The Importance of the Syllabus

What It Is

The syllabus is a contract between you and your professor. It's your responsibility to read and understand all the material on each syllabus. Your syllabus is the blueprint for the course expectations, requirements, ground rules, readings, assignments, exams, and final projects. It will also list your professor's contact information, office location, and office hours. It contains all the information you need to navigate the course over the term. However, if you have questions or concerns about any of the information on the syllabus, talk to your professor right away! The syllabus is your number one reference tool for each class, and it's imperative that you use it to plan your course work.

Your ability to read and understand this document can make or break your chances for success in college classes. Each syllabus will be slightly different, but within those pages you'll find all the information needed to gain a clear understanding of what's expected of you.

How to Use It

♦ Look for specific pieces of information on your syllabus.
♦ Use the syllabus to understand your professors’ expectations.
♦ Use the syllabus from each class to map out your term.
♦ Use the syllabus to make communication with your professors easier.

Where to Get It

Each professor creates a syllabus for every class they teach. Syllabi are typically handed out to students during the first class period of a term. This does not mean
that you have to—or even should—wait until the first class to get your syllabus. Many departments post the syllabi for that term’s classes on their website. If the syllabus for your class is available online, print a copy and you are ready to go. If the syllabus for your class is not posted on the department website, send your professor an e-mail asking if you can get a copy in advance. To find your professor’s e-mail address, go to http://pdx.edu/colleagues and type the professor’s full name into the “Search for Faculty/Staff and Departments” box on the right side of the page.

**Look for Specific Pieces of Information on Your Syllabus**
The following are some things you should find on a typical syllabus:

- Professor’s name, office location, phone number, e-mail address, and office hours (times set aside for the professor to meet with students);
- Course objectives;
- List of reading material (both required and suggested) and assignments,
- Grading policies, such as class participation points, extra credit, and penalties for late papers or missing class;
- Important dates for the quarter, such as readings, quizzes, papers, and exams.

If the syllabus is missing any of this information, make sure you ask the professor to provide it.

**Use the Syllabus to Understand Your Professors' Expectations**
We keep pointing out that it’s important for you to understand what's expected of you if you want to be successful at college. The syllabus is an excellent source of information about your professors' expectations. The syllabus will contain information related to expectations about classroom behavior, such as participation in classroom discussions, policies on absences and tardiness, and penalties for turning papers in late. Some professors also include policies in their syllabi regarding use of cell phones and other electronic devices (such as MP3 players), eating in class, or chewing gum. Said simply, if your professor has made a note about it in the syllabus, you can be assured it’s important to her that you respond appropriately.

**Use the Syllabus to Plan Your Term’s Activities in Each Class**
We continue to stress the importance of backwards planning. The syllabus is the key to using this planning strategy. Once you obtain the syllabus, write the due dates for each assignment in a daily planner or electronic calendar. Continue to do this for every assignment and exam for the class. Then estimate how much time you’ll need to prepare the assignment or study for the test. Include dates to begin this work in your calendar as well.
Use the Syllabus to Make Communication with Your Professors Easier

Try to visit each professor during their office hours during the first two weeks of classes. Use the syllabus as a discussion point for your initial visit. If you have questions about what's on the syllabus or what's missing from the syllabus, this is an opportune time to ask. You can always go through the syllabus and find something on it to ask the professor about. This helps especially if you're feeling nervous about approaching your professor during office hours.

A good tip is to make a copy of each of your syllabi, and keep one copy of each at home—on a bulletin board, wall, or on your desk—and put the other copy in your notebook along with your notes for that class. You will continually refer to your syllabi throughout the term, and having them accessible is key to succeeding in your courses.