

Creating a Learning-Centered Syllabus

Your syllabus is a powerful tool for communicating your expectations on a variety of issues, as well as giving students a roadmap of sorts for the course. How, then, is a learning-centered syllabus different from the ones that we are all used to seeing and writing? According to Judith Grunert in *The Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centered Approach*, an effective learning-centered syllabus should accomplish the following basic goals:

- Define students' responsibilities
- Define instructor's role and responsibility to students
- Provide a clear statement of intended goals and student learning outcomes
- Establish standards and procedures for evaluation
- Acquaint students with course logistics (a particularly important element as we include more group work and out of class experiences)
- Establish a pattern of communication between instructor and students
- Include difficult to obtain materials such as readings, complex charts, and graphs

Focusing on learning rather than teaching requires a shift from an overview of what you as the instructor will cover to consideration of what your students need in order to be successful learners. This change in focus can also affect the student's role in your course. Accepting responsibility for their own learning can be difficult for students who have been education, as most have, as passive listeners. This change in role may be particularly difficult for some international students who come from cultures in which asking questions of the professor is openly discouraged and perceived as unacceptable student behavior. As Grunert notes:

Your syllabus is your first opportunity to introduce the learning-centered paradigm to your students and to describe for them the role and responsibilities they will have in your class. You can ease this transition for your student by communicating in a comprehensive manner what the expectations are for your course. A carefully developed and effectively used syllabus can actively support their learning and success. (Grunert, ix-x).

The syllabus serves a variety of functions for students and faculty. The following functions, which Grunert describes, show the various ways that a learning-centered syllabus can assist you and your students.

A learning-centered syllabus establishes an early point of contact and connection between student and instructor. Research has shown that students want more frequent interaction with faculty. You can begin to communicate your availability by including basic information such as your name, office location, telephone number, e-mail address, office hours, how to arrange for a conference, etc. You can also include a page soliciting biographical information that will help you to learn students' names, their interests, and why they are in the course. To encourage interaction with other students in the course, you might use this information to develop a student roster, that is particularly useful for group work and work time out of class. You can include similar information about other important student contacts, such as main office staff, librarians and others as appropriate. This contact information will be useful in case plans change during the course of the semester.

A learning-centered syllabus helps to set the tone for your course. Your syllabus communicates much about your attitudes towards students and learning. The way in which you communicate your views helps students to understand whether your class will be conducted in a formal or informal manner. Communicating openness to questions, concerns, and dialogue begins with the syllabus.

A learning-centered syllabus describes your beliefs about educational purposes. You can explain whether your course has a product or a process orientation and how that determines your expectations of students. Explain how you have set your agenda for the course, how the course structure reinforces goals and objectives, how the activities and assignments will help them to meet both product and process goals. You may describe learning strategies and techniques you will use and your rationale for using them. You can make explicit how your criteria and standards for both their work process and products are aligned with course goals.

A learning-centered syllabus acquaints students with the logistics of the course. Courses vary in terms of the days classes meet, the instructors for each class, and the type of sessions which occur (i.e., guest lecturers, teamwork session, simulations, films, etc.). Your syllabus can detail this information so that students will know what to expect and can be prepared for each class meeting. Providing students with a course calendar helps them to plan their work. Noting holidays and any days on which class will be cancelled or rescheduled allows students to plan ahead and prevents misunderstandings. It also shows that you respect the value of the students' time.

A learning-centered syllabus can contain collected handouts. Faculty often distribute handouts as they become appropriate to the topics covered. Often students put them into whatever notebook is at hand and then find it difficult to retrieve them. By planning your course, preparing the necessary handouts, and including them in your syllabus, you help students, among other things, to keep all course material together and accessible. These times might include biographical information forms, detailed information on assignments, various evaluation forms, or diagrams and other visual representations.

A learning-centered syllabus defines student responsibilities for successful course work. Your syllabus can help students to achieve some personal control over their learning, to plan their semester, and to manage their time effectively. If your students have a clear idea of *what* they are expected to accomplish, *when*, and even *why*, they will be more likely to finish assignments within a reasonable time and be appropriately prepared for classes and exam.

A learning-centered syllabus describes active learning. Student often conceive of learning as the acquisition of correct information, but they may not know what it means to take an active role in the process, beyond rote memorization and recall. You can include a description of your expectations for student initiative in your syllabus. If critical thinking, problem-solving, and inquiry are part of your course, it is helpful to tell students that they will be asked to consider multiple viewpoints and conflicting values and to imagine, analyze and evaluate alternate positions on issues or solutions to problems. It is also important to describe what students can expect from you in your role as teacher: content expert, formal authority, socializing agent, facilitator, role model, experienced learner, resource consultant, coach, or counselor.

A learning-centered syllabus helps students to assess their readiness for your course. What are the prerequisites for your course? In addition to specific course prerequisites, students should be given some idea about what they should already know and what skills they should already have before taking your course so they can realistically assess their readiness. Your syllabus can provide information about the challenges students will face, the assumed skill level, the skills they will build upon, and the skills they will learn during your course. You may also include information about institutional or other sources for academic support. Some faculty include self-assessment tools and learning contracts to assist students with this process.

A learning-centered syllabus sets the course in a broader context for learning. Your syllabus can provide a perspective that allows students to see instructors in your discipline as active and experience learners engaged in inquiry in their professional fields or disciplines. Many students are unaware that their instructors are involved in research and creative professional activity beyond the classroom, that they are not simply transmitters of knowledge and skills.

You can encourage your students to approach the learning situation as apprentice learners in a community of scholars. You can help them to see you and other faculty as experienced active learners who can provide expert guidance about general and specialized knowledge of content and practice in your field. Your syllabus can provide information that shows students how your course fits within the discipline or profession, the general program of study, and their own educational plans.

A learning-centered syllabus provides a conceptual framework. Your syllabus can support major ideas, topics, and factual information. Include in it questions or issues for students to think about that range from major issues or key questions in the discipline to the meaning of a significant passage in a course reading. Such a framework will help students organize information and focus their learning.

A learning-centered syllabus describes available learning resources. You can list campus resources such as libraries, reserve desks, reading rooms, laboratories, computer clusters, and studios that students may use (including their locations, availability, and policies) as well as any information concerning the location and use of aids such as tape recordings, copy services, CD ROMs or videos. You may also note the locations of specific books, videos, and sites on computer networks.

A learning-centered syllabus communicates the role of technology in the course. Computers and computer networks have increased our ability to access information and communicate with each other. Computers are working tools that students use for their own learning: to enhance their thinking; plan and revise learning goals; monitor and reflect on their progress; set up and access their own personal knowledge files; share a common database; build their own database; use a spreadsheet; run statistical software; keep a journal; write, illustrate, and revise texts; and build up a portfolio. You can use computers as a resource tool to provide direct instruction of new content, tutorials, and interactive simulations; to model extremely small or large phenomena.

E-mail is a practical way to interact with your students. Assignments, comments on their work, important class information, and questions to you and to other students, and extended classroom discussions are all possible uses and allow documents to be prepared, sent, received, and read by the recipient at convenient times. Institutions, individual faculty, and students are creating their own home pages on the World Wide Web or using information servers to share course materials on-line, such as your learning-centered syllabus, reading lists, lecture outlines or notes, collaborative software, and other course information.

A learning-centered syllabus can expand to provide difficult-to-obtain reading materials. There are times when courses are developed before comprehensive literature is available on the topic. The syllabus can include copies of articles you want your students to read, as well as supplemental information not found in course texts. You can include materials that expand on, synthesize, and facilitate critical reflection on issues presented during formal instruction. You might include materials that fill in the gaps not covered by class presentations, or present questions raised by other points of view. When you use the syllabus in this way, be certain that you obtain necessary copyright clearances for reading selections. You can check with Adam Burke or Waubonsee's [Copyright Clearance Center](#) for more information.

A learning-centered syllabus can improve the effectiveness of student note taking. Good, carefully written notes are a significant resource for active learning. Active thinkers keep notebooks and journals of ideas from readings, lectures, presentations, and their own ruminations about topics. It is important to make every effort to help students improve the quality of this form of writing. As a model, you may want to include outlines that provide an orientation to topics for lectures and presentations, making it clear what you want students to remember, and providing room for their own interpretations and elaborations of the material. It is also helpful to include any detailed formulas and diagrams that students will be required to use. You may want to include study techniques that are specific to your

course. In this way, the contents of the syllabus will help to organize and focus student note taking and learning.

A learning-centered syllabus can include material that supports learning outside the classroom. Much learning takes place outside of the classroom. You can transform student study time outside of class by providing strategies in your syllabus that help students to interact more critically with the textbook, supplemental readings, or other work, so that they will be better prepared for class. For example, along with the readings you might give students a short (one page or less) writing assignment that asks them to support, reject or modify the thesis or claims in the reading. You might include a guide for troubleshooting a story or a drawing. You can also provide self-check assignments that allow students to monitor their progress.

A learning-centered syllabus can serve as a learning contract. As an agreement or contract defining mutual obligations between instructor and students, your syllabus also speaks for the college and university. You will need to be familiar with institutional policies regarding attendance, examinations, drop/adds, course withdrawals, learning disabilities, and academic integrity.

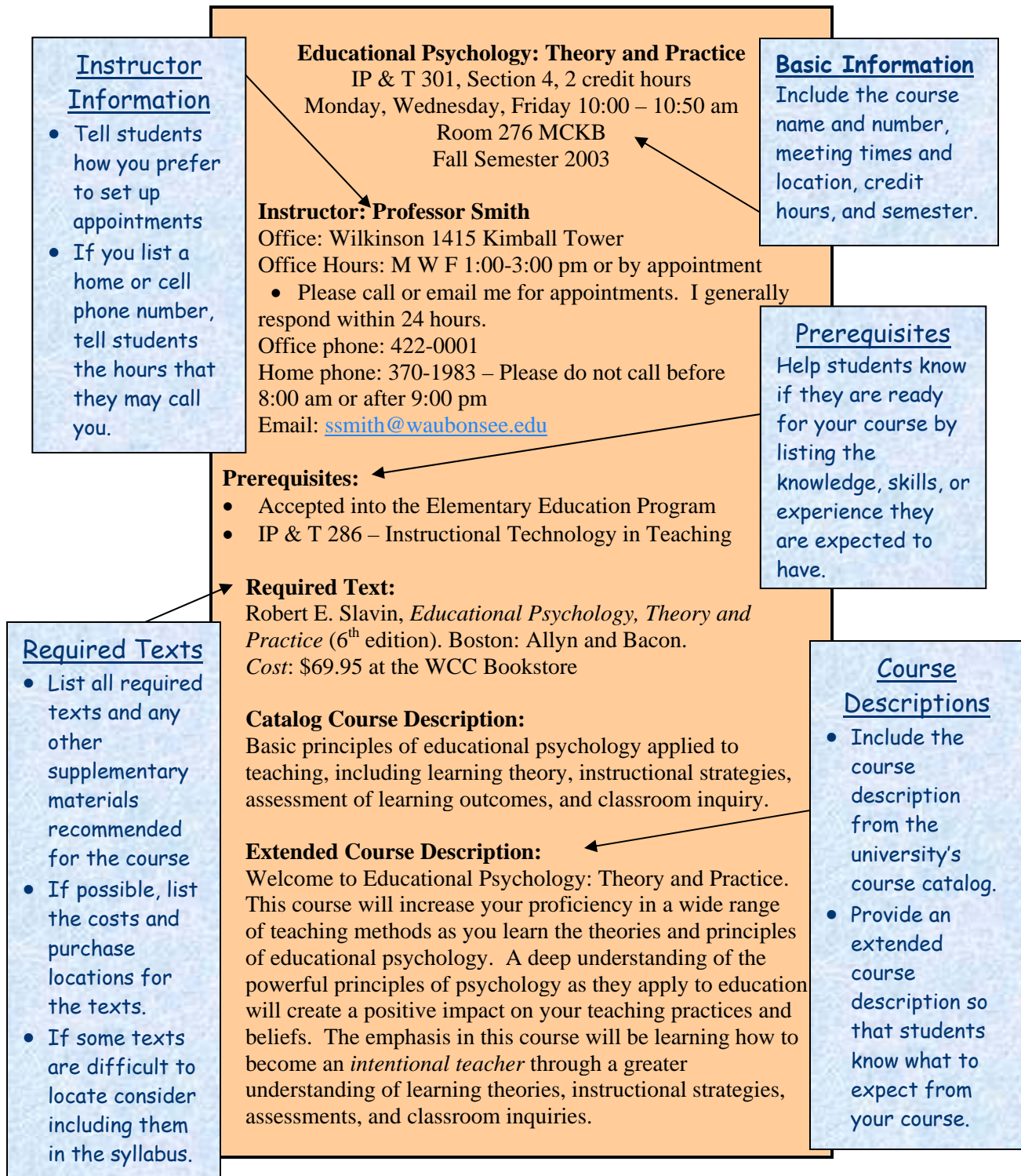
Remember to follow these tips when constructing your learning-centered syllabus:

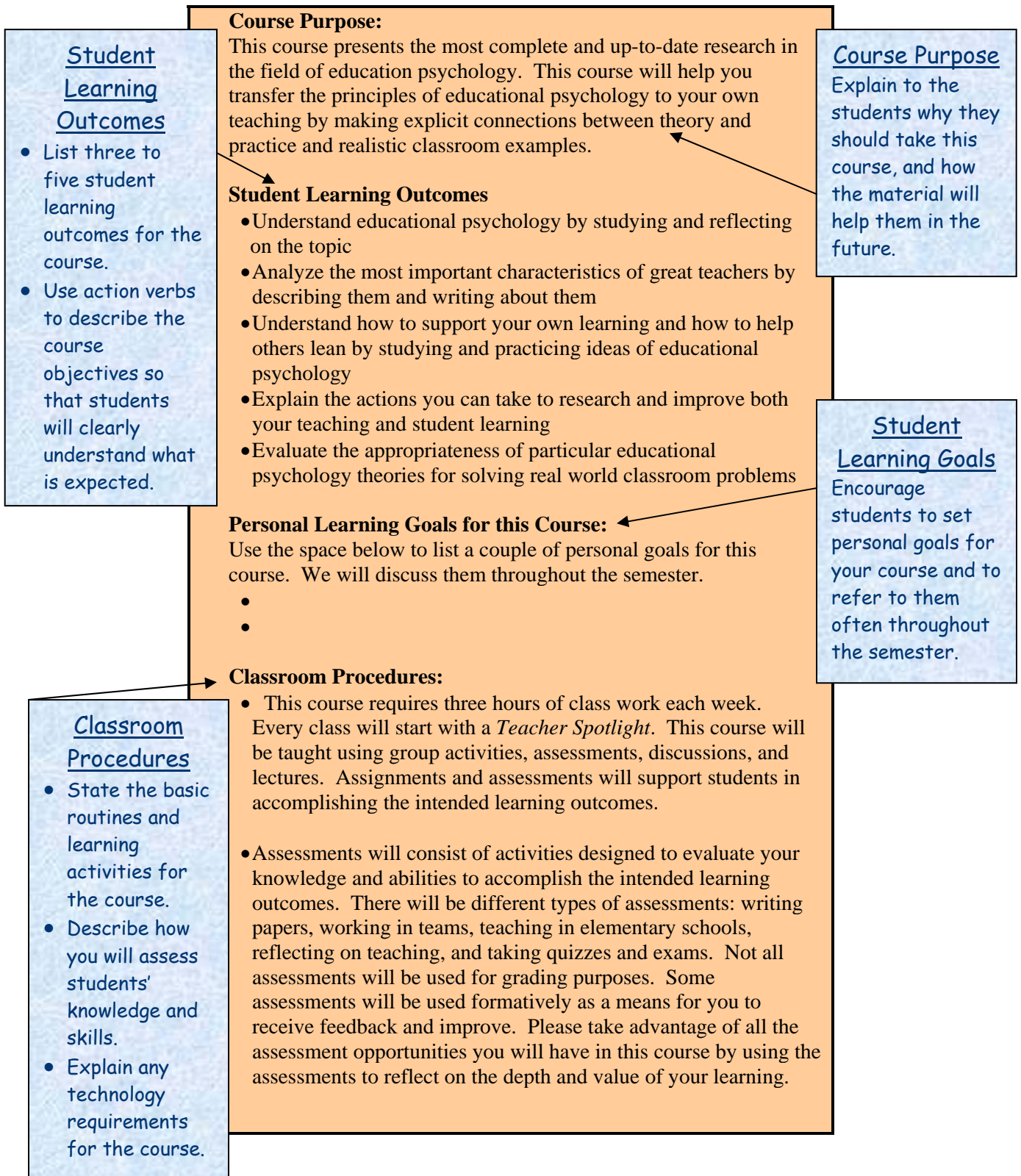
- **Set the tone for your course in the syllabus:** Through the syllabus you can set high expectations for students and begin a line of communication. Set the tone for student success by developing a syllabus that emphasizes and supports student learning, including information about what students will learn in the course, how they will learn it, and how their learning will be assessed.
- **Anticipate students' questions:** Students come to class the first day with many questions. The syllabus can quickly provide answers to many of those questions. Try answering typical student questions and placing the answers in your syllabus: Why should I take this course? How does this course relate to the general education program? How will this course help me intellectually and practically?
- **Include more rather than less material:** A detailed syllabus is a valuable learning tool for students and lessens their initial anxieties about a course. Syllabi should include detailed descriptions of assignments and criteria that will be used to distinguish quality in student work. Providing this information in the syllabus will save time throughout the course.
- **Keep the syllabus flexible:** Some classes move more quickly than expected, while others are slowed by extra time needed in some areas. These changes in schedule can help tailor the class to student needs and enhance student learning; but they may also confuse students. To accommodate for needed course changes, be prepared to either issue a new course syllabus midway through the semester or include a disclaimer to account for changes in the syllabus.
- **Use the syllabus in organizing the course:** Use the syllabus to organize your course. Plan the course schedule in advance – including all assignments, exams, and holidays – so students can know how to plan for their course participation. Spread out assignments and exams throughout the semester so that you do not overload and discourage students.



Concept Check: Examine your course syllabi. Could they be more learning-centered? Are there sections you could include that you are not already? Compare your current syllabus with the example found on the next few pages. What distinctions do you see?

Example of a Learning-Centered Syllabus





Student Learning Outcomes

- List three to five student learning outcomes for the course.
- Use action verbs to describe the course objectives so that students will clearly understand what is expected.

Course Purpose

Explain to the students why they should take this course, and how the material will help them in the future.

Student Learning Goals

Encourage students to set personal goals for your course and to refer to them often throughout the semester.

Classroom Procedures

- State the basic routines and learning activities for the course.
- Describe how you will assess students' knowledge and skills.
- Explain any technology requirements for the course.

Participation

- Provide students with an explanation of how they will be expected to participate in your course.
- Make the descriptions of your expectations positive.
- Tell students how you will grade participation.

Participation:

Readiness to learn means that you will come to class with questions and insights to offer others and prepared to discuss the relevance and application of the course materials.

Characteristics of Students Who Excel in this Course

- Come to class with reading assignments finished.
- Bring thoughtful questions to class for discussions.
- Prepare for the exams in study groups with peers.
- Take notes during class discussions and while completing reading assignments.

Recommended Study Habits:

Highlight the textbook or take notes as you complete the reading assignments to help you on the quizzes. I suggest that you form small study groups to prepare for the midterm and final exams. Get the phone numbers of at least two classmates that you can contact if you have questions or need help studying.

Recommended Study Habits

- Provide your students with an idea of how to study and prepare for the assessments in your course.
- Encourage your students to get the names and numbers of classmates so they can study together and answer questions for each other.

Tips on Using this Syllabus:

- Use the student learning outcomes to evaluate your academic progress throughout the course.
- Refer to the assignment descriptions and point values often.
- Use the recommended study habits to obtain the grade you want.

Tips on Using the Syllabus

Provide students with a few tips on how to use the syllabus effectively throughout the semester.

Grading Procedures:

Grades in this course will be based on the following assignments:

<u>Assignments</u>	<u>Points Possible</u>
8 quizzes (12 items per quiz – ½ pt. each)	48
Teacher Spotlight & Summary	52
Midterm Exam	75
Teaching & Reflection Project	50
Final Exam	100

Total 325

Grades will be determined by dividing the total points earned by the total points possible. Letter grades are assigned based on the following grade breakdown.

A= 90-100%
B= 80-89%
C= 70-79%
D= 60-69%
F= below 59%

Grading Procedures

- Students want to know up front how they will be graded
- Show the points possible for assignments in the course.
- Provide a chart that shows the grade breakdown.

Assignment Descriptions

- Provide brief descriptions of the course assignments for the students.
- Include descriptions of the types of questions asked on quizzes and exams.
- If assignments are not described directly in the syllabus, indicate where the descriptions can be found.

Assignment Descriptions:

Quizzes

Take the online quizzes for reading assignments before class begins. Quizzes (6 points each) consist of multiple-choice and matching questions. You may use your textbooks or notes during the quizzes. However, the quizzes are timed; you will have 15 minutes to complete 12 questions. So, you need to read the assignment before starting the quiz. Students that try to take the quizzes without reading the assignments usually run out of time looking for the answers in the text.

Teacher Spotlight & Summary

For the teacher spotlight (25 points), you will give a 2-minute oral description in class of an academic teacher who had a significant influence on you. Come to class prepared with the following information about the teacher.

- Name and subject he or she taught
- Reasons why this teacher had a significant influence on you
- 3 competencies or characteristics that make this teacher a great teacher

Take notes on the teacher characteristics mentioned during the spotlights because you will need to know the top three competencies for your summary.

Midterm Exam

You will take this exam in the testing center; it consists of multiple-choice, short answer, and essay questions. During the next class period after the exam, you will have the opportunity to retake the exam in small groups for additional points on your grade. 30% of the test will assess your ability to remember and understand facts, concepts and theories. 40% of the test will assess your ability to apply theories and concepts to particular situations, and 30% will assess your ability to evaluate the appropriate use of theories.

Teaching and Reflection Project

For this project, you will relate principles of educational psychology to teaching experiences you will have while you assist elementary teachers during the Practicum. You will write a description (6-7 pages, double-spaced) of one teaching event that illustrates an important principle of educational psychology. I will provide a detailed assignment description sheet for this project later on in the semester.

