES & RESOURCES

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Online Resources

Honolulu Community College:

<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/writesyl.htm>

Iowa State University, Center for Teaching and Learning. "Learning-Centered Syllabi Workshop."

<http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/syllabi.html>

University of Massachusetts at Lowell, Faculty Teaching Center. "Learning-Centered Teaching."

<http://www.uml.edu/centers/FTC/lcsyll.html>