
What Is a Good Course Syllabus?

Why Do You Need One?

By Paul W. Joice, Sr.

About midway through the fall term, Joe Bond, a new instructor, appeared at the door of the department chairperson, looking deeply troubled. The chairperson was glad to see Joe. She had planned to discuss with him some of the rumors circulating about his courses and to question him about the lack of course syllabi in the department's file.

The chairperson discovered that Joe felt very discouraged about his courses. Students often misunderstood his assignments. Their written submissions followed no uniform format, and they often turned papers in late. Some students were using the previous edition of the assigned text. The date for midterm exams had caught both Joe and his students unprepared. Undoubtedly, Joe was in serious difficulty.

After thoroughly discussing the problems, Joe and the chairperson agreed upon a course of action. First, Joe would improve his course planning. Producing an effective course syllabus would be one required outcome of this effort. The syllabus would serve as the "contract" between instructor and students.

Joe learned the hard way that to teach effectively, he needed to give students more than a sheet of paper listing the course title, teacher's name, textbook, and daily or weekly assignments for the course.

Purpose. A well-developed course syllabus should help both the instructor and the student. For the instructor, the syllabus is an essential element of course planning and development that helps to measure the effectiveness of the instructional delivery system. For the student, it

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provides vital information about instructional materials, scheduled activities, class objectives, and performance expectations.

Contents. The structure and content of the syllabus will vary, depending on the nature of the course and the instructional activities preferred by the teacher. Most syllabi include general information, instructional materials to be used, course objectives, homework assignments, grading method, and format for reports on films, readings, and guest lecturers. The syllabus should also include policies relating to such items as test scheduling and administration, criteria for accepting late assignments, and the instructor's office location and hours of availability.

General Information

This would list the course prefix number and title, the name of the instructor, the building and room number where the class will meet, the days and hour of class sessions, and the academic credit value of the course. This section should also include a brief summary of the course content.

Instructional Materials

The next section of the syllabus should indicate what instructional materials are required or recommended and where they may be obtained. After determining course objectives, the teacher can decide what materials will best assist the student in reaching those objectives.

Course Objectives

Perhaps the most important section of the syllabus deals with behaviorally based course objectives. These objectives should result from curriculum development relating to the overall objectives for the instructional program. Each course should form a carefully articulated component of the overall department program or curriculum. The bibliography at the end of the article lists some helpful reading on developing course objectives.

A large number of textbooks now contain specific objectives for each chapter. These are usually stated in behavioral or performance based terms. Limiting to four or five the number of general objectives for the class will force the instructor to plan this area carefully. Omitting objectives or including too few may convey the impression that nothing important will occur in the course. Having too many general objectives may make the syllabus redundant to the textbook's chapter objectives.

Class Activities

The class activities, or methods and procedures section should describe, in general terms, what will take place during class sessions. This lets students

know how they will be involved. Preparing this part of the syllabus reminds the instructor that a variety of learning possibilities exist and should be used to improve student learning and motivation.

Course Assignments

The syllabus should let students know what is expected of them in terms of homework assignments. How much work will be required? What format is to be used? When is the work to be submitted?

The assignment schedule should include the dates when the class meets, the session number, test dates, and daily assignments. An excerpt from an assignment schedule might look like Figure 1.

With clear instructions such as these, there should be little, if any, misunderstanding about assignments, due dates, or scheduling of tests. Though time consuming, preparation of this section of the syllabus is absolutely essential. The teacher must plan around such events as skip days and holidays that inevitably occur during the school term. Outlining the schedule in this way helps the teacher arrange for films or guest lecturers. It also dictates how much time can be devoted to a particular topic or chapter. If the course is offered more than once during the school year, reworking the syllabus calls attention to the varying lengths of the quarters or semesters, and helps the teacher plan accordingly.

Grade Determination

Almost without exception, students are interested in grading policies. Including this information in the syllabus reassures students about the fairness of the process. It also helps the teacher to use uniform and objective standards in evaluating student achievement.

Obviously, for the teacher to include this information in the syllabus, he or she will have to establish criteria to use in grading projects or assignments. Historically, there have been too many horror stories of students who had no idea how they were doing in a course until their grade report arrived from the records office. This is highly unprofessional behavior on the part of the instructor.

Both student and instructor will benefit from timely feedback on student performance. Students want to succeed and will strive to meet course or instructor standards. Teachers need to know how well students are meeting course objectives so that they can make appropriate instructional adjustments. Without prompt evaluation of student assignments and tests, this cannot occur. Delaying such evaluation until the end

FIGURE 1				
Date	Session Number	Chapter Number	TOPIC	Assignment
Nov. 18	12	4	The Approach	Questions 3, 6
30	17	*** Test #1, Chapters 1 - 6 ***		

of the term means that it is too late for corrective action by either the student or the instructor.

Policy Statements

The syllabus might also include policy statements about such items as late assignments and missed tests. Will late work be accepted? Will points be taken off? When can students make up quizzes and tests?

Reports

Many courses require students to submit written reports. These may include summaries of periodical articles, reviews of films shown in class, or reports on the presentations of visiting speakers. The format of such reports may vary, depending on the preference of the instructor. Whatever the requirements, they should be carefully developed and communicated effectively to students through the syllabus.

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Summary

Each college or graduate course is designed to cover a particular segment in the department's curriculum and to contribute to the overall objectives of the department. The course syllabus provides a useful tool to help achieve departmental objectives. It cannot substitute for an effective, dynamic, classroom instructor. However, it can greatly enhance the instructional delivery system.

The department chairperson should review the course syllabus *before* it is given to students. This is especially critical for new or inexperienced teachers. If the course is a cognate requirement of another department, the syllabus should also be scrutinized by the other department chairperson. This will provide additional input and ensure the fulfillment of both departments' objectives.

Once a course syllabus has been prepared, it should not be thought of as a "work of art"—chiseled in marble and never to be changed. Rather, it should be seen as a dynamic vehicle to be revised each new term. New instructional materials are constantly being developed. Some teaching methods may not have proved as effective as anticipated. Therefore, some things must be added, others discarded. As a result, the teacher should revise the syllabus before the beginning of each term. These changes can be made quite easily if the instructor uses a computer word-processing program. The original syllabus becomes the model or "boiler plate" for succeeding revisions, as well as for syllabi in other courses.

Although the spell check feature of the word-processing program will pick up some errors, there is no substitute for thorough proofreading. The teacher should make sure all bibliographic information, such as chapter titles and page numbers, is accurate and complete.

Conclusion

A syllabus containing the elements discussed above should produce these positive results:

1. It forces the instructor to plan more effectively.
2. Course objectives will be more carefully developed and more likely be achieved.
3. Greater care will be given to the selection of appropriate instructional materials.
4. Methods and procedures for evaluating student performance will be clearly stated, making grading easier.
5. Time will be more logically allocated. No more hurriedly covering the last six chapters during the final week of the term!
6. More effective communication with students will improve motivation and morale.
7. Wasteful acquisitions of supplies and equipment can be eliminated.

The professional educator should utilize every tool available in order to ensure the effectiveness of the educational process. A good syllabus is one such tool.

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EDITORIAL

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ent expectations. Doing so does not become easier with time. We now deal with students whose values and life-styles have brought some of them in conflict with their parents, and many more in conflict with their church. I have great respect for our deans and their staff who guide the campus life of our students. In the face of immense pressures from contemporary culture they nurture students toward a mature Christian life-style. They deserve our support and encouragement.

In the second arena—maintaining high academic standards—we face an equally daunting task. This responsibility falls largely upon our faculty and academic deans. They are constantly asked to miraculously prepare large academic meals with small loaves and few fishes. They really have done remarkably well. However, the push for quality must continue relentlessly. This commitment begins with a well-qualified faculty, continues with opportunities and support for faculty development, and ends with a high level of teaching competence, academic maturity, and professional confidence. In addition, the high-powered academic life described above must harmonize with Adventist life and faith, or the whole mission of our institutions will falter.

In my new position as a college president, people frequently ask what I think about my job. Already I am greatly impressed with the remarkable talent and commitment of the human resources in our educational institutions. As educational leaders we must find ways to release this talent and commitment. To the extent that we make existing and pent-up resources available to young people, we will have achieved our goal of improving Adventist education.

—Niels-Erik Andreasen.

Dr. Niels-Erik Andreasen recently became President of Walla Walla College, College Place, Washington.

COURSE SYLLABUS

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CAN ADVENTIST COLLEGE BOARDS PASS THE TEST?

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as well as studying the craft of boardmanship; (2) participation—sharing wealth, wisdom, and working to the level of their capacity, with special emphasis on regular attendance at board meetings; and (3) evaluation—periodically requesting the chair to lead them in a self-study to assess their own performance.

Certainly, the challenges of tomorrow will require greater skill, devotion, and disinterested commitment on the part of board members in order to increase the quality, cost-effectiveness, and spiritual contribution of Adventist colleges and universities. Even more importantly, the Adventist Church must seek greater openness combined with deeper trust by everyone who has the challenge of operating these institutions in the 1990s. □

Elder Philip Follett is President of the Atlantic Union Conference, South Lancaster, Massachusetts.

sachusetts, and Chairman of the Atlantic Union College Board.

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¹ Cyril O. Houle, *Governing Boards: Their Nature and Nurture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1989), p. 19.

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³ Morton A. Rauh, *The Trusteeship of Colleges and Universities* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1969), pp. vi, viii, quoting Wilmarth S. Lewis, "The Trustees of the Privately Endowed University," *American Scholar*, vol. 1, pp. 17-27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵ Clark Kerr and Marian L. Gade, *The Guardians: What They Do and How Well They Do It* (Washington, D.C.: The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1989), p. 12, 13.

⁶ Kerr and Gade, p. 29.

⁷ Houle, pp. 5-12.

⁸ Kerr and Gade, pp. 47, 48.

⁹ Miriam Wood, *Trusteeship in the Private College* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 94-100.

¹⁰ Wood, pp. 115-123.

OF INTEREST TO TEACHERS

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bus plunged over an embankment into a water-filled excavation pit after colliding with a delivery truck at an Alton intersection.

Based on the investigation, the NTSB held that the truck driver was responsible for the collision itself, but said that the students died because there were too few emergency exits on the bus, which filled with water within 30 to 60 seconds and came to rest on its side in 10 feet of water.

The bus's front door jammed shut, and only three to five students were able to escape through the rear emergency door, which was repeatedly forced closed by the water pressure. Most of the students who escaped the bus crawled out through 9-inch by 24-inch windows, but many students became stuck or too many students tried to escape at the same time.

The board asked the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to develop a guide for training transportation and emergency-service personnel in school-bus rescue methods and drills on the use of bus exits.

The board also asked the NHTSA to study whether larger windows would aid in passenger evacuation, and to revise federal safety standards so that floor-level emergency exits such as doors remain open during school-bus evacuations. In addition, the board reiterated a call for improved passenger exits in school buses, which it had made after 27 Kentucky children died after being trapped in a school bus fire.—Reported by *Education Week*, vol. IX, No. 40, August 1, 1990. □