



# Teacher Guide

## Designing an AFNR Course Syllabus

### 1. What is a course syllabus?

A syllabus is a documented outline of the subjects in a course of study. However, it can serve a broader and more complex purpose than simply listing unit topics. Modern syllabi for agricultural education courses serve as a guide to the course and the expectations you have for your students. Syllabi include a variety of components (described below) and are commonly reviewed at the start of a course.

### 2. Why is a course syllabus important to the success of your students?

A well-designed, organized syllabus is an essential tool for effectively managing an AFNR course. It gives students a clear and complete understanding of your expectations and a road map for how the course will be facilitated, assessed, and scored. When done thoroughly and correctly, a syllabus can prevent breakdowns in communication and misunderstandings as the course progresses. Taking the time to intentionally build your course thesis will help your students to be successful.

### 3. Who should help with and approve your syllabus?

It is essential to have your syllabus reviewed and approved by your department chair (if applicable) and your designated administrator before you distribute it to students and guardians. This ensures that it is aligned to your school policies, and that your administration is aware of how you intend to handle certain situations (e.g., plagiarism, cheating, late or missing work, and misbehavior) should they arise.

It is recommended that you provide others at least one week, depending on the time of year and other ongoing responsibilities, to review and approve your syllabus. Provide a copy to administrators electronically so they may reference it later, as needed.

### 4. What should you include in a syllabus?

A good syllabus starts with thoughtful course design. If you have not done so already, take the time to identify thoughtful learning goals for the course that are appropriate for your students and the course topic. Ensure these outcomes can be met in the time allotted for the course (e.g., quarter, semester, year, etc.).

An AFNR course syllabus should include at least the following components:

1. *Course and Educator Information*
2. *Course Description*
3. *Required Materials*
4. *Anticipated Assessments*
5. *Relevant Policies*
6. *Course Schedule*

An expanded look at each of these components is below. Although basic, many of these syllabus components can be expanded to include sub-components, as needed. Many of these elements will change for each course that is offered by your local program, such as the description, materials, and assessments.

#### 1. What should be included in *course and educator information*?

Include the course title, number of credits toward graduation, and the location, days and start times, and duration. Include your name, preferred email address, and a school or alternative phone number that guardians or students may use to contact you regarding the course. If applicable, also include the hours or best times to reach you and when you are usually available for meeting or discussion outside

of normal class times. If a specific online learning management platform is to be used in this course, include any information that is required to access and utilize it.

## **2. What to include in your *course description*?**

A good course description is brief, but informational. Include an overview of the course, enduring understandings and takeaways, and any significant projects or trips incorporated into the course curriculum. Depending on your local implementation of Supervised Agricultural Experience projects and FFA programming, you may also need to advertise and clarify this as an embedded and potentially graded component of the course. You may also include any prerequisite courses, such as Introduction to the Agricultural Industry, required to enroll. Remember that course descriptions are often used by school counselors when working with students to make course selections, so it can be advantageous to write the course description as a small advertisement for the AFNR course.

## **3. What to include for *required materials*?**

AFNR courses are by design hands-on and work-based, which can require significant supplies and materials. If students are expected to provide any materials, such as a course notebook, binder, notecards, soil samples, personal tools, a small engine, tissues, hand sanitizer, etc., you should list those items on the course syllabus for use as a checklist. List any other materials that students are encouraged or incentivized – but not required -- to provide. If materials are known to be needed at a certain point in the course, you may list the anticipated timeline specifying when those items will be needed. This will allow students to prioritize which items are needed first and may also prevent unneeded materials from being stored in your classroom or laboratory and creating an additional hazard or taking up needed workspace.

## **4. What to include for *anticipated assessments*?**

It is helpful for students to have information about the method and timeline for assessments, particularly formal or summative assessments, before the course starts, if possible. Provide the known information for any exams, quizzes, projects, team-based challenges, problem sets, assignment check-ins, or reports. Depending on your local school policy regarding grading and assessments, it may prove helpful to breakdown how the cumulative course score is calculated.

## **5. What to include in your *relevant policies*?**

Your school handbook or student manual likely has policies regarding several scenarios, including, but not limited to, grading, late or missing work, attendance, late arrival, classroom participation, acceptable use of technology, and standards for academic honesty and integrity. Review those policies, adapt to your course as needed or desired, and include them in your syllabus. Many school handbooks are daunting and overwhelming for students, so they may not know these policies. Incorporating them in your course syllabus provides a consolidated, quick reference for students in need of that information. Including them in your syllabus also gives students the opportunity to ask clarifying questions and discuss any concerns they may have.

## **6. What to include in your *course schedule*?**

A course schedule, also commonly referred to as an outline, provides the reader with a listing of anticipated course topics, often chronologically, and thereby describes the course in greater detail than can be found in the description. The course outline may also be aligned with anticipated dates, assessments, and enduring understandings. Showing the course schedule in this way gives students a mechanism for monitoring their own progress, setting personal goals, and understanding how the learning activities of each day fit into the overall course plan.

## **5. How do you ensure your students understand the syllabus?**

The time and effort put into syllabus design can be futile if students do not take the time to read and learn from its content. An important first step is taking some time in class to intentionally review each component, at least in brief, so that students know where specific items and answers can be found should they have a question later. There are other unique strategies that ensure students review the document. Some common examples are listed and described below.

### **Syllabus Strategy 1 -- Easter Eggs**

Some educators will hide small “easter eggs” in their syllabi to figure out just how closely students reviewed and understood the information that was provided. Easter eggs can be in many forms, including asking students to email the teacher a funny photo or directing students to do something inconspicuous around the room (like standing up at their seat, writing their middle name on the board, or even saying the name of their favorite music genre out loud without an explanation). Easter eggs can be a fun, less-intrusive way of figuring out which students are paying close attention and which may be distracted or confused by the syllabus.

### **Syllabus Strategy 2 -- FAQ-Style Syllabus**

Another great strategy, especially for digital syllabi, is to create a syllabus that looks and functions like the frequently asked questions (FAQ) page of a website. A digital FAQ format offers the reader brief responses to commonly requested information. You will also find that a digital FAQ format may include more information than a traditional, paper-based syllabus and will save agricultural educators time in answering repeated questions from students and guardians. Another advantage to consider is the ability to constantly update the syllabus should unexpected, but frequently asked questions arise throughout the year. School policies can also be linked within the digital resource for convenience.

### **Syllabus Strategy 3 -- Syllabus Quiz**

A syllabus quiz, which can be offered in a variety of styles (multiple choice, open response, true-false, etc.), is a direct way of assessing each student’s understanding of essential policies and components. Quizzes can be closed or open-note and completed individually or in small groups.

## **6. Syllabus Templates**

Several resources have been developed in anticipation of agricultural educators needing to create high-quality, informational syllabi for multiple AFNR courses in a single school year. Start by reviewing the respective course description available in the [ISBE AFNR Course Guide](#). This will help in describing the anticipated content of your course but can be adapted to suit your local design. Illinois agricultural education staff have also developed a number of recommended course outlines, which can be [found here](#). In addition to these resources, an existing template (many of which are available and easily found online) can be very useful. This [AFNR Course Syllabus Template](#) may also suit your needs.

### **More Information**

For more information on course and syllabus design, consult the following resources:

- *The Course Syllabus: A Learning Centered Approach (2008, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)* Judith Gruner O’Brien, Barbara J. Millis, and Margaret W. Cohen. ([Link](#))
- *Course and Syllabus Design for Active Learning and Critical Thinking.* Institute for Teaching, Learning and Academic Leadership at the University of Albany (SUNY). Bill Roberson. ([Link](#))
- *Designing your Course.* The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University. ([Link](#))