

Creating Course Outlines

Course outlines, or syllabi, are an integral part of course design. They generally summarize our course design plans and serve as a “contract” with our students regarding the course described. But how do you create a useful outline? Some outlines are barely a page long while others are tomes. Recent research (Becker & Calhoun, 1999) in the use of course outlines by students indicates that the most commonly-used parts of an outline are those regarding assessment: due dates, reading material covered by each exam or test, grading procedures and policies, and types of assessment. Is this all you should include or is there more? Creating a 3-5 page outline is appropriate for most courses. The following are some suggestions regarding the content for such an outline:

- **Administrative information** – Course name and number, term, your name and contact information, TA name(s) and contact information, and office hours all constitute administrative information.
- **Required texts, readings, or materials**
- **Course description** – What is this course about? Focus on the students’ perspective: Why might they want to take this course? What can they hope to gain from taking it?
- **Course goals or objectives** – Again, from the students’ perspective, list what they should be able to do, know, or feel by the end of your course. What will they learn during the course? It will likely be more than just content.
- **Structure and sequence of class activities** – Present topics to be covered, dates, and readings to be done in a columnar format so it is easy to read and refer to. Highlight due dates of assignments or dates of tests within this schedule of class activities. You may also want to discuss methods of instruction and your rationale for teaching in that manner, particularly if your methods may be unexpected by the students.
- **Grading procedures** – Again, using columns, provide a breakdown of the course grade. Also explain policies such as those for late assignments or missed exams.
- **Other course policies** – If attendance and participation are not part of your course grade, consider outlining your expectations about them in a separate section. This is also a logical place to discuss issues such as academic dishonesty.
- **Any institution-required statements** – Some institutions, faculties, or departments may require instructors to include standardized statements in their course outlines about issues such as academic dishonesty or classroom conduct. Check with your department to see if such requirements exist.

Remember, too, that while you may have reviewed your outline with your students on the first day, they may not refer back to it throughout the term. So be sure to reiterate critical information such as deadlines or any course policies that students may have tried to violate.

(from TRACE's Half-Day Workshop on Course Design, Winter 2001 – reference to Becker, A.H. & Calhoun, S.K. (1999) “What introductory psychology students attend to on a course syllabus.” Teaching of Psychology, 26, 1, 6-11)