

Designing a Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centered Approach¹

If your syllabus were graded, would it pass?



The following document is a resource to support you in designing a Learning-Centered course syllabus. Using this resource in developing your syllabus will help you:

- Learn why a syllabus is important.
- Understand what students expect from a course syllabus.
- Explore the major components that should be included in a syllabus.
- Develop a syllabus that will enhance student learning.

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Benefits of a Well-Written Course Syllabus

- Establishes a contact and connection between students and instructors
- Sets the tone for the course
- Describes your beliefs about learning, teaching and assessment
- Acquaints students with the structure of the course
- Contains handouts or detailed assignment descriptions
- Defines student responsibilities for success
- Helps students determine their readiness for the course
- States how the course fits into the curriculum and overall program
- Describes available learning resources
- Communicates technology requirements for the course
- Contains difficult-to-obtain reading materials
- Describes effective student study habits
- Includes materials that support learning outside the classroom
- Serves as a learning contract (Grunert, 1997, p. 14-19)

Definition of a Learning-Centered Course Syllabus

A learning-centered course syllabus focuses on the needs of the students and their learning process.

Instructors specifically include information that will facilitate the academic success of students.

Components of a Learning-Centered Course Syllabus

- Description of the course purpose so that students know what to expect from the course and why it is important that they learn the content presented.
- Intended learning outcomes describe specific student behavior and learning goals that are expected through the course.
- Extensive description of how students are expected to participate in the course.
- Recommended study habits and details of how students succeed in this course.
- Additional assignment descriptions or grading rubrics.
- Recommended or suggested reading materials that are difficult to obtain.

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Tips for Creating a Learning-Centered Syllabus

Set the Tone for Your Course in the Syllabus

Generally, the syllabus is the first connection between you and your students at the beginning of a course; therefore, the syllabus will establish the course tone. Through the syllabus, you can set high expectations for students and begin a line of communication. If you want to establish a more relaxed tone in your course, write your syllabus in first person. However, for a more formal tone, write your syllabus in third person.

Anticipate Students' Questions

Students come to class the first day with many questions. The syllabus can quickly provide answers to many of those questions. Try answering typical student questions and placing the answers in your syllabus: Why should I take this course? How does this course relate to the general education program? How will this course help me intellectually and practically? For more practice thinking like students, read the vignette, *Student Perspectives on a Course Syllabus*, found on page 12 of this document.

Include More Rather than Less Material

A detailed syllabus is a valuable learning tool for students and lessens their initial anxieties about a course. If the syllabus includes detailed descriptions of assignments and criteria that will be used to distinguish quality in student work, time will be saved throughout the course.

Define and Limit Course Content

Davis (1993) challenges instructors to avoid forgettable content and focus on the most important knowledge, skills, and values students need to know. Try to divide course content into the following categories.

1. Required content for all students to learn.
2. Content that supports students' inquiry for learning beyond the required content.
3. Content that interests students who want to specialize in the area of study.

Keep the Syllabus Flexible

Some classes move quickly, and others get sidetracked. Either issue a new course syllabus midway through the semester to accommodate for changes or include a disclaimer to account for changes in the syllabus.

Organizing the Semester with the Syllabus

Use the syllabus to organize your semester and course. Plan the course schedule in advance, including all assignments, exams, and holidays. Remember to spread out the assignments and exams throughout the semester so that you do not overload and discourage students.

Further Resources

Ideas for this instructional guide were adapted from the following resources. For more detailed descriptions about a Learner-Centered syllabus, please refer to these resources.

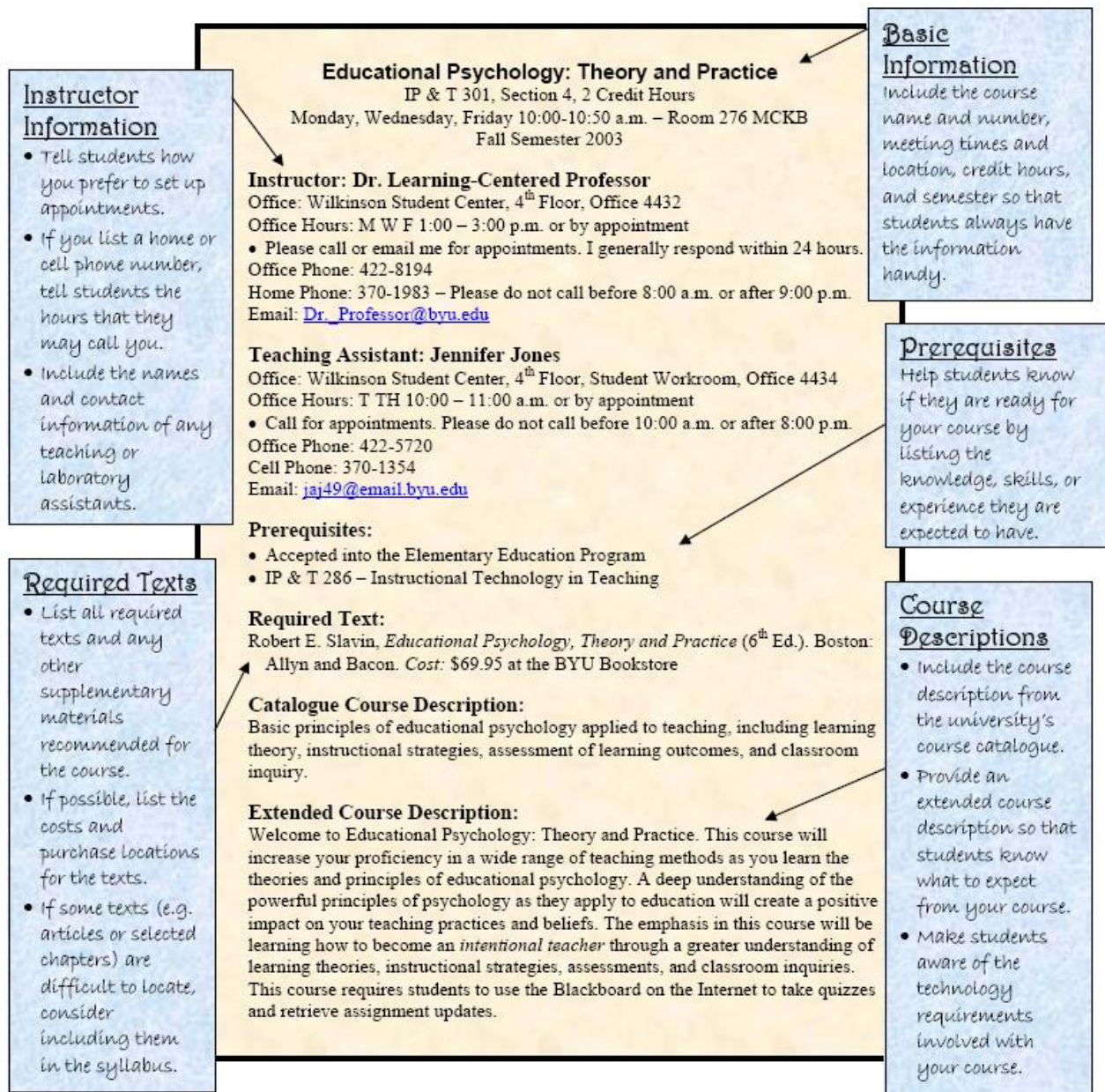
Davis, B. G. (1993). *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Duffy, D. K. & Jones, J. W. (1995). *Teaching within the rhythms of the semester*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

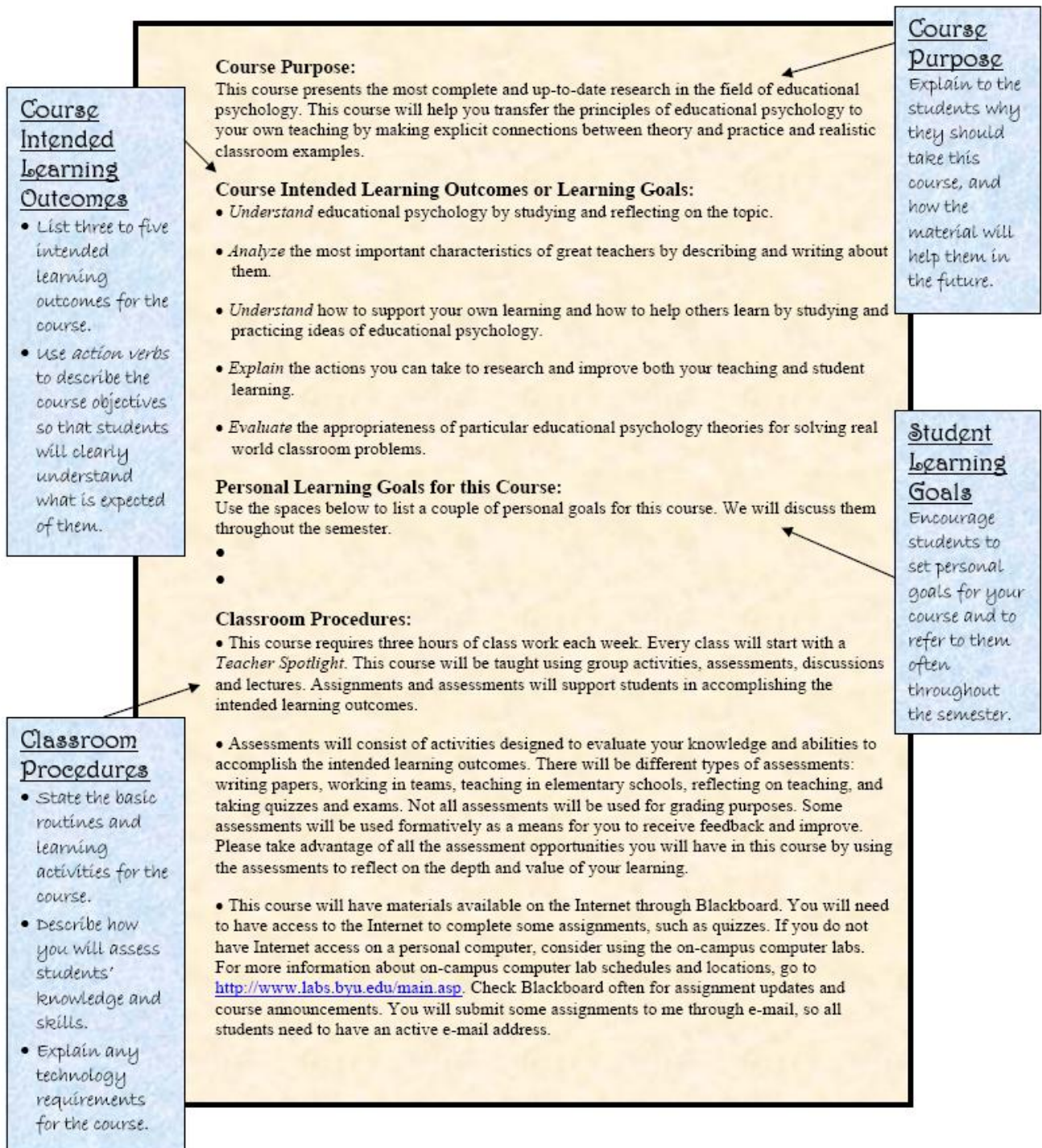
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“A detailed course syllabus, handed out on the first day of class, gives students an immediate sense of what the course will cover, what work is expected of them, and how their performance will be evaluated... A well-prepared syllabus shows students that you take teaching seriously” (Davis, 1993, p. 14).

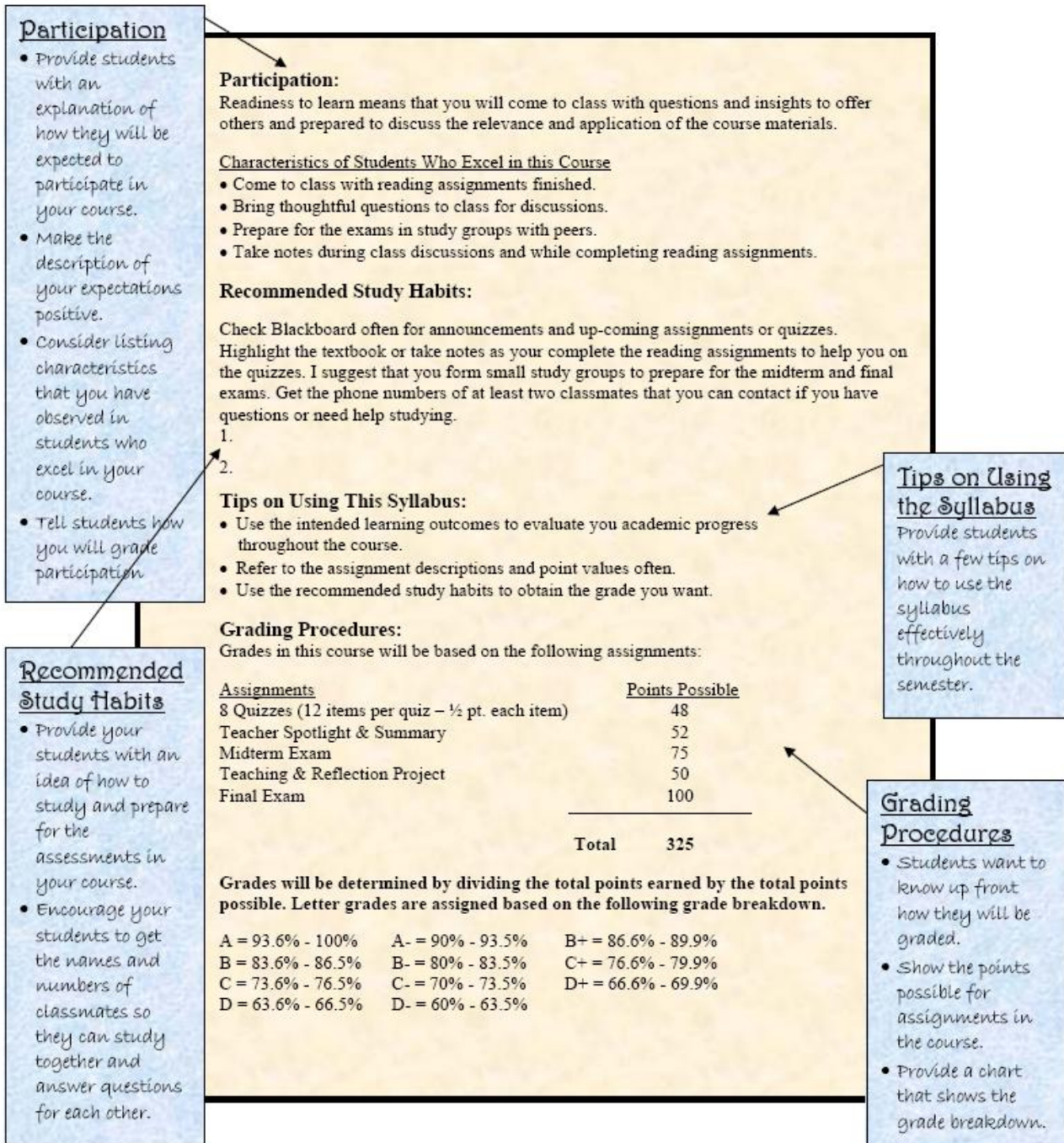
Example of a Learning-Centered Syllabus



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Assignment Descriptions

- Provide brief descriptions of the course assignments for the students.
- Include descriptions of the types of questions asked on quizzes and exams.
- If assignments are not described directly in the syllabus, indicate where the descriptions can be found.

Assignment Descriptions:

Quizzes

Take the online quizzes (posted on Blackboard) for reading assignments before class begins. Quizzes (6 points each) consist of multiple-choice and matching questions. You may use your textbooks or notes during the quizzes. However, the quizzes are timed; you will have 15 minutes to complete 12 questions. So, you need to read the assignment before starting the quiz. Students that try to take the quizzes without reading the assignments usually run out of time looking for the answers in the text.

Teacher Spotlight & Summary

For the teacher spotlight (25 points), you will give a 2-minute oral description in class of an academic teacher who had a significant influence on you. Come to class prepared with the following information about the teacher:

- Name and subject he or she taught.
- Reasons why this teacher had a significant influence on you.
- 3 competencies or characteristics that make this teacher a great teacher.

Take notes on the teacher characteristics mentioned during the spotlights because you will need to know the top three competencies for your summary. For more information about the Teacher Spotlight Summary (27 points), see the attached assignment description in the appendix.

Midterm Exam

You will take this exam in the testing center; it consists of multiple-choice, short answer, and essay questions. During the next class period after the exam, you will have the opportunity to retake the exam in small groups for additional points on your grade. 30% of the test will assess your ability to remember and understand facts, concepts and theories. 40% of the test will assess your ability to apply theories and concepts to particular situations, and 30% will assess your ability to evaluate the appropriate use of theories.

Teaching & Reflection Project

For this project, you will relate principles of educational psychology to teaching experiences you will have while you assist elementary teachers during the Practicum. You will write a description (6-7 pages, double-spaced) of one teaching event that illustrates an important principle of educational psychology. I will provide a detailed assignment description sheet for this project later in the semester.

Final Exam

You will take this exam in class during the university scheduled final time; it consists of multiple-choice, short answer, and essay questions. 30% of the test will assess your ability to remember and understand facts, concepts and theories. 40% of the test will assess your ability to apply theories and concepts to particular situations, and 30% will assess your ability to evaluate the appropriate use of theories.

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COURSE SCHEDULE	
<u>Date</u>	<u>Reading & Assignment Due Dates</u>
9/3 – Wed.	Introduction & Course Overview
9/5 – Fri.	Chap. 1 (p. 1-24) – <i>Educational Psychology</i>
9/8 – Mon.	Chap. 1 cont. – Quiz 1 online
9/10 – Wed.	Chap. 2 (p. 27-47) – <i>Theories of Development</i>
9/12 – Fri.	Chap. 2 cont. – Quiz 2 online
9/15 – Mon.	Chap. 5 (p. 139-171) – <i>Behavioral Theories of Learning</i>
9/17 – Wed.	Chap. 5 cont. – Quiz 3 online
9/19 – Fri.	Chap. 6 (p. 173-215) – <i>Cognitive Theories of Learning</i>
9/22 – Mon.	Chap. 6 cont. – Quiz 4 online
9/24 – Wed.	Chap. 8 (p. 253-287) – <i>Student Centered Instruction</i>
9/26 – Fri.	Chap. 8 cont. – Quiz 5 online
9/29 – Mon.	Chap. 10 (p. 325-361) – <i>Motivating Students to Learn</i>
10/1 – Wed.	Chap. 10 cont. – Quiz 6 online
10/3 – Fri.	Chap. 13 (p. 453-495) – <i>Assessing Student Learning</i>
10/6 – Mon.	Chap. 13 cont. – Quiz 7 online
10/8 – Wed.	Review for Midterm Exam
10/8-11	Midterm Exam in the Testing Center (No class 10/10 – Fri.)
10/13 – Mon.	Retake the Midterm Exam in class in small groups
10/15 – Wed.	Prepare for Practicum Teaching Experience
10/17 – Fri.	Review results of the Midterm Exam
10/20 – 11/19	No class – Practicum Teaching Experience in Elementary Schools
11/21 – Fri.	Chap. 14 (p. 497-509) – <i>Standardized Tests</i>
11/24 – Mon.	Chap. 14 cont. – Quiz 8 online
11/26 – Wed.	Peer Review of Teacher Spotlight Summaries
11/28 – Fri.	No class – Thanksgiving Holiday
12/1 – Mon.	Project Presentations – Written Portion of Projects Due
12/3 – Wed.	Project Presentations
12/5 – Fri.	Project Presentations – Teacher Spotlight Summaries Due
12/8 – Mon.	Project Presentations
12/12 – Wed.	Review for the Final Exam
12/18 – Thurs.	Final Exam – Room 276 MCKB (7-10 a.m.)
*Course Schedule subject to change by the instructor according to students' needs or course delays.	

Course Schedule

- Include all of the course assignments and due dates.
- Provide a detailed description of the reading assignments, including page numbers.
- Bold due dates of important assignments such as quizzes, exams, or special projects.

Schedule Changes

Include a statement in your course syllabus that explains how you will handle changes in the course schedule.

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Course Policies

- In this section, include all of the policy standards that you expect your students to complete.
- State your course policies positively so that you do not intimidate your students.
- Describe the policies that are important to you and your course. The syllabus then becomes a kind of contract for the students to follow.

Suggested Topics to include in Course Policies:

- Class attendance
- Tardiness
- Late work
- Missing assignments
- Tests or exams
- Makeup work
- Extra credit
- Requesting extensions
- Reporting illnesses
- Cheating and plagiarism

Course Policies:

Attendance

Students are permitted 3 absences for illnesses or personal reasons. All absences after that must be cleared with me first. Repetitive absences will lead to a lower grade.

Reporting Illnesses or Emergencies

Call me in my office or at home to explain your illness or emergency. If I am not there, please leave a message.

Late Work

Assignments will be due at the beginning of class unless otherwise indicated. Assignments turned in after the due date will be penalized (one grade per late day). Assignments more than a week late will not be accepted without prior approval for emergency situations.

Preventing Sexual Harassment:

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination against any participant in an educational program or activity that receives federal funds. The act is intended to eliminate sex discrimination in education. BYU's policy against sexual harassment extends not only to employees of the university but to students as well. If you encounter unlawful sexual harassment or gender-based discrimination, contact the Equal Employment Office at 422-5895 or visit the website at <http://www.byu.edu/hr/eo/info.html>.

Students with Disabilities:

Brigham Young University is committed to providing a working and learning atmosphere that reasonably accommodates qualified persons with disabilities. If you have any disability that may impair your ability to complete this course successfully, please contact the Equal Employment Office at 422-5895 or visit the website at <http://www.byu.edu/hr/eo/info.html>.

Church Educational System Honor Code:

Brigham Young University exists to provide an education in an atmosphere consistent with the ideals and principles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That atmosphere is created and preserved through commitment to conduct that reflects those ideals and principles. Observance of such standards is a condition of employment and admission. Those individuals who are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are also expected to maintain the same standards of conduct, except church attendance. If you have any concerns, please contact the Honor Code Office at 422-2848. For more information on the following related topics, visit the Honor Code office website at http://www.byu.edu/honorcode/honor_code.htm

- Be honest
- Live a chaste and virtuous life
- Obey the law and all campus policies
- Use clean language
- Respect others
- Abstain from alcoholic beverages, tobacco, tea, coffee, and substance abuse
- Observe Dress and Grooming Standards
- Participate regularly in church services
- Encourage others in their commitment to comply with the BYU Honor Code
- Academic honesty
- Dress and grooming standards

Student Rights

Include the university's policies concerning sexual harassment, students with disabilities, and the Honor Code.

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APPENDIX
Assignment Description

Teacher Spotlight Summary (27 Points Possible)

Objective: Analyze the most important characteristics of great teachers by describing and writing about them.

Teacher Spotlight Summary:

The summary is a one-page, single-spaced paper about the 3 most commonly mentioned competencies or characteristics of great teachers. The one-page summary should be turned in on **December 5**.

To write the one-page summary, you should listen closely to the teacher spotlights given during each class period; take notes and pay particular attention to the qualities of the teachers being described. Your task is to summarize the three most important characteristics that make great teachers based on the spotlights. You may categorize what you hear in your own descriptions, however, you should justify why you feel your descriptions cover the three most mentioned characteristics of great teachers. At the end of the one page summary, you should list the 3 characteristics you described in the summary and assess yourself relative to the characteristics (see the example below). Then, in a few sentences, describe the assessment of yourself. You will not be graded on your actual self-assessment scores.

	Poor			Excellent	
Enthusiasm for teaching	1	2	3	4	5
Love for students	1	2	3	4	5
Creativity in methods	1	2	3	4	5

Peer Review of Summary:

The purpose of this activity is to provide you with constructive feedback. During the peer review activity, you will also have the opportunity to apply the educational psychology principles of *Assessing Student Learning* that we will study in class this semester.

Bring your summary to class on **Monday, November 26** for the peer review. Each student will review two summaries according to the criteria presented in the following grading rubric. Please provide your peers with thoughtful feedback so that they can improve their summaries. The feedback given by peers will not affect your final grade.

Grading:

The following portions of the Teacher Spotlight Summary will be graded:

- grammar, organization, and clarity – **5 points**
- accurate synthesis of the spotlight presentations – **10 points**
- participation in the peer review learning activity – **7 points**
- self-assessment relative to the three characteristics – **5 points**

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Peer Review for Teacher Spotlight Summary Grading Rubric

Directions

Please rate the paper you are reviewing based on each of the following statements. You will receive 7 participation points towards your final grade for this learning activity.

	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>Adequate</i>	<i>Very Good</i>	<i>Excellent</i>
1. Responds fully to the assignment.	①	②	③	④	⑤
2. Expresses the purpose clearly and persuasively.	①	②	③	④	⑤
3. Meets the needs of the defined audience.	①	②	③	④	⑤
4. Begins and ends effectively.	①	②	③	④	⑤
5. Provides adequate supporting arguments, evidence, examples, or details.	①	②	③	④	⑤
6. Organizes and unifies main ideas.	①	②	③	④	⑤
7. Uses appropriate direct language.	①	②	③	④	⑤
8. Acknowledges and documents sources correctly.	①	②	③	④	⑤
9. Avoids errors in grammar, punctuation, word choice, spelling and format.	①	②	③	④	⑤
10. Maintains a level of excellence throughout.	①	②	③	④	⑤
11. Shows a level of originality and creativity in realizing criteria (1) through (7).	①	②	③	④	⑤
Overall Evaluation	①	②	③	④	⑤
Comments:					

*adapted from T.A. Angelo – Institute for Teaching & Learning – University of Akron

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Vignette: Student Perspectives of a Course Syllabus

The bell rang just before Dr. Mulligan came through the door carrying a stack of papers and a couple of textbooks. The students sat at their desks looking bright as brand new toothbrushes. The first day of the semester was always like this. Mulligan wrote the course number on the whiteboard and turned to face his new students. “Everyone here for English 329, right? Intro. to folklore?”

Some students nodded, some said “yup”, and some just sat.

“Welcome to class,” said Mulligan. “I hope you all had a good summer vacation and have come back to school ready to hit the books again. I think you’re going to like this class. There’s a couple of things we’ve got to get through today. Let me start out by passing around the syllabus. I just want you to take a look at it for the next few minutes. Read over it, and then we can talk about it, and I’ll answer any questions you might have.”

Syllabi are like menus at restaurants that only serve one dish. The students were eager to look at the syllabus because they wanted to know if they would like what was for dinner, or if they should walk across the street and try again.

Vignette idea adapted from Duffy, D. K. & Jones, J. W. (1995). Teaching within the rhythms of the semester. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Student Perspective 1

Trey, a second semester freshman, signed up for English 329 because it filled his letters requirement for his G.E.s. He figured that folklore was all about ghost stories and urban legends, a far cry from the “boring” stuff he’d have to read in most of the other letters-eligible classes. He looked over the syllabus to see what he was getting himself into. Would they start with the story about the lady who lost her golden arm or the one about the hook man? He loved those. As Trey looked at the syllabus, he was disappointed to see that it contained very little information about course content. There were a few textbooks listed that he would have to buy, but the course outline was so sparse, all Trey could figure was that class was going to be held on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday; that there would be three exams; and that a final project would be assigned. What he couldn’t tell was what the exams would cover or what the project would be about since there didn’t appear to be any specific material scheduled.

Student Perspective 2

Prue was an English major interested in getting an emphasis in folklore. She was excited to learn about the folklore item collection process and to work on her final project, which she had heard would be put into the university archives. Disappointment set in, however, when she took a look at the syllabus. It was a skeleton compared to the ones she had received in her other classes. It didn’t include any details about what the class would be covering. She didn’t know if Dr. Mulligan would spend more time on a certain aspect of folklore that she wasn’t particularly interested in pursuing. If the course content was covered on the syllabus, Prue would at least have time to review it and switch to another section of the class if the content did not meet her needs. Now she had to make a guess. If syllabi were like menus, this one had been written in disappearing ink!

Student Perspective 3

Lorena was an international student from Madrid. She signed up for English 329 to fill her letters requirement, but also to learn more about folklore. She knew it covered things like traditional stories

and harvest festivals like the ones held in the Basque regions of her native country. She would need a lot of time to devote to this class because she really wanted to do well in it. She also knew that she would need a lot of help. Lorena was disappointed that Dr. Mulligan's office hours were not listed on the syllabus, nor were his telephone number or the location of his office. How could she get help from a professor who didn't even provide his contact information? Furthermore, Lorena noticed that there was no breakdown showing the value of exams relative to assignments or the final project. This was going to be a long semester unless she could get some more information.