Some Guidelines for Constructing Syllabi

A syllabus can be a powerful teaching tool and a valuable public document, but to do that, it must offer more than a reading list and a string of due-dates. Here are some ways to think of your syllabus that can fulfill its greater potential.

Course Description
The standard course description for all sections of English 101 as stated in the undergraduate catalogue is “An introduction to the writing of academic arguments, including analytical reading and research techniques. Focus on the goals and skills appropriate to writing in a variety of disciplines in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences” (185). The course description that appears in particular syllabi should fit with this larger statement, differing only in that it will define key elements in greater detail. It should clarify, at the very outset, that the course is designed to help students improve their writing – that is, that the course, regardless of particular theme, is a writing course. In fact, the course description should save all discussion of its particular theme for the final lines, and only develop in detail how that theme provides an appropriate context for studying compositional strategies and academic rhetoric in the “Course Introduction.” Here is a useful, composite model for the Course Description I’ve adapted from several good syllabi, in particular those by Roz Foy and Dierdre Finnegan:

This course seeks to extend your understanding of and control over the conventions of academic and public discourse. It will emphasize strategies for writing analytically and argumentatively about a particular set of concepts and the ways that others have written about them. More specifically, this class teaches students how to generate and arrange ideas, how to support claims, how to revise and edit a draft, how to stylize particular sentences for maximum effectiveness, how to conduct library research and incorporate quotes from others, and, most broadly, how to begin to take part in the kinds of conversations that define the university. Toward this end, the readings for the course will enable students to explore, rhetorically, a variety of issues of ….
[and here follows a brief statement about the particular thematic focus of the course’s readings; for example one might insert, after the ellipses, phrases like “gender-identity in key texts of twentieth-century American fiction” or “the role of the scapegoat in the literature of classical antiquity” or “the documentary films by and in response to Michael Moore” and so on].

Course Introduction
The paragraph that follows this subheading can enlarge on the theme of the course and connect it more elaborately to how the course teaches writing. This paragraph can also explain in more detail the particular value of the course, how it prepares students for the rest of their college career and for life outside of school. It can also sketch essential assumptions that form the basis of the course. It might also allude to one of the course’s readings, even offer a particularly powerful quote as an epigraph to the course. Here’s another composite model I’ve adapted from several syllabi, one that, at key points, might touch on the theme of your course in ways you’ll want to build upon:

An essential feature of U. S. culture, many scholars have claimed, is the experience of the frontier, and thus the debates about what that experience once meant, how that meaning has evolved, and how it might continue to evolve provide a rich context for cultivating one’s own rhetorical skill. As allusions to the frontier regularly recur in political speeches, Hollywood films, television advertising, and even the metaphors of everyday conversation, they carry with them a vast array of implications for many other “frontiers,”
boundaries between Self and Other, known and unknown, “legitimate” and “outlaw,” private and public, to
say nothing of other divisions in our culture between the genders, the races, the economic classes, the
generations, and so on. The tensions that arise around such borders are explored quite eloquently in Mary
Louise Pratt’s essay, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” and thus we’ll use her essay as a kind of conceptual guide to
writing in those spaces where different cultures collide. And, throughout the course, we’ll reflect on the
powers and the problems of writing in and around and perhaps beyond the “frontier” as a well-worn
commonplace in the discourse of U. S. culture.

Course Goals, Objectives, and Assignments
The information you offer under this heading can specify in yet greater detail exactly
what will happen in your course over the fifteen week semester – the type and the
sequence and the weight of assignments, and, of course, how these serve the overall
purpose of the course. Think of the course-goals in terms of what you want students
ultimately to understand – that is, a broad set of concepts/definitions that are arranged to
show, too, the general trajectory of the course through an evolving body of content.
Think of the course-objectives in terms of what you ultimately want them to be able to do
– that is, a set of sub-skills they will cultivate during the semester within the larger skill
of writing itself. Finally, think of the assignments as the particular tasks through which
they will develop particular understandings/abilities. For example, in a section of English
101, the course-goals would include concepts of invention, revision, analysis, argument,
style, and research, among other possibilities, and, within these, refer to particular matters
of theme. And the course-objectives could then delineate the particular activities that will
give students concrete experience with each rhetorical and thematic element.
Here is a rough model:

Students who have successfully completed this class should

• Understand **invention** as set of tools (reading, discussing, freewriting, clustering) for generating ideas within
  a specific context – in this case, the contemporary academic discussion of the role of the supernatural and of
  spiritualism in the Victorian novel, in which both themes serve, broadly, as ways of reckoning with
  “forbidden” subjects of gender and sexuality. Students will cultivate this skill by participating daily in class
discussion of assigned readings, writing ten short papers (one page each, **worth two points each**, due anytime,
though never more than one per week) that grow out of reading and discussion, and four larger papers (five
pages each, **worth twenty points each**, due roughly every fourth week) that address more ambitious topics that
range over several readings at once.

• Understand **revision** as an essential step in structuring and developing a text to connect with a particular
  audience -- in this case, an audience comprised of one’s classmates and the academic community that
devotes itself to Victorian fiction and gender studies. Students will cultivate this ability by synthesizing
shorter writings into the major papers, by significantly revising and recombining any two of the first three
major papers into a longer research paper due at the end of the semester, and rewriting the works of others
(classmates and/or the nineteenth-century novelists we’ll read and/or the contemporary literary historians and
critics we’ll read) for credit as short, two-point papers.

• Understand **analysis** as method of reading one text through the lens of another to discover its key
  components, subtle connections between these components, and the similarities and differences between it
  and others of its kind. Students will cultivate this skill in each of the major writing assignments of the
  semester, and, more pointedly, by becoming familiar, through reading and discussion, with the conventions
  of the Victorian novel and of the current academic discussion of it.

• Understand **argument** as a mode of language-use that can include but that ultimately differs from narration,
description, exploration, and ornamentation, among others. Again, students will cultivate this skill in each of
the major writing assignments of the semester, and, in particular, when, in the final research paper, they
advocate for one side or another in one of the key scholarly debates we’ll consider this semester.

• Understand **style** as a tool for tinkering with sentences and paragraphs to manage ever greater complexity
ever more coherently and, ultimately, to tap into the “musical” dimension of language’s power. Students will
cultivate this aspect of their writing by including at least two stylistic devices from the handout on style in
each of their short papers and ten stylistic devices in each of their longer papers.

• Understand **research** as a skill that involves exploring both library and internet resources to substantiate
claims with academically sound evidence. Students will cultivate this skill by including at least five sources
in their final research paper and by developing an annotated bibliography as part of the drafting process for that project.