

# Writing a Course Syllabus

Are you designing or revising a course syllabus? Senate Committee on Academic Standards, Curriculum & Pedagogy – Basic Course Outline Model. See (<http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/senate/committees/ascp/index-ascp.html>).

All students benefit from an organized, well-written and complete syllabus. They are also better equipped to plan their semester if they have a clear idea of their educators' expectations, the demands of their courses, and the due dates of their assignments. With these tips you can make your course and syllabus accessible to the greatest number of students.

## General tips on writing an accessible course syllabus

- Communicate clearly the essential requirements of the course to all students, including learning outcomes.
- Include a course outline that covers the required readings, assignments and defined expectations.
- Encourage students to tell you about any accessibility concerns in private.
- Describe your teaching philosophy.
- Highlight any outings, labs and all deadlines. Specify any activity that might be out of the ordinary, such as changes in time or class location.
- Provide contact information and office hours for all instructors involved in the course (for example, professors and teaching assistants).
- Give students more than one option for getting in touch with you — via email, by phone or visits during designated office hours.
- Consider having multiple methods of student evaluation, such as exams, presentations, papers, etc. There may be more than one appropriate way to meet and measure learning objectives.
- Ensure ample time between assignments for students to receive feedback before the next assignment is due. Consider the time required for your students to complete assignments, and for you and your teaching assistants to mark and return assignments.
- Review your syllabus throughout the course. Send any updates to students, or post them where the class can receive them in an accessible format.
- Review your syllabus on an annual basis. What could be changed?
- Learn from your peers and students and discuss what works well.
- York University offers services to help you create an accessible environment for learners. Consult the

Teaching Commons and/or Counselling and Disability Services for more tips and to find out about supports that are available.

## Make the document accessible

Some students use assistive technology to adapt information into a usable format for their learning needs. Some examples of assistive technology are:

**Screen readers:** These read aloud information on a computer screen, such as written text, or the description of an image provided through alternative text or Alt Text.

**Screen enhancement software:** This allows users to magnify the computer screen or change the contrast to make the content easier to see.

- Your syllabus will be one of the first contact points that students have with your class. Providing the document in an accessible format — one that can be read easily and used by an assistive technology such as a screen reader— will demonstrate that your course is inclusive.
- Make the syllabus available electronically to all students, and update it if there are revisions during the course; this could be done through a learning management system, such as **Moodle**, Blackboard, Web CT, Desire2Learn, or Sakai; by email or on the course website.

## List campus supports and policies

- Use the syllabus to inform students about other services on campus that could assist them — for example, the Counselling and Disability Services, the Writing Centre, Library Accessibility Services.
- Include relevant York University policy statements on issues, such as:
  - academic integrity (<http://www.yorku.ca/academicintegrity/>),
  - student code of rights and responsibilities (<http://calendars.registrar.yorku.ca/2012-2013/policies/code/>),
  - accommodations for students with disabilities (<http://calendars.registrar.yorku.ca/2012-2013/policies/disabilities/>), and
  - accessibility for persons with disabilities (<http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/policies/document.php?document=153>).

## Include York University's accessibility statement

Including an accessibility statement as part of your syllabus gives you an opportunity to demonstrate your willingness to provide reasonable accommodations in your class for students with disabilities.



## York's course accessibility statement

### Access/Disability

York University is committed to principles of respect, inclusion and equality of all persons with disabilities across campus. The University provides services for students with disabilities (including physical, medical, learning and psychiatric disabilities) needing accommodation related to teaching and evaluation methods/materials. These services are made available to students in all Faculties and programs at York University.

Students in need of these services are asked to register with disability services as early as possible to ensure that appropriate academic accommodation can be provided with advance notice. You are encouraged to schedule a time early in the term to meet with each professor to discuss your accommodation needs.

Please note that registering with disabilities services and discussing your needs with your professors is necessary to avoid any impediment to receiving the necessary academic accommodations to meet your needs.

<http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/senate/committees/ascp/index-ascp.html>

### Choosing course materials

- Choose course materials early. If you are assigning a number of readings, this will allow you enough time to have the documents converted into alternative formats or

for students to request the formats they need from the bookstore.

- It's useful to cover core material through a variety of mediums — for instance, lectures, textbooks and/or visual presentations. If possible, choose accessible electronic versions of course readings. This will allow students the ability to convert the reading into the format required, whether they use a screen reader, an enlarger or other technology.
- Note that some PDFs (Portable Document Format files) are not accessible to students using a screen reader; when possible, choose tagged PDFs, which may be read by assistive technology. (Look for the related Tip Sheet: "Using Word documents and/or PDFs" for more information).
- Encourage students to make their class presentations accessible (e.g., captioning, using ALT text or tagged PDFs).
- If you use video or audio files, consult with your disability services office. Captioning or transcripts must be provided on request for students with disabilities. They may also be beneficial for students whose first language is not English and for the entire class.
- York University's Faculty Resource Guide: Teaching Students with Disabilities is a helpful resource. <http://www.yorku.ca/facultyawareness/>

**More resources:**

University of Guelph, Teaching Support Services, Centre for Open Learning and Educational Support, Universal Instructional Design Project:  
[Creating a Syllabus using the Principles of Universal Instructional Design.](#)

UDL-Universe, A Comprehensive Faculty Development Guide: [Syllabus Rubric.](#)

The University of Toronto Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation has a [Tip Sheet on Creating Syllabi.](#)

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To obtain this document in an alternative format, please contact:

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