

Using a Syllabus to Build Connections with Your Students

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In collaboration with the University of Iowa Center for Teaching, three undergraduate students created this handout with the intention of helping faculty members design more welcoming, meaningful, and personal syllabi. As students, we can attest to the importance of the course syllabus in relation to outcomes in a course.

Your department or college may already provide a syllabus template or required syllabus items, and you can use strategies from this handout to adapt your syllabi, making them more personable. This handout is primarily about how you can use the syllabus to make learning more meaningful for us as students. We have all received syllabi that seem impersonal or intimidating, which creates a negative perception of the course and the instructor.

The syllabus sets the tone for the course; it is the first substantial connection students have with the course. The impression you leave through the syllabus will remain with them until the course concludes. We have developed this handout to help you communicate what is required in your course along with introducing who you are, how you will support your students, and your plans to teach the class in ways that promote their educational and professional success.

Making the Syllabus Personal

Relatively small adjustments to emphasis, tone, and welcoming language can significantly impact our impression of the instructor.

- Include your preferred way to be addressed to alleviate anxiety that comes with addressing an authority figure (Dr., professor, or your first name).
 - [Add a phonetic pronunciation](https://dna.its.uiowa.edu/lingo) of your name at dna.its.uiowa.edu/lingo.
 - Although not required, you could choose to include your pronouns.
- Connect with your students by using first- and second-person forms (you, we, etc.).
 - For example: *We will investigate various challenges to public health policies.*
- Include a personalized welcoming statement.
 - Example: "All of us in the class, you, me, your peers, have a responsibility to create an environment in which we can all learn from each other. I expect everyone to

participate in class so that we can all benefit from the insights and experiences that each person brings” (Center for Urban Education, 2018, p. 49).

- Use your creativity to make the course your own.
 - Rename intimidating headers to something that relates to your course.
 - Consider renaming a “course policies” section to “course values,” “course plans,” or “how to be successful in this course.”
 - We find it helpful if you include sections like “how to study for exams.”
 - We have found it more encouraging to study for an exam and less stressful when provided with ways to study, especially an interactive study guide.
 - You can address questions about whether you provide study guides in this section.
 - All instructors are different, so including strategies on how to do well on your exams will, in return, boost success in your class.
- Explain the purpose of your office hours to encourage us to connect with you.
 - Reframing them as “student hours” or using your own definition can be more welcoming and less intimidating for us.
 - Example: *I welcome you to contact me outside of class in student hours to ask questions about class material or about your professional goals related to this course. You may email me, call my office, or contact the department and leave a message. Student hours: MWF 9:30–10:20 (drop in – no need for an appointment during this hour) Email: professor@uiowa.edu Phone: 319-555-5555 Department office: 319-555-1111.*
 - Arranging a personalized five-minute individual or small group introductory meeting with us at the beginning of the semester creates a warmer relationship. After the initial meeting, we tend to find it easier to meet with professors later.

Fostering Transparency and a Welcoming Environment

What are ways for you, as an instructor, to empower us to learn when life happens?

- Include a wellness statement acknowledging our well-being and health.
 - Find [examples](https://cteresources.bc.edu/documentation/sample-syllabus-statements/mental-health-and-wellness) from the Center for Teaching Excellence at Boston College at cteresources.bc.edu/documentation/sample-syllabus-statements/mental-health-and-wellness.
- Include technology, materials, or any outside knowledge needed to be successful.

- If no prior knowledge is needed, be sure to include, “Any skill level welcome. This will be an intro course.”
- We often have to budget for course materials, so we encourage instructors to be cognizant of expensive items.
- Design comprehensive assessment and activity descriptions so we know what to expect in the course. We value instructor transparency, especially when addressing these questions:
 - How will assessments be graded? What percentage of the grade will they be?
 - How quickly will you respond to emails? How soon after assignment submission can we expect grades?
 - How many hours per week would you recommend spending on course work?
- Provide links to campus resources to encourage student success (e.g., Writing Center, Student Success).
- Build flexibility into course policies.
 - Consider sharing information about requesting accommodations closer to the beginning of your syllabus so students see that you care about our success.
 - Consider allowing students to email you to discuss options if we anticipate an assignment being late, missing class, etc.
 - If your class policy is “For each day late, I will deduct 10 percent of the grade,” you may want to add a simple reasoning like “Since this assignment is meant to be a check in about your learning, timeliness is important.”
 - An example of a positive participation policy includes, “It is important that you attend class and contribute your brilliant thoughts and voices! Not attending class will greatly affect your ability to reach your learning goals, but because life happens to us all, you will have two unexcused absences. After these two, your final grade will drop by 2% for each missed class. If something arises and you will need to miss more than two classes, come talk to me.” (Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, n.d.)
- Create an organized and easy-to-navigate schedule.
 - We appreciate an overview of a course calendar when signing up for a class.
 - Consider attaching measurable learning objectives to the assignments and show how they fit in the course context.
 - Example: *The goal of the first paper is to address and fulfill course learning objectives 3 and 4.*
 - Including readings or activities to be completed before class or during class can be helpful for students to prepare or get ahead if time allows.

- It is a nice reminder for students when you add exam and project due dates in the course schedule.
- Refer to breaks by their seasonal names to ensure inclusiveness.
 - Winter break instead of Christmas break.
- Consider leaving room in the schedule for student engagement with materials we could be interested in learning more about in your course ([CAST, n.d.](#)).

Presenting Your Syllabus

To encourage us to read your syllabus, aim for a syllabus appearance that reflects you and the class you are teaching.

- Create a visually appealing document with memes, images, and a fun, enthusiastic design to help students understand you and the course. Visuals can also decrease the intimidation we may feel from the course and the instructor (Nusbaum et al., 2021).
- Put special phrases in color (plus bold), maybe even your favorite color, to personalize it.
- Dedicate at least part of the first class to the syllabus so there is ample time to review it and answer questions.
- Inviting questions, comments, and concerns about the syllabus from students makes us feel heard and important to you.
 - Share ways students can reach out to you (during class, in student hours, or by email).
 - Send an anonymous survey during class for us to submit questions.
- [Add your syllabus](#) to the course listing on MyUI so we can view it before signing up for classes at wiki.uiowa.edu/display/mauihelp/Syllabus+Information.

Citations

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