

Introducing your syllabus to your students

Studies show that instructors often view the syllabus as the most important contributor to effective teaching (Cooper & Cuseo, 1989).

Syllabi represent one of the earliest opportunities for students and instructors to interact within the bounds of a particular course (Addy et al., 2021). Iowa students often share with Center for Teaching staff, that they make their decision to take a course or not based on its syllabus. This document gives instructors an opportunity to communicate to students their teaching expectations and values as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion principles.

Before we begin, consider a reflective question:

What does your current syllabus say about your teaching philosophy and values?

Think of why students read or do not read course syllabi and how we can encourage them to read them and actively use them.

Leveraging your syllabus for student engagement can promote active learning, student agency, and self-directed learning. Embedding activities to read, discuss, and review course content can increase transparency around teaching and learning, a sense of student belonging to the class, discipline, and academic success.

To set the tone, we suggest creating a getting started module on Icon introducing the course overview, a copy of a course syllabus with explanation how to use it as a guide throughout the course, and a welcoming message (as a statement or a video). See two samples here: [a welcome statement](#) from *What Inclusive Instructors Do?* (Addy et al., 2021, pp. 180-181) and [an introductory monologue](#) shared by Bianca Williams in *Race, Equity, and the Learning Environment* (Tuitt et. al., 2016, pp. 71-72).

We also recommend you offer students activities that can foster their engagement with the syllabus. To be more transparent, when introducing an activity to your students, share its purpose and the alignment to the course objectives and your own teaching philosophy. For instance, one Iowa instructor introduces their syllabus review activity in the context of their “be a self-directed learner” expectation and shares what self-directed learner means in the course context.

Below you can find multiple ways to foster students' engagement with the syllabus. Please think about how you could adapt them to your own teaching context and use this list as a source of inspiration rather than a prescription.

Low time commitment activities:

1. One-minute paper, is an activity where students write a short response to an open question (might take one or two minutes). Examples:

- Write down your personal learning goals for the course and discuss how they correspond with the course objectives stated in the syllabus.
- What parts of the syllabus provide opportunities to shape your own experience in this course?
- Why do you think we start with topic X (Week 1) instead of topic Y (Week 3)?
- What do you notice about the course readings?

2. Muddiest point, an activity in which students take a few minutes to write down the most difficult or unclear part of the reading or other materials. Examples:

- What is the muddiest point of the course expectations section in the syllabus?
- What is unclear for you in our grading policies?

3. Exit tickets, short anonymous one-minute papers collected on index cards or posted notes at the end of a class.

- Example: After reading the syllabus, write down one thing you are excited about in the course and thing that is still unclear. Please post your note on the whiteboard before leaving the class.

Medium time commitment activities:

1. Think-pair-share.

- A prompt: What is one (or more!) other question you have about this course based upon what you know so far?
- Ask students to share about the relevance of course concepts to their own lives.

2. White board activity: students write their questions and reflections about the syllabus on a white board. Example:

- On the left side of the whiteboard please indicate the parts of the syllabus you are most excited about, and on the right side of the whiteboard share what parts make you feel a bit nervous.
- This white board activity can be turned into a gallery walk, when students physically move around the room, explore, and discuss various answers.

3. Four corners activity

- After reading a syllabus, students pick one of the corners of the room based on their emotional response: Excited – curious – overwhelmed – nervous (these words could be written on a whiteboard or posted notes). Instructor asks the students to comment on their feelings and share why they decided to move to a certain corner. During the debrief, students are allowed to move to a different corner if they prefer.

Higher time commitment activities:

Icon discussion board

You could ask your students a reflective prompt and they could submit their answer to an Icon discussion board: Ask students to write their own course objectives before discussing the syllabus in class. Collect and consider their responses or questions regarding the course and discuss them during the next class. Some Iowa instructors create an Icon discussion board for syllabus questions and encourage their students to post there throughout the semester.

- Group Annotation activity: [Perusall](#) is a social e-reader that allows students to collaboratively annotate texts, videos, etc. Putting a syllabus in Perusall allows students to engage with the syllabus by commenting on it, annotating it, and asking questions about it. To enable Perusall in your course, please contact Student Instructional Technology Assistants (SITAs): sita@uiowa.edu
- Create an in-class syllabus quiz that covers the key points of the syllabus. It could be done on paper or in Icon.

1. Syllabus quiz examples:

What is the preferred name of the instructor? Pick all that apply.

- First Name Last Name
- Mr. or Ms. First Name
- Mr. or Ms. Last Name
- Professor Last Name
- Dr. Last Name

What is the best way to contact the instructor if you have questions or concerns about the course?

- in-class
- email
- phone
- social media

When is a midterm exam scheduled?

- Week 4
- Week 6
- Week 8

Is group work required for this course?

- Yes, there will be multiple group projects for this semester.
- No, all assignments are individual.
- There is one optional group project.

What resources are available for academic support? (Pick all that apply):

- Office hours with the instructor
- Office hours with the TA
- Writing center
- supplemental instruction
- tutoring services

Gamification:

- Consider a syllabus bingo activity. For example, include hidden messages in the syllabus and give a small prize for the first student to get to and follow a specific set of directions (example: "Put a star next to this scheduled assignment.").
- Create a scavenger hunt that requires students to search through the syllabus for specific information. For example, they could be asked to find out the date of the midterm.
- Another way is to create a jeopardy game with categories related to syllabus. This will not only help students learn important information but make a process fun and engaging.

Collaborative activities: co-constructing a course journey.

- Allow students to decide some elements of the assignments or make some assignments optional.
- Co-create rubrics with the students and help them think about which course objectives or assignments are important and why it is imperative that they learn these.
- Ask students to identify themes, cases, communities, traditions that they felt were missing from or underrepresented in the course and develop an argument about why it should be included.
- Incorporate students' interests and ideas into the syllabus throughout the semester. Some Iowa instructors leave a gap for students to fill in their own goals so that is an opportunity to revisit it during the semester.

References:

Addy, T. M., Dube, D., Mitchell, K. A., SoRelle, M. E., Longmire-Avital, B., & Felten, P. (2021). *What Inclusive Instructors Do: Principles and Practices for Excellence in College Teaching* (1st ed.). Stylus Publishing.

Cooper, P., & Cuseo, G. (1989). The course syllabus. *Teaching Newsletter California State University at Dominguez Hills*, 2 (4), 1–4.

Tuitt, F., Haynes, C., & Stewart, S. (2016). *Race, Equity, and the Learning Environment: The Global Relevance of Critical and Inclusive Pedagogies in Higher Education*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.