How my course syllabus is created
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I do not start the course with a prepared syllabus that lays out course policies or grading schemes. The only thing I hand out on the first day of class is a list of readings and a tentative schedule of when we will do the readings, and a tentative list of due dates for the papers to be handed in. I pointed out them that the course website already had a lot of resource material and routine information.

On the first day of class, I ask students why they registered for the course and what they hope to learn from it and use this information to structure a general course outline. I tell them that while I am open and flexible to any and all suggestions, I also have an ethical responsibility to my field of study and the university to ensure that the course content has academic integrity and conforms generally to the published course description.

I asked the students to list all the things that they expect from an instructor who is giving 100% to the course. The students came up with this list, which is actually quite revealing about their prior experiences with teachers:

1. Give students their papers back in a timely way
2. Give students lots of criticism and feedback on work
3. Have passion for the material
4. Listen and respond to student concerns
5. Care not only about academics but also about students as people
6. Realize that students have a life outside of class and not make unreasonable demands on them
7. Not stick only to the class readings for discussions
8. Take all questions seriously and not fake it if you don't know the answer to something
9. Provide inspiration to students so that they will want to change their minds

I then asked them to list what they would expect to see in their peers if they were giving 100% to the course. On their own, they came up with the first eight items, and I added the last three.

1. Doing the readings
2. Listening to others and appreciating diverse opinions
3. Students learning from each other's ideas
4. Keeping things light-hearted
5. Not putting others down if you disagree
6. Showing up for every class and being on time
7. Showing respect for everyone's ideas
8. Going beyond just academic conversation and bringing personal elements into the discussions too
9. Responding thoughtfully to weekly journal prompts
10. Being conscientious about sending weekly private emails to instructor

11. Checking the website regularly so that you know what is going on and can carry out your responsibilities

We all agreed to abide by these guidelines, and I think we did.

I also said that the tentative due dates for the papers were set so that they could space their work out for best results. The dates were not rigid and there would be no penalty for lateness, and if they had something come up which prevented them from meeting a due date, just to let me know. However, I did warn them that I had other work too and that handing things in late meant they would get them back late and thus letting things slide too much would mean they would get into a serious time crunch at the end of the semester. Only one or two students each time had serious problems with keeping up and I would gently remind students when they were getting a little too late.

I avoided any talk about grades for assignments or the course until a student raised the topic of how they were going to be assessed. This has resulted in this topic of grades being first raised anywhere from two to five weeks into the semester, usually in conjunction with talking about their papers.

We discuss possible schemes for assigning grades. I tell them that I am open to suggestions but have an ethical duty to ensure that the final scheme should reflect the level of each student's performance in ways that can be defended on purely academic grounds. This ensures that frivolous ideas are not part of the discussion and I would feel free to rule them out. In actual practice, students have never made any frivolous suggestions except in an obviously joking manner.

We jointly determined (based on the work involved) that the following distribution seemed reasonable.

Papers 1 and 2 total: 20-30 (default: 25)
Paper 3: 30-40 (default: 35)
Talks: 10-20 (default: 15)
Participation (participation in class, attendance, punctuality, journals, weekly emails, etc.): 20-30 (default: 25)

The students arrived at the default values based on my advice about the relative work involved for each item, but I then added a range for each item and allowed each student to choose from within the range such that the total had to equal exactly 100. Most students went with the default settings. The students said that they would go by my judgment for assigning grades for each item and the overall course grade, and they never challenged my judgment.

When it came to deciding on criteria for evaluating their papers, I waited until it was time to write the first papers. I posed the question of what kind of paper they would need to read for it to change their minds on a topic that they had strong opinions on. Based on the ensuing discussion (in which I participated to suggest more subtle things that had not

occurred to them), we then codified those ideas into a rough set of criteria as to what constitutes a good paper. I then fine-tuned these criteria into a rubric for subsequent approval by the class. The same process was followed when it came time for them to prepare to give talks based on their research papers.

In subsequent years, in order to save time, we took the rubrics prepared in earlier years (which the current students knew were largely student-produced) and just refined them.

The rubrics that resulted are attached.

PAPERS RUBRIC

CRITERIA	MEASURES	READER COMMENTS
Argument	The point of paper is clearly defined and its importance is established; writing is persuasive; author's point of view is clear; arguments are good and made clearly and simply; alternative points of view are considered and evaluated; conclusions are the author's own synthesis and not just a summarizing or paraphrasing of other people's arguments.	
Evidence	Research has been done and evidence (data, citations to credible authorities, quotes, examples) is provided for assertions. Bibliography satisfies criteria.	
Organization	Each paragraph makes just one point or a few closely related points; purpose of each paragraph in overall structure of argument is clear; good transitions between paragraphs.	
Style	Writing strives to be concrete (via use of examples, stories, evidence, images, and metaphors). Good choice of words, images and metaphors; colloquialisms, clichés, and stale phrases avoided (unless specifically required).	
Mechanics	It is evident that care and effort has gone into preparing the paper. (i.e., no grammar or typographical errors; correct use of citations, direct quotations, and paraphrases.) Meets all specifications regarding length, format, etc.	

TALKS RUBRIC
Code: √+ ⇒ criteria met at a high level; √ ⇒ criteria met; √− ⇒ more work needed

CRITERIA	MEASURES	Circle one			COMMENTS
Content	Good opening: Makes clear what the talk is about, why topic is important and/or worth listening to.	√-	√	√+	
	Good conclusion: Ends with a summary of key points (for long talks) and/or with a quote or story or anecdote to illustrate the main idea.	√-	√	√+	
	Argument makes sense, the ideas flow logically and coherently, with good segues, sources of evidence cited.	√-	√	√+	
	Information is interesting. Ideas are presented with examples, stories, and anecdotes to clarify points.	√-	√	√+	
Clarity	Words enunciated clearly, not mumbled, with effective pauses.	√-	√	√+	
	Uses appropriate and vivid language, defines key terms, signposts the talk.	√-	√	√+	
	Spoken loud enough to be heard at the back.	√-	√	√+	
	Talk is paced well. Ends calmly and is not rushed.	√-	√	√+	
Non-verbal	Good eye contact with audience.	√-	√	√+	
	Engaging manner (smiles, hand gestures)	√-	√	√+	
	No distracting mannerisms (patting hair, jangling coins in pocket, too many hand gestures)	√-	√	√+	
	Good use of audio-visual aids (if applicable) that keeps pace with talk, not too cluttered, does not distract from spoken words.	√-	√	√+	