Preparing the Course Syllabus

The traditional and most common elements in a syllabus include the following:

Course Description
Usually the description that appears in the catalogue . . . however, the description could be designed to describe special features of the course as it will be taught. This statement may also be called the Course Purpose.

Course Objectives
These are more or less precise statements that indicate what learners can expect from the course. Traditionally, the teacher fashions that objectives. We have largely come out of the era where behavioral or measurable objectives were required. Measurable objectives were required for the following reasons:
1.   Teachers have to be more responsible in thinking through what it is they are actually teaching (i.e., what it is students should learn from the course).
2.   There has to be more precise ways to assess learning (i.e., how is the teacher to know that the student has, in fact, learned?). Students have a right to know more precisely what they will learn and how their learning will be measured or tested.
However,
1.   Focusing on measurable objectives may cause the teacher to miss or under-emphasize the non-measurable aspects of a course. Restricting objectives to those that are behavioral or measurable may force the teacher to emphasize (and test) the more trivial or non-essential elements of a course.
2.   Focusing on teacher-defined measurable objectives prohibits input from learners.

Course Outline
An outline is used to provide an overview of course content. An outline can show how the various parts of the course relate to one another. The teacher may outline the content of the course and include questions, problems, themes, readings, additional references, etc. in each section.

Subject matter may be outlined according to the class period or week it will be presented. Or, the subject matter may simply be outlined without reference to class periods. A fixed outline, prepared in advance may provide an "advance organizer" or it may restrict the effectiveness of a course.

Course Format
This section may be included in the "syllabus" to describe any unique features of selected class periods, or the total course design. Questions related to format include: Does the course consist of static or given knowledge? flowing ideas? a succession of principles? key ideas? processes? people? needs?

Learning Assignments
The tendency is to use the same type of assignments in all courses (reading, reading reports, term papers). Other assignments can include written research projects, observation and report, interviews, comparative reports on pertinent literature, debate, preparation of an article for publication, preparation of a workshop or a presentation for a committee, analysis and recommendations, problem solving, production of a play, video, or slide series, development of a series of overhead transparencies for presentation. . .

Evaluative Methods
Usually the number and/or type of test is included in this section (mid term, final examination, weekly quizzes). Testing and grading is probably the least reliable element of teaching and continues to be characterized as objective (multiple choice, true/false, matching, fill in the blanks, short answer) and subjective (essay, projects).

Selected Bibliography or Reference List
Different approaches are possible. The teacher may give the students a selected bibliography of books and articles that will be used in the course; provide a more complete bibliography of sources pertinent to the subject area; teach the students how to compile their own bibliography--perhaps as the basis for a research project. Sometimes it is wise not to append a reference list to encourage students to create their own.