HOW TO CREATE A SYLLABUS

Advice Guide

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Perhaps you're offering a new course, or you're looking to revamp an old one. Maybe that section you were scheduled to teach didn't make enrollment, and now you're facing a new prep with only a few weeks (or days!) to get ready. Even if you don't need to write or revise a

course syllabus, though, there's never a bad time to re-examine and rethink your syllabi. As much as we exhort our students to Read The Syllabus, we ought to make sure we're giving them something that's actually worth reading. So without further ado: here's how to write a syllabus.

Jump to a section

A syllabus is more than just a checklist or collection of policies and procedures. In fact, approaching it as akin to a "contract" — while that's a popular analogy in higher education — is not the way to create an effective syllabus. We should aim to do more than badger our students with arbitrary dictates that suggest we fully expect them to misbehave. The course syllabus is, in most cases, the first contact that students will have with both us and the course. As the cliché goes, we don't get a second chance to make a first impression. The syllabus sets the tone for the course. Rather than emphasize what they can't do, an effective syllabus is a promise that, as a result of our course, students will be able to do a number of things either for the first time or at least better than they could before. As you create a syllabus, then, the question you ought to keep at the center of the process is: *What am I saying to my students?*

With that in mind, this guide is aimed at showing you how to create or redesign a syllabus so that it's not only an effective map of your course's nuts-and-bolts logistics but also an invitation to actively engage in the learning process. Whether you've been teaching for years or are embarking

on your first course as instructor of record, you'll find in this guide the resources, recommendations, and tips and tricks to craft a syllabus that will guide students through your course and motivate them to succeed in it.

You won't need much to get started, but it helps to have the following on hand before you begin syllabus construction:

- **Your course materials.** Assemble the books, readings, and other resources you'll ask students to acquire for the course, along with other things they might need to be successful (e.g., specific art supplies or high-speed internet access for streaming media).
- **Your institution's academic calendar.** When does your term begin and end? What holidays occur during the course? What campus events or deadlines are important to be aware of as you schedule class activities and assessments?
- **Other calendars.** Two, in particular. First, consider referring to a calendar of major religious holidays from the traditions represented at your institution. My campus does not close for Jewish or Muslim observances, but I take them into account in my course schedule, as I know I will have students of those faiths in my classes. Second, have your personal calendar available, too. If you are attending a conference during the semester, or have an article, a project, or a tenure-and-promotion file due, you'll want to ensure that you won't have a stack of 45 essays descend upon you at the same time.
- **Any other relevant information or materials.** Some institutions require every syllabus to include a set of boilerplate policy statements. Perhaps you might have departmental assessment outcomes that need to be part of your course goals. For laboratory courses, there may be lab-specific materials that need to go into your syllabus. It's far better to have such materials in hand than to have to go back after you

thought you were done and shoehorn in two pages. If you're unsure whether your department or institution has any of these types of requirements, ask your department chair or dean, or see if your department has a syllabus archive where you might look at previous iterations of the course you're teaching.

Syllabus Essentials (and Two to Avoid)

As you'll see, there is a wide variety of options when it comes to formats, styles, and content. Many institutions have templates or checklists to help you get started. Another good resource is *The Course Syllabus: A Learner-Centered Approach,* which has sample syllabi and templates in its appendices. Whatever model you choose, there are certain core elements that every syllabus needs in order to be effective.

Remember, the purpose of a syllabus is to set the tone, map the course for your students, and explain how to be successful in the class. Leaving out essential components is tantamount to showing students that you are absent-minded and unprofessional, or that you don't care about their success in class. To avoid sending such a counterproductive message, make sure your syllabus includes the following essential pieces (a fuller discussion of each can be found in subsequent sections):

- **Basic course information.** What course is this? (You may be required to include the catalog description.) When and where does it meet? How many credit hours does it offer? Is the course face-to-face, online-only, or blended? Are there prerequisites?
- **Instructor information.** Who are you? What's your departmental affiliation? Where is your office (if you have one)? When and where can students meet with you — what are your regular office hours, or do you schedule individual conferences? How can students communicate with you via phone or email, and do you have a preference?
- **Course goals.** What will your students be able to do as a result of this course that they could not do, or do as well, before? What purpose does this course and its material serve? Are there discipline-specific objectives, larger metacognitive goals, or both?
- **Course materials and requirements.** What books, readings, and other course materials will be needed, and where can students acquire them? Are there other skills that students will need to be successful (for example, proficiency with specific software)? Will the course involve site visits or fieldwork outside of regular meeting times?
- **Course policies.** Do you have policies regarding attendance or missed work? Are there particular classroom expectations that students need to be aware of? What about technology use?

- **Grading and assessment.** What will students be asked to do? How is the course grade determined, and what is the grading scale? Do you offer extra credit?
- **Course schedule/calendar.** What will students be asked to do for particular class sessions? When will quizzes and/or examinations be given? What are the due dates for the papers, projects, or other assessments? Is there a final exam, and if so, when? (Many institutions have a special calendar for final-exam week.)

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Syllabus Design for Dummies

The 3 Essential Functions of Your Syllabus, Part 1

The 3 Essential Functions of Your Syllabus, Part 2

Ineffective syllabi —or just plain bad ones — have common attributes of their own. Whether you're creating or revising a syllabus, make sure the following are *not* part of it:

- **Sloppy editing.** Given this document's importance in setting the tone for a course, the worst way to begin the term is to convey the impression of unprofessionalism. There's nothing wrong with reusing syllabi, or adapting sections of one syllabus for another one. But when you cut and paste information, and leave in a reference to the "Fall 2016" section of the course, or when a policy section is a mishmash of three font sizes, you're not inspiring confidence in your attention to detail. If the syllabus is riddled with typos or poorly formatted, any message you're trying to convey to students about the importance of proofreading their papers is undercut. *Do as I say, not as I do* does not lead to successful courses.

- **Scolding.** There's a temptation to put something in your course policies that responds directly to that one student who did that really aggravating thing two years ago and you'll be damned if that happens again. If you do that, however, you end up with a list of policies that is both oddly specific and overly long. Students will see all of those "thou shalt nots" as your telling them that you expect them to screw up at some point during the semester, or that you anticipate "bad behavior." Subsequent sections of this guide will look at ways to approach course policies (and etiquette) in a more constructive manner, but the takeaway here is: Ask yourself if your policy sections would sound, from the student's perspective, like a scolding. Also, AVOID USING ALL-CAPS SENTENCES FOR EMPHASIS, as that is now seen as how one yells at other people on the internet.

The Syllabus Components

Course Information

The first thing students should see on a syllabus is information about the class and about you, the instructor. The course title, section, date, time, and location, too, ought to be immediately apparent — which may seem obvious but isn't always so. Featuring that information prominently is particularly important if you teach at an institution where students "shop" for classes the first week of the term — your syllabus will be what they refer to as they consider whether to enroll or switch classes. It's also essential to make sure this information is up to date; there's no worse feeling than getting ready to distribute your syllabus to

students on the first day of class, only to notice that you forgot to change the semester and time information from when you taught the course the year before. (That happened once to … uh … a friend.)

Put the essential facts of your class at the top of your syllabus.

If you're teaching a blended or online class, you should include a description of that format here. Students might not be familiar with what a blended course entails, for example. And first-time online students could use an explanation of the expectations and requirements for a course of this nature (and how those differ from a face-to-face class). It's also useful to give a brief description of the course here so students can quickly gauge its scope and content, and be aware of any prerequisites or corequisites; the description listed in the course catalog is often ideal for this role.

Instructor Information

While the previous section is relatively straightforward, information about you — the Instructor — involves more reflection and choices. Some instructors include brief biographical information; for example, where they did their graduate work, or a brief explanation of how their scholarly and teaching interests intersect with the course topics. It might read something like this: *Welcome to "U.S. History to 1877." As a historian who specializes in the Revolutionary and early national periods of U.S. history (my Ph.D. is from one of the oldest universities in the country), I really enjoy teaching this course, and I look forward to sharing some of what I've learned in my own research on this period as we journey together this semester.* It's up to you how much information you provide, or whether you include a biographical statement at all. But if you feel that it's a good idea to

emphasize your credentials and qualifications (something that many academics who are not white males have to consider, unfortunately, given what we know about the biases that lead some students to question the expertise of female and/or minority faculty members), then a short biographical introduction could be the opportune moment to do so.

Whether or not you choose to include biographical material, I highly recommend incorporating a statement of your teaching philosophy. There are a number of ways in which taking the time to discuss your pedagogical approach makes the syllabus more effective: It helps personalize a potentially dry document, it projects a caring and welcoming stance (particularly important if you're teaching a large lecture class, in which "impersonal" is the default setting), and it creates a larger framework for your particular goals, assignments, and expectations. It might seem difficult to conceive of a philosophical statement like this in the relatively abbreviated space available in a syllabus (as opposed to the two-to-three-page statements of teaching philosophy you might have included in your job applications). But this needn't be a full-blown exposition of your pedagogy — that will become apparent as time goes on in the classroom. Rather, it should be an overview — the "elevator talk" version — of your pedagogy that gives students a good sense of how you approach teaching and learning. As you consider how to effectively and concisely convey your teaching philosophy, you may find it helpful to consider the following questions:

- **Why are you teaching?** What drew you to the profession? What do you enjoy about working with students in the college academic

environment? Your students will appreciate seeing what motivates you to be with them.

- **Why are you teaching this course?** If you drew the short straw in the departmental rotation and are teaching it because no one else wanted to, perhaps it's best not to say so. But usually there is something about the course — it's in your area of specialization, it's one of your personal favorites, you enjoy introducing nonmajors to your discipline — that drew you to it. Tell your students what that is, and invite them to share that interest with you.
- **How do you define successful learning?** How do you know when your students have learned? What sort of processes do you think are most effective to foster learning? How do you define "success?" Students will benefit from having a tangible sense of what constitutes success in your course.
- **What can students expect from you?** A statement outlining your teaching philosophy is a good way to signal what students might expect. If your syllabus says you believe that learning occurs best through discussion and deliberation, for example, they'll know they can expect class to be discussion-oriented. If you have a particular organizational schema for your material, or if there are pedagogical techniques that you embrace, conveying that to your students helps them visualize what their experiences will be like during the term. Moreover, it can open a conversation about expectations and roles.

Once again, this doesn't have to be an extended essay. A brief paragraph that gives students a sense of your excitement and interest in the course and in their learning can be an invaluable tone-setter. The process of formulating such a concise statement can be a clarifying exercise for you as well.

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Finally, an effective syllabus should include information that makes it as easy as possible for students to meet and/or communicate with you outside of class. A quick glance at the beginning of your syllabus should convey the following:

- **Office hours.** Are they at set times every week or by appointment? Perhaps a mixture of both? What if your posted office hours conflict with a student's schedule? How would he or she make an appointment to see you then?
- **Office (or other meeting) location.** Your students need to know where to find you. But given that contingent instructors teach nearly 75 percent of credit hours in U.S. higher education, and often do not have a designated office or work space, the traditional version of "office hours" is far less prevalent than it used to be. If you have a campus office, be sure your syllabus lists the location. If you expect to meet students in some other campus space, make that clear high up on your syllabus — something like "I hold office hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 to 11 a.m., at the coffee shop on the main library's ground floor. Come find me there."
- **Options for (and preferred method of) contact.** List your campus email address and/or office phone number. If you have a preference for one method of communication over the other, specify that here. Also, it's useful to include information about how you tend to respond. Making it clear that you will respond to email within 24 hours, or that

you don't reply to email on Saturdays or Sundays, for example, can save your inbox from being inundated with scores of "Did you get my email?" messages, which can commence mere minutes after the original email was sent.

A common lament is that students never come to office hours, or that they write vague and/or unprofessional emails that leave you mystified as to what they're trying to find out. A clearly defined section of the syllabus that not only provides the contact information they need but also explains the process and expectations surrounding out-of-class communication is a vital way to set the stage for positive faculty-student interactions.

Course Goals

Some call them learning outcomes. Whichever label you use, you are very likely required by your institution to articulate some for your course. Without goals/outcomes, you won't know what to assess, and you won't be able to talk about your students' learning in any coherent fashion. Regional accreditors tend to look unfavorably upon that. "Assessment" is one of those words that often elicits faculty grumbling, usually the product of cumbersome and ineffective procedures that aren't collaborative. But at its root, and done well, assessment is the vital practice of telling your pedagogical story: What are your students learning? How well are they learning? How can we prove that learning is occurring? Your syllabus can play a crucial role in answering those questions.

Clearly expressed course goals help students understand what the class is about and how they will be assessed.

How to articulate course goals and objectives. There are reasons beyond assessment (and those pesky accreditation requirements) to articulate a good set of learning outcomes. If the syllabus maps where you and your students are going, then the course goals are the destination. Well-constructed goals convey the purpose of the journey to students (and can help you clarify it for yourself, on occasion), and they also can provide the starting point for course design. In their influential 1998 book, *Understanding by Design*, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe outlined how to use "backward design" to ensure that all the various elements of your course are in alignment. Backward design suggests that you begin with the end in mind — that is, with your course goals. Then work backward:

- Define measurable objectives that demonstrate fulfillment of the broad course goals.
- Design assignments, tests, and other assessments to measure whether students meet the objectives.
- Devise the day-to-day class activities that will help students understand the material and succeed on the various assessments.

Here's how that might look in my own history course:

- **Course goal:** *"Students will be able to understand and apply the analytical habits of mind used by historians."*
- **Measurable objective:** *"Students will be able to assess disparate accounts of a historical event and create an evidence-based interpretation."*
- **Assessment:** A research essay that makes use of both primary and secondary sources.
- **In class:** Activities to help students acquire the research skills and documentary analysis necessary to write the essay.

In a well-aligned course, goals, objectives, assessments, and activities act like a set of Russian nesting dolls, the smaller resting neatly within the larger.

From a student's perspective, a well-crafted set of course goals can provide a handy framework for organizing and synthesizing the material throughout the term. Your course goals belong at the front of the syllabus, if not on the first page itself. To introduce them, consider using phrasing along the lines of *"As a result of this course, you will be able to …,"* or *"This course will help you develop the necessary skills to…"*. Framing the goals in that way is what Ken Bain sees as the basis of a " promising syllabus." In his 2004 book, *What The Best College Teachers Do*, Bain pointed to a common element he found on the "best" teachers' syllabi: "First, the instructor would lay out the promises or opportunities that the course offered to students," which "represented an invitation to a feast." The invitation was the crucial element, according to Bain — "giving students a strong sense of control over whether they accepted" and motivating them to pursue the work involved in fulfilling those promises. The syllabus "was the beginning of a dialogue" and "became a powerful influence on setting high standards and encouraging people to achieve them." Motivation is a key ingredient in

effective learning, and a syllabus that puts these types of "promises" front and center, and shows students the possibilities open to them, is a great way to seed that motivation within their initial encounter with your course.

Embrace all of your course content. One other factor to consider as you frame your course goals: the "noncontent content" you teach. For example, a class I teach on the history of the ancient world features specific content from ancient societies through the fourth century CE. But students in that class also create course blogs on the ancient world using WordPress, and in the process, acquire proficiency on that platform and learn to create digital pieces of text and media. Those skills are a significant aspect of my course that can be useful outside the context of ancient history. One of my course goals, then, states that students will learn to write in a digital medium for an online audience. Academics talk all the time about the larger academic and intellectual skills that we teach beyond our content area. Incorporating those skills into a course goal presented on the front page of your syllabus is an excellent way to make that point explicit for students (and for other audiences, like assessment committees that use syllabi to determine what students are learning from particular courses and curricula). Moreover, a course goal built around "noncontent content" lends itself to the idea of a "promising syllabus" that stokes student interest and motivation. For courses with a reputation for being difficult, or in subjects (such as mathematics) around which students feel significant anxiety, this is a particularly salient point.

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There's a lot to think about when it comes to course goals. The key question becomes how to present them on a syllabus without either giving them short shrift or overwhelming students (and ourselves) with text. One strategy is to consider grouping course goals by theme. Are there a few "meta-subjects" into which your specific goals can be sorted? For example, if there are content-based goals grouped around disciplinary knowledge, and application-oriented goals that come from a laboratory or recitation component, that might be the schema you use to present those goals on the syllabus. Alternatively, many instructors choose to organize their course goals around conceptual frameworks such as Bloom's Taxonomy or L. Dee Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning Experiences. Both offer a natural way to organize your course goals. And you can see for yourself whether you're paying sufficient attention to all of the cognitive areas you want to see your students develop (e.g,, are you focusing too much on simple understand-and-remember outcomes at the expense of higher-order thinking?).

It is essential, whichever structure you choose, to phrase your course goals clearly and carefully. As Ken Bain's discussion of the "promising syllabus" makes clear, presentation matters. Creating a set of thoughtful, explicit learning outcomes provides a powerful opening statement for your syllabus and for the class itself. Course goals framed as opportunities — rather than abstract or generic goals (the kind that make students' eyes glaze over) — set the table not only for a successful and engaging learning experience but also for the rest of an effective course syllabus.

Course Materials and Requirements

Clearly, this part of your syllabus is context- and discipline-specific. Lab courses require different materials from classes built around lectures and discussion. Students will be asked to acquire a much different array of tools for a studio-art course than for one on managerial accounting. Still, there are some considerations to keep in mind regardless of the type of course you're teaching:

- **How — exactly — do students access your materials?** that's pretty straightforward if you're simply requiring a few books that are available at the campus bookstore. But if you're using proprietary software that requires an access code or an account to be created, be sure your students are aware of that. If you're teaching a film course for which students need a Netflix account, stipulate that on your syllabus. A good rule of thumb: If you're requiring students to use something in your course, it should be discussed (even if briefly) on the syllabus.
- **What's the cost?** It's no secret that the high cost of textbooks and course materials is a major issue confronting many students. It's more important than ever to take costs into consideration when you decide what course materials you're asking them to acquire. There are ways to help ease the financial burden, such as using " open educational resources" or adopting textbooks that have a large number of used copies available (a quick way to check is to look for the book on Amazon and see how many used copies are for sale; that's probably a good indicator of general availability).
- **Are there any copyright and intellectual-property issues?** Some instructors cut costs for instructional materials by making PDFs of the course readings available free to students on the course-management

system, or via some other work-around. Just be sure, however, that you're within " fair use" guidelines if you do so. For example, using a photocopy of one chapter from a scholarly monograph is probably OK, but scanning the entire book is a copyright violation. If you want to model good information-literacy practices for students, those are the types of things you have to consider. Your campus librarians are an excellent resource to navigate fair-use and intellectual-property issues as you decide how to make course materials available to students. Speaking of the library, consider having copies of any required materials available at the reserve desk for students who might benefit from that access.

Course Policies

What and why. This section is the heart of a course syllabus. Most institutions and syllabus templates refer to it as "policies and procedures." Here is where you discuss course expectations and logistics — what students will be be asked to do (and discouraged from doing). It's where you begin to create the type of climate you want to see in your classroom. It's also the portion of a syllabus that can be the most fraught. Many of the pitfalls that make for an ineffective syllabus reside here, and the potential for unintentionally conveying negative or counterproductive messages is significant. All too often, it's in this portion of a syllabus where things bog down, where the instructor's initial enthusiasm turns to jaded cynicism. Too many times, this section is where you simply cut and paste institutional boilerplate or fall into the trap of peevishly reciting all of the things you don't want students to do. Even if you don't mean for it to happen, your syllabus can slouch into the type of adversarial tone that alienates rather than welcomes students to the course.

Sections of policies can come across as adversarial. Avoid that by discussing policies in constructive terms that highlight the reasons rather than the consequences.

With each policy you list, keep the key question for syllabus construction in mind: *What are you saying to your students*? Reflect not just on the specifics of your policies and procedures but also on the reasons you have them. The "policies and procedures" section can devolve into a laundry list of thou-shalt-nots for two primary reasons:

- **Institutional requirements.** Most colleges and universities, figuring that they have a captive audience, require instructors to make room on their syllabi for a laundry list of policies or statements. Some of those mandatory statements can run several pages as they attempt to pre-empt any scenario of student malfeasance.
- **Your own past experience in the classroom.** That one student who danced along the line between paraphrasing and plagiarism? Add a new statement on academic honesty! That time when a student challenged a grade because missing half the class period wasn't the same (in the student's opinion) as an absence? New late policy! If we teach long enough, the course-policies section can read like a greatest-hits collection of weird scenarios. Ask yourself, though, if specific cases of "bad behavior" should be what animates the heart of your syllabus. Nothing will spoil an otherwise promising and engaging syllabus than a litany of policies that read like veiled threats. *What are you saying to your students*? With policy bloat, you're saying you expect them to do something wrong. And it's not a matter of *if* but *when*.

In short, every syllabus — brand new or redesigned — should have a policy section that's the product of significant discernment and reflection about what is included, why it's there, and how it's worded. Here is a list of the

most common types of course policies, with some thoughts and questions that might help you articulate what they look like for your specific course and students.

Attendance

You may be required to adhere to an attendance policy set by your institution or your department. There might be a cap on the number of "allowable" absences, perhaps a percentage of total class meetings or, in most cases, a specific number. Perhaps there's a policy about the types of absences that should be excused (with any missed work made up for credit), and the ones that shouldn't (meaning that penalties will ensue). Conversely, some of us are at institutions where these matters are left to the discretion of individual faculty members. If you're unsure where you fall on this continuum, it's best to consult your department chair or dean.

Strict attendance policies don't ensure attentive students. A flexible policy reduces stress and makes life easier for you as well.

The foundational question of an attendance policy is, *Why is it essential for students to be in class*? (I'm defining "in class" broadly, so as to cover online courses as well.) The answer ought to be how you introduce your attendance policy on the syllabus. For example: *"Because class discussion is at the heart of this course, you are required to be in class, and what we do in the course of our class meetings will determine a large portion of your grade."* Note, I've underscored that attendance is important, and I've tied its importance to the very way the course will be conducted. Policy derives from philosophy, which helps make clear to students the legitimate pedagogical reasons behind these expectations.

But perfect attendance almost never occurs. What then? What about those occasions when students do end up missing a class session (or online unit or module)? Some instructors with the latitude to do so categorize all absences in the same way — capping the number of classes a student can miss without penalty and making no distinction between "excused" and "unexcused." Most instructors (and most institutions/departments) opt to keep that distinction in place, and attach penalties only to the "unexcused" variety. I recommend the more flexible approach — it's a recognition that life happens. Worry about academic penalties shouldn't be added to an already stressful situation like a family emergency or illness.

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Additionally, forcing students to choose between attending class and participating in a university-sponsored activity (which might be connected to a scholarship that pays their tuition) places them in a lose-lose situation. Avoid that if at all possible. Incorporating these additional considerations into my sample attendance policy would make it read something like this:

> *"Because class discussion is at the heart of this course, you are required to be in class, and what we do in the course of our class meetings will determine a large portion of your grade. Of course, I understand that sometimes emergencies or other unexpected circumstances arise that make attendance that day impossible. If this is the case, please talk with me as soon as possible so we can make arrangements to get you caught up (this provision will not apply to nonemergencies like oversleeping). If you will be absent from a class for a university-sponsored activity, please make arrangements with me — beforehand — regarding any work you might miss."*

That's a concise statement that outlines a policy, makes the necessary distinctions between what is excused and what isn't, and informs students that they will need to take responsibility for initiating the process to make up missed or late coursework.

Late or Missed Work

Will you accept late work? If so, how late? What, if any, adjustments will you make to the assignment's grade if a student submits it past deadline? Perhaps you are less deadline-focused and have a rolling submission policy. Some instructors set assignment deadlines in collaboration with their students. When it comes to late policies, a compelling case can be made for one that offers a grace period and abandons hard-and-fast deadlines. As Ellen Boucher argues, "It's time we give our students the same respect and flexibility that we demand in our own careers" and not make *a priori* assumptions that late work stems from some academic or character deficit instead of real-life circumstances. On most syllabi, a late-work policy

will be closely tied to the attendance policy, as a majority of instructors allow for the submission of late work without penalty if an excused absence is involved. However you choose to deal with deadlines in general — or with late submissions, missed exams, and the like — your syllabus should convey your policy clearly. That will save you from spending the semester adjudicating every case of late work. More important, students will know ahead of time exactly what to expect if they turn in assignments past the deadline.

Academic Honesty

Drafting a policy on academic integrity and cheating is one of the thorniest areas of syllabus construction. The ready availability of online resources raises a plethora of issues around paraphrasing, attribution, and plagiarism. Some students cheat intentionally by buying papers from online essay mills, but many end up plagiarizing unintentionally simply because they don't know how to use digital sources properly — a difficulty exacerbated by the often hazy line between paraphrasing and outright expropriation. Cheating has become a matter that's both increasingly relevant for academe and increasingly byzantine for students. That trend is reflected in course syllabi, where academic-integrity policies have become both longer and more punitive in tone. My own institution, for example, mandates that all syllabi include a two-page academic-honesty policy, much of it given over to a detailed description of the appeals process should a student be charged with a violation. While I understand the logic — clearly the previous policy didn't work — I don't think adding a long section of campus boilerplate that reads like a criminal statute is particularly effective. Once again, you're essentially telling students you think that many of them will cheat, and you're already weighing how to punish them.

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Yes, academic integrity is important. Yes, this is increasingly complex terrain. You have an ethical imperative to be abundantly clear about your policies on your syllabi. So how do you talk about academic honesty without descending into the language of pre-emptive indictment? Two strategies can help you deal with this constructively:

- **Focus on equity, not punishment.** All too often, professors and institutions rush into procedures for "catching" students without explaining why academic integrity is such an important issue. There are compelling intellectual, ethical, and legal reasons for a robust and effective policy on academic honesty. So explain them to students: Creators should be able to control what we create; appropriating others' ideas or labor without credit or attribution is theft; no creators want their stuff stolen. The entire scholarly enterprise depends upon an adherence to those norms. Citation and attribution are also important ways to ensure that scholarly discourse is open to all voices and does not silence marginalized or minority perspectives. In that regard, plagiarism can be a form of censorship, in that it removes someone's voice (and by extension, scholarly identity) from the conversation. These fundamental principles of fairness and reciprocity are a much healthier framework for a conversation about student cheating than a list of thou-shalt-nots and their consequences. Academic honesty should be more than just a game of cops and

robbers; It's the scaffolding for most of what we hope to accomplish in higher education. Use your syllabi to make that point.

- **Examine your assignment design and class requirements:** As James M. Lang argues in his excellent 2013 book, *Cheating Lessons: Learning From Academic Dishonesty*, one of the best ways to combat cheating is to change the environment in which it usually occurs. For example, almost every case of plagiarism I've encountered is the product of procrastination, followed by panic the night before an assignment is due and by poor decision-making skills that make copy-and-pasting from the internet seem like a viable solution. It didn't matter how many students I turned in for academic dishonesty; the next semester, the same thing would unfold with different students. But ever since I modified my syllabi to break down large assignments into smaller components — due at various points throughout the semester, with numerous check-in points to receive formative feedback — plagiarism has virtually disappeared in my courses. Assignment scaffolding is only one way to create a classroom ethos that militates against cheating. Another strategy: Design essay prompts so course- and context-specific that students can't find an easy answer for them online. While assignment design may go beyond the immediate scope of syllabus creation, how you choose to either revise or recreate assignments to counteract academic dishonesty will have a big effect on what your syllabus says about those assignments and their structure. It's worth thinking about these issues before drafting a syllabus.

Even if you're required to add lengthy and/or punitive campus policies on cheating to your syllabus, you should still try to put them in language oriented toward equity and the ethics behind these requirements. Ideally, a discussion of academic honesty will complement other elements of the syllabus, like the description of your teaching philosophy and the assignments/assessments section. Most important, though, frame this section with that key question in mind: *What are you saying to your students*? Tone and approach matter, especially when it comes to an issue as complex as academic integrity.

Technology

Perhaps no area of the syllabus has changed more in recent years than the section on how students use technology in our courses. When I became a college teacher, in 1998, the only reference to technology on my syllabi was a requirement that final drafts of essays and research papers be typed or word-processed. (I know, "typed." How quaint.) Now, however, there's a whole section of my syllabus devoted to how to handle email communication and use our learning-management system, how to create accounts for the course-blogging platform, and how to access online readings. Here, too, you must discuss your expectations for technology clearly and thoroughly without becoming pedantic or hectoring students. Make sure your technology policy covers these two areas:

It's best to tackle technology — both how it will be used in the course and how it should be used in the classroom — head on.

- **Logistics.** Be explicit about any technology that students will be asked to use in the course. Do you post assignments and readings on your university's learning-management system? Does your course include

various platforms (e.g., WordPress, Google, YouTube, Blogger, Dropbox) that require students to create an account? Does your institution's email system affect the workflow for your course? Don't assume that students are proficient in — or even aware of — the various applications and platforms you've become used to using. A final point: Most (if not all) of the online tools and platforms that college teachers use require high-speed internet to function. For some students, access to that type of bandwidth is inconsistent at best. The Pew Research Center has found that 75 percent of Americans have home broadband service; if your campus demographics mirror that average, then a quarter of your students have to go elsewhere (like a public library or campus computer lab) for the internet. In other words, the digital divide is real, and it should inform the technology policy on your syllabus (not to mention your course design). On the syllabus, invite students who need assistance obtaining regular broadband access to talk with you about their options.

- **Technology etiquette in your classroom.** There are several schools of thought about how to approach this issue on the syllabus. At one end of the spectrum are faculty members who enforce a technology ban. I understand the sentiment — students looking at eBay or YouTube in class are distracting not only themselves but also to those around them. But students with disabilities may need to use laptops or other technology in class, and so-called "laptop bans" force them to either avoid using those tools (and thus hinder their learning) or out themselves to both the instructor and their classmates. As Rick Godden and Anne-Marie Womack argue in their important article on this subject: "All too often, underlying discussions of appropriate student behavior and traditional best practices are narrow visions of students' abilities and classroom praxis. Seeing a study body as an undifferentiated group leads to strict rules and single solutions." You

wouldn't employ a single pedagogical method throughout the entire semester; you should think about technology policies with the same logic. It's far better for students and their learning that you draft flexible technology-use policies that adjust to both specific contexts and student needs. If you are worried about distracted students, look at class planning and course design rather than trying to craft syllabus policies aimed at the symptoms, rather than the causes, of that distraction.

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Ask your students. One solution to the "what do we do about potential disruptions" conundrum — whether it relates to technology use or student behavior in general — is to invite students to collaborate with you on the policy. Set aside class time early on and allow students to help set the community norms for the course. I've previously written about this practice, which has been a successful one. I've found that students have a sense of ownership over class meetings, hold themselves to a higher standard, and are more invested in learning when they've had a say in coming up with the technology policies and other classroom rules. Then, when a conflict arises, I remind students that they created the class rules. So maybe leave this section of your syllabus blank, with a note that says "to be determined by the class," or the like. Whatever you decide about technology and other sorts of etiquette policies, though, your syllabus should be explicit and transparent about your expectations as well as the philosophy that informs them. Showing students that you made these

decisions intentionally and carefully is the key to a classroom-policies section that complements the rest of an effective syllabus rather than switching the tone from inviting to scolding.

Accessibility and Inclusion

More and more institutions require at least some language on syllabi about accessibility and inclusion. Even without a requirement, devoting space to those issues on your syllabus can pay significant dividends. While the two areas overlap (accessibility can be seen as a subset of inclusion), it's probably best to deal with them distinctly.

Accessibility. Some professors discuss accessibility on their syllabi under the heading of "disability." Not only is that an inherently stigmatizing and exclusionary way to approach the issue, but it undermines a broader conversation you could be having with your class on diverse ways of learning. An accessibility policy that is limited to specific accommodations for students with "official" documented disabilities may satisfy the letter of the law, but it leaves other important issues unaddressed. You and your students are better served thinking about accessibility in the terms proffered by the advocates of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Learning, UDL advocates argue, is something that can occur effectively in a variety of ways rather than in one "true manner" that treats "accommodations" as a less-satisfactory deviation. On your syllabus, rather than a "disability policy," define what "universal" or "diverse" learning looks like in your course. Invite students to discuss any learning issues they have with you, but do so within the larger framework of describing how everyone in the course can fully participate. Reframing "accessibility" as a

matter for the entire class — and not just a few student "exceptions" who need to be "accommodated" — can contribute to the inviting tone and motivational qualities that make for an effective syllabus.

Inclusion. Academe is finally catching up to what student protesters have been saying for years: that a commitment to diversity and inclusion is crucial, both pedagogically and institutionally. Inclusive pedagogy is a worldview rather than a specific set of techniques. But as institutions welcome a student population that is more diverse than ever, and wrestle to reach more learners with less money, creating an inclusive learning environment is especially challenging. And making your position on inclusion clear on your syllabus is an excellent first step. The terms "diversity" and "inclusion" are so ubiquitous they can seem like buzzwords on a syllabus rather than signifiers of a genuine commitment. Consider the following questions to avoid falling into that trap:

- **What does diversity mean for you and for your discipline?** Are you committed to genuine inclusion (all voices will be heard in your course)? That means not only ensuring an environment in which every student might contribute but also representing the scholarly diversity of the discipline itself. Do your course materials show a wide range of scholars/producers and viewpoints? If so, consider calling your students' attention to that commitment on the syllabus as your model for the course.
- **How will you promote inclusivity in your classroom?** Re-emphasizing some of your already stated policies can do some of this work for you. Refer students to your teaching philosophy or your views on

accessibility, for example. If you and your students are setting course expectations collectively, that is another opportunity to both promote and model inclusion, particularly when it comes to laying the ground rules for class discussions. The more inclusive your classroom climate, the likelier it is that your course will be a significant learning experience for all of your students, not just those whose families have a long history of going to college. One way to promote inclusivity is through content warnings, sometimes called "trigger warnings." If you decide to use such warnings, the syllabus is where you introduce them and your rationale for their use. Content warnings have come in for criticism, mostly from arguments based on a caricature rather than on how they are actually used. If your course includes content that is likely to provoke controversy or cause strong emotional reactions, content warnings are entirely appropriate. Note that warnings do not "excuse" students from that particular material, but rather help them prepare themselves to encounter it constructively. Given the increasing number of diagnosed PTSD cases among college students, you should consider how to use powerful or emotionally difficult material so that it actually promotes learning. Your course can be both compassionate and rigorous if you use tools like content warnings to prepare students for the work ahead.

- **What campus resources can assist you?** If some of your students need further assistance, where do they go? The syllabus can highlight such important campus locations as the counseling center, student services and learning support, the tutoring center, multicultural offices and organizations, and so on. Don't assume that your students know about those places or what they offer. Highlighting that information in your syllabus helps reinforce a message of inclusion.

Whatever form it takes, this section of your syllabus should be the product of thoughtful reflection and should effectively convey how and why you value these aspects of the learning environment. Using your syllabus to tell students they *matter* — even via seemingly quotidian means like letting them know you will use their preferred pronouns or emphasizing your commitment to the principles of Title IX — is a powerful way to foster an inclusive course climate. An effective syllabus should do all it can to foster that climate.

Grading and Assessment

This is one of the sections (if not *the* section) to which students turn first, so there's a powerful impetus to set the right tone. Moreover, striving for clarity and transparency in your discussion of assignments and grading will pay off over the duration of the course. You will see less student frustration, anxiety, and/or complaints with a thorough and accessible presentation here. Here are some particular elements to ponder as you frame your grading policies.

Clarity and transparency when it comes to grading will avoid drama later in the course.

Offer a complete assignment list. Ideally, students should be able to peruse this section of your syllabus and know everything they'll be asked to do in the course. That doesn't mean you have to list every assessment one by one — but the number and various types of assignments should be clear. One strategy is to group assignments into categories, specify how many will be required in each category, and briefly describe them. For example:

> ***Examinations:*** *There will be three in-class examinations during the semester, and a final examination at the conclusion of the course (see the course calendar for specific dates). The in-term exams are worth 100 points, and the final exam is worth 150 points. Each exam will contain objective (multiple-choice) and short-answer questions, as well as a brief essay prompt. I will distribute a study guide about a week in advance of each exam, but bear in mind that the best way to prepare for these exams is to keep up with the readings and our in-class activities. We'll take some time in the week before an exam to talk about study strategies, and I'll be happy to answer any review questions you may have. The purpose of these examinations is to assess your command of the material we've covered in a particular unit (the objective and short-answer questions), as well as your ability to synthesize concepts into an evidence-based argument (the essay).*

It's a useful practice to include some mention of the assignment's outcome or purpose. Why are you asking students to do [X]? Or, to put it a different way: When students ask why they have to take a test/write an essay/post on the discussion board, do you have a good answer ready? Think of the assignment description as the pedagogical analog of the dissertation or thesis "elevator talk" — a thorough but pithy overview that gives the details one needs to know at the outset, with the insinuation that more information is to come.

Grading schema and scale. It's easy to lament students' single-minded focus on grades — *we want them to learn, not argue with us about the difference between a B-plus and an A.* — but their fixation merely reflects what they have been told since childhood. Grades and grade-point averages

have always been a metric by which they've been judged. That mindset is worth trying to undo in college, but I don't think it's fair to expect students to not care about grades when they begin our courses. Grades are not only omnipresent but anxiety-inducing as well, which is why it's important to be as clear as possible about how students' work will be assessed. What "counts," and how can students track their progress? Are you using letter grades? Percentages? Points? Tiny multicolored beads? Whichever system you adopt, be sure your syllabus explains it clearly. How many points do they need — or what is the percentage cutoff — for an A, a B, etc.? Does your institution have a standard grading scale, or is this something left up to individual instructors? Do you use simple letter grades, or is there a plus/minus dimension as well? Spelling all of that out in your syllabus creates a useful reference and may decrease the potential for complaints.

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Exceptions and distinct features. If you incorporate any sort of measure that is different from the standard grading procedures that students are used to, be sure to make it clear in this portion of your syllabus. For example:

- Some instructors allow students to revise and submit work that originally received a subpar score. Others allow students to submit corrections and receive partial credit for exam questions they missed. There's a great case for using these types of measures — when students

have the opportunity to reflect upon and learn from failure, it can be powerful.

- The same holds true for any system in which you eliminate or reapportion specific scores. Perhaps you drop the semester's lowest quiz score before averaging a student's grades. Or you use weighted grading, in which an average of all a student's test scores counts for 25 percent of the total grade, their quiz average another 25 percent, and so on. Be sure to explain this clearly in the syllabus so that students won't receive graded assignments back and miscalculate how much weight those scores carry in their overall grade average.

There's nothing wrong with using unconventional grading systems so long as you think you have a good set of pedagogical reasons for doing so. But keep in mind: Students aren't nearly as familiar with different grading approaches as you are, so their use needs to be accompanied by a clear and understandable explanation.

Frequency and distribution of assessments. The number and type of assignments in a course will vary widely by discipline, class level, and other factors. But a few general principles bear directly upon your grading policy. First, it's important to ensure that students have some opportunities early in the course to receive both qualitative and quantitative (graded) feedback. If your institution employs any sort of "early alert" practices, by which instructors can identify students who are struggling academically early in the term so that they can be connected with the appropriate support services, you'll want to ensure that you have enough data to make that system effective. So time your assignments on the syllabus accordingly. In a

larger sense, it's simply good pedagogy to give students a sense of where they stand, preferably via a mix of mostly low-stakes assignments and a few high-stakes ones. Classes in which grades are determined solely by the average score of three or four high-stakes exams make it difficult for students to alter their approach or seek out assistance. (And it's questionable whether those exams accurately measure student learning in a course.) However, courses that offer a range of short, predominantly low-stakes assignments in the early weeks of the term allow students to adjust their approach to the material and help you identify who among them are struggling. As you construct your syllabus, make sure the workload and the pace are appropriate for the type of course and the level of students.

Course Schedule and Calendar

How will your students know what to do, and when? A course schedule and/or calendar is a crucial ingredient. Surprisingly, many institutions list it as an optional component within their recommended syllabus formats. Yet it contains much of the information that research shows students use most frequently — the topic(s) for a particular session, the assessments scheduled that day, and the due dates of assignments and readings. Ignoring it in your syllabus will only confuse and frustrate your students and convey the sort of message you don't want to send: that you're disorganized and don't place a lot of value on regular coursework. Or, worse, that you don't care about students enough to help them plan for the semester. It's vital to include a clear and thorough course schedule and/or calendar.

Including a detailed calendar of classes and assignments helps both you and your students plan appropriately.

At the very least, your syllabus should offer a breakdown of the course by weeks, units, or modules, listing all the readings and assignments associated with each chunk. Ideally, you will provide more detail, such as a session-by-session accounting of topics, assignments, and important course dates. An effective course calendar includes the following elements:

- **Topics or unit descriptions.** The course calendar is an excellent opportunity to present your course organization visually. Perhaps you've listed the various topics in the course description. But seeing them laid out in order and associated with particular dates throughout the term can be even more useful for students. They can also refer to the calendar for a quick reminder of how a particular unit fits into the larger course schema.
- **Due dates for all assignments.** When students look at the course calendar, they should be able to see when each assignment is due and when a test is scheduled. Your exhortations for them to plan for the semester ring hollow if you aren't giving them sufficient resources with which to do so. That holds true for both major and routine work that you assign. Besides the big due dates, they also need to know which specific readings you want them to have finished for class next Tuesday.
- **Any exceptions to the routine schedule.** Is there an off-campus site visit that your students need to attend? Will there be days when class won't meet in person? If so, what are you requiring students to do in lieu of the regular session? Anything you're planning that isn't included in the campus academic calendar needs to be highlighted on your syllabus.
- **Important campus dates and deadlines.** You can use your course calendar to highlight important dates, even if they don't pertain directly to the course. What's the deadline to drop a course (both with

and without a “Withdrawal” on the transcript)? Are there holidays when campus offices (including the library) are closed? When is final-exam week? And if your final exam is on a different day and time than the normal class meetings, is that noted on your calendar? Consider adding major religious holidays, especially if there is a diversity of faith traditions represented among your students.

A clearly formatted and easy-to-read course schedule is a crucial part of your syllabus. Monthly calendar templates work well for this section: You can provide a significant amount of detailed information yet retain a clear and accessible organization. Whichever mode you use, your course schedule/calendar accomplishes several important things: It conveys your expectations regarding coursework; it presents a visual guide to the organization and flow of the course; and it gives students the information they need to plan for the entire term.

Putting It All Together

Creating Your Syllabus

Now that you’ve collected all of the information you need to convey, scheduled the course activities and assignments, and decided how you’ll organize everything, it’s time to create the actual syllabus. Depending upon your institutional and departmental requirements, you may have considerable latitude in how you present this material to your students. Conversely, there may be pretty significant restrictions on appearance and format that you’ll need to take into account. If the former is the case, don’t be shy about design. Try to make your

syllabus as visually compelling and interesting as you can. Sure, you can retain the simple, text-based structure that will make it resemble a rider on an insurance policy. But it's easier than ever to be creative — even unconventional — in presenting information to students. Faculty members have made a graphic syllabus, presented their syllabus as a Prezi, or used specific tools to create a visual and/or interactive syllabus.

You don't need to be a graphic designer or web developer to produce these types of documents. Simple steps like adding color, varying headings, and incorporating images or graphics (think infographics) go a long way toward creating a more interesting and creative syllabus, one that students are more likely to read and remember. Don't be afraid to ask for help. If you have a teaching center on your campus, chances are it has sample syllabi and expertise with the tools you'll need.

How Will Students Access Your Syllabus?

At first glance, the answer may seem obvious: *My students will have access to the syllabus when I pass it out to them the first day of class.* But for those who teach blended or online classes, that's not the case. Moreover, even in traditional face-to-face courses, many instructors are rethinking how and when to make the syllabus available. For online classes, it's generally seen as best practice to send an email and/or post an announcement on the course web page that includes an introduction and directs students to the syllabus. It's a good idea to adopt this practice for in-person classes, too. Consider emailing a PDF of your syllabus, or posting it on your course web page, a week before class begins. You might introduce the document by directing students to a few of the sections you know they'll be most interested in, such as assignments and grading, or the schedule. If you want

to draw their attention to other sections, highlight them in the email. Not every student will read the syllabus before the first day of class, but providing it early can (a) set a professional and organized tone and (b) assist those students who like to plan ahead.

Here are a few specifics to consider if you decide to go the digital route:

- Distribute your syllabus in a way that minimizes any technical or accessibility issues. The best way to make the digital version easily readable is to convert it to a PDF before emailing or posting it. If you distribute the syllabus in its original format — say, in MS Word or Publisher — students who don't have that software won't be able to open it, and there's also the danger of your formatting being disrupted, since these file types can be edited. A PDF will preserve your formatting and is easy for students to read on whatever device they're using; there are lots of PDF reader software and mobile apps that are easy to install and free of charge.
- Another consideration when using electronic documents is their accessibility for visually impaired students using screen-reader technology. (This, of course, holds true for any digital course materials.) Use the "styles" function in whichever document platform you're on to designate the "titles," "headings," and "normal text" as such on your syllabus. Otherwise the student's screen-reading software will read everything back in undifferentiated form, just a monolith of plain text. For any images on your syllabus, be sure that you enter alternative text. You don't need to use phrasing like "a picture of" — screen-reading software will identify an image as such. Instead, think of the alt-text as a brief caption that describes the image ("George Washington commissioned this portrait as a young militia officer in the early 1760s"). There are several useful online guides to using alt-text for

accessibility, including one from the University of Minnesota and a more advanced set of resources from Oregon State University.
- For a general resource — for both nuts-and-bolts matters (like alt-text) and larger considerations about rhetoric, image use, and policies that promote access — I highly recommend Tulane University's Accessible Syllabus Project.

While these considerations may not be at the top of your syllabus-construction agenda, accessibility is and will continue to be an urgently relevant matter for both students and institutions. If you're not in the habit of ensuring that your course materials are accessible, it's time to start. The syllabus is an excellent place to begin.

Getting Them to Read It

There is a cottage industry of "It's in the Syllabus!" gear — T-shirts, coffee mugs — that joke about the seemingly universal student trait of not knowing what's in the document you've spent so much time and energy preparing. But is it really true that students ignore the syllabus? Only if you've given them reason to ignore it. Here are some strategies to make sure they don't:

- **Keep mentioning your syllabus in class.** If you dump the document on students and rarely (or never) refer to it again, you're telling them it doesn't contain any information vital to their success. If you don't treat your syllabus as important, why should they?
- **Don't read the syllabus aloud on the first day of class.** It's one thing to take class time to highlight the important areas of the syllabus. But to spend a class period reading it to students — or going over it so closely as to have the same effect — is overkill. Do that and your students may

decide they've heard everything they need to hear about the syllabus, and put it out of mind. Like your syllabus, the first day of class is an important opportunity to set a particular tone. Try to avoid turning that class session into merely a "syllabus day."

- **Let students know where they can find a backup copy.** One of the prime culprits behind "they don't read the syllabus" is students who lose their copy and don't know (or are too embarrassed to ask) how to get a new one. If you use a learning-management system or some other digital platform for your course, be sure to have a PDF of your syllabus prominently featured on the landing page. Some instructors choose (or are forced by budget cuts) to make their syllabi available only in an online format. In that case, be sure to communicate where to access it, and follow up to ask if they have.
- **Give a syllabus quiz or other low-stakes assignment.** Sometimes students are motivated by grades more than other factors. However much you wish that wasn't so, use it to your advantage by giving a short syllabus quiz in the first week of the term. It's a good way to see who's engaging with the course right away, and who might need extra encouragement. It's also an easy way for students to be successful on their first assignment and perhaps lessen their anxiety over grades (particularly true in subjects that are anxiety-producing or viewed as intimidatingly difficult).
- **Hide an "Easter egg" on your syllabus.** My father likes to tell a story from his undergraduate days when he discovered, about halfway through the semester, a line on the syllabus where his instructor had written something to the effect of "if you read this, let me know by the second week's class meeting and I'll owe you a beer." Of course, no one in the class collected on the offer. Examples abound of instructors who hide "Easter eggs" on their syllabi. In addition to letting students catch a glimpse of your whimsy and humor (like the instructor who asked his

students to send him an image of the ’80s sitcom character Alf), this is a way to gauge how many students have actually read your syllabus. It’s likely most haven’t, at least not at first; but it’s better to know early rather than assume everyone is familiar with your syllabus and charge ahead with the material.

- **Make the syllabus matter throughout the semester.** Be explicit about why your syllabus is as important in the final week of class as it was at the beginning of the term. Students often skim over the course goals and dismiss their importance compared with the “real information” like the course schedule and grading scale. But your goals are a vital part of both the syllabus and the course itself, and should be front of mind for students as well. Use questions on a syllabus quiz in the first week of class to place your learning goals/outcomes on center stage. Linda B. Nilson, in her 2016 book, *Teaching at Its Best*, suggests questions like “Which of the learning objectives for this course are most important to you personally, and why?” That encourages students to see course goals as something relevant to them personally, rather than just static decrees. Then, throughout the semester, keep referring to the course goals in assignments. Explain how an assignment aligns with those goals. For example: *“This essay is meant to help you practice the research-and-analysis skills that are important parts of this course. Recall that one of our course goals is that you will ‘develop the critical-thinking skills necessary to meaningfully analyze historical material and arguments’ [HIST 112 Syllabus, pg. 1]. This assignment is your first chance to show the results of your work in those areas.”* Another strategy: Link a reading assignment to a particular course goal. That’s the key here: You want students to see the alignment between the coursework and the course goals. We’ve internalized that understanding. Our students have not, and they need more explicit signposting.

The Work Isn't Done: Assessing and Revising Your Syllabus

Loopholes

There will very likely come a time when — no matter how thoroughly you think you've explained specific assignments, policies, or other material — a student finds a loophole (or, if you prefer, an ambiguity) in the syllabus. I experienced this the first semester that I asked students to submit assignments via our campus learning-management system. My usual practice had been for them to hand in assignments by the end of class on the due date, and I simply assumed this would continue with digital submissions. As it turned out, students interpreted the "due date" on the syllabus as meaning they could submit the assignment any time that day, so long as it was before 11:59:59 p.m. Digital submissions were time-stamped, so their interpretation made perfect sense. Of course, it took me asking *"Why did most of you not turn in the essay?"* — and then receiving bewildered responses along the lines of *"Um, we still have time, don't we?"* — to realize what was happening. In the end, I've left the end-of-day specification for due dates, as it makes more sense and is what my students are used to. But the larger point: Be prepared to adjust your policies on the basis of new technology or other changes that lead to loopholes on your syllabus.

When a student challenges an ambiguity on your syllabus, the first question to ask is whether you have, indeed, presented information unclearly. If your language is unambiguous and the student has simply misinterpreted that portion of the syllabus, a constructive conversation can be had. But if a student challenges you over phrasing that is genuinely open to interpretation — like a wishy-washy due date or a late-work penalty — don't get defensive and reject the request. Rather, work with that student and then go back and fix the syllabus issue before you offer the course again. It's both unfair and unethical to penalize a student for a misunderstanding that's your responsibility, as frustrating as that might be to admit in the moment.

Conversely, be careful about the exceptions you make to your syllabus policies. As the instructor, you certainly have the discretion to work with students whose life experiences have interfered with their studies. But it's problematic if you allow one student to make up an examination because she overslept, while denying that chance to another. Students expect fairness and consistency — and that's a professional obligation for any instructor. If you have a blanket (pun intended) makeup policy for students who overslept, that's great — so long as it's offered consistently. Also, if you're lax about your stated policies until late in the semester, when you suddenly become a stickler, that will only confuse and frustrate your students. Again, the key is to remain fair and consistent. One final

consideration: If your syllabus specifies penalties for late work, and you never enforce them, then you might be placing colleagues who do in an awkward position.

Revisions on the Fly

Perhaps it's not a student, but you who notices a vague or contradictory passage on the syllabus after the course has started. Or maybe it becomes clear after three weeks that the reading assignments are overly ambitious. Sometimes weather-related campus closures play havoc with the class schedule. There's nothing wrong with revising your syllabus in the midst of a semester. Indeed, attempting to rigidly adhere to something that's obviously not working is a recipe for disaster. Just be transparent about any changes, and make them for clear reasons. Ideally, involve students in the conversation if the needed change stems from something they've identified as a difficulty. Post any revisions in the same manner as the original syllabus, and clearly identify the changes as addenda to the document. You will find yourself on firmer ground here if you include a statement on your original syllabus that reserves the right to modify its contents — something to the effect of: *"This syllabus, like our course, should be seen as an evolving experience, and from time to time changes might become necessary. As instructor, I reserve the right to modify this syllabus, with the stipulation that any changes will be communicated to the entire class clearly and in writing."* That way you can make revisions while remaining fair and consistent.

What to Keep, What to Change

After the semester ends, it's good practice to critically reflect on your syllabus (and the course itself) and discern what worked well and what didn't:

- Did your syllabus achieve did everything you intended it to?
- Were there sections that students either missed or had difficulty understanding?
- Did your course policies — articulated on your own or in collaboration with students — foster effective learning?
- Were there any issues that arose during the semester that might inform future versions of your syllabus? Perhaps a class discussion degenerated into a hostile argument. Should you revisit your discussion policies or the way you framed the topic?
- Were too many students routinely late to class? Maybe you should rework your policies on attendance and lateness in the next iteration of the syllabus.

Even though the end of a course is often a flurry of grading and other work, take the time to reflect on how the syllabus worked while it's still fresh in your mind. It's also worth keeping tabs on what changes are occurring in the departmental and/or institutional environment. Perhaps there's a new, department-wide attendance policy that you'll need to incorporate in syllabi, or new boilerplate that your college is requiring you to include on your next syllabus (a frequent occurrence). No doubt you hope students will reflect on what they've learned in your course, but you should take the time to do that, too.

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