

What to Look for in the Syllabus

This week as you visit all your classes for the first time, you will receive syllabuses from all of them. Since you are all accomplished Berkeley students, I don't want to waste your time with too many details on what a syllabus is for and how to read it, but I do want to highlight two very important pieces of information contained on every syllabus that sometimes gets lost in all the other formalities and less important items:

1) Course Grade Percentage Breakdown:

This is possibly the most important piece of information on the entire syllabus. Take a look on how much your homework is worth. It could be as low as 5% of your grade or as high as 30%! In an ideal world you will have as much time as necessary to devote on homework for all your classes but in reality you will most likely be short on time and the homework grade percentage should dictate how you allocate your efforts. For example if you spend more time per week on homework in a class where it is worth 5% then on the homework in another class which is worth 20%, you might not be using your time very efficiently if your 20% homework grade suffers because the 5% homework was eating up all your time.

Also take a look at how much your exams and your finals are worth. If your midterms are worth 25% and your final is worth 30%, then you can pretty much treat all three exams with equal importance and allocate more study time at the end of the semester to that other final that is worth 50% of your grade in another class.

Remember your overall grade entirely depends on how the different percentages of the class are weighed and this information should shape your entire study strategy and time allocation for the rest of the semester. If you have a perfect homework score that is worth 5% of your overall grade, but you bombed the final worth 50% all those hours spent on homework won't help your grade very much. Always try to do better on the parts of the class that are worth a higher percentage of your grade for maximum results.

2) When are your exams?

Look at the dates of all your midterms this coming semester. If you are really lucky you will not have multiple midterms on any given week but this never happened to me yet. Most likely you will have at least one week with two or even three exams possibly even on the same day. If you have weeks with midterms piled on top of one another, you can plan ahead for these weeks. First of all, it is worth considering how much each exam is worth when allocating time for studying. For example, if one exam is only worth 10% while the other is worth 25%, you may want to focus more of your efforts on the test that is worth more. If you are aware of these scheduling nuances you will be able to plan ahead where to allocate your efforts. Try to get ahead when you can so you can better absorb the blow that a two or three exam week can cause to your score.

The overall idea is to develop a rough time plan for the semester and to use the grade percentage allocation and any favorable scheduling instances to try to cancel out disadvantages from weeks with unfavorable exam scheduling. This should get you started in thinking about your entire semester ahead with the goal of maximizing your overall academic results by optimizing how much time you spend on what. However you should definitely not make a rigid plan that is very detailed. Circumstances will change, and unforeseen difficulties are bound to come up during the semester. Your planning should remain fluid and always ready to adapt and every week you should reassess how and where to allocate your time. But your overall time allocation strategy should always use the grade percentage breakdown for every class as a guide to maximize your overall grade in the end.