

# Using a Syllabus

by Alison DeRudder



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers how you can use your syllabus to prepare and plan for the course ahead of you. Here is what will be discussed:

1. Reading the Syllabus
2. Interpreting Course Expectations and Requirements
3. Estimating Your Time Commitment
4. Reviewing the Grading Criteria
5. Identifying Your Responsibilities
6. Obtaining Required Texts and Supplies

## 1. Reading the Syllabus

In an online course, the syllabus typically available to you on or before the first day. In a traditional classroom setting, the instructor will typically go over the syllabus during the first class meeting. But this doesn't mean that it isn't a good idea to read the syllabus in full on your own, either before the first class (if it's available) or after or both. The instructor is not likely to review every aspect of the syllabus and there are a number of questions or concerns you may have that the instructor is not able to anticipate. By reading your syllabus actively and critically, you can put yourself in the best position to succeed in the course. You will give yourself the opportunity to ask for clarification or explanation of what you are expected to accomplish during the course, and you will give yourself the ability to plan ahead to better facilitate those accomplishments.



### BIG IDEA

What does it mean to read a syllabus thoroughly, actively, and critically?

1. To read your syllabus thoroughly means to read it carefully from beginning to end, without scanning or skipping any section, no matter how mind-numbing it seems. In some ways, a syllabus is similar to a contract, and you need to pay attention to how specific policy points are phrased and worded.
2. To read your syllabus actively means to not just drag your eyes across the words but to engage with what you are reading, to pause and think about what you've read and what you can do to put what you've read into action.
3. To read your syllabus critically means to think about what questions you might have or where you might need the instructor's explanation or clarification. In other words, you don't have to accept the syllabus as

## 2. Interpreting Course Expectations and Requirements

Considering the course expectations and requirements at the beginning of the term can help you to anticipate and deal with potential issues and stressors that could arise later in the course. For example, if you know the instructor's policies regarding attendance and punctuality and think about them in relation to circumstances that could interfere with your ability to meet those requirements—work, childcare, transportation, etc.—you can plan for contingencies or, if need be, discuss your issues with your instructor. If you are a student who experiences anxiety about public speaking or social interaction, you might want to consider the degree to which group work or presentations are integral to success in the course (so you be ready for the challenge, not so you can avoid it!). Or if you are a student who struggles with writing, you'll want to know how much writing will be required and how important it is to your grade.

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## 3. Estimating Your Time Commitment

It is always wise to plan ahead, and the syllabus gives you precisely that opportunity. If you can estimate how much time work for a class will take in a given week, you can coordinate with your other classes and responsibilities and budget your time accordingly. Having a set plan can give you a sense of control over your schedule and help you to avoid the stress of calendar conflicts or last-minute desperation. At the same time, you should remain flexible and adjust your schedule as you move through the class and better understand how to work smartly and efficiently.



### THINK ABOUT IT

Whether you are a full-time or part-time student, in a typical term you will receive a syllabus for each class, and each of those syllabi will contain a different, separate schedule of when readings, tests, presentations, and assignments are due. It is possible to consult each schedule or calendar individually and stay on top of your work, but wouldn't it be easier if you had *one central calendar of all your work in all of your classes*? Yes, it would. And in the digital age, this is easy to do. Putting in a little organizational work at the beginning of the term can save you crucial time at the end of the term.

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## 4. Reviewing the Grading Criteria

Your syllabus will tell you which assignments are graded and how important each assignment is to your grade. This most commonly takes the form of a grading breakdown wherein each graded element of the class—which includes conventional graded assignments like tests or quizzes, but also often includes participation as well—is allotted a percentage of your ultimate grade. Attention to the grading breakdown gives you a sense of which assignments your instructor thinks are most significant, and allows you to budget the time you give them in accord with their importance. In addition, your syllabus may provide you with more detailed information about how specific assignments are graded, such as rubrics for essays or guidelines for

presentations. Sometimes these individual assignment descriptions and specifications will be given out separately later on in the semester. If this is the case, treat those documents the same way you do the syllabus—read closely, actively, and critically. Ask questions and plan ahead.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Sometimes getting a good sense of your grade can involve a little bit of math. For example: let's say at the midpoint in the semester you're hoping for at least an A- in your sociology course, but you've gotten B's on both your first essay and your midterm exam. The grading breakdown looks like this: "Essay 1: 15%; Midterm: 20%; Essay 2: 15%; Final Exam: 20%; Participation: 30%." Is your goal of an A- achievable based on a closer look at the breakdown? Yes! You've got 65% of your total grade out there for the taking! Learn from your experience with the first essay and the midterm and focus on ramping up your participation.

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## 5. Identifying Your Responsibilities

We can divide your responsibilities as a student in a given course into two categories:

1. those that are general and ongoing, like attendance and participation, and
2. those that are specific and due at a certain date and time.

Being mindful and diligent about your ongoing responsibilities will establish the foundation for your success in the course. Of course, knowledge of a policy is integral to abiding to that policy, but you can also "customize" or condition certain habits and behaviors based on certain class policies. For instance, some instructors may encourage the use of laptops in the classroom and others may altogether prohibit them.

If you know your specific responsibilities—the assignments that are due at specific points of the term—you can input this information into a calendar that will allow you to track your work both within and among your classes. This way you can plan ahead to avoid being overwhelmed with work at the end of the term.

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## 6. Obtaining Required Texts and Supplies

Your syllabus should inform you of everything you need to have to complete the course. This includes textbooks and course packets, but also can include other kinds of supplies depending on the course. In general, "required" is not a word that suggests a lot of flexibility, but if you have legitimate challenges in meeting the requirements it's worth asking your instructor about alternatives.

### IN CONTEXT

You've already paid a lot to enroll in the course and now the instructor wants you to buy books you can't quite afford at this time. Does this mean you should drop the course or try to complete it without the books? No! Most instructors understand that textbooks can be a significant investment and they wouldn't want to exclude a student from their course because of their economic circumstances. Ask your instructor if alternatives are acceptable—this could mean finding used copies of the books on the internet, checking a copy of the book out of the library, sharing books with classmates, or making copies.



## SUMMARY

This tutorial covered how to use a syllabus, starting with **reading the syllabus** in order to employ several strategies that will help you prepare for a successful semester to come, including **interpreting expectations and requirements**, **estimating your time commitment**, **reviewing the grading criteria**, **identifying your responsibilities**, and **obtaining required texts and supplies**.