

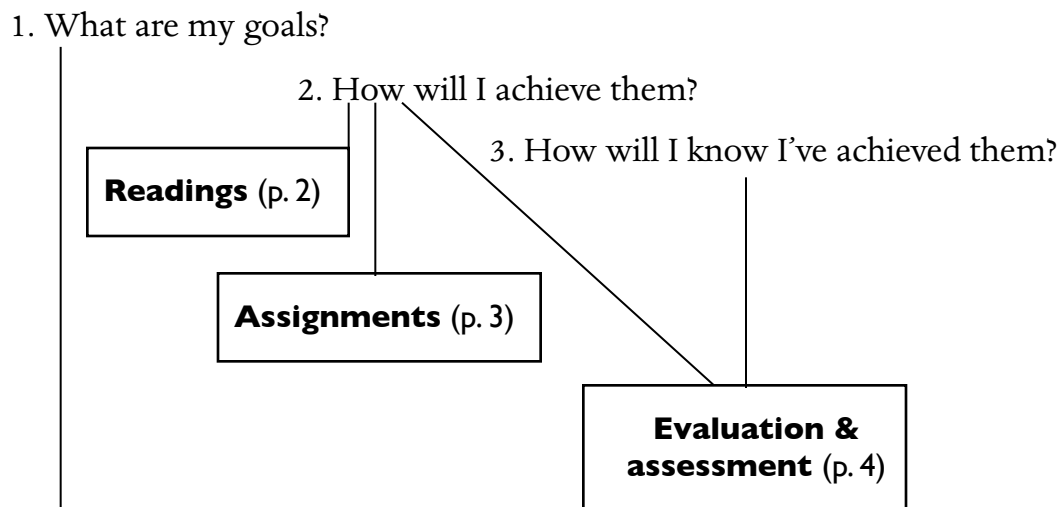
# SYLLABUS DESIGN

## A Few Basic Principles

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Designing a syllabus means designing the overall structure of a course. Because syllabus is an implicit — and in some places explicit — contract between the instructor and the students, it's worth spending time on it.

Designing a syllabus is much like designing a research project. It has three main steps:



### Course goals

There are many possible goals for a course. You can — and probably should — have more than one. The key is to be clear on them, both to yourself **and to your students**.

1. What do I want the students to **know** at the **end of the course**?
2. What do I want the students to **know how to do** at the **end of the course**?
3. What do I want the students to **have read**?
4. What do I want the students to **have done**?

The last two can be important because you might think there are experiences that are good for the soul, whether the students come anywhere near mastering them or even if it is impossible to measure and evaluate their mastery. For example, you might think that every educated human being needs to have been exposed to *The Iliad*, say, or community service.

*In thinking about these goals, keep in mind the differences between your students. What does it mean to meet the goals partly? Is it OK?*

## Readings

### CHOICE

The choice of readings seems like the easiest thing about design a course, but it isn't. The first decision you'll need to make about readings is to decide on the relationship **between readings and in-class work**:

- Are the readings self-explanatory (e.g., as in a conventional textbook)? If so, what will you do in class? Whatever it is, it had better not be to explain the readings.
- If the readings are not self-explanatory, will they be explained in lectures, or will classes be used to analyze/interpret them.

### Level and amount

We struggle with pitching the readings correctly, in large part because of the huge variety of texts students are exposed to in their courses. Keep the following considerations in mind when thinking about these questions.

- **Students can understand harder texts than you might think.** Just because many courses use textbooks, it's possible to assign actual scholarly work — primary texts, research articles — to them.
- **Students can struggle with texts you take for granted.** It's hard to remember how much time and exposure has gone into making us familiar with the work we read. The things students struggle with can be things you've forgotten about: some specific concepts (while Pareto optimality might be part of your everyday vocabulary, it's probably not your students'), modes of exposition (how to interpret a data table or a graph), for example.
- **Lots of reading allows you to cover more material, but at a tradeoff.** The amount of reading in courses can vary from even just a 10-20 pages per class to several hundred. The choice depends on *what you want students to get out of the texts* and *what you want to do with them*. If you assign an entire book for one class, what can and will you cover from it? If you assign six articles per class, how will you synthesize it? And remember that students don't necessarily need to read every text relevant to your topic: *you can cover things in class without a text*.
- All this leads to an idea that should be obvious, but isn't: **Students need training on how to read.** Tell your students whether they can or should skim something, what they should focus on, how to get most out of many texts efficiently.

### TIMING AND ORGANIZATION

There are many ways of structuring your syllabus over a term. Some basic approaches are:

- **Chronological.** Organizing your readings chronologically makes sense when the topic is, in some broad sense, historical.
- **Thematic.** This is self-explanatory.
- **Problem-based.** This a variant of the thematic approach.

Whichever approach you choose, it is generally a good idea to make it clear on the syllabus, but it's not always necessary.

*In addition to the intellectual logic, consider beginning the term with something exciting, easing off when things are tiring for students, and ending with something exciting as well.*

# Assignments

Assignments serve three different purposes:

- They allow students to **practice skills**.
- They can **motivate** students to do readings and attend classes.
- They allow students to **demonstrate their learning**.

Following are possible assignments, from the more common to the more unusual:

## Exams

**Pros:** Efficient and scalable. Easy to grade. Good for testing recognition, memorization, and mechanical application of basic skills.

**Cons:** Bad for testing understanding and other kinds of deep learning.

## Quizzes

**Pros:** Extremely efficient and scalable. Easy to grade. Good for testing reading and preparation.

**Cons:** Bad for testing understanding.

## Papers

**Pros:** Practices and evaluates multiple dimensions: understanding, innovation and creativity, analytic and synthetic skills, basic writing skills. Can be interesting to read.

**Cons:** Time-consuming to grade. Can be difficult to grade because of the multiple dimensions. Require quite a bit of pedagogy and preparation to help students master skills. Can be frustrating to read.

## Presentations

**Pros:** Allows students to demonstrate learning in multiple dimensions.

**Cons:** Virtually useless without much instruction on presentation skills.

## Low-stakes and diagnostic writing (Blogs, journals, non-graded in-class writing)

**Pros:** Allows students to practice writing risk-free without increase in instructor workload. Allows instructor to get a sense of student learning.

**Cons:** Can allow mistakes and poor skills to go uncorrected and undeveloped. May motivate students less than graded assignments.

## Online quizzes

**Pros:** Efficient and scalable. Easy to grade. Good for checking on student preparation. When done before class, allows instructor to see areas of problems.

**Cons:** Bad for testing understanding and other kinds of deep learning.

*All assignments themselves require some skills — some purely technical, some deeply cognitive — so it is helpful to have students get some relatively low-stakes diagnostic practice in any assignment that is significant for students' grades.*

## Evaluation and Assessment

Grades play very different roles for instructors and students. For instructors, they are the measure of student learning. For students, they are the reward for effort as well as one of the intrinsic goals of the course. It's easy to be critical of the student perception, but instructors' perceptions too are closer to ideals than reality: it is very difficult to make grades an accurate operationalization of student learning.

When designing a grading scheme, keep the following considerations in mind — *and make your choices transparent to the students as much as feasible.*

- **Grades motivate.** Take advantage of it: make them one of the *means* with which you achieve your learning goals, in addition to its assessment.
- **Effort vs. merit.** How do you want to balance the two? None of us like the idea of an “A for effort,” but what about “B for effort”? That is, you might make your course grade a combination of contract grading (“Do the work, and you get a B”) and merit-based evaluation (“...but beyond that it's the quality of your work that matters.”)
- **Curve vs. individual learning.** How do you want to balance these two consideration, each of which is valid and worth thinking about?
- **How do account for differences in student preparation prior to your course?** This is related to the previous consideration. Does it matter for you? How might you leverage the differences to the students' advantage? (E.g., you might consider different kinds of assignments and approaches and making some of them optional.)
- **Personal crusades against grade inflation hurt everybody.** Student course evaluations do, unfortunately, correlate with grades. It is one, though only one, of the reasons for grade inflation. While we may lament grade inflation, you don't do your students any service by effectively penalizing them for what might in fact be greater learning they've received in your course. In Michigan's political science courses, the mean is around B. Knowing that allows you to design a grading scheme that still differentiates between the kinds of things you care about without punishing the students or you.

### OTHER TYPES OF LEARNING ASSESSMENT

It may be helpful to supplement the traditional instruments — graded assignments — with tools that get at it in different ways. And remember that if you want to find out what students have learned in your course, it is important to figure out what they knew or knew how to do before. Surveys of prior knowledge, learning styles and interests are one way of doing this. *Metacognitive instruments*, with which students themselves reflect on their learning, are also a potentially valuable tool.