

Learning Skills, Room 120

How to Use a Course Outline

What is a course outline?

On the first day of classes, your instructors will give you a course outline and go over it with you. This is an important document and will help you understand some essential aspects of the course, the instructor, your responsibilities, and evaluation. All instructors have their own way of presenting a course outline, but all outlines should outline course details; teaching and learning information; policies, expectations, and responsibilities; and assessment information.

Course Details

The course outline puts the course in context:

- Is it an introductory or specialized course?
- How does it fit into the overall discipline?
- What are the prerequisites?
- What will be covered and in what order?
- What are the texts and readings?

Teaching and Learning

The course outline refers to teaching methods and philosophies and to learning outcomes:

- How will the content be presented and learned? Lectures, labs, group work, presentations, and on-line activities and resource are some options.
- What is the instructor's philosophy/attitude about teaching and learning?
- What are the instructor's goals?
- What are the learning outcomes?
- How will the instructor support your learning?
- What are the instructor's office hours and contact information?
- What other supports are available?

Policies, Expectations, and Responsibilities

The course outline explains your responsibilities, the expectations of the instructor, and the policies of the institution:

- What are the policies on attendance, due dates, plagiarism, and exams?
- What are the expectations regarding participation in class?
- What are the expectations regarding communication with the instructor?
- What are the instructor's expectations regarding use of technology?
- What are your responsibilities regarding out-of-class learning?

Assessment

The course outline will tell you how your learning will be evaluated:

- Assignments: What kinds of assignments? How many? What are their weights?
- Exams: How many exams? Do the exams cover everything from the beginning or just from the last exam? What are their weights? Are there make-up exams?
- Participation: Is a mark given for class or group participation?
- Other: How else will you be evaluated?

What should you do with your course outline?

Whatever you do, don't read it once in class and then never look at it again! Use your course outline as a valuable resource to guide you through the course. Here are some suggestions on how to use your outline in an active way that will enhance your learning.

Keep it

- Three-hole punch it and file it in a safe, accessible place in your course binder.
- Put it in a plastic page protector or put a coloured sticky on it for quick access.
- Make a copy and keep it in a folder labeled Course Outlines.

Extract information from it right away

- Highlight the most important pieces of information.
- Write important dates (assignments due, exams) in your agenda book.
- Enter the instructor's email address in your email address book.
- Browse through the online resources right away and bookmark them in Favourites.

Refer to it often

- Refer to it often to remind yourself of the "big picture" of the course.
- Always refer to it when starting an assignment. How does the assignment fit into the course in terms of learning outcomes? Due date? Marks?
- Keep track of where you are in the course: What topic comes next? When is the next exam? What will it cover?
- Use it to track your progress. Are you meeting the learning outcomes and goals? Make an appointment with your instructor to discuss your progress. Your course outline is a communication and management tool - use it to your advantage!

Why is your course outline important?

As you can see, course outlines do much more than simply give an overview of the course and information about grades. Used properly, it is an important learning tool that you can use:

- to make informed decisions about whether the course is suitable for you
- to see the course in the context of learning outcomes and goals
- to understand the intentions and expectations of your instructor
- to know how to access information and support
- to clarify the importance of individual learning tasks (assignments and exams)
- to reflect on yourself as a responsible, self-reliant learner