First Time Up
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Published by Utah State University Press

Dethier, Brock.  
First Time Up: An Insider'S Guide For New Composition Teachers.  
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9303.

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PREPARING

Some people postpone worry and stress by simply not thinking about upcoming tasks until they absolutely have to, then running around frantically trying to get everything done, hoping that nothing breaks or goes awry and that they’ve accurately predicted how much time they will need. This chapter, and indeed much of this book, is not for such people. It’s for worriers like me, people who are quite certain that something will go wrong and who can best reduce their stress by imagining what will break and readying the materials they will need to fix it or head off catastrophe.

One word of warning: it is possible to overprepare. You may be overdoing it if

- you’ve rehearsed what you’re going to say so often that when it comes time to say it, your voice does the job without towing your brain along. Your lecture comes out of a zombie’s mouth
- you’ve got every minute and detail so well planned that one deviation, one adjustment, sends you into a tizzy
- you know the answers to your questions so well that you save students the effort of thinking and just give the answers yourself.

Get the picture? The problem isn’t really overpreparing, it’s that you’ve shut your mind off, so you’re not actively engaged in teaching. Luckily, in your first year you’ll have so much to do to get ready for your courses that you won’t have time to overprepare.

Assuming you’re not a last-minute person and you do want to spend some time to reduce the chaos and trauma of the first week, what should you do?

TAKE THOSE SILLY WORRIES SERIOUSLY

That’s what Chapter 8 is about. I try to imagine the worries that you might have (I’m a professional worrier, so it didn’t take much imagination) and suggest how to combat them. But even a professional worrier can’t predict everything that will make you lose sleep. Spend some time with a
sympathetic piece of paper that won’t laugh at your worries. If confronting them on paper doesn’t help, find someone who can face them down with you, perhaps in the pages of Wendy Bishop and Deborah C. Teague’s *Feeling Our Way: A Writing Teacher’s Sourcebook*. In it, fifteen new teachers describe some of the things that bothered them in their first year of teaching, from worrying about their nipples showing to debating whether to try to hide their accent.

For me, confronting worries on the day before helps me avoid too much trauma on the day itself. For instance, I determine ahead of time what to wear. My advice for the first few days? Whatever makes you most at ease. That doesn’t necessarily mean the clothes that are most “you,” the ones you wear to putter at home. I know some normally casual men who wear a sport coat and tie the first day of class, just for that little boost of authority. You don’t want to be asking yourself, in the first fifteen minutes of the semester, “Does this shirt really go with these pants?”

Another issue that you don’t want to confront on your first day: What will students call you? Again, your comfort should be your guide; there’s no right and wrong, no rules to follow. I feel uncomfortable being called anything but “Brock”—especially because everyone butchers my last name. However, colleagues I respect and admire insist on being called “Doctor” or “Ms.”

All such decisions involve adjusting distance, and there’s no way to determine the ideal distance from your students until you’ve taught for a while. Some teachers close to students in age and outlook prefer to have students use a title, while some whose demographics now make them alien to their students try to close that gap by insisting on first names.

Take some time to go through the first day in your mind, note anything that worries you, and figure out how to relieve that worry. Afraid you’ll forget something crucial? Start a list right now of the things you want to bring to class and add to it whenever you obsess about something new. Uptight about repeating yourself (Wilkerson 10)? Don’t be. Supervisors encourage it and students expect it.

Worried about equipment? Find the room you’ll be in and check everything from the placement of electrical outlets to the presence (or absence) of chalk or markers. (I always keep extra markers in my pack; you never know when the previous teacher will walk away with them.) Try out your voice in the empty classroom, find the closest bathrooms, determine whether there will be distractions from a noisy hall or people outside the windows.
“Memorize your first sentence; everything will follow after that,” advises a consultant with the University of Virginia’s Teaching Resource Center, which recommends that new teachers “use many acting techniques such as relaxing, energizing and warm-up exercises; breathing techniques; and vocal practice” (Wilkerson 11).

Few of us ever become the smooth-tongued orators that we’d like to be, and for a few semesters I’d try not even to think about your imperfections as a lecturer. If you’re in a program that videotapes new instructors, you’ll have to confront soon enough your failings as a stand-up intellectual. (When I first heard myself on videotape—and only Pennsylvanians who remember Mayors Frank Rizzo or H. J. Tate can appreciate the depths of despair here—my reaction was, “He sounds like he comes from Philadelphia!”) You know the obvious do’s and don’ts of public speaking: face your audience, make eye contact, don’t mumble or go too fast, don’t fill empty moments with self-deprecation (Wilkerson 11). Practice that first sentence, and when you get to the end, with your list of the day’s activities in front of you, imagine what it will feel like to soar into the role that you will almost certainly love.

Once again, your imagination is your friend.

WORK FOR COHERENCE, SHORT- AND LONG-TERM

No, I’m not adding yet another worry to your list; I’m encouraging you to plan, so that you can avoid lots of little worries throughout the semester, especially worries of the “Why am I doing this?,” “What should I do next?,” and “What’s the point?” variety.

Long Term

Nothing more debilitates or demoralizes us as teachers than feeling, in the mid-semester doldrums, that we’re just making busywork, finding things to fill time, randomly appropriating exercises. It’s a struggle to do much about that feeling when you’re in the middle of it, lost in the trees and unable to see the forest. But if you spend an hour or so planning in the summer, you’ll be confident throughout the semester that you can answer those questions—in fact, you did, back in August.

What Kind of Coherence Am I Talking About?

First, the whole semester needs some kind of shape or form; assignments, activities, emphases need to be sequenced in a way that makes sense to you and your students and that builds toward major assignments
Preparing and projects. You could certainly create a course out of thirty or forty-five discrete days and activities, unrelated to each other or to any larger whole. Assuming you chose the individual activities well, students might learn a lot from such a course, but I don’t think it would feel intellectually satisfying for most of us. And while students might recall individual activities, a class of fragments wouldn’t build students’ overall base of knowledge as well as would a class in which everything ties together. To remember something, we have to link it to something we already know. If a student gets introduced to the concept of “writing process” on day one and engages in some kind of writing process activity almost every day for the rest of the semester, she may retain some knowledge of the general concept, some sense that she can approach any writing task in a variety of ways, even if she forgets all the individual activities.

**What Shapes Could a Composition Semester Take?**

When I was just starting out, a colleague, Dan Regan, suggested a sequencing strategy on which I still base most of my writing courses: make the semester itself mirror the writing process for an individual paper. Start with ways of coming up with ideas, move to approaches for sorting those ideas and choosing a good one, on to focusing, developing, researching, peer reviewing, revising, proofreading, publication. Of course, in practice, this process is somewhat recursive (as are most writing processes)—half way into the course you might be helping students come up with ideas for a new paper on the same day as they proofread a paper they began in week one.

As a general scheme, this one has great advantages. It’s simple and commonsensical, so teachers and students have no problem remembering it; it’s flexible; it provides teachers with ready answers to the question, “What should I do next?”; it helps align students’ priorities by focusing on content and ideas for weeks before turning to grammar and punctuation; it can easily expand or contract and mesh with other schemes.

You can take a class through an entire process in an hour, writing for two- or three-minute blocks on note cards, or show students how someone writing a book might expand the process to well over a semester. If the course mixes literature and writing, you can go through one process starting with the students’ own ideas, then another one that starts with responses to literature. The simple principle, which could be phrased “start at the beginning and move to the end,” provides a logical basis for endless variations.
Many teachers develop long-term coherence, too, by creating a logical progression of paper assignments. Almost any progression would be defensible; you just need to have a logic for yourself and for your students. My logic depends on my goals and what kinds of writing my students have experienced. I most often start with a personal paper—something students can write pretty much out of their own heads—and then move to progressively less personal assignments, ending with a research paper or researched essay that combines traditional “objective” research with the personal. Personal papers aren’t necessarily easier for students to write than research papers; in fact, some students in the sciences, used to writing research papers, find it very difficult to express opinions or write about themselves. But I start with the personal because it forces students to see right away that their own ideas and experiences do have a place in college papers and can provide the basis for much academic writing. It would be just as logical to start with an external focus and move to the internal.

Another approach is to organize by workload. Students haven’t read enough or discussed enough to write big papers at the beginning of the semester, especially research or response-to-literature papers. On the other hand, students often complain about having too much work due at once at the end. So in a reading-oriented class, I plan the bulk of the reading for the first half of the semester, with only short reading responses, and then space the major papers out over the second half. In a student-friendly variation, students write the bulk of the papers before the last month, then revisions or smaller papers in the final weeks. In courses with less reading, I space big papers evenly throughout the semester and plan smaller assignments in the off weeks. It’s always good to space papers relatively evenly, so students have time to get feedback and perhaps do revisions on one paper before they focus on the next.

You will, of course, never please all your students; some will have two exams and a paper due for another class in week eleven, which you had figured would be a slack time when you could require extra work.

Or you can organize by student roles. I’ve used this principle most often in upper-level courses with students who are planning to be teachers, but it could be a way to think about any course, especially if the course includes a public-speaking or presentation component. At the beginning of the semester, students naturally slip into the traditional “student” role, relatively quiet, passive, and obedient. As the course progresses, students can take on more responsibility, more autonomy, more control of what
gets said and done in class, moving from closely supervised small groups into more independent small groups, and climaxing in groups or individuals leading whole segments of the class.

Many teachers’ default mode of achieving coherence is to follow the text. If you rely heavily on a text, it makes sense to use it as your course backbone, rather than have two different skeletons underlying everything you do. Authors put together some texts so intelligently that their organizational scheme becomes an important focus of class discussion. Moffett and McElheny’s *Points of View*, for instance, is a reader that follows Moffett’s taxonomy of narrative perspectives, from interior monologue to “anonymous narration—no character point of view.” Bruce Ballenger’s *The Curious Researcher* takes students through a non-traditional research-writing process, first asking them to question all their assumptions about research papers, then helping them build a researched essay based on their own interests and predilections.

However, instead of bending everything else to fit a book’s organization, I feel more comfortable coming up with my own coherence for the semester and fitting textbook chapters into it. So I would follow the text, but with these caveats:

- **Determine the book’s main goals, and see if they resemble your class goals.** Maybe the book emphasizes writing with style (with lots of pointers about creating tight, graceful, elegant sentences), while you concentrate on writing to learn, and you want activities that will help students brainstorm, focus, organize. Or maybe you want to make literature a larger or smaller part of the course than the text does. I’m not suggesting you should throw out the textbook and wing it; I’m just saying that if you know where you and the text are headed, you can work out the best convergence.

- **Be sure the text itself has an organizing principle that you understand and accept.** Some older writing texts began with an emphasis on the word and then built to sentence, paragraph, and finally whole papers. That quite logical organization would be disastrous in most teachers’ hands.

  It’s too easy to assign a chapter each week without asking “Why is the book ordered this way?,” “Is it the best order for my class?” and “Does each focus deserve the same emphasis?” If you discover the organization of the book only when your students do, you’re not going to be able to make the best use of it.
• Question each chapter. Individual chapters wind up in a textbook for all sorts of reasons, many of them having nothing to do with pedagogy—maybe documentation issues are fashionable among publishers, or an editor is fascinated by logical fallacies or writing about films. Unless you’re only using one book and/or it’s short, you probably won’t have students read every word. So pick and choose.

A word about teaching with a text (or even a syllabus) given you by your department or program: unless the writing directors are obsessive micromangers, you’ll still have plenty of freedom, and you may come to appreciate having some decisions made for you. Find out from veterans and administrators what’s required and what’s just suggested, what your boundaries really are. If you’re told what kinds of papers to assign, you can probably still choose whether to emphasize voice or persuasiveness or style or organization. Even if you’re given a grading rubric, you can still exercise creativity and choice in how you teach students to achieve the prescribed organization or style.

The same holds true for the readings. If you’re told to teach an essay you’re not crazy about, you can have students critique it, find its strengths and weaknesses, knock the professional author off the pedestal. It’s always good for students to see that even published essays fall short and could benefit from revision. You can use the reading as a model, good or bad; have students expand on it or argue against it; study its lead, end, or general persuasiveness; analyze how the author creates its voice. The possibilities are endless.

In any case, don’t let yourself be bullied by a text or a syllabus; if you see yourself as mechanically carrying out the instructions of an author or writing director, you won’t enjoy your job and you probably won’t do it well. I’m not suggesting that you fight city hall, at least in your first semester; respect the limitations you work under, but see them as a challenge, perhaps even a spark, to your imagination. All writers are used to working under various kinds of restraints—of form, material, length, time, audience. We just accept those restraints as a given and strive to make, for instance, profound beauty out of the seventeen syllables that haiku “allows.” The same holds true for teaching. If the restraints make you feel straitjacketed, ask veterans where they find wiggle-room.

Far from being mutually exclusive, these organizational principles work well together. In fact, this last one would almost certainly need to
be combined with one of the others. And I’m not advocating rigid adherence to anything. But you’ll feel better about your whole course if you always know how a particular activity fits into a larger scheme. If none of the above appeals to you, look around; almost any recent writing text includes suggestions about the movement of a semester and the sequencing of assignments. James D. Williams, for instance, develops a rationale for sequencing assignments very different from mine (282-288).

Short Term

So you’ve got the whole semester moving logically and you feel good about the course goals. Why worry about day-to-day coherence?

Again, the answer is less stress for you, more learning for students. To make a class or a week of classes coherent, simply pay attention to connections. Of course, planning can help—choose the perfect reading to dovetail with a particular writing assignment, or read the speaker’s work just before he or she gives a talk. But good planning doesn’t necessarily eliminate the gaps between the day’s classroom activities. I observe a lot of seasoned teachers who no doubt planned the day’s activities based on a sense of continuity and thematic ties, but they don’t emphasize those ties during class, so the class session sometimes feels like a series of discrete segments. Such a class may leave the teacher dissatisfied, and since students often don’t see the big picture no matter how well it’s presented to them, they’re almost certainly going to miss it if we don’t point it out. . . which most likely means they’ll forget the day’s activities within hours. As E. M. Forster said, “Only connect.” You can link almost any pieces of a class, and forcing yourself to summarize and show connections may yield some surprising insights. Just ask yourself what the links are, then let students know about them in overviews and reviews and in transitions from one segment to the next. Sounds rather like writing a coherent paper, doesn’t it? If we taught the way that we advocate students should write, we’d all be stars.

Handouts and Overheads

In the weeks before your first class, scope out how the department gets text to students. I’m a fan of the copy machine (and the recycling bin), but budgets and departmental histories and biases probably determine copying policy more than convenience. Does the department expect you to do everything on overheads? If so, does every classroom have a functioning machine? Are you encouraged to make a course packet and
have students buy it from the bookstore? Does everyone post material on a class website or use the library’s electronic reserves?

As online courses have proved, it’s possible to run an excellent writing course without using paper at all. Finding that terrific article you want students to read is often as easy as Googling the title and then posting the URL for students or copying the whole text to your website. If you have access to a scanner and can make pdf files, you can transfer anything on paper to a website. The most important resource I offer the new teachers I supervise is to enter them as “students” into the staff website I’ve created, which includes everything from syllabi to favorite readings to student papers from the past. But before you invest the time into creating such a website for yourself, consider its limitations. Do you want students to bring copies of some of the materials to class? If so, does the website just shift the copying burden from your department to your students? Plead as you might, you will never get all your students to come to class armed with the crucial handout if each student has to print it out. So sometimes relying on online materials has the appearance of saving paper and money but the effect of leaving less diligent students in the dust.

Under any copying policy, go into the first month armed with handouts. (For the rest of this section, I’m going to use “handouts” meaning “or overheads, electronic reserves, etc.”) A meaty handout can anchor extended discussions and therefore act as your spare tire when something else goes flat or blows out unexpectedly. Students like to have something in hand or on screen when they’re trying to follow what you have to say. Besides, the thought that goes into composing a handout helps expand and clarify our own ideas and plans.

While you’ll never have a full semester’s handouts ready to go before the first class, it’s worth spending some time gathering and creating them before you start teaching. It will help you feel more secure, and it will improve your thinking about subjects that at the moment may be just notations on a schedule.

Should you “gather” or “create” your handouts? All teachers use handouts, and most veterans have a huge collection. Though I can’t speak for the comp teacher down the hall, the composition world in general has a long history of sharing, so most colleagues will gladly let you use their handouts. You can probably collect most of what you need for the semester in a few minutes of asking around.

On the other hand, it’s difficult to teach someone else’s lesson. We have to make it our own, and sometimes that takes using it three or four
times. Besides improving your understanding of the subject, creating your own handout will give the handout your own stamp, as it is written in your voice, for your purposes. So while I would encourage you to gather as many handouts as possible during your first year, I would wager that in the long run, you will end up remaking many of them.

A special word about coursepacks, a popular option for schools that can’t afford big photocopying bills and for teachers who like to supplement a reader or replace it entirely. It’s terrific to have a set of readings and activities in students’ backpacks from day one, especially since the readings can be your favorites, things that you feel confident about. But schools and copy centers differ radically in how they deal with the issue of copyrights. Some may still assume (wink, wink) that you have clearance for the material in your packet, and they’ll run off your copies in a couple of days. Others take copyright law very seriously and will not copy your material until they’ve gotten written clearance from publishers or authors, a clearance that may come months late and with a hefty price tag. So if you intend to use such a packet, find out how the copy center handles it, and be ready to submit it many weeks ahead of time if you include copyrighted material.

SYLLABI

You’ve dealt with plenty of syllabi as a student, but if you’ve never created a syllabus, you may find the task daunting. Keep in mind three fundamental truths about syllabi that you probably didn’t think about as a student:

1. Making up a syllabus is the best—for some teachers the only—way to plan your class. So yes, it’s a pain, but each syllabus is easier than the last (partly because you can create boilerplate parts to move from one to the next), and if you do it well, you’ll have much less to worry about for the rest of the semester.

2. The syllabus, a quasi-legal document, lays out a sort of contract between you and your students. So when students complain that they didn’t know about certain rules or dates, you can respond, “Look what it says in the syllabus.” But it works both ways—students can hold you to your syllabus—so you need to be sure that you mean what you say.

3. Many students will only glance at the syllabus. That is, in general, their problem, but it means you can’t put something in the syllabus and forget about it, assuming everyone got it.
Crucial Details

Because of the first two points above, every syllabus should include a number of crucial details. You need to make up your mind about them and you need to alert students to them in an official way. To get a sense of local syllabus traditions, ask some veterans to show you theirs. If the program offers a core syllabus, use it. Look it over very closely and make modifications if that’s acceptable. You’ll have plenty of other chances day-by-day to be creative. Almost certainly, your syllabus will need the following.

*Your information.* Name, office number, phone number, email address, office hours. (Some teachers give out their home phone number, something I discourage. And I would definitely not list my home address.)

*Class information.* Course number, section number, meeting place and time.

*List of books and other materials required* for the course and where students can or should get them.

*Course objectives.* I used to make these short and simple. Having recently dealt with outside accreditation and assessment, I now realize that the easiest way for an administrator to “prove” that a particular course includes a particular element is to find that element in the course syllabus under “objectives” or “goals.” I’d be surprised if one student in one hundred paid any attention to the objectives, but listing them may help you clarify in your own mind what you’re trying to do, and it may also keep your boss happy.

*Course grading procedures and standards.* I usually provide descriptions of A, B, C, D papers. I’m not sure they really help students, but pointing to them provides one quick answer to the “What do you want?” question. Including in your syllabus specific rubrics for particular assignments can save you headaches later. (See Figure 7 and Anson and Dannels, “Developing Rubrics for Instruction and Evaluation.”) You also need some system of weighting each graded assignment, whether you give a percentage or a number of points to each paper. Make sure you include everything that you want to affect students’ grades. Students will question this section of the syllabus more than any other, so it’s worth thinking through a number of times and perhaps running by some peers.

Consider including your stance on issues such as: Do you consider improvement or effort? Do you use the same grading scale throughout the semester? Can the same grade mean very different things in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper? (See Chapter 5 for more on grading.) What does “late” mean? (Wilhoit 39-40) (Say “due at the beginning
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of class” so you don’t have students skipping class to show up with a paper at the end of the hour.)

List of crucial due dates. I usually start my planning by figuring out what papers, exams, and major readings I want students to do. I try to spread them out more or less evenly over the semester. Don’t rush this step; think through it from all angles—How much time has elapsed since the last big assignment? Will students have done all the prerequisite work? How will you deal with students who neglect the day’s reading or don’t even show up for class on a due date? What else is going on in your life on the due date? Will the spacing provide time for students to rewrite and for you to respond?

There are advantages and disadvantages to detailing in the syllabus what’s going to happen every class day of the semester. Scheduling each day can make you feel boxed in, and if you don’t leave flex days, one unavoidable change—a snow day, a sick day for you, a holiday no one told you about—can render the whole schedule useless. On the other hand, it’s a great relief to go into the first day of class knowing that you have at least a skeleton for the whole semester, and all you have to do day to day is put flesh on it. I sometimes try to have it both ways by jotting down for myself what I plan to do each day but putting only the major due dates in the syllabus that I give students.

Descriptions of assignments and requirements. To sharpen your thinking and improve your communication with students, make your assignment descriptions as detailed and complete as possible. You need to see, and be able to communicate to students, the connections between assignments, the progress or development from one assignment to others, the skills that students will practice in one assignment and need for the next. You won’t see many of these kinds of connections until you’ve gone through your assignment sequence at least once, but thinking about them before you teach will help you see coherence in the whole semester and alert you to the issues that link one assignment to the next.

It’s up to you whether you put the detailed descriptions in the syllabus or just summarize the assignments in the syllabus and hand out a full description later, when you start talking about the assignment. If you put the whole thing in the syllabus, count on calling attention to the assignment description weeks before the particular project is due; otherwise students won’t read it.

In the assignment description, you should articulate your stance on any of the following that you haven’t covered clearly and completely in class. Often only the best students read and follow the assignment
directions, but you still want to have them written down so you don’t have to repeat them to each student who asks.

- Paper length: max and min? Because padding to reach a page minimum encourages terrible writing, I avoid setting minimum page numbers for any one paper, requiring instead that each student turn in a set number of polished pages over the course of the semester. And unless the assignment is a summary or some other task that tests students’ ability to compress material, I usually don’t give a page maximum.

- Due date and time. (If your syllabus doesn’t already state your late paper policy loudly and clearly, state it here.)

- Goals, objectives, context, audience for the paper. How does this paper relate to what you’ve covered in the course? What are its purposes (always plural, to my mind)? What skills do you want students to practice as they write it? (Ideally, all papers should be learning opportunities, not just substitutes for tests.) Should the paper stand alone and make sense to anyone who happens to pick it up, or can the author assume that the reader knows a certain body of information? Do you have a particular audience in mind? Can students choose to write for a specific audience (high schoolers thinking about going to college, for instance), or do you want them to write for a general audience or perhaps an audience with a certain knowledge background?

- Grading criteria. You may want to create a grading rubric or matrix for each assignment. (See Figure 7.) In any case, give students as clear an idea as possible of what you’ll be looking for. Imagine the shortcuts that a clever or lazy student might take and head them off. For example, in my Teaching Writing courses, I ask students to research a thorny issue in the discipline so they’ll understand the various sides and see the issue’s complexities. But the first time I gave the assignment, a number of students found an easy answer to their issue—like “Let’s just abandon grades!”—without considering the other side, the consequences of their stance. So now I include two or three sentences about engaging, not evading, that thorniness.

- Your preferences on
  - format
- use of title page
- name, date, section in particular places
- summary, abstract, or overview necessary or preferred
- documentation (prefer a particular style?; in-text or footnotes?)
- use of “I”
- use of personal anecdotes or opinions
- single-spaced vs. double-spaced
- particular kinds of analysis or organization
- use of headings, subheadings, lists, bullets
- particular terms or concepts necessary (ie. should students use the terms they’ve been studying?)
- specific number and types of sources (eg., can they all be from the Internet?)
- getting help from classmates or other students
- using work from another class
- folders, staples, paper clips, plastic covers

You can’t assume that students “know” about any of these issues or that their previous teachers agree with you. If you don’t care, say so. But do some soul-searching before you announce your preferences to students. Perhaps you think it’s too fussy to insist on a title page, but if a nice clean title page gives a paper a positive boost in your eyes, you need to tell your students. And give some thought to what you’re calling this assignment, what type of paper you want to get: an essay? a personal essay? a researched essay? an argument? a response? an analysis? Students tend to fall back on the labels and approaches they’re familiar with; I never use the phrase “term paper” in my classes, yet students often do, and they bring with that label assumptions inappropriate to my class.

*Your definition of a successful paper:* Again, you can’t assume that students or their previous teachers share your ideas about what makes a good paper. Consider whether you feel strongly about any of the following and/or borrow some from this list and articulate your own priorities. Some teachers feel that a good paper should

- demonstrate an understanding of class concepts and successfully use class terms
- answer completely the question(s) asked in the assignment or posed in the paper’s first paragraph
be well written, with no unnecessary words and no mechanical mistakes

be original and creative in form and/or content

reveal complex thinking by the writer

leave the reader thinking

be clear and easy to read and grasp

demonstrate a solid grounding in relevant literature

have a strong writing voice, perhaps using humor and figures of speech

challenge the writer and reader

effectively blend in other voices from sources or interviews

My colleague Keith Grant-Davie suggests that teachers should engage in some serious self-scrutiny to determine what they really grade in students’ papers and then pass that information on to students. He also asks a series of questions to help teachers perfect their own assignment descriptions:

Could I suggest ways for my students to choose and focus their topics?
Could I prime their thinking by suggesting questions for them to consider?

Could I define the parameters of the assignment more clearly by suggesting or requiring that students follow specific methods of research and analysis, consult certain sources, or include particular material in their papers?

Is there any other information I could give students about the assignment that would help them learn from it?

Small but important issues. What’s your attendance policy? (I suggest something like “Your grade will fall after 3 absences, and anyone who misses more than six classes may fail the course.”) Your tardiness policy? Do you accept late papers? (I do, but I lower the grade one-third of a letter for each late day. I seldom articulate this fact to the whole class, but when you grade portfolios at the end of the semester, as I usually do, so students have a chance to revise their papers and improve their grades, lateness penalties become almost moot.) Do you grade participation? If so, how? And can you explain why? Do you grade every paper that students turn in? Do they get a chance to revise? Do you insist that students with planned, excused absences turn in the work they will miss before they leave? (See Chapter 5 for a thorough discussion of such issues.)

In general, it’s a good idea to be tough about such things in the syllabus; then you can bend in individual cases. I feel very strongly that
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you should spell out a tough attendance policy. I’m less clear about late papers. When I was a student, I hated it when I worked hard to get a paper in on time only to hear the professor tell a lazier student, “Sure, turn it in tomorrow.” On the other hand, some lateness excuses can melt your heart, and you’ll sleep badly if you have to say “sorry, can’t bend that policy” too often. Perhaps the most inane “education” policy of recent years has been “zero tolerance,” which equates a nail file with an assault rifle and ibuprofen with cocaine. The stupidity of “zero tolerance” highlights the need to make decisions based on all the circumstances in a particular situation, not hide behind unbendable rules.

Accommodation and discrimination information. This is another quasi-legal aspect of the syllabus; your state or school may require—or at least recommend—that all syllabi contain sections about sexual harassment, discrimination, and accommodations for persons with disabilities. (See figures 2 and 3.) Even if it’s not required, get it in your syllabus somewhere. It may be relevant only once a year, but you don’t want to feel that a deaf student

Figure 2

**Sexual Harassment** (Modify for your school.)

Sexual harassment is defined by the Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Commission as any “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature.” If you feel you are a victim of sexual harassment, you may talk to or file a complaint with the Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Office.

Figure 3

**Students With Disabilities** (Modify for your school.)

Reasonable accommodation will be provided for all persons with disabilities in order to ensure equal participation within the program. If a student has a disability that will likely require some accommodation by the instructor, the student must contact the instructor and document the disability through the Disability Resource Center, preferably during the first week of the course. Any request for special consideration relating to attendance, pedagogy, taking of examinations, etc., must be discussed with and approved by the instructor. In cooperation with the Disability Resource Center, course materials can be provided in alternative format, large print, audio, diskette, or Braille.
or a rape victim suffered through your class because they didn’t feel welcome to come talk to you.

**Plagiarism definition.** Students can’t be told too often, or too strongly, about plagiarism. Check out what the school catalogue says about it and use the school’s language or make up your own. My school doesn’t prohibit self-plagiarism, but I consider turning the same work in to two different classes unethical. So my definition is broader than the school’s. (See Chapter 9.)

**GENERAL ISSUES**

**Short Versus Long**

I’ve seen one-page syllabi that read like introductory letters between friends-to-be and twenty-five-page syllabi that present a good chunk of the course through everything from quotations to comics. My own syllabi tend to be in the middle of that range—eight pages or so, with all the crucial information I’ve listed above, plus more on how I grade and a page of my philosophy. Many teachers set down some of their assumptions and guiding principles in their syllabus to encourage students to open up (“I believe that all opinions are valuable”) and to head off potential problems (“I will not tolerate language that is demeaning to a particular sex, race, nationality, or religion.”)

Although I feel guilty asking students to read eight dull pages for the first night’s homework, and I love the feeling that a short, endearing letter gives, I would feel naked creating only a one-page syllabus. I would want to follow it almost immediately with something like “rules, assignments, and requirements,” and that would defeat the purpose of keeping it to one page. I see the advantage of creating a mammoth syllabus—it saves time later, ensures that students have the crucial materials that they need, and “saves me from writing on the board,” as my wife puts it. But I don’t usually want to scare students away by presenting them with a massive tome on the first day, and I don’t know with certainty everything I plan to do in a semester.

So there’s a lot of latitude with syllabus length. I would encourage you to be meticulous about including the crucial stuff and then just add anything that you want everyone to know from the outset.

**Voice**

You probably think of a syllabus as having as much voice as the tax code, but consider that the syllabus introduces you to students, and the
sense they get of you from the syllabus may be lasting. I think of my syllabi as fairly dry and businesslike, but students have told me that they decided to take my class because of bits of humor or humane policies in the syllabus.

So shaping the voice of the syllabus is a tricky business. You don’t want to sound like a comedian; sometimes teachers try too hard to be funny or chummy and end up sounding frivolous. Others are so intent on putting the tough foot forward that they sound like ogres, an impression that may be slow to dissipate. Make your policies tough, if you wish, but there’s no reason to give the syllabus a drill-sergeant voice. Be yourself—a tightly written, well-edited self.

Don’t leave your syllabus to the last minute. That will mess up your planning and make you stressed in ways you may never recover from.

Do proofread your syllabus over and over, and get some help. If your first offering to students sags with errors, how can you hold students to high standards of editing and proofreading? Anyone can help you with proofreading, but another teacher can also look at your syllabus for problems, omissions, contradictions.

Do make copies well before the first day of class. You can bet there will be a line at the copying machine on the first day . . . if the machine hasn’t chosen that day to give up the ghost entirely.

Emphasis

Your dream may be to teach Romantic poetry, Marxist theory, or self-actualization, but you have to remember that yours is a writing course. There’s room to use some of your favorite literature as models or to spark ideas, but you need to monitor constantly the time students spend in class and on their own, making sure that the vast majority is writing time. In the simplest terms, we learn to write by writing; even rhetorical analysis has limited value in the composition classroom if it doesn’t contribute directly to students’ writing improvement. I fret when a new teacher’s syllabus seems to be creating a literature course under the guise of First-Year Writing. Don’t worry your supervisors; and even if you think this is the only writing course you’ll ever teach, give yourself a chance to see how interesting it can be to put writing in the spotlight.

THE PLEASURES OF PREPARING

You’ll hear veterans complain about having three or four “preps” in a semester (meaning that they teach that many different courses, rather
than multiple sections of the same course). And when you contemplate everything I’ve mentioned in this chapter, you may find the prospect of preparing to be overwhelming.

There is a lot to do, but preparing can be calming and reassuring rather than onerous. As with any large task, you need to divide it into small pieces and start as soon as possible. I think you’ll find as you check each small task off your list, you can erase corresponding anxieties in your mind. We fear the unknown, the uncertain, the uncontrolled. Once you’ve learned, for instance, the department’s approach to handouts, actually producing the handouts—whether by making overheads or by trundling your work to a copy center—becomes just a chore, much lower on the anxiety scale than “What am I going to do about . . . ?”

Just as important, preparing allows you to daydream about the possibilities, what you could do, and what a blast it would be if everything went according to schedule, you found the perfect word and the perfect example each time, and every face mirrored your enthusiasm. It may happen that way, but even if it doesn’t, it’s healthy to dream a bit as you prepare and to revel in the feeling that you can do it, you will be prepared, and it will even be fun.