FIRST SEMESTER · WEEK 1 STUDY GUIDE · STUDY SKILLS

Reading a Syllabus

The syllabus is the rulebook and the map for a course. Ten careful minutes with it in week 1 saves hours of panic later.

AFTER THIS GUIDE YOU CAN

- Name the main sections of a syllabus and what each one tells you.
- Use grade weights to see where the points are.
- Move every date from the syllabus into your own calendar.
- Find the policies you will be held to before you need them.

Key terms

Syllabus	The course document that lists goals, materials, grading, the schedule and the rules. Many instructors treat it as a contract.
Learning outcomes	What you should be able to do by the end of the course. Exams are built from them.
Grade weight	The share of your final grade that one category is worth, such as exams at 40 percent.
Weighted average	Each category average times its weight, added together. This is how most final grades are figured.
Office hours	Set times when the instructor is available to students, in person or online. You do not need an appointment unless the syllabus says so.
Late work policy	What happens to work turned in after the due date: a penalty, a few extra days, or not accepted.
Attendance policy	Whether attendance counts toward your grade and how many absences are allowed.
Prerequisite	A course or skill you are expected to have before starting this one.
Accommodations	Adjustments for students with documented disabilities, arranged through the campus disability services office.
Course calendar	The week by week list of topics, readings, quizzes, exams and due dates.

The big ideas

- Read the whole syllabus in the first week, then keep it where you can find it in seconds.
- Copy every due date and exam into one calendar on day one. A date that lives only in the syllabus is easy to miss.
- Grade weights tell you where to spend effort. A category worth 40 percent deserves more of your time than one worth 5 percent.
- Policies on late work, attendance, integrity and AI use differ from course to course. Never assume one course works like another.
- Most "When is this due?" questions are already answered in the syllabus. Check there first, then ask.
- If something is unclear, ask early. Instructors would rather answer a question in week 1 than an appeal in week 14.

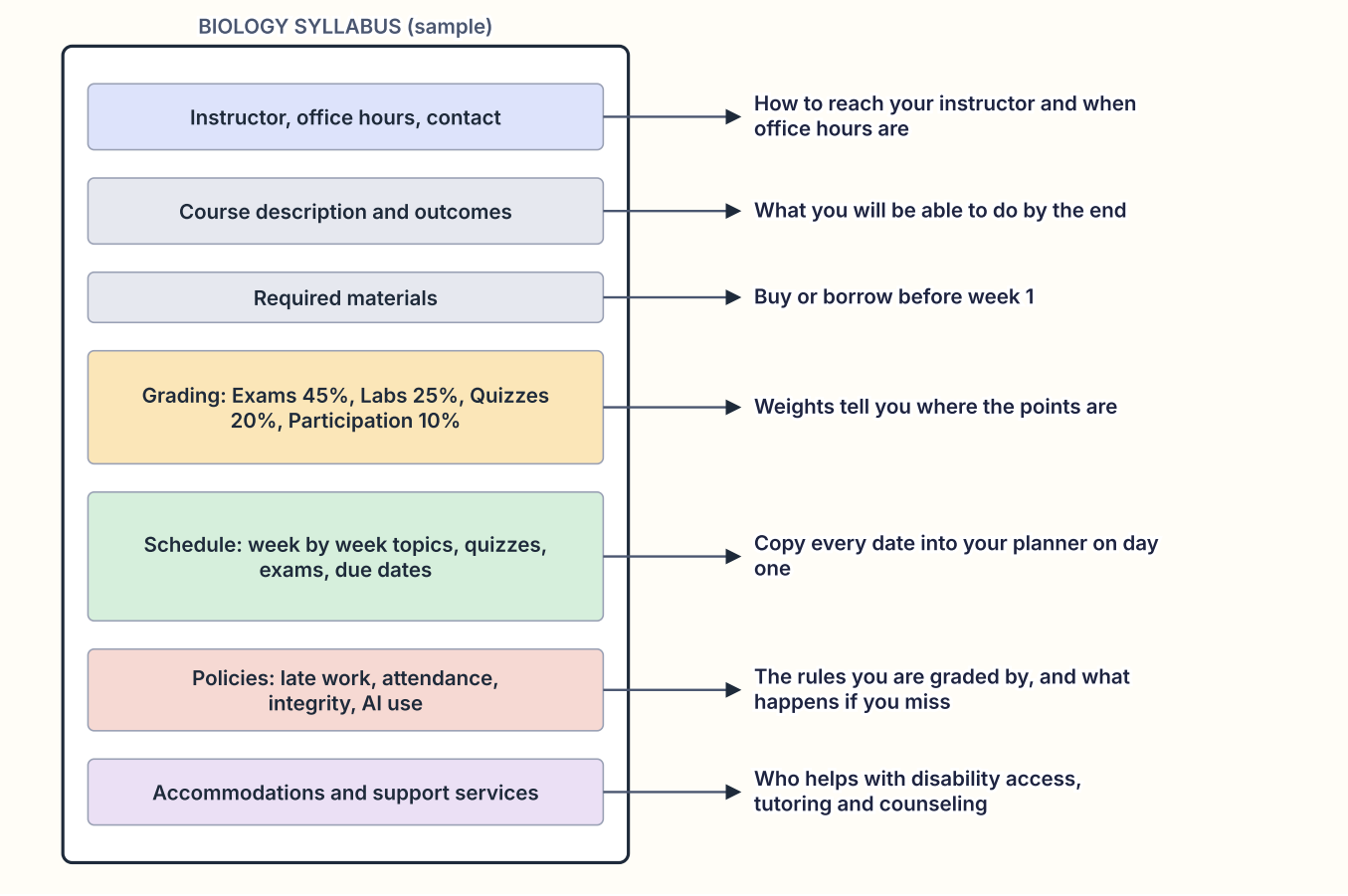

Figure. A sample syllabus, labeled.

Worked example

Week 1 at the Main Hall library. Professor Okafor's Biology syllabus lists: Exams 45 percent (midterm 20, final 25), Labs 25 percent, Quizzes 20 percent, Participation 10 percent. By midterm you have Exams 70, Labs 95, Quizzes 80, Participation 100.

1. Multiply each average by its weight: 70 times 0.45 is 31.5. 95 times 0.25 is 23.75. 80 times 0.20 is 16. 100 times 0.10 is 10.
2. Add them: 31.5 plus 23.75 plus 16 plus 10 equals 81.25, a B minus on most scales.
3. Notice where the points are: raising the exam average by 10 points adds 4.5 points to the final grade, while the same jump in quizzes adds only 2.
4. Look at the calendar: Quiz 1 is in week 3. Put it in your planner with a review session the day before.
5. Check the late work policy: labs lose 10 percent per day. Set reminders two days before each lab is due.

Common mistakes

- Skimming the first page and never opening the syllabus again.
- Assuming every course has the same late work or attendance rules.
- Treating all assignments as equal instead of checking the weights.
- Emailing the instructor a question the syllabus already answers.
- Waiting until a problem happens to learn the policy on it.

Check yourself

1. Name four sections you will find in most syllabi.
2. Exams are 50 percent and homework 10 percent. Which deserves more study time?
3. Your averages: exams 80 (weight 0.5), labs 90 (0.3), quizzes 70 (0.2). What is the final grade?
4. What should you do with the course calendar on day one?
5. Do you need an appointment for office hours?
6. Where do you go to arrange disability accommodations?

7. Your friend says late work is always accepted with a small penalty. What should you do?
8. Why do learning outcomes matter when you study?

Answer key

1. **Any four: instructor contact and office hours, outcomes, materials, grading, schedule, policies, support services.** Each one answers a question you will have later.
2. **Exams.** They carry five times the weight.
3. **81.** 40 plus 27 plus 14 equals 81.
4. **Copy every due date and exam into your own planner.** One calendar for everything means nothing slips.
5. **Usually not.** Office hours are open times for students unless the syllabus says to book.
6. **The campus disability services office.** Instructors carry out accommodations, but the office arranges them.
7. **Check this course's late work policy.** Policies differ by course and instructor.
8. **Exams and assignments are built to measure them.** They tell you what you must be able to do, not just what to read.

Help is real. If you or a friend are struggling, talk to your campus counseling center. In the United States you can call or text 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline) any time. Outside the US, contact your local crisis line.

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