



What Will the Syllabus Say to Students?

We rely on this one document to do so much. In creating a [syllabus template](#) for a campus, we include all of the policy language an instructor might want to include. During a pandemic, that policy language has only increased. In this uncertain time, we want to provide students the ground rules for campus safety and information about online methods for teaching and learning. We also want to provide this information as early as possible (see our [Reaching Out to Students Before the Semester teaching tip](#) for some ideas).

This year we have added a section clarifying course format, protocol for campus safety, sample attendance policies, a new non-discrimination statement (thanks to the leadership of PJ Roberts and others in OU Student Congress), and more “netiquette” guidelines.

The syllabus and its policies are meant to provide structure, transparency, and accountability. A template is a starting point, with which every instructor should make their own, and perhaps students make their own as well. What are you communicating to students in your syllabus decisions? Is it document that invites coming back to, or the terms of service they must accept to essentially be in the class? Here are three ideas to consider:

Communicate Care during COVID-19

When courses suddenly moved off campus in March, some faculty were sharing ways they communicated the new “rules” to students. A UNC Chapel Hill faculty member’s [Adjusted Syllabus Statement](#) was widely circulated. [Faculty in a graduate program at University of Colorado, Denver wrote of six statements of how faculty would be compassionate in their teaching during this time](#). One of these faculty, Remi Kalir, [adjusted the final project to include course concepts as it relates to the pandemic](#).

While we are more accustomed to the idea of social distancing and other aspects of pandemic life, these statements are still relevant and important. New challenges are

arising, such as parents having to coordinate their children's schooling at home while trying to continue with their own courses. (Not requiring cameras will help with the bandwidth strain to come.) Acknowledge how the pandemic may affect the learning environment and the ways which you will create a supportive environment for students. You are likely already doing this with careful course planning, but communicating it directly will make it clear to students that you have been putting their success and safety first.

Simplify Things for Students

[This engaging syllabus design example](#) seeks to strike a balance of providing the information students need without making it difficult to find the most relevant information. Banner art helps distinguish the syllabus from other course syllabi. It opens with a message that links to important parts of the syllabus. It communicates hope and anticipation--what we really need to get us through stressful times and focus on the learning. Policy language is condensed to main points and linked out to full policies on university webpages. A Google Doc makes it easy to update, annotate, and consult on different devices.

[OU biology instructor Dr. Sarah Hosch uses a more visual syllabus](#) to communicate grades and distinguish syllabus sections.

There are many ways to simplify the syllabus, and any of these ways shows students you want them to engage with it rather than it being legalese.

Let Students Work on the Syllabus

Cate Denial, history professor writing the book *Pedagogy of Kindness*, starts the semester by having students annotate the syllabus, noting what they like and look forward to, what they have questions about, and even proposed changes. ([She shares this in a recent podcast episode](#), which also includes a transcript to get to this section.) A syllabus in Google Docs allows students to do this synchronously or asynchronously, but similar conversations can happen in a live class discussion or in a discussion forum.

If this seems like a step too far, consider other ways students can work on the syllabus, such as picking the banner art, adding optional readings or multimodal texts to compliment assigned readings, or discussing specific policies related to class discussions.

During complicated times, it is helpful to step back to see the larger picture and communicate what really matters.

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