

Ideas for Creating an Effective Syllabus for Online Learning

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Online students need to feel an instructor presence in their classes. Thorough explanations and effective communication help fulfill this need and can transform a mediocre online course into a great one—and it all starts with the syllabus.

Structure and communication. That's what I've found to be the keys to an effective online course syllabus. Well, that, and something I call a chapter checklist, to go along with the syllabus. I've discovered both to be essential to my asynchronous online foreign language course.

Now that I've been teaching Spanish online for five years, experience has taught me some excellent ways to both connect with my students and provide much-needed structure. I've found that small details often make a big difference in professor-student communication in an online course. As I go along, I'll refer to examples in my sample syllabus and chapter checklist ([available for download](#)) and explain why I've incorporated them. It really is all in the details.

Pertinent Announcements – After the course and instructor information, I present the most pertinent announcements concerning the course. I put them in red and even highlight some of them (See **PART A in the download**). Since I'm not there in person to go over the announcements with my students, this is a way to stress their importance. For my Spanish 1001 course, for example, they are expected to read and understand the syllabus, be aware that they absolutely must have their own computer access, understand that I use Facebook as

a “classroom,” as well as the number of hours they’re expected to spend on the course. I also include the tech support phone number of the language learning website we use and encourage them to be familiar with it. I present all of these things right from the start—in red and yellow—to draw attention to them.

Autonomy and Self-Motivation – I take a moment to explicitly describe the amount of self-discipline and motivation required to be successful in an online foreign language course (See **PART B**). This is a way for me to cover this very important aspect of online learning since I won’t be going through the course guidelines with them. Additionally, should this become an issue at some point in the semester, I’m able to point out to the student that I specifically stated in the syllabus that the course required a high level of autonomy and self-motivation, and that he or she chose to stay in the class with this knowledge.

Tech Support – In **PART C**, I go on to differentiate my role from that of tech support. I make it clear that I answer questions about the course content – not technical issues and user problems. I give them the phone number, email, and hours of tech support, and I link them to information about how to manage their accounts.

Communication – When teaching an online language course it is essential to have a dependable, quick, easy way to communicate to students in real time. I use Facebook to do this (See **PART D**). I hold office hours by opening a post to answer questions in real time. I also talk with students individually through Facebook “chat,” making myself available to help them get from point A to point B in a timely manner as they work through their exercises. Incorporating this feature into my virtual classroom has saved a lot of time and frustration! Having it on the syllabus reinforces the fact that there is an instructor on the other side of the submission button and that I’m just a click away, available and willing to help.

Technology Instruction – I assign a project that requires the use of a certain technology, so I outline the instructions for setting up and using that technology right on the syllabus (See **PART E**) for a two-fold effect: It signifies that it’s an important part of the course while giving the student specific instructions on how to use the technology without having to figure it out. As tech-savvy as they are, there are things millennials do not know how to do, and non-traditional students appreciate the extra guidance.

How to be Successful – Providing some tips on how to study and be successful in my online course is a way to connect with my students and show them I’m interested in their success. I get positive comments and feedback about the “how to be successful” list I created for them (See **PART F**). I make it conversational and add some color and emoticons to add a personal element by showing my personality. This has been a valuable addition to my syllabus since I incorporated it a couple of years ago.

Academic Integrity – It’s always good to outline some kind of honor code for your course. This may be your personal honor code, your department’s honor code, or your university’s (See **PART G**). Of course, students who really want to cheat are going to find a way to do so,

but this is an easy way to make them think twice. It brings it to their attention and details the consequences should I find out they've been academically dishonest.

Grading Sheet – Because my course is asynchronous, students work on their own and can work ahead if they choose, so almost all of their activities are open and waiting for completion. This means that their grade in the language learning website is not correct until the very end of the course when absolutely all activities and assessments have been submitted and graded; thus, I provide a grading sheet (See **PART H**) for them to figure out their grade on their own at any point in the semester should they wish to do so. Additionally, this gives them a snapshot of exactly how their grade is divided and decided.

Chapter Checklist – I regularly get positive feedback about my Chapter Checklist (See **PART I**). Many students have thanked me for it and even said they wished they had one for other classes. It's really quite simple, but it's probably the most useful tool I give them. It's literally a checklist in which I list what they're to do by week and chapter. I include small blanks before each task for them to literally check items off as they're completed so they can see, at a glance, what they've done and what's left to do in each chapter. While it's true that this creates more work for me, it's worth it to know that my students feel grounded and confident in the completion of their activities from week to week.

In closing, included as a download is most of my Online Spanish 1001 course syllabus and the first couple pages of my Chapter Checklist. Perhaps it will provide you with ideas about how to outline other features in your class and/or create a framework for your students. Of course, my syllabus and Chapter Checklist include many items specific to my university, course, and language learning website. They are quite detailed, which is something else I've found to be pertinent, especially for an asynchronous online course. General ideas stated in a sentence or two in on-campus syllabi become entire paragraphs in online syllabi. Perhaps the most important thing I've learned in the last five years is that the small things are often the big things. Mention them. Express them. Explain them. Doing so increases understanding and curtails confusion, for a smooth, productive, enjoyable semester.

Download the sample syllabus and chapter checklist.

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