



## The Welcoming Syllabus

The course syllabus is more than a simple contract or informational document for the students. The syllabus serves many purposes:

### Welcomes

- Welcomes students to the course.

### Informs

- Provides information (such as learning outcomes and prerequisites) to let students know if the course is a good fit,
- Provides information to understand how the course aligns with other courses in a program, and
- Describes how student learning will be evaluated.

### Schedules

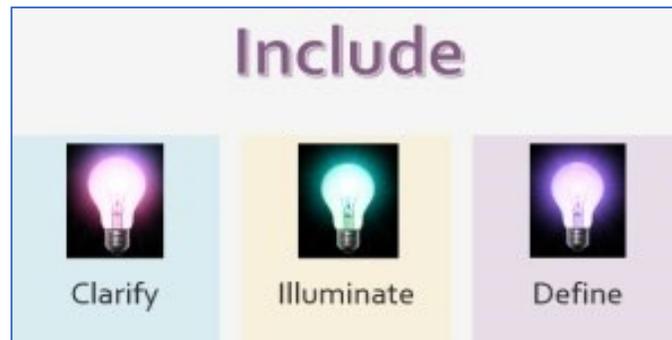
- Serves as a resource for students throughout the course to keep track of due dates, assignments, expectations, and other resources.

A class syllabus is not only a record of assignments and activities; it is also a representation of who we are as instructors and the goals and ideals we wish to share with our students. The policies we choose to include in our syllabus – and the way we frame required policies – reflect our values and convey to students how we see them as learners and citizens in our classroom.

How the syllabus is written informs learners' decisions to complete or withdraw from a course, shapes the way they view the course and interact with faculty, and informs their decisions to seek assistance when academic difficulties arise.

Developing a welcoming syllabus is a key first step towards creating an inclusive classroom environment.

Creating a welcoming syllabus also demystifies the language, expectations, and social mores of higher education that students who have historically been discriminated against, and first-generation college students, may not have been exposed to previously.



For example, I add a simple statement to my courses explaining what a syllabus is and why it's important. Defining the word "syllabus" also helps concurrently-enrolled high school students who may not understand its importance. Defining the term helps to level the playing field and welcomes each student on equal footing.

The syllabus tone sets the mood for the class and can range from pleasant and welcoming to formal and disciplinary, or even condescending and demeaning.

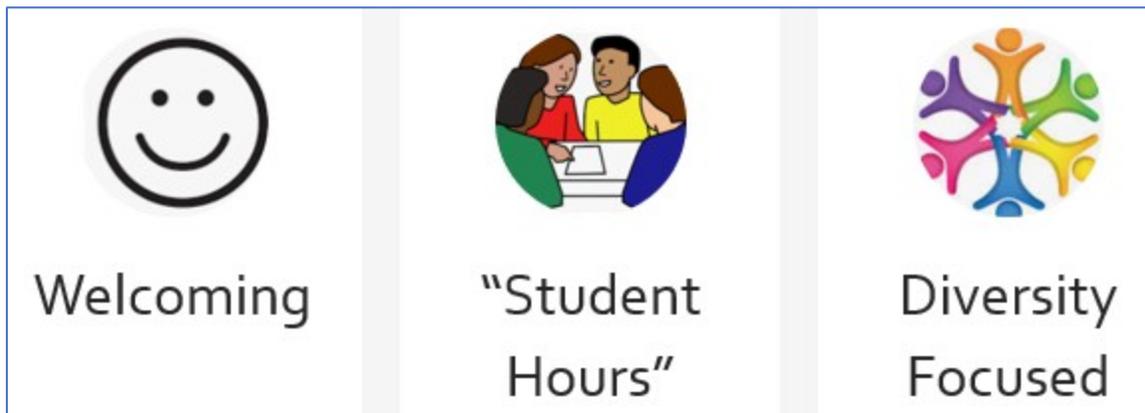
Language that is pleasant and welcoming can encourage and motivate learners; this is particularly important in courses where students face academic difficulty.

Welcoming language can also help readers recall information more easily than when they believe the language is unfriendly or punitive.

Harsh language in the syllabus can be intimidating and discouraging for some students and, as such, hinders their success.

An example that you can implement right away is to make a simple change from using the term “office hours” to “student hours”. This completely shifts the focus to the students, so they easily perceive that this is time that you have intentionally reserved for them.

Being warm and welcoming by including diversity- focused statements that invite students to interact with faculty and affirming students’ beliefs that you expect them to succeed are effective ways to engage with students through the syllabus.



Less effective are ‘listers’ who specify the books and chapters that students must read each week with no rationale about why they were selected, and ‘scolders’ who provide brief course content and extensive details about the different types of infractions that can result in loss of points and other forms of punishment.



Students perceive the less effective styles and practices as mistrustful; they prompt learners to believe that their instructor does not expect them to succeed.

Other ways to implement a warm, welcoming style in your syllabus are to avoid third person. Instead of “The students will...” use “You will” and “I will” and “We”.



Also, phrase policies in a strengths-based manner rather than framing policies in the context of penalizing students. For example, “You will receive full credit for assignments when completed on time. In instances where an assignment is submitted late, you will only receive partial credit of up to 90% of the total” rather than “For each day late I will deduct 10 percent of the grade”.

Remember that while the syllabus does contain important information about your expectations for students, it should not read like a rule-book. For example, instead of a “course policies” section, you could call it “How to be Successful in this Course”.

Unlike an instructor’s class comments, which may or may not ‘stick’ with learners, the syllabus is a physical document that students can access over the course of the semester. Therefore, it is important that we carefully choose language that welcomes, encourages, and motivates students.

Syllabus language often shapes students’ first impressions of instructors and helps learners discern the faculty’s attitude toward teaching and learning. When students believe language in the syllabus is friendly, they view their instructors as warm and approachable and believe they are highly motivated to teach. When syllabi contain punitive language, students are less inclined to approach an instructor for academic assistance; they do not feel welcome.

To ensure your students feel included and welcome, use an inviting and engaging tone in your syllabus, show your enthusiasm for the subject, express high expectations for your students, and explain how to succeed rather than how to fail.

Read your syllabus aloud. Does it sound like something you would want told to you? Is it sending the message you want your students to hear?

Edit your syllabus; welcome your students.



## References

Adams, M., & Bell, L. A. (Eds.). (2016). Teaching for diversity and social justice. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. Chicago, IL: John Wiley & Sons.

Becker, A. H., & Calhoun, S. K. (1999). What introductory psychology students attend to on a course syllabus. *Teaching of Psychology, 26*(1), 6- 11.

Bowen, W. G., & Bok, D. C. (1998). *The shape of the river: Long-term consequences of considering race in college and university admissions*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Calhoun, S., & Becker, A. (2008). How students use the course syllabus. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 2*(1), 1-12.

Canada, M. (2013). The syllabus: A place to engage students' egos. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2013*(135), 37-42.

Collins, T. (1997). For openers, an inclusive course syllabus. In W. E. Campbell & K. A. Smith (Eds.), *New paradigms for college teaching* (pp. 79-102). Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.

Davis, B. G. (2009). *Tools for teaching*. Chicago, IL: John Wiley & Sons.

Dowd, A.C. & Bensimon, E.M. (2015). *Engaging the "race question": Accountability and equity in US higher education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gurin, P., Dey, E., Hurtado, S., & Gurin, G. (2002). Diversity and higher education: Theory and impact on educational outcomes. *Harvard Educational Review, 72*(3), 330-367.

Habaneck, D. V. (2005). An examination of the integrity of the syllabus. *College Teaching, 53*, 62-64.

Harnish, R. J., & Bridges, K. R. (2011). Effect of syllabus tone: Students' perceptions of instructor and course. *Social Psychology of Education, 14*(3), 319-330.

Ishiyama, J. T., & Hartlaub, S. (2002). Does the wording of syllabi affect student course assessment in introductory political science classes? *Political Science & Politics, 35*(03), 567-570.

Ledesma, M. C., & Fránquiz, M. E. (2015). Introduction: Reflections on Latinas/os, affirmative action, and education. *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal, 9*(1), 6-12.

Lewis, C. W., & Middleton, V. (2003). African Americans in community colleges: A review of research reported in the community college journal of research and practice: 1990-2000. *Community College Journal of Research & Practice, 27*(9-10), 787-798.

Marcis, J. G., & Carr, D. R. (2003). A note on student views regarding the course syllabus. *Atlantic Economic Journal*, 31(1), 115.

Marcis, J. G. & Carr, D. R. (2004). The course syllabus in the principles of economics: A national survey. *Atlantic Economic Journal*, 32, 259.

Martin, D. B. (2000). *Mathematics success and failure among African- American youth: The roles of sociohistorical context, community forces, school influence, and individual agency*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Moses, R. P., Cobb, C. E., Jr. (2001). *Radical equations: Math literacy and civil rights*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Perrine, R. M., Lisle, J., & Tucker, D. L. (1995). Effects of a syllabus offer of help, student age, and class size on college students' willingness to seek support from faculty. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 64(1), 41-52.

Pliner, S. M., & Johnson, J. R. (2004). Historical, theoretical, and foundational principles of universal instructional design in higher education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 37(2), 105-113.

Roberts, Maxine T. Center for Urban Education. "The Syllabus: A Tool that Shapes Students' Academic Experiences" [PDF download](#).

Rubin, S. (1985). Professors, students, and the syllabus. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 56, 31-35.

Smith, M. F. and Razzoul, N. Y. (1993) Improving Classroom Communication: The Case of the Course Syllabus. *Journal of Education for Business*, v68 n4 p215-21 Mar-Apr.

Winkelmess, M. A., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K. H. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students' success. *Peer Review*, 18(1/2), 31.

## Resources

- Appleby, D. C. (1994). How to improve your teaching with the course syllabus. *Observer*, 7(3). Retrieved from <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/how-toimprove-your-teaching-with-the-course-syllabus>
- Barkley, E. F., Cross, K. P., & Major, C. H. (2005). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brandtmeier, Broscheid, and Moore. "Inclusion by Design: Survey Your Syllabus and Course Design." <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/course-design-ideas/inclusion-bydesign-tool-helps-faculty-examine-teaching-practices/>

- Chase, B., Germundsen, R., Cady Brownstein, J., & Schaak Distad, L. (2001). Making the connection between increased student learning and reflective practice. *Educational Horizons*, 79, 143–147.
- Clark, C. (2014, August 26). Turn your syllabus into an infographic [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://ltlatnd.wordpress.com/2014/08/26/turn-your-syllabus-into-aninfographic/>
- Davis, B. G. (2009). *Tools for teaching* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- [Developing an Inclusive Syllabus](#) (University of Utah)
- [Diversity and Inclusion](#) (Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning)
- [Effect of Syllabus Tone](#) [Harnish, R. J., & Bridges, K. R. (2011)]
- Fuentes, M. A., Zelaya, D. G., & Madsen, J. W. (2021). Rethinking the Course Syllabus: Considerations for Promoting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. *Teaching of Psychology*, 48(1), 69-79.
- Grunert O'Brien, J. (1997). *The course syllabus: A learning-centered approach*. Bolton, MA: Anker.
- Grunert O'Brien, J. G., Millis, B. J., & Cohen, M. W. (2008). *The course syllabus: A learning-centered approach* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Guertin, L. (2014, August 27). Getting students to read the syllabus with a syllabus quiz [Blog post]. Retrieved from the American Geophysical Union website at <http://blogs.agu.org/geoedtrek/2014/08/27/syllabus-quiz/>
- Harnish, R. J., McElwee, R. O., Slattery, J. M., Frantz, S., Haney, M. R., Shore, C. M., & Penley, J. (2011). Creating the Foundation for a Warm Classroom Climate. *APS Observer*, 24(1).
- [Inclusion By Design - Survey Your Syllabus and Course Design](#) (James Madison University)
- [Inclusive Statements for Syllabus](#) (University of Utah)
- [Inclusive Syllabus Design](#) (UCLA)
- [Inclusive Syllabus Rubric](#) (Columbia University)
- [Inclusive Teaching and Learning Online](#) (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning) • [Inclusive Teaching Practices Toolkit](#) (ACUE) (Assoc of College and University Educators)
- Kaufmann, K. (2003). Building a learner centered syllabus. Retrieved from [http://www.4faculty.org/Demo/read2\\_main.htm](http://www.4faculty.org/Demo/read2_main.htm)
- Nilson, L. B. (2007). *The graphic syllabus and the outcomes map: Communicating your course*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nilson, L. B. (2010). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nilson, L. B. (in press). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Parkes, J., & Harris, M. B. (2002). The purposes of a syllabus. *College Teaching*, 50, 55–61.

- Riviere, J. (2014). Syllabus construction. Retrieved from <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guidesub-pages/syllabus-design>
- Rutgers University, Center for Teaching Advancement and Assessment Research. (n.d.). Syllabus design. Retrieved from <https://ctaar.rutgers.edu/teaching/syllabus/>
- Sample, M. (2011, May 31). Planning a class with backward design [Blog post]. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/planning-a-class-with-backward-design/33625>
- [Sample Syllabi](#), UCLA Inclusive Syllabus Design
- Sinor, J., & Kaplan, M. Creating your syllabus. Retrieved from [http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/p2\\_1](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/p2_1)
- Smith, R. (2014). *Conquering the Content: A Blueprint for Online Course Design and Development* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- [Syllabus Design](#), Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching
- [Syllabus Review for Justice, Equity, and Inclusion](#), Sonoma Senate Diversity Subcommittee
- [Syllabus Rubric Guide](#) (University of Virginia)
- Taylor, S. D., Veri, M. J., Eliason, M., Hermoso, J. C. R., Bolter, N. D., & Van Olphen, J. E. (2019). The Social Justice Syllabus Design Tool: A First Step in Doing Social Justice Pedagogy. *JCSORE*, 5(2), 132-166. <https://doi.org/10.15763/issn.26422387.2019.5.2.132-166>.
- Twigg, C. A. (2003). Improving learning and reducing costs: New models for online learning. *EDUCAUSE Review*, 38(5), 28–38.
- Vaccaro, A. (2019). Developing a culturally competent and inclusive curriculum: A comprehensive framework for teaching multicultural psychology. In J. A. Mena & K. Quina (Eds.), *Integrating multiculturalism and intersectionality into the psychology curriculum: Strategies for instructors* (pp. 23–35). American Psychological Association.
- Wieman, C. (2014). *First day of class – recommendations for instructors*. Retrieved from the Carl Wieman Science Education Initiative at the University of British Columbia website: [http://www.cwsei.ubc.ca/resources/files/First\\_Day\\_of\\_Class.pdf](http://www.cwsei.ubc.ca/resources/files/First_Day_of_Class.pdf)
- Wilson, S. (2006, April 21). Classroom realities. *Insider Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2006/04/21/classroom-realities>