

TEACHING

Department of Philosophy
University of Maryland



Graduate students in the Department of Philosophy are expected, at some point during their graduate career, to serve as the primary instructor for an undergraduate level course. One reason for requiring graduate students to independently instruct such a course is to encourage their growth as educators, while doing so in an environment tolerable of missteps. The purpose of this brief information sheet is to ensure that each student's first attempt at independently instructing a course is productive for both the undergraduate students and the instructor. This brief pamphlet contains easily implemented advice pertaining to:

- syllabus construction
- making a reading list
- preparing lectures



This information, in many cases, is derived from University-level policies, and **must** be applied to each undergraduate course taught at UMD. For students teaching courses for the first time, their course should abide by the recommendations in this pamphlet.

SYLLABUS



A course syllabus is the primary document for an undergraduate student to reference in ascertaining the content of a semester-long course, and the skills the students can expect to learn. The syllabus should clearly indicate the topic of the course, the content a student in the course is intended to learn by the end of the term, the skills they will hone, and the means of evaluating whether they have achieved these ends. More plainly, the syllabus must contain the following:

SUMMARY

Students enrolled in the course should have a general idea by the end of the first day of instruction what they will learn from the course. A summary helps achieve that goal. Using a non-technical vocabulary (when possible) this section of the syllabus should contain a paragraph-length explanation of the course's substantive content, and introduce the general themes that unite, and motivate the course's content.

BASIC COURSE INFORMATION

The course syllabus should contain all of the following information in a transparent format:

- course number and title
- instruction locations (e.g. SKN 1115)
- textbook information
- course webpage (if not in ELMS)
- instructor's contact information
 - name
 - office
 - contact info (i.e., email address)
 - office hours



ASSESSMENT

Evaluating students' progress through the course material, and toward the instructor's learning goals, is a mandatory component of any UMD course. While the nature of this assessment is fairly liberal (e.g. presentations, written work, exams, group projects, etc.), there are a few requirements mandated by University Policy about the nature of assessment.

DETAIL

Assessment particulars **must** be included on the course syllabus. Students in any course are entitled to know how they will be evaluated and held accountable for the course's goals. An indication of the various types of assignments, and how they are incorporated into the student's final grade **must** be present on the course syllabus. The primary instruments used in the Department of Philosophy for such evaluation come in the form of either written work ("papers") or timed exams. The due dates for such "Major Grading Event" must be clearly indicated in the course's *syllabus* (and not merely on the *Reading List*).

FINAL EXAM

Each course **must** have a Final Exam (or some equivalent *comprehensive* assignment). University Policy also demands that this Final Exam is administered at the time determined by the University's *Final Exam Schedule*. Instructors **cannot** hold a final exam at any time other than that indicated on the *Final Exam Schedule*.

ATTENDANCE

The University explicitly forbids incorporating student attendance in class (lecture or discussion) into the student's final course grade. No part of a student's grade can be explicitly determined based on their attendance in the course, unless the content or the instruction modality of the course mandates student participation. The paradigm for such a requirement is lab-based instruction, which does not generalize to philosophy courses. Students are expected to attend class, but they *cannot* be evaluated on their (lack of) attendance.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

The university has a few explicit policies regarding the operations of a course, many of which need to be reflected on the syllabus.

ACCOMMODATION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

the syllabus must contain language pertaining to the university's policy regarding accommodations for students with disabilities, and each instructor is obligated to follow them:

🔗 <http://www.president.umd.edu/administration/policies/section-vi-general-administration/vi-100d>

ATTENDANCE

student attendance cannot be a component of a student's final assessment for the course, without special approval—unless a student misses a "Major Grading Event" without an approved excuse: 🔗 <http://www.umd.edu/catalog/index.cfm/show/content.section/c/27/ss/1584/s/1540>

FINAL EXAMS

the final exam time and date must appear on the syllabus, and must be that time and date assigned by the university:

🔗 <http://www.umd.edu/catalog/index.cfm/show/content.section/c/27/ss/1584/s/1540>

ACCOMMODATION FOR RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

generally a student is permitted to miss class due to religious observance—additionally, instructors cannot schedule major grading events on particular religious holidays; a list is available here: 🔗 https://pdc-svpaap1.umd.edu/teach/attend_student.html

READING LIST



The list of readings, or the course schedule, is likely to be the most time consuming portion of constructing any syllabus, and preparing to teach a course. For first-time instructors this can seem daunting. Below are few tips in constructing that list.

USE A TEMPLATE

The courses graduate students are typically asked to instruct have been taught before at Maryland, and many times over. As a first time instructor, it is best to simply use a previous course's reading list. The faculty that previously taught the course undoubtedly put some time into thinking about the readings they chose, and the order they have them in the schedule. So you can be confident that the list of assigned readings from those courses is a good place to start.

Equally as important, teaching a course for the first time will prove to be more difficult than anticipated. A multitude of variables conspire to make a course successful or not, and wrangling those components to work together is no trivial task. Settling on a reading list that is tired-and-true (even if it's not terribly innovative) makes that task much simpler.

QUANTITY & QUALITY

Be sure the reading list is not overly burdensome for undergraduates, both in terms of length and depth. This is especially true for introductory (100 or 200) level courses. As a philosophy enthusiast, it is easy to overlook how difficult reading philosophy can be for the untrained undergraduate. An overly demanding reading list is the quickest way to ensure that most of the courses students will disengage from the material.

As a good guide, students in introductory-level courses should be reading no more than twenty-five(25) pages a week. Students in upper-division courses should be reading no more than forty(40) pages a week.

READ

Read everything on the reading list assigned to the students, *prior to the first day of class*. This might sound obvious, but failing to do so can make the preparation of lectures difficult, often resulting in confusion for the course's students. Since each lecture for the course should touch on, and be continuous with, the theme or subject of the unit a given reading is for, having a general appreciation for the broader themes of the unit prior to writing any particular lecture is indispensable (see "Preparing Lecture").

PREPARING LECTURE



Given the size of the courses graduate students are initially asked to instruct, the primary pedagogical method used for each session is lecturing. This facet of course instruction requires the most amount of preparation and time. Here are some helpful suggestions for preparing lectures:

TEACH PROBLEMS

Much of philosophy deals with addressing particular questions or problems, and not their solutions. Students should take away from each course the various questions the reading material attempts to address and the various commitments different proposed answers take on board. It is often tempting to treat lecture as a time to summarize that day's reading, to ensure that students have interpreted the text appropriately. There is value in doing so, but (more importantly) the lecture period should also offer students a means of placing a particular reading in the context of the problems or questions the reading addresses, in ways that go beyond the reading itself.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Each lecture period should engage the students. While there is value in teaching them the skill of actively listening to a lecture, if an instructor does not occasionally solicit the students' input students are likely to disengage from the lecture.

In the lecture environment the most efficient means to accomplishing this is by asking questions for the students to respond to. But these questions should (typically) have an open-ended character. If as an instructor you know the answer to the question you are asking, there's little to be gained by asking a question, as opposed to merely making a statement.

For example: "What does Peter Singer say about the role of pain regarding our obligations to animals?" This question has a definitive answer given an assigned text, and will likely not inspire student participation. Compare: "Do you think it is wrong to cause animals suffering? Why?" For a given student, you as an instructor do not know the answer to this question, since you likely do not know what they think. But this kind of question, put in the proper portion of a lecture about a reading on "animal rights" can help students engage with the material, and spark critical reflection.

USE COLLEAGUES

Talk with other graduate students and faculty about teaching. The department requires that graduates students receive an evaluation of their teaching by a faculty member. But new instructors need not wait for this occasion to seek feedback. Getting feedback early on from an experienced instructor can vastly improve the direction of a course. Since many of the program's students have had experience instructing courses, they have likely dealt with the same difficulties you will encounter and may have valuable suggestions about overing obstacles.

FAQS



ARE THERE SAMPLE SYLLABUSES TO REVIEW?

Yes! The department keeps copies of every course syllabus used in the past ten(10) years. Graduate students are encouraged to consult this resource.

HOW MANY OFFICE HOURS DO I NEED TO SCHEDULE?

The University does not have explicit guidelines on the number of office hours an instructor needs to hold each week. As a useful guide, you should have an office hour for every hour of in class instruction. Those hours should also be spread out between at least two weekdays.

WHAT IS ELMS?

The Enterprise Learning Management System (ELMS) is an online learning platform, made available for each individual course taught at Maryland. For more information including workshops on using ELMS go to:  <http://elms.umd.edu/page/instructor-support-landing>

ONLINE RESOURCES



UMD Faculty Handbook:

 <https://faculty.umd.edu/teach/syllabus.html>

Expectations of Faculty:

 <http://www.president.umd.edu/policies/docs/v-100a.pdf>