

# Reading Your Syllabus for Success



Your first academic term at university comes with new experiences and challenges. Many things have changed, and one important tool that may be unfamiliar to you is your course syllabus (plural: syllabi). Although some high school teachers have syllabi for their classes, syllabi are provided for all university courses.

## What is a syllabus?



A syllabus is essentially a course roadmap. It should contain information on the instructor, the course's learning objectives, readings, assignments, tests, and schedule. It will also likely include important university policies and relevant resources for students. These components are generally standard, although the content will be different depending on the course. Let's briefly look at each component:

- 1 The **course description** gives you some context on the course, as well as the learning objectives and information on the instructor.
- 2 If you have any required **readings**, they'll likely be listed near the top of the syllabus.
- 3 **Assignment** and/or **test descriptions** may be provided. These are usually short blurbs on what the assignment or test will cover and how much of your overall grade it represents.
- 4 The **course schedule** gives a visual overview of what will be covered in class each week, and when things are due. Usually, it will also include what readings you should be doing every week. Most instructors expect you to familiarize yourselves with the readings before class, so keep that in mind.
- 5 **Policies and resources** for students usually appear near the bottom of the syllabus. Policies can include your instructor's expectations on late work, as well as official university policies such as the Academic Integrity Policy (Policy 71).

Information on your course instructor and the learning objectives will likely be near the top of the syllabus. Information on tests and assignments is usually in the middle of the document, with the course schedule appearing near the end just before university policies.



While most of these components are standardized, it's important to remember that not all syllabi look the same, so make sure you actively look for every component as you go through one. You will likely receive your syllabi on LEARN on the first day of class.

## What do I do with it?



The first thing you should do with your syllabus is **read it**. Read it front to back. Read it in detail. Read it again. It contains important information that may answer questions you have about office hours, assignments, grades, and test dates.

Once you've read the syllabus, you may find it useful to record the name of your instructor and/or teaching assistant, their office hours and contact information in a place that is easily accessible. This could be a planner, a note on your laptop, or in your email. Having contact information readily available makes it easier to get in touch if you have questions or concerns.

## How do I use it to succeed?



Your syllabus is a road map for your course: use it as such! Within the first week of getting your syllabi, sit down and **record due dates for tests and assignments**. As you do this, take care to label each due date with the appropriate course and time it's due. Recording your deadlines can help you prioritize your work and give you an idea of what your term will look like.

Likewise, when comes to working on a project, your syllabus can help you plan. You can use your syllabus to:

- 1 Understand the **general scope of an assignment** and estimate how much time it may take to complete. Remember, instructors often include a short description of assignments in their syllabi.
- 2 Learn the **weight of each assignment**. Assignments that are worth more tend to require more planning, time and effort. Heavier assignments also tend to occur towards the end of the term, so consider starting them early to give yourself extra time.
- 3 Get ahead on **group projects**. Early contact with group members can be incredibly beneficial for getting these projects going.
- 4 Determine what **resources** you may need – for example, library resources, supplementary materials, assistance with reviewing your work, etc.
- 5 **Work backwards from the due date** to create soft deadlines for different project components. UWaterloo's [Assignment Planner](#) is a great resource to assist with this.
- 6 Verify expectations around things like **participation, citation styles and late policies**. Instructors usually make these expectations clear. If they aren't, don't hesitate to reach out and ask!
- 7 Refresh your memory of university **policies and procedures**. These give you a general sense of your roles and responsibilities as a student.

Thanks to your syllabus, you likely know when all of your assignment due dates are. Working backwards from the due date, you can plan out the stages of your assignment and when you want to have each stage done.



# Wrapping Up



A course syllabus is a tool that can help you stay on top of your readings and assignments. It provides a map of where you're headed and highlights expectations.

In summary, here's what we discussed above:

- 1 Your syllabus is an important tool for helping you understand course objectives, expectations and assignments.
- 2 You can use your syllabi to create a plan of what your term will look like; writing down all your assignment due dates is a great way to stay organized.
- 3 Syllabi usually have blurbs about the major course assignments; use these to get a general sense of them, so you can start planning early.
- 4 The course schedule gives a visual overview of what will be covered in class each week, and when things are due. Usually, it will also include what readings you should be doing every week. Most instructors expect you to familiarize yourselves with the readings before class, so keep that in mind.
- 5 Policies and resources for students usually appear near the bottom of the syllabus. Policies can include your instructor's expectations on late work, as well as official university policies such as the Academic Integrity Policy (Policy 71).

If you need more help planning, writing or designing assignments, the Writing and Communication Centre is here! You can [drop in](#), [book a virtual appointment](#), and/or check out our [online resources](#).



A syllabus is a tool. Using it to help you plan and stay organized can reduce assignment-related stress.