

4 / *Constructing a Syllabus*

Having defined the destination of your course, you're ready to lay out the more specific "promises" that will take you and your students along the route. This chapter will help you construct a class-by-class calendar, including lectures, discussions, and reading and writing assignments—in sum, a "promising syllabus."

Most instructors who are designing a course—rookies as well as veterans—suffer from the obsession to "cover" everything. Behind this noble intention lurks the voice of the academic devil. In a survey of the English novel, for example, you can't imagine leaving out *Tom Jones*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Middlemarch*. Then again, can your students really read 2,280 pages in three weeks and also write that five-page midterm essay? In "U.S. History since 1945," you think you should spend a week on World War II, but looking ahead in the syllabus, how will you cover the Vietnam War in only one day? At moments like these, the devil whispers: "Don't worry. You can make the students read faster. You can lecture faster."

The truth is, however, that a speed-up strategy won't solve the problem. Large reading assignments and bell-to-bell, thickly detailed lectures tend to produce surface learning. *Less (material) equals more (learning)*.¹ This is not as paradoxical as it may first seem. Early-twentieth-century employers were astonished to find that when they reduced the workday from ten to eight hours, factory workers' productivity increased. The same principle holds true for students laboring in your course.

Even if you grudgingly let go of "coverage," however, you still have to figure out how to make those bedeviling decisions of what to exclude. There are no easy answers, and certainly not absolute ones. But I offer a four-step approach that will help you make your way through the quandary of coverage.

COVERING

Material and time—these are your two antagonists. You will try to stuff too much material (topics, lectures, discussions, readings, exams) into too little time (so-and-so many weeks of so-and-so many classes). But exactly how much and how little? To measure what you're up against, I recommend the following tactics.

First, tape your statement of aims and outcomes above your desk where you won't lose sight of it. Let it serve as a generalized map to keep you on track as you plunge into the messy specifics.

Now take one of two paths, depending on whether you prefer to work inductively or deductively. Or if it suits you, commute between them.

For the *inductive* approach, begin by brainstorming all the topics that, ideally, you would include in your course, scribbling them onto a page in no particular order. That is, translate your general aims and themes into specifics. Better yet, scribble *questions*, because they are more powerful; questions engender topics.

Next, take out a calendar and list every class date, as well as every holiday, in the forthcoming semester.

Finally, match each question or topic with an available day of class. When you reach the last day you'll discover how many questions/topics remain "untaught." Coverage has collided with reality.

You can reach the same goal via a *deductive* path. Instead of inventing the questions/topics on your own, let the conventional authorities in your field do the job. For one thing, you should feel free and unapologetic to borrow from other professors' syllabi. Exchanging ideas is, after all, what scholars do. (You and I are doing it at this very moment in this book.) Also open a standard textbook in your field and list the title of every chapter or subchapter that, ideally, you want your students to know by the end of the course. Then pair each title (that is, topic) with a class day and discover by how much you have exceeded the time available.

Either way, inductively or deductively or some combination thereof, you will have charted an itinerary—unwieldy and imprac-

tical, but a start. Now you're ready for "uncoverage": that is, for deciding which topics to give up.

UNCOVERING

A scene from some long ago movie comes to mind. Fleeing his pursuers, the protagonist flings his clothes pell-mell into a suitcase, tries in vain to close the lid, and finally wields a pair of scissors to snip the sleeves and pant legs spilling over the edge. I presume you're looking for a selection process that is intellectually more defensible than this Suitcase Solution. I also presume you're wanting a course that has coherence and continuity.

First of all, I suggest that you *sequence* your provisional list of questions/topics according to your rationale for how the course will progress. Is your course chronological? Or does it build from basic principles to more sophisticated ones? Or does it go from theory to application, or vice versa? Whichever rationale you adopt, you also need to confront a big question: What do students need to know at this stage of the course, and what can be better addressed or understood later? Or even more important, what do they need to know at this stage in their intellectual journey through college? Your answer to these last two questions will help winnow topics that are interesting but unnecessary. (For a more detailed discussion, see the section below on "cognitive modulating.") Don't worry at this point about fine-tuning the transitions from one topic to the next. This is a rough draft.

Second, in order to define patterns among the questions/topics, *categorize* them according to which theme(s) they represent. And to make this process more graphic, color-code them. Like the English historian I quoted in chapter 3, you may be tracing gender (G-red), class (C-blue), status (S-green), agency (A-yellow) and ideology (I-black) across several centuries. Or, like an anthropologist of globalization, you may be emphasizing transnational migration, capital flows, and the like. When you're done, scan the list and take note of the distribution. Are most of the red questions/topics, for example, clustered in the first third of the

course? Does this distribution match your intentions, or, on the contrary, does it signal that you forgot about this theme while planning the rest of the course? If the latter, you need to add questions/topics for this theme, even though that means you're lengthening a list that is already too long. But console yourself that you're improving the continuity and coherence.

Finally, you're ready to ponder which questions/topics, if push comes to shove, are dispensable. As a half-step, divide the list into four or five *units*, like chapters in a book. For historians, this is the process of periodization (the colonial era, the Revolution, the republic, etc.). A political science course may be moving not across time but across space: from local to state to federal. An introductory philosophy course may start with language before turning to ethics, aesthetics, and the mind-body problem. Even if you don't discern obvious dividing lines and "chapters," I encourage you to make rough cuts. One can't have second thoughts without risking some clumsy first thoughts. No revision without a prior vision.

As the next half-step, notice whether one unit is much longer than the others. It will be the first candidate for possible shrinkage. Engage in cold-blooded self-reflection. Why did you allocate disproportionate time to this section of your subject? Did you emphasize it because it's the most important? Or because you wrote your dissertation on it and feel underprepared to teach the other sections of your subject?

Even if you decide to pare this unit, however, you may nevertheless face that movie star's Suitcase Dilemma: more to pack than the calendar allows. Now comes the moment not only for reflection, but for ruthlessness. Which questions, topics, or themes can you delete and still have a course that fulfills the promise of its title? Which ones would your professional colleagues rank as indispensable or central to understanding the subject, and which ones peripheral?

Let me reassure you again: the first time you teach a course is inevitably a dress rehearsal. You will identify the excesses, omissions, and confusions only as you perform it in dialogue with a live audience.

ADDING

Up to this point we have focused on you and your subject matter—the teacher and what will be taught. Now let's bring in the third party to this relationship: the learners. As students pick up your syllabus on the first day of class, they will want to know what you will "cover" and why you care about it. More urgently, though, they want to know what *they* will be expected to do.

- How many books or articles are there to read? Where are they obtainable?
- How many discussion sections, if any, will there be?
- How many exams, research papers, or Internet assignments are there, and of what length, and when are they due?
- How will grades be assigned?
- What is the attendance policy?

The more precisely you spell out what you expect students to do, the more clearly they will understand how to succeed.

We will deal with writings and grading (plus attendance policies) in chapter 8. For the moment you need only think about when to schedule writing assignments. The traditional model has included a midterm, a final, and perhaps a research paper. Recently, however, many teachers have found that students learn best by doing several writing assignments, short rather than long, spread across the semester.² The reason is simple. If your students have trouble grasping the concepts or techniques in your course, they (and you) need a second and third chance. Learning improves with repetition.

Before nobly sprinkling the calendar with writing assignments, though, you need to think about your own workload. Three blue-book exams times 60 students equals 180 exams, graded at, say, 20 minutes apiece, equals 60 hours. A three-page research paper for 60 students at 30 minutes apiece to grade equals another 30 hours. And that's not all. Repeat the arithmetic for the other course(s) you'll be teaching. Pedagogy collides with exhaustion. There are no formulas for how much is too much to ask of yourself. Assign what seems to make sense. And as we'll note in

Figure 4.1. Storyboard for a Syllabus

Unit 1: The Emergence of Modern Art, 1890–1914

<i>Date</i>	<i>Question/Topic</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Discussion</i>	<i>Writing</i>
Jan. 12	Introduction What does “modern” mean?	No	No	No
Jan. 14	Impressionism Why was Cézanne crucial?	Textbook, chap. 1	No	No
Jan. 16	Cubism What is abstraction?	Articles 1–3	Yes	Reaction paper
Jan. 19	Picasso vs. Braque Collaborators or rivals?	Textbook, chaps. 2–3	No	Quiz
Jan. 21	Writing workshop How to use visual evidence?	No	Break-out groups	No
Jan. 23	Surrealism Why is surreal abstract?	No	No	First essay

chapter 8, you don't need to grade or even comment on every piece of writing.³

The same commonsense principle holds for readings. Students will fare best with shorter assignments at regular, frequent intervals—every week or two. Don't forget that your course is one of four or five that they're taking. While reading Mill's *On Liberty* for you, they may be reading Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*, plus studying three chapters of *Macroeconomics*, writing a research paper on abortion, and dissecting a frog.

Equally important, if you pair each reading with an opportunity for students to discuss it and/or write about it, they (and you) will know more effectively what they understood or have misunderstood.

By now you realize what has happened to your syllabus. After you struggled to define a list of topics and then struggled to shrink the list to fit the calendar, you have gone on to add exams and discussion sections, which means you have to delete more lectures. The challenge of "uncovering" does not relent. Moreover, you need to synchronize readings to lectures and discussions, and synchronize writing assignments to all three of those.

If you're feeling that you're juggling too many balls at once—or even if you're not feeling that way—try using what media people call a "storyboard" (see Figure 4.1). It will help you plot the relationships among the various components. Indeed, some teachers print their syllabus in a storyboard format because it furnishes students a clear overview of their responsibilities.

MODULATING

Besides meshing the activities of each week, a professor needs to calibrate the overall rhythm and sequence.⁴ I have in mind not only the experiential dimension, but also the cognitive one.

Experiential Rhythm

People learn by repetition, but repetition can also turn into monotony. Break-out groups produce a welcome respite from the

lecture mode, but after four break-out groups in four successive lectures, they will be predictable, routine, perhaps less lively. You may be the most scintillating teacher, but after thirty-one classes your students (as well as you) will welcome a different voice and approach. After all, the brain loves diversity. In addition, the spirit craves nourishment. As the semester builds toward its climax, students are falling behind, losing sleep to complete one or more term papers. In the fall semester they're succumbing to flu; in the spring semester, spring fever.

So I recommend that you build variations into the second half of your syllabus. Add one or two guest lecturers, for example. Perhaps schedule a film, a debate, a simulation, or a field trip (see chapter 7). You would also do well to list one day as TBA (to be announced)—in case you proceed more slowly than expected or have to cancel a class because of an ice storm or your daughter's strep throat.

Cognitive Sequence

In addition to varying the experiential rhythm, you need to pay attention to how you design the cognitive sequence. People learn best by starting with simple material before confronting complexity. Regular verbs before irregular ones. Simple equations before quadratic ones. James Joyce's *Dubliners* before *Ulysses*. This principle is hardly surprising; indeed, it's commonsensical. Putting it into practice, however, proves surprisingly tricky.

Unlike the sciences, mathematics, economics, and foreign languages, knowledge in the humanities isn't necessarily structured cumulatively.⁵ Therefore, teachers of history, literature, and philosophy don't always arrange a syllabus in order of difficulty. A so-called introductory course like Western Civilization, for example, begins not with conjugating the verb "*parler*" or solving $2x + 4 = 13$, but with reading Plato. That's like plunging novice whitewater rafters into level five rapids. How can a professor successfully guide first-year students through *The Republic* when most of them still think history consists of memorizing facts and dates?

The quantitative solution seems obvious enough: assign less

and proceed more slowly than you would later in the semester, when students have become better-trained historians. On second thought, though, this solution sidesteps the basic problem. *The Republic* doesn't necessarily prepare students to understand Augustine's *Confessions* and, in turn, Machiavelli's *The Prince*. These texts don't form building blocks from simple to complex or regular to irregular. They move laterally to other authors and subjects that present fresh complexities.

To build a cumulative curriculum, you should plan not simply the content, but what you want students to do with the content—that is, *cognitive skills*. We're returning to the aims and outcomes (chapter 3). If you're like most professors, you have defined your aims in general terms: "think critically; interpret evidence; hone an argument." These work well enough to chart your goals, but they don't address the specific steps by which beginners will learn how to critique, interpret, or hone. This omission isn't surprising. After all, professors used to be those undergraduate students who leapfrogged the rudimentary steps. That's how they became professors. To teach slower students, professors must back up, slowly analyze their mental processes, and explicate the intermediate steps they have taken for granted.

For example, if you pose that favorite graduate seminar question, "what is the main flaw in Malinowski's argument?" you're presuming that your undergraduates already comprehend his argument. A lecture on the "structure" of Van Gogh's landscape presumes that students will know how to overlook the scenery and see the painting in formal terms.

As with everything else about teaching, these issues will be solved most effectively in the crucible of classroom practice. You'll figure out how to set appropriate cognitive expectations through the dialogic back-and-forth with your students. If someone in the front row raises her hand and asks, "What do you mean by 'structure'?" you'll hear the signal to back up and fill in the missing steps of analysis.

In the meantime, though, Benjamin Bloom's classic ladder of cognitive skills may prove enlightening. Usually, a student needs to work successfully on the lower rungs before climbing to the

higher ones. As you devise lectures, frame discussions, or formulate exam questions, ask yourself which type of cognitive skill you're asking students to perform:

1. *Recall*—A student remembers factual materials; verbs that a teacher uses include *define, describe, list, name, identify*.
2. *Understand*—A student grasps the meaning of a concept; verbs include *put in your own words, discuss, explain, classify*.
3. *Apply*—A student is asked to solve problems; verbs include *apply, illustrate, demonstrate, use*.
4. *Analyze*—A student understands the structure and components; verbs include *analyze, compare, contrast, criticize, examine*.
5. *Synthesize*—A student combines ideas to form a new whole; verbs include *compose, create, design, formulate*.
6. *Evaluate*—A student is asked to make value judgments; verbs include *appraise, argue, assess, support, attack, recommend*.⁶

If this six-step model seems bewilderingly complicated (as I've found to be true for many new teachers), here is a simplified three-step version:

1. *Knowing*—A student has the ability to memorize, comprehend, and express ideas in one's own words.
2. *Understanding*—A student recognizes examples and sees relationships.
3. *Thinking*—A student applies what he/she has learned, creating something beyond what exists.⁷

In the early weeks of the course, you should keep your eye on lower-level skills while working your students toward the more interesting, sophisticated issues. Unless they know the meaning of a concept like "structure," and can express it in their own words, they won't be able to analyze it in Van Gogh's paintings or compare Van Gogh's structure to Braque's. I am not advocating recitation drills, though. Ideally, students will come to learn the concepts in *the context* of grappling with issues that captivate them. Think of learning to play the piano. True, students must practice their scales, but they will become quickly discouraged if they don't have

Figure 4.2. Heading for a Syllabus

POLI 101: Introduction to Political Science
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the chance to play real songs, even if only simple tunes like “Myrtle the Turtle.” When your students first tackle sophisticated problems, their use of fundamental concepts may sound woefully heavy-handed and off-key, but you’re helping them on the way toward playing intellectual sonatas. Even in mathematically oriented fields like economics, many outstanding teachers help students grasp advanced concepts by engaging them in problems long before conventional wisdom says that they know enough.

Easier said than done, especially if your students are a mix of novices and majors in your field. Gauging the right pitch will also be difficult if you’re starting out at a university where you’re unfamiliar with the students’ abilities. Again, let me reassure you: trial and error will be your best teacher. If you discover, a few weeks into your course, that students aren’t “getting” something, consult these cognitive models and reflect on whether you’ve set the mental task at too high a level. If they’re impatient, move higher on the ladder.

After so much attention to gauging students’ attitudes and abilities, you may be clucking, “Standards! What about standards!” That is, you may think that my approach advocates satisfying every student at the price of diluting quality and difficulty. On the contrary, it wants to help you maintain high standards by enabling students to reach them. I’m not addressing the content of your course. I’m addressing the process by which you teach them to grasp the content.⁸

NUTS AND BOLTS

Now comes the easy part of constructing a syllabus. At the top of the first page, list the basic information that your students will need to know (see Figure 4.2):

- What is the course name and number?
- Where and when does the class meet?
- Who are you?
- How can they find you? (Note your office location and office hours, e-mail address, and office telephone number; you may also choose to list your home phone number, with a limit such as "Don't call after 10:00 P.M.")

After the section on "Aims and Outcomes," and either before or after the calendar,

- list the books to be purchased and materials to be read on reserve at the library;
- outline the grading system (what proportion of 100 percent will you give to each assignment?).⁹

How long is a typical syllabus? I have seen ones as short as two pages and as long as twenty or more. As Voltaire remarked, he would have written a shorter letter if he had more fully understood what he had in mind. Likewise, your syllabus may shrink in future years as you become a more experienced course designer. In any event, informativeness, not length, is the relevant criterion. In however many pages one requires, a "promising" syllabus should define:

1. *The promise*—What you will "cover" and what your students will learn to do better (understand more clearly, solve problems, etc.).
2. *Means toward the promise*—How you and your students will work to realize these goals. (This is conventionally called the "requirements.")
3. *Measurement of progress*—How you and your students will understand how much of the promise has been realized. (This is conventionally called "grading.")