# 11 Steps to Planning a Course You've Never Taught Before

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You wait with anticipation. You receive the email: *Course assignments are posted*. You click on your Course Assignment. And—you're assigned to teach a course that you have never taught before. Maybe you feel excitement, maybe you feel anxiety, or some mixture of the two. Emotion aside, how do you plan a new course?

Planning a new course can seem intimidating, even anxiety-provoking, but it doesn't have to be. You can start planning with confidence and getting your mental energy away from worry and back to the most important thing: teaching and reaching your students.

Here are concrete steps you can take to start planning a brand-new course you have never taught before:

**1. Gather three previous course syllabi**. Get a sense of the course goals, major assignments, and ideally a course schedule. Read and study them to get a sense of the course, but no need to understand every detail. Just try to get the big picture of the course.

**2. After reading these syllabi, answer: What should students be able to do after this course is over?** Synthesize what you've just read from the syllabus and come up with your major take-way. You'll refine this answer and use this end goal to guide the course. This is

part of backward course design. (Check out more resources from Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in *Understanding by Design* for more thorough explanation and steps.)

**3. Talk to two people who have taught this course.** These can be the people whose syllabi you studied, or anyone else you can get connected with. If you don't know of anyone, check in with an administrative assistant or someone in your department in charge of scheduling.

Talking to someone who has taught the course before can give you a sense of the course beyond the nitty gritty of assignments and required texts (that info is probably on the syllabus). What were their goals for the students? What other insights can they give you into what worked well/doesn't work well? And a big one: Why is this course important? Why does it matter? (This is a question that *needs* answering to make it matter for students). Two great questions to ask: What advice would you give to someone teaching this course for the first time? If you were to teach this course again, what would you do differently or keep the same?

**4. Return to your question after talking to these people: What should students be able to do after this course is over?** What new insights did these instructors give you?

**5. Think major assignments.** What major assignments will help your students reach this goal? (Yes, this is part of backwards course design again). You might use the major assignments listed on previous syllabi or develop your own.

**6. Start a day-by-day course schedule.** Make a table in Word or another program to get a big-picture overview of the semester. List the topics you plan to cover each day. Include the number of days and weeks you have with any semester breaks included. This visual can help you think about course logistics (should we have the midterm on a Monday? What about the big test right after fall break? How many weeks between major papers?)

**7. Niche your topics.** Norman Eng is a huge advocate of this, and I refer you to his book, *Teaching College*. We can't cover everything in class, and it's better to go deeper than wider. The goal isn't to cover the whole textbook, but to create meaningful experiences for students that will prepare them for life outside the classroom.

**8. Draft major assignment sheets.** Get ideas on paper beyond the brief description on the syllabus. Look at old assignments for ideas. (It's okay not to have these perfect or even nearly done, but get a description, some grading criteria, and a due date drafted down).

**9. Identify textbooks/class resources.** Try OER Commons for open-access textbooks and other resources. Bookmark some website resources that you can later refer to. When I taught American Literature, I bookmarked the *Journal of Teaching American Literature* website. When I teach writing courses, Purdue OWL is my go-to resource.

**10. Know where to go for help.** Maybe one of the folks who has previously taught the course offered to answer questions that arise during the semester. If so, use this person as a resource. If not, see if another instructor would be willing to serve as your check-in partner, even if teaching a different course. Talking about teaching can give you new ideas, and it's refreshing to reflect on what's going well or not going well in the classroom. Every instructor has been in a situation of uncertainty teaching a new class. Let's all agree to help each other out.

**11. Add this syllabus line: "This course schedule is subject to change."** Because it probably will. And it likely should change as you get to know your students and how this course can best help them reach their goals.

Before the beginning of the semester, have a basic, solid outline for the course. Know the learning goals, major assignments, course policies, and the big picture goals of the course. Don't get bogged down in details. Trust the process, your course plan, and your ability to adapt and meet the needs of your students along the way.

## References

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria: ASCD, 2005.

Norman Eng. *Teaching College: The Ultimate Guide to Lecturing, Presenting, and Engaging Students.* Norman Eng, 2017.

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