



Sharing Your Vision Through a Syllabus Letter

I have read and written a lot of teaching tips on sending early messages to students and preparing an effective syllabus, so when I came across this one from the author's [Learning That Matters Resources webpage](#), I was delighted at its fresh approach. In it I found useful ways to reflect on our choices on how we make a first impression on our students. This teaching tip reminds us of the underlying messages in the syllabus and advises us on things to include or exclude in our first class messages to set the right tone and prepare students for an exciting semester. - Christina Moore, CETL associate director and editor of this CETL Teaching Tips Blog.

The Syllabus Letter and Introductory Video

I don't know about you, but in my institution, syllabi have become fairly drab, filled with loads of verbiage we are required to cut and paste into it. Add to that the fact that most students don't read the syllabus or only read a few select parts, and you'll find that the syllabus itself isn't doing anything terribly meaningful, although that isn't to say that we shouldn't try to make them more invitational. Many years ago I decided to experiment with something I dubbed the syllabus letter. I quickly discovered that students were remarkably interested in reading such a letter, and it gave me the opportunity to give a positive first impression of myself and the course. Your best bet is going to be to look at a few examples first before you read on, just to get a sense of what these look like. Visit the [Learning That Matters: Resources page](#), and scroll down to "Portable Outcomes: Ch. 4."

A note on an introductory video

Consider both a letter and an introductory video. The video will be more about introducing YOU while the letter will introduce the course. Both should focus on giving students a great first impression: that you are an interesting person who is passionate about work and life, that your goal is to help them learn as much as possible, and that the course will be fascinating and meaningful.

Underlying messages

We know from research that students learn best in an environment where they feel the environment is welcoming, the material is seen as having utility value, the student believes they are capable of succeeding, and the teacher is credible (cares about them, knows their subject, knows how to teach their subject). Therefore, you can get them on the right track by finding ways to send the following messages:

- I care about you as a person and a learner
- I know my subject well, I am passionate about it, and I'm good at helping people learn it
- This isn't a class designed around weeding people out; my goal is to do whatever I can to help you succeed
- You will be able to succeed in this class by working hard, applying the feedback you receive, and utilizing evidence-based learning methods; a special talent for the subject is not required. (If a student can't succeed without a certain level of prior knowledge and skill then those should be prerequisites for the course.)
- This course will be useful to you.
- You belong in this course. People like you have had success in this field.

Topics to consider for your letter

The main goal of your letter should be to share your vision of what this course could ideally be, so focus primarily on that. Below are questions that should definitely be answered somewhere at some point. Think about which you want to include in your letter and which you may want to briefly discuss during the first week or two of class.

- Let me tell you about how I hope you will be different as a result of taking this course and what I hope you will be able to do with what you learn years from now - what students can expect to get out of the course, including what students have said they gained from it in the past
- This is why I love teaching this particular class
- Here is why this content matters
- Let me explain how this content relates to other fields and other courses you have taken or may take
- This is the primary portable outcome I will help you develop
- Here is what you can expect from me
- These are some things about this class that are unusual with an explanation of why I am doing them
- This is how the course is structured and why

Topics you may want to exclude

Don't go too deep into the weeds with expectations, or the letter will move from being inspirational to preachy. But do choose one or two expectations that are both very important to you and that can be stated in a way that is positive and encourages students to be their best selves. Most of the topics listed here are important, but they should be discussed one by one over time so they don't get lost in the shuffle or feel overwhelming.

- Expectations for communicating with you and with one another
- Expectations related to level of participation in class
- Expectations about the quantity and quality of work you expect from your students
- Expectations related to working in teams

Topics to *exclude*

These are topics that are important but dull. They should be in your actual syllabus on in a “getting started” document.

- What technology students will need for the course, how to obtain any needed technology they don’t already have, and how to get technical support if needed
- Policies specific to your course (as opposed to policies required in the syllabus) such as your policy for late work, missing class, etc.
- Expectations related to the use of cell phones, laptops, etc.

Shooting an introductory video

A video can be a nice addition to a syllabus letter. The video would focus on four things: a. your professional interests (what you love about your field, how you got into it, what you love about teaching this particular class), b. your personal interests (family, hobbies, travel, where you are from, etc.), c. what makes you credible, and d) helping students feel welcomed and supported.

- The video should be two minutes or less and very informal. Students are accustomed to informal videos shot on the fly and they *like* them. Do not go to great lengths to make your video great
- Lay your phone sideways on a steady surface somewhere with a pleasant background and no noise.
- You’ll want filtered light shining on you, not behind you.
- Have someone help you sit or stand so that your torso fills the screen. The other person can tilt the camera if needed as long as it stays on the surface.
- Use the other person’s phone so you can see a timer, and then just talk naturally to the other person (who should have their face right behind the camera).
- If you make a significant mistake, have your assistant stop the camera and start over from the beginning, but don’t stop if you make the kind of mistake people naturally make in conversations. Keep going until you have two or three takes with no stops.

Send the letter and the video to the class a day or two prior to the course beginning if possible. Also, post the letter and the video in your course LMS so that if students want to look at them again later, they can.

I would love to hear how this goes for you or see what your letter looks like. Please consider sharing your experience with me at cynthia.alby@gcsu.edu

About the Author

Dr. Cynthia J. Alby is one of the authors of [Learning that matters: A field guide to course design for transformative education](#). Dr. Alby is a Professor of Teacher Education at Georgia College. She is also the Lead Developer for Georgia's "Governor's Teaching Fellows Program" at the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. Her primary research question is, "How might we re-enchant learning in order to help faculty and students flourish?" Cynthia and her husband, Charlie, live on a farm called "[Shangri-Baa](#)" where they raise a critically endangered breed of sheep and livestock guardian dogs.

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