

# Your Course Outline— A Critical Document

BY TOM GARRISON

I love course outlines. A well-crafted course outline reveals a great deal of information about a professor's love and knowledge of his or her topic, approach, attitude toward students, and education philosophy. This make-or-break document is usually the student's first view of what they're in for, and often serves as a better gauge of quality than a locally published set of student opinions or a "Rate My Professor" Web site entry. Course outlines can be short or long, elaborately illustrated or plain, handed out or posted on a course Web site, but an excellent course outline will immediately transmit an enthusiastic invitational approach to the topic. An effective course outline allows a lecturer to begin discussion of oceanography immediately during the first class meeting—the details of discussion sections, teaching assistants, attendance policy, and other impedimenta are in the document and need not be detailed in class.

But I get ahead of myself! How should a course outline be structured? What should it contain? A few thoughts:

**Begin with a bang, not an admonition.** We oceanography pros have a huge advantage over our nonmarine colleagues in that our subjects are inherently interesting and spectacularly amenable to illustration. Consider deploying that characteristic on Page One. It's easy to embed an image within a block of text,

and if it shows you in the middle of a huge wave or backed by a volcanic eruption or piloting a replica Viking ship, so much the better. Show your enthusiasm up front! How much better to begin that way than by writing, "This oceanography course demands your complete attention, and you will be dropped if you miss more than three lectures..." even if that might well be true.

**Include the catalogue description.** Your university catalogue's course description is a binding document describing what will be taught, what prerequisites are required, how the instruction will be accomplished, and the course's Carnegie unit value.

**Add your contact information.** Your institutional e-mail address and those of your teaching assistants will be useful. Consider adding a brief biographical sketch as well.

**Present your objectives.** Our institution is in the midst of yet another let's reword-our-objectives fad (these seem to appear in five- to seven-year cycles), but there is much good to be derived from the imaginative consideration of just what one is trying to accomplish in an organized course of instruction. I recall from my distant teaching-assistant days a professor who insisted we write the objectives *and* all the course examinations before planning the lectures and lab exercises. Objectives write themselves

if a simple formula is followed:

- A = Audience. Who will be learning?
- B = Behavior. What will these people be able to do when they have completed your course that they can't do already?
- C = Conditions. How will you evaluate how effective your instruction has been? (That is, what sorts of exams or practical demonstrations will you require?)
- D = Degree. Will you consider your work to have been successful if 50% of the students receive a passing grade? 90%?

In your course outline you should list the five or six *major* objectives you plan to achieve. In my large oceanography lecture course, major objectives include the age and origin of Earth, the operation and implications of plate tectonics, the ocean's global thermostatic effects, atmospheric circulation and its effect on the ocean, the common origin and evolution of life on Earth, and the extent of anthropogenic change.

**Use the textbook.** Your choice of a supporting text should mesh carefully with your approach to the course. It need not precisely track your path through the material (chapters may be assigned out of order), but it should certainly reflect your enthusiasm and objectives. Good texts *are written for students*, not to show off an author's erudition or

mastery of large words. (This does not excuse inaccuracy or a lack of currency.) Texts are expensive, and an author has an obligation to provide value for dollar. The instructor has a similar obligation to use the text if he or she requires it—to specifically assign reading in the course outline, refer to text examples, and use illustrations and questions from the text on examinations.

**Discuss grading criteria.** Optimism runs high in that first week of class, and a good course outline can tap into that good feeling by listing the dates of examinations, offering test preparation review sheets (online?), noting times when students can meet with TAs to review course material, and encouraging students to stay up with the subject. If you'll be using a standard 90%–100% grading scale, now's the time to mention it.

**Testing policy.** Here's a slippery slope. If you give, say, four interval exams, what will you do if a student misses one of them? If you count only three of the four (the three highest scores in the case of a student who takes all four exams), you imply that 25% of the coursework is unimportant. If you host a make-up day near the end of the semester during which a missed exam may be completed, you reward the absent student with a few more weeks to master the material. In large classes, a few students will wonder when the make-up is for the make-up (and the obliviati will *never* figure it out). Whatever you decide, here's the place to explain the policy. Be consistent.

**Extra credit.** Grit your teeth and resist this! Your objectives have specified the content to be mastered. Grade solely on the basis of content mastery. In my world, there is no such thing as extra credit.

**Attendance policy.** Another slippery slope. The state-funded institution where I teach requires attendance accounting for reimbursement, so we take roll. If a student misses, say, four sessions before the first midterm, my course assistants will drop him or her from the roster. After that, I pay little attention to attendance. My teaching attitude is invitational rather than confrontational, and I believe if a course is well run, students will want to attend. Most do so consistently.

**"The Chit."** A colleague ends his course outline with a tear-off form on which a student certifies he or she has read the course outline and understands its provisions. When the student shows up near the end of the semester to complain about a missed exam or some point about attendance—and claims ignorance of the detail in question—the prof digs out the signed chit and hands it to the student. Game over.

Reading course outlines for classes in your subject area taught at institutions other than your own can be instructive. This exercise is especially true of 100-level introductory coursework. Does your content coverage parallel that of colleges and universities with excellent reputations in your field? Do you cover too much (or too little)? Which texts do professors adopt most often? How are they used? There's much to compare!

And when all's done and your course outline's first draft is complete, pick up the printout and look at it with the eyes of a student. Now, would you want to enroll in that course? *Good!* ☑

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