Preparing a Course for the First Time

It is tempting to begin a new course prep with the calendar and texts (course content) alone. To focus the course on student learning outcomes, instead of reducing it to timelines and content, resist the temptation and follow these tips.

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Getting Started

First, take some time to think about the big picture. Jot down some thoughts about what you see as the major aims or objectives for the course. Even if these are already listed on an existing syllabus, what do they mean to you? What do you want students to know or be able to do as a result of the course? You can break this down further into specific content goals and skills goals.

Next, imagine all of the possible ways you could assess whether those objectives have been reached. Will you use objective, quantified tests? How many? Will you use open-form essay tests? Will there be demonstrations of skill? Do you have a mix of low-stakes "on-the-way" assessments and higher-stakes "end-of-unit" assessments?

Rule of Thumb

Students do best with some form of assessment early in the course (4 weeks in).

Organization

As you then shift into planning out specific content and looking at the calendar, does the course lend itself to being "chunked" into smaller units, preferably those that can build on each other? It will help you and the students if you all feel as if you've accomplished mini-goals as you go, rather than seeing the course as one unbroken stream of content.

Think of titling those chunks or units in ways that remind students of how the smaller pieces fit into the larger themes or aims of the course. This will also help remind you to "circle back" throughout the course, reminding students of where they've been and how that connects with where they're heading next.

Timesaver

If you're using a textbook from a major publisher, see what resources they offer. Sometimes they have a sample syllabi to work from. You can also Google your course and see what's out there for you to borrow from. (You may not have had any say in what text was ordered for your course. Make sure there is a text by looking on Online Services. Make your peace with an "unwanted" text for that first semester and look for ways to use it that are intuitive for you—which may not follow the order in the Table of Contents.)

Be Realistic

If you're normal, you'll realize at some point that you've run out of days. It is tempting to "squish" content into fewer days to make room for more, but be realistic. You may be convinced it's essential that they read War and Peace, but scheduling 3 days for it, instead of 3 weeks, will be an exercise in frustration for everyone.

The previous point is why it's critical to have a lock on what is truly essential about the course, versus what would be "nice." You may decide to assign chapters of a text "out of order" or to eliminate chapters that don't directly serve your particular course.

Don't overload your syllabus with policies to address every possible contingency (this is my hobbyhorse—others will disagree). Do be clear on non-negotiables (attendance, late work, academic dishonesty, accommodations), but don't box yourself in with policies you may not need or may not want to enforce. Also, strike a tone that assumes the best of your students rather than the worst.

Students should be able to see clearly how their grade for the course will be determined and what your grading scale is. Due dates for assignments should also be clearly expressed.