High-Impact Learner-Centered Syllabus Toolkit

A clear syllabus sets the tone and demonstrates a commitment to student-centered learning. Your syllabus can be a helpful tool and guide for you and your students throughout the semester.

Kevin Gannon, author of *Radical Hope* (and keynote Speaker at CHIIPs 2022!), writes of the syllabus in his Advice Guide for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

> 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?*

Included in this toolkit are strategies, actionable items, and examples of suggested wording for course content, communication, and teaching practices. You do not have to list every numbered item in your syllabus. Instead, you may choose what works best for you and communicate the information during class, through a video recording in D2, or both.

In addition, we will bring in advice and sample language from guides by Gannon and others, which we encourage you to read in full.

Contents

Make Your Syllabus Matter

Before teaching the course:

- o Work collectively with your colleagues to ensure content is relevant and student-centered focused.
- o Flexibility with "guardrails." Design the course with structure and policies that allow room for unexpected circumstances without ruining a student's chance of success.
- o Consider the workload. Estimate the amount of preparation required for the course, remembering that students are often enrolled in several courses and have out-of-class responsibilities. Use the Wake Forest Course Workload Estimator tool to assist.
- o Welcome students with a friendly email before the semester begins. Suggestions for this include:
  - o Personalize it by sending it to each student individually (for smaller classes).
  - o Go light on the details (save these for the syllabus), focus on the big picture and engagement.
  - o Your personality and story: Why do you like teaching this class? What got you into this field? What do you hope students will learn and get out of the class? What advice do former students typically give? Are you more of a dog person or cat person?
  - o Make the language welcoming and inclusive with a warm tone of voice throughout. For example: "*Welcome to our class... welcome back to ETSU...*"; "*I am glad you will be joining us for this class...*"; "*Here are some of the topics/subjects/content we will investigate in this class...*"; "*As a student you can be successful in this class by...*"; "*Please let me know any questions or special needs you may have...*"; "*I'm just using your name as it appears on the roster. If you go by another name, just let me know.*"
- o See some examples on this Start of the Semester checklist from the CTE.
- o Record a syllabus video (3-5 minutes) highlighting the essentials students will want to know.

On the first day:

- o Introduce and review your syllabus. Strive to anticipate learning needs by including content, policy explanations, and tools they will find useful for active, purposeful, and effective learning.
- o Connect your students with the syllabus by engaging in active learning, a group discussion, a scavenger hunt, an online poll, etc. Example questions:
  - o Why is logging in regularly and reading announcements helpful to succeeding online?
  - o When is the first reading assignment due? What is included in the assignment?
- o Use a questionnaire (open-ended or adapted to a scale) to discover individual students' academic goals, concerns, or information that could help you plan relevant learning opportunities. Examples:
  - o How does this course fit into your academic plans?

o   Identify at least three strategies you plan to try/use to ensure your success in this course.

During the semester:

o   Refer to your syllabus often, modeling to students its importance as a source of information:
  o   At the beginning of class, project the syllabus page to show the class plan for the day.
  o   At the end of class, project the syllabus page to review, preview future topics, and remind students of upcoming assessments to solicit questions.
o   After each class session, write notes on your syllabus: What went well? What didn't seem to go well? What questions or requests did students ask? What can you improve to help your students? Use these notes to improve your syllabus and assess the implementation of making changes. Consider using these notes as a source to document the progression of your teaching.
o   Commit to continuous growth by inviting periodic feedback about the course and student learning. See the support resources on the CTE website such as Mid-Semester Feedback Discussions.
o   At the end of the semester, show the course objectives and ask students to rate how well they fulfilled each objective and why. This exercise can help review objectives for the student (and inform next year's objectives). Please encourage students to save the syllabus for their records.

Overall Tone and Format

Tone: Use a positive and supportive tone in your syllabus. Examples: "Late work is eligible for 60% of the original points;" "You have what it takes to succeed in this course without engaging in academic misconduct. Do not jeopardize the hard work you've put into this course." Consider switching from "this course will…" to "we will…"

> Gannon (2023) advises to avoid a scolding tone, writing: "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."

Accessible course design: Ensure *all* your students can participate, engage, and enjoy your course's many opportunities and experiences. Limit the number of barriers a student might encounter by thoughtfully structuring course plans, communication (verbal and text), and affordable and accessible educational materials.

o   See Accessibility at ETSU

- See [AccessibleSyllabus.com](#): Accessible classroom resources promote student engagement and agency
- See [UDL Syllabus](#) for suggestions from Universal Design for Learning

> Gannon: 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. (Gannon, 2023)

Course and Instructor Information

Logistics:

- East Tennessee State University, College, Department
- Course name (Full course title, course abbreviation with number/section – XXXXX-1010-01)
- Semester/term, academic year
- Number of credit hours
- Meeting days/times: [See ETSU Schedule of Classes](#).
- Location with delivery mode: In-person (room number/building), hybrid, online (synchronously or asynchronous), etc.
- Lab/discussions/recitations/studios, etc., with days/times and locations (if applicable), including equipment training information, safety instructions, etc.

> 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.) (Gannon, 2023)

Instructor information: Full name(s), pronouns, campus office location(s), email, and office telephone number for each instructor, co-teacher(s), and grad assistant(s).

- o **The best way for students to connect with you is:** To email or attend the student office hours or use D2L Inbox (Instruct students on enabling D2L's notifications so they will receive them).
- o **Provide a response timeframe:** Generally, how quickly will you respond to students?
    - o Example: Please reach out again if I do not respond within 48 hours. My inbox may be full, but I want to hear from you. I would appreciate the gentle reminder.
    - o Tip: It's okay to only *sometimes* be available. You do not need to operate a 24-hour help desk. Take the time to set boundaries to preserve your creativity and autonomy.

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. (Gannon, 2023)

Student office hours: Promote your outside-of-class hours for those seeking help or wanting to discuss your discipline, questions, concerns, or share any feedback. Maximize the number of students in an office or via web conferencing software (scheduled or drop-in).

- o Example: Student office hours: Tuesdays & Thursdays from 1-2:30 p.m. in my office or via Zoom. If these times conflict, please let me know, and we will try to find another time to meet. If you have questions or comments, I encourage you to use this time early and often.

Course Plan

Course prerequisites and foundational knowledge:

- o List the course, skills, permissions, etc. (if applicable).
  - o Example: It is a requirement that you complete <<PREREQUISTE>> before enrolling in this course. If you are underprepared for this course's underlying concepts, visit me to discuss resources that may help build foundational knowledge from << PREREQUISITE>>.
- o Determine prior knowledge. Assess via a quiz, questionnaire, or assignment the class as a whole and individual students' prerequisite and baseline knowledge, skills, and attitudes.
- o Demonstrate the basic skill techniques as you teach new concepts with "how-to" details in all student examples and assignment answers. The "how-to" may be more than some students require, but when the subject is still new, outlining the details enables them to comprehend the method and validates their thinking.

Teaching and Learning approach: Share your teaching approach and what they can expect from the learning environment, the course, and you. If you are teaching online, this component is especially effective for creating and building your presence in the course.

- o Example: We will use asynchronous discussions to practice critical thinking and communication skills while following proper netiquette.

Use active learning High-Impact Teaching Practices: such as think-pair-share, guided inquiry, and reflection to build community and connect to content. They will learn more, be more engaged, develop a peer network, and succeed.

- o Example: Intentionally pause for 90 seconds twice while teaching for 50 minutes. During those 90 seconds, request that your students review their notes, then ask a neighbor if they discovered anything unclear in those notes. Researchers found that students will recall more content if brief engagement activities are introduced into the lecture (Prince, 2004).

Course-level objectives: Use [Iowa State University CELT's Tips on writing course goals](#)

- o List 4-5 broad-based intended course-level learning objectives to reflect what students will know and demonstrate by completing the learning activities. Consider including life skill development such as team collaboration, critical thinking, etc. Use a grid with each objective connected to the assessments to achieve them, for example:

Course Objectives	Activities or assessments to achieve the course objectives
You will trace the development of xxxxxx throughout the xxxxxx	Textbook readings & weekly quizzes
You will use clear communication techniques (written/verbal) to foster inquiry, collaboration, and engagement in this discipline.	In-class group work, papers, and the final project

Outcomes: Include university-wide, college, and program-level outcomes.

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. (Gannon, 2023)

Course Materials

Specify require course materials: Textbooks, lab/studio supplies, field equipment, etc.

- o Tip: To save students time and money, please clarify the difference between *required* and *recommended* course materials and your expectations of what they need to succeed. Be transparent about cost, how to access, and other technical requirements.

ETSU Course Reserves & Guides: See the Sherrod Library Faculty Guide

Open and Affordable Course Materials Program: This ETSU initiative assists and awards instructors to find and implement freely accessible textbooks, media, and other resources for teaching learning. See more at the website.

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. (Gannon, 2023)

Course Policies

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 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. (Gannon, 2023)

Academic Integrity

Academic and classroom conduct: Clearly state your expectations for class attendance, absences, academic dishonesty, classroom disruption, and course ownership. Review the [Student Code of Conduct and Honor Code and Pledge](#).

- Tip: Give students options if possible (e.g., attendance policy that allows missed day(s) without penalty, flexible or self-paced deadlines, and options for topics or modalities, such as written versus oral presentation).
- Tip: Consult this [Achieving Academic Integrity](#) page from Iowa State University.
- Tip: Share expected conduct for a conducive learning environment; see the [Effectively Managing Disruptive Classroom Behavior toolkit](#) (PDF).
- See below for suggested language.

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.

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. (Gannon, 2023)

Assignments

- o **Offer multiple lower-stakes opportunities.** Create opportunities and reinforce the process (with how to details) for students to practice, receive feedback, and practice again. With multiple lower stakes assessments spread over the semester, it is less problematic for a student to miss one than the possible negative outcomes of only high-stakes exams.
- o **Be transparent:** Create assignments and teach with a transparency framework (tilthighered.com):
  - o Purpose: Why do they have to do the assignment? (e.g., content, skills, and relevancy)
  - o Tasks: What are they supposed to do, and how do they do it?
  - o Criteria: How are they being evaluated? (e.g., criteria for success, grading rubric)

Attendance

Gannon: 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.

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. (Gannon, 2023)

Feedback

- o **Give timely and specific feedback:** Frequent feedback provides students with a way to monitor their learning (e.g., graded and non-graded quizzes, tests, projects, online polling, reflection papers, etc.). They can adjust their learning strategies or seek additional support.
- o **Deliver feedback tactfully and empathetically:** Provide straightforward comments based on the assignment criteria. Encourage perseverance, focusing on developing efficacy and self-awareness. Consider a process and time for students to debrief, revise, and redo.
  - o Tip: See this [Teaching Essentials guide on feedback early and often](#).

Grading

- o **Provide clarity:** List all course requirements contributing to a student's grade:

  - o Briefly describe each graded item (e.g., quizzes, exercises, projects, papers, etc.).

  - o Describe where students submit assignments/projects (e.g., D2L, in-person).

  - o Specify when, how, and where exams will be administered and how you (or proctors) will verify students for exam purposes (e.g., ETSU Card).

  - o State when assignments are regularly due and when students can expect your feedback. These dependable routines and expectations can help students plan and prioritize.

  - o Do you assess participation? Explain why participation is useful and what counts (Gillis, 2019): Do you include attendance and timeliness, preparation for class meetings, small group work, and full-class discussions? Or provide opportunities to participate in other ways (e.g., attending student (office) hours, using the writing and media center or the academic success center, peer editing papers, or talking about course content with students outside of class).

  - o Clarify make-up options, extra credit, exams, and incomplete marks for students; see the [ETSU Catalog's Grading information](#).

- o **Provide explicit grading requirements:** Ensure grading criteria and evaluation methods are explicit and connected directly to learning objectives.

- o Consider removing penalties, not grading all assigned work, and giving additional options for students to achieve points.

- o Share tools such as grading rubrics, assignment descriptions, and criteria to help your diverse community of learners.

- o Include components of the final grade, weights assigned to each course element, and whether grading is on a curve or scale, determine the distribution from a fixed mean, or assign a predetermined fixed percentage of the letter grade (A, B, C, etc.).

- o Use a pie chart to display each course element's weights (percentages).

- o **Provide up-to-date grades:** This step allows students to calculate their overall course grades.

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.

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.

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. (Gannon, 2023)

Group Work and Peer Interactions

- o **Foster a Community of Learners:** Support your students' interactions with peers with strategies for developing a [community of learners](#) in any setting.

- o **Group projects and expectations:** Detail group work and course relevancy. Task students with well-defined activities to discuss strengths, personal learning goals, anticipated contributions, and formative feedback.
  - o Example: Students enjoy being engaged to practice using their new knowledge and skills, helping them to connect how your course applies to what they'll do after graduation. Share explicitly with students "WHY" you assign group work. What will students learn/gain from the experience? Foster the "HOW" students can communicate, listen, and create meaningful interactions with each other in collaborative activities during structured class time.
- o **Reflect on peer interactions:** Give students regular opportunities to reflect upon ways their peers enhance their learning at the end of a class with questions, such as: "What did you learn from someone else today? How did your peers support your learning today?"

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. (Gannon, 2023)

Course Schedule with Weekly Overview

o **Promote student-centered deadlines:** Set deadlines for assignments at a time of day that connects to and promotes student learning. For example, instead of a Friday at midnight deadline, set and state in class: This assignment is due by 5:00 p.m. on Thursday to check your understanding of the topic before we move on to the next unit on Tuesday.

o **Provide a calendar (e.g., week by week):** Outline substantive topics, reading requirements, assignment due dates, dates/times of any exams scheduled outside of class time, etc., in the visual planning grid (below). If necessary, revise it and ensure students receive the update.

  ▪ Demonstrate the significance of student ratings and include the survey dates in your course calendar; see Online SAI How Tos for Faculty.
  ▪ Use the Interfaith Calendar website to consider potential conflicts when scheduling projects, presentations, and exams.
  ▪ **Example visual planning grid:** Project the syllabus page to show or review the class plan, preview future topics, and remind students of upcoming assessments to solicit questions.

Week #	Date with time & location	Topic & Agenda summary	Readings & recommended course material	List Assignments
Week 5	Sept. 22 (in-person)	Making it work: Nerve-muscle synapse	Required: Ch.3 in book Recommended: Course reserves #4	Quiz 1 due after class During class: Lecture, poll

				questions, & group work

- o **Include a subject-to-change disclaimer.** Example: In extenuating circumstances, our schedule, policies, or procedures in this course are subject to change. We will make every effort to keep assignment due dates and scheduled exams. Any modifications will be communicated in writing, verbally in class, and published in the D2L course.

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.

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. (Gannon, 2023)

Tips for Success

Academic support: Help students achieve the highest level of academic success of which they are capable by promoting and embedding resources throughout your course:

- o [Center for Academic Achievement](#)
- o [Sherrod Library](#)
- o [Disability Services](#)
- o [Graduate Student Success Specialist](#)
- o [Undergraduate Student Success Specialist](#)

Care: Encourage your students to practice self-care. Where barriers to such self-care exist, seek to put in place practices and resources to remove such barriers:

- o Empower students to develop strategies for overcoming obstacles to their academic success with self-care tools available 24/7 from a platform such as [TAO](#).
- o Tip: Prioritize your well-being. Model the essentialness of self-care, sufficient sleep, and exercise to reduce your emotional reactivity and improve class, workplace, and campus climate. Use resources from [ETSU Behavioral Health & Wellness Clinic](#).

Share success strategies: Make clear your obligations to successfully teach the course and your expectations of students in your course. State these in your syllabus and discuss them throughout the semester with your students. If you feel comfortable, share a story about when you needed help while in school (or doing research). Doing so is a powerful way to show students that seeking help is a sign of strength and holistically connects them to you.

Including HITPs in Your Syllabus

We encourage you to adapt these suggestions for syllabus statements about your use of HIPs in accordance with other best practices about syllabus design including using a **warm tone** and **transparently communicating** the rationale behind your approach to teaching and learning.

Share why you think your approach to teaching works for learning, citing research which shows these are among the most effective means for student learning and success. Depending on your teaching context, you may want to acknowledge how this approach may initially seem unfamiliar and at times challenging, but your intention is to create an inclusive learning environment conducive to learning for all.

Along with sample language, please see sample headers you could use in your syllabus for this short section. See the HITPs Toolkit for more examples and resources.

Example Syllabus Statements:

- **Class Instruction**
  Throughout presenting topics in this course I will frequently pause and ask students to reflect on the topics. This may take the form of writing, responding to a poll question, a low-stakes quiz, or turning and talking to a partner. We will do little activities such as this for many reasons. It helps you better retain information and think critically about what you are learning. A lot of research into how learning works supports these methods. Perhaps most importantly, it makes class more fun and engaging.
- **Teaching Practices in This Class**
  In this class, we leverage the benefits of social interaction for learning. Beyond lecture presentations from the instructor, we will use evidence-based high impact instructional methods such as guided inquiry, focused discussion, and think-pair-share. With these methods, we aim to facilitate peer-level support, encourage diverse perspectives, foster a sense of community, and provide a safe platform for the exploration and exchange of ideas.

Syllabus Attachment Statements

Syllabus Attachment Information:

- Important Dates
- ETSU Divisive Concepts Syllabus Statement
- Diversity Statement
- Academic Integrity and Misconduct
- Discrimination and Harassment
- Student Rights and Freedoms
- Prerequisites
- Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities
- Permits and Overrides
- Class Attendance
- Where to go for help?
- Sexual Misconduct/Title IX Statement
- Technical Resources
- ETSU COVID Response

Gannon on getting students to read the syllabus: 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.

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Center for Teaching Excellence at East Tennessee State University | www.etsu.edu/teaching | teaching@etsu.edu | 423-439-8488