

# Teaching 101: Getting By



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## Preparing Your Syllabus

Your syllabus is a contract that spells out all of your expectations for students. While it might seem like a lot of work to identify class policies and decide how to handle tardiness, late work, and student absences, a little time spent thinking about these common problems before the semester begins--and incorporating your policies into the syllabus--will save you much time and aggravation later. Sara Wilson, assistant professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, attests, "I wish I had known more about the importance of creating and sticking to clear, easy-to-follow, and rock-solid classroom rules and expectations that are set up the first day of class."

So what should your syllabus cover?

- Reading assignments and due dates
- Late-work policy (i.e., if it's accepted, whether points are deducted for late work, how many points are deducted each day, at what point late work will not be accepted)
- Attendance policy
- Policy on academic dishonesty
- Grading policy (i.e., how will students' work be evaluated?)
- Test dates
- Makeup policy.

Consider your syllabus a work in progress. As the semester advances, you may encounter issues not addressed in your syllabus (such as cell phone use in the classroom). Take notes on these incidents and incorporate what you've learned into the following semester's syllabus.

### **Class Preparation: Practice Moderation**

It's easy to let teaching take precedence over research because teaching is a scheduled activity whereas research is more flexible. Remain disciplined, however, because class preparation can take as much time as you allow. Perfection isn't possible when it comes to teaching, especially while balancing an active research and publication program, but it is possible to teach well without overinvesting your time.

Most new instructors overprepare for classes, notes Robert Boice in *Advice for New Faculty Members*. New instructors tend to rely on "extensive, painstaking preparation with a focus on understanding and covering everything--especially on avoiding criticism about a lack of comprehensiveness" (p. 13). Unfortunately, this approach tends to generate too much material

to cover in a given class period, resulting in too fast a pace of presentation to permit discussion and student participation, and ultimately leading to poor comprehension and stressed, unhappy students--and professors.

Boice and the successful professors he has studied recommend preparing for about an hour and a half (and no more than 2 ) for each hour in class. Prepare in 20- to 30- minute sessions throughout the week, rather than in a long marathon session. This allows you to add examples as they come to you, rather than forcing them. Don't write out your lecture: Prepare an outline of your major points, discussion questions, and activities, but leave room for flexibility and spontaneity.