



Guide to Writing Your Syllabus

Kim Case and Katherine Maynard, Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence.¹

Getting started: Your approach

What role(s) do you intend your syllabus to play in your course? However you choose to approach your syllabus, it's always important to remember that your syllabus is one of the first (if not THE first) encounter a student will have with you and your teaching. Thus, ideally, you'll find a way to make your syllabus an expression of who you are as a professor.

Before you begin crafting your syllabus, take a moment to think about the function of the syllabus for your course and how you can ensure that the syllabus fulfills that function.

A syllabus can have multiple functions for your course. Among other things, it can be:

- An invitation to learning
- An explanation of the goals and objectives of the course
- A chance to introduce the essential questions of the course
- A road map for the semester
- An introduction to you as a professor, a scholar, and/or a researcher
- A contract between you and your students
- An overview of your expectations for the class
- A presentation of important course and institutional policies
- A way to connect the course to the department curriculum

Writing our syllabi offers us a chance to think more deeply about our vision for the course, and it gives us a chance to communicate our expectations and goals to our students. This guide will walk you through the basics of writing a syllabus for your courses at VCU. To go more in depth, be sure to check out the suggestions in the “bibliography and further reading” section of this guide.

Making your syllabus inclusive

Faculty around the university are including an anti-racism syllabus statement. While there isn't a standard for an anti-racism statement, you can use the [faculty senate statement](#) as a guide or develop your own. [The following recommendations](#) were developed as a collaborative effort between the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence, The Office of Institutional Equity, Effectiveness and Success, and additional units across VCU:

- Acknowledge current events and specifically name them (such as George Floyd's murder, Black Lives Matter, anti-Black racism and anti-Asian hate crimes and violence, the uprising in Richmond and the reclaiming/renaming of Marcus David Peters Circle).

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- Recognize the impact of these events on students and how that impact is different for different students.
- Center the experiences and needs of the most vulnerable students when developing the norms of how to approach these topics in your class. (This might mean not talking about it because those students would like a space where they don't have to address these concerns.)
- Acknowledge your (the instructor's) own personal forms of privilege and ways in which you will take accountability for it, especially as it relates to the course and your role as a teacher.
- Take responsibility for your own learning rather than inviting or expecting students to teach you or asking an individual to speak for those who look like them.
- Reflect on what you are going to do differently and then state that explicitly.
- Acknowledge ways your own discipline has perpetuated racism and any current anti-racism initiatives developing within your discipline.
- Provide guidelines for students about how they can talk to you about these issues. For example, make it clear that while you understand the power difference between student and teacher, you still encourage them to engage in approaching those in power with questions and feedback.

Additional inclusive statements to consider:

- You might add **an inclusive teaching statement**: for pointers on how to create a successful statement, you can watch this recorded workshop about how to [personalize your inclusive teaching statement and humanize your syllabus](#). [Additional examples](#) are available through the CTLE.
- You might consider adding a [land acknowledgement specific to VCU](#) to your syllabi and course materials. You can find [some examples here](#).
- You can also tell students about the VCU [Call me by my name initiative](#).

As one of the core documents of your course, your syllabus should invite all students to feel fully included in your course. Dr. Kim Case, created a helpful checklist called the [Syllabus Challenge: Infusing Inclusive Practices](#). In it she highlights the many ways that inclusion is an ongoing iterative process. Potential improvements go beyond the syllabus and require in depth attention at all levels of instruction, including but not limited to, schedules, assignments, texts, multimedia accessibility, vocabulary, recognition of identity, office hours, assessment, pedagogy, and so much more...Each item in this checklist will have a meaningful impact for students in your classroom.

We suggest reading the above documents before you begin writing your syllabus, and then again as you finalize it to make sure that you are reaching as much of the student population as possible. Inclusivity is a process and each syllabus will be an improvement over the last. You might also check out this recording of a previous CTLE workshop on [Carrot not stick: syllabus policies for inclusivity](#).

Making your syllabus learner-centered

Mary Bart offers [five principles of learner-centered syllabi](#) that may be helpful to keep in mind:

- provide a rationale for course objectives and assignments
- allow for shared decision making
- warn students of potential pitfalls in the course
- offer students a chance to set class expectations
- recommend ways for students to stay on track and succeed in the class.

Your student learning outcomes

The syllabus policy statement for VCU requires a statement of student learning outcomes (SLO). These outcomes might be provided to you by your department, in which case, you might consider any additional outcomes that are important to your course. [This guide from Cornell](#) can walk you through the process of writing those learning outcomes. You might also find it helpful to see some examples of SLO statements like [these from the University of Wisconsin-Madison](#) or [these examples from Chapman University](#) (which emphasize General Education requirements).

No matter what your course's learning outcomes, learners can benefit from a clear explanation of the rationale for those outcomes. When students understand the “why” of course objectives and assignments, you've invited them into your course as participants and collaborators in learning.

Course schedule

Creating a course schedule can be daunting, and many times, instructors hesitate to offer too much detail for fear that they will be forced to follow the schedule too closely. It's entirely fair to tell students that the schedule is subject to change depending on their needs and their progress. That being said, do keep in mind that changing the dates of major assignments (or leaving them unknown) can be particularly difficult for students balancing jobs, families, and other commitments, so if you do make adjustments, we recommend communicating those changes clearly and considering allowing students ample time to adapt their schedules to new deadlines and assignments.

As you work on your course schedule, balance is important—for you and your students! Here is a checklist meant to help you think about how to make your course load manageable for everyone:

- ☒ Are your assignments spaced out throughout the semester so you and the students are able to get regular feedback on student performance in the class?
- ☒ Are your assignments spaced in a way to give your students sufficient time to complete one task before launching into the next?
- ☒ Do you provide a good balance of low stakes and higher stakes work so students can test out their knowledge and skills in a lower pressure environment before a big assessment?

- ☒ Have you given yourself enough time to grade/give feedback so students can use that feedback to improve on the subsequent assignment?
- ☒ Is your course schedule realistic?
- ☒ Are you clear about whether or not students have a chance to turn in an assignment late or take a missed exam?
- ☒ Have you made it clear how students should communicate with you in the event that they need extra time or to make-up an exam?
- ☒ Have you explained any penalties/reductions for late work clearly?
- ☒ If you have more than one class you're teaching, have you made sure that you aren't overloading yourself with deadlines at any one time?

We suggest that you state your expectations for late or missed work up front and stick to them as much as possible. Remember that some students might feel comfortable asking for extensions while others may not, which means that if you do grant extensions without making that clear up front, not all students will benefit from that option. To avoid this issue, you might consider building in some possible 'free' passes that all students can use to create a more equitable playing field for students.

For major assignments, you might consider breaking the assignment down into smaller steps—steps that can comprise a series of low stakes assignments that contribute to the larger assignment. Focusing on progress as much as the final product can contribute to student learning and offer support for students who might need more structure and feedback. For example, for a major research assignment, you might create separate assignments that can each count for credit toward the final assignment: a bibliography, an abstract, an outline, a first draft, a peer review, a presentation, could all be part of that larger assignment. This kind of structure gives students a chance to develop their ideas over time, and it tends to make for a better final result and easier final grading in the long run.

Student attendance and participation

Many of us have reconsidered our approach to attendance and participation due to the Covid-19 pandemic. [This overview from the University of Indiana](#) helps clarify some of the basic principles of how to create and enforce these policies (if they are not already determined by your department).

Connect your attendance policy to course goals

No matter how you decide to create these policies, keep your course goals and objectives in mind: how you frame attendance and participation should correlate to what students need to do to learn and demonstrate their learning in your class.

Find multiple ways for students to participate

One of the most important takeaways from the pandemic has been that there are many ways that students can demonstrate their course engagement. Even if students are back face-to-face in your classes, it's worth considering different ways that students can be a part of the class. For example, in addition to raising

their hand in class, could students demonstrate their participation with an online discussion board, with comments on a reading platform like Perusall, video commentary on Canvas or Flipgrid, or through a backchannel like Zoom chat or TopHat? These various options can encourage student engagement in multiple ways and help students who, for whatever reason, are not comfortable with all formats.

Create policies/expectations for participation together

Asking students to reflect on what good participation looks like can be a constructive way to create your policies. It gives you a chance to learn about your students' needs, and it gives them a chance to understand what kind of teacher you are. You can use and adapt a [guide like this one](#) to compile a list of shared expectations. In an additional step, you could ask the students to [assess their own participation](#).

Recommended elements:

Your own course description

While the university's official description of your course will give students the one version of the course, you'll likely want to include your own description of the course—usually a couple of paragraphs that present something that might read like an abstract of the course. James Lang suggests that the most effective course descriptions describe not only the knowledge and skills that students will acquire; they also explain to students why your course matters (4). One way to accomplish this is to frame your class around big questions to encourage your students to engage out of a sense of curiosity or a feeling of personal connection to the course topic. To find those questions, you might ask yourself:

- What big questions remain in your field?
- What do YOU still wonder about your field?
- How does this course apply to complex social justice issues?
- What mysteries motivated the foundational thinkers in your field?

Once you've found an intriguing big question that your class can help answer, you can use this as the framework throughout the semester, returning to it multiple times in the semester and using it as a way to open and close the course.

Student support services

While the link to [VCU syllabus policy statements](#) on the Provost's site (which needs to be included on your syllabi) does include some information about student services, you might choose to highlight support areas that will contribute to your students' success in your class. For example, depending on the needs of your students, you might want to give additional information on how to contact the Campus Learning Center or the Writing Center. You might choose to talk more specifically about your approach to accessibility or student wellbeing. Finally, you might make a more explicit statement of support for students with accommodations: for example, you could invite students with

accommodations [to make an appointment with you](#) to discuss how you can ensure their full participation in your course.

Communication plan

How will you communicate with your students? How do you expect them to communicate with you? It can be helpful to make this explicit in your syllabus. You might consider sharing the best way that your students can get in touch with you and how often they should expect to wait to hear back from you. (For instance, if you don't answer emails at specific times of day or specific days of the week, communicating that to your students can benefit everyone.) You might also make students aware of how they can keep up to date with class announcements—should students check their email or will they find announcements on Canvas? Finally, what is your expectation in terms of student communication to you? How often do you expect students to check their email? How much time do they have to reply to you? Do you want them to write to you when they have to miss class? etc.

It might also be valuable to take some time early in the semester to show students the class Canvas page (or other platforms you might be using) during class time. If you use Canvas regularly for class announcements, you might also show students how to [change their Canvas notification settings](#) so they receive that information in a timely manner.

Technology use

The syllabus offers you a chance to state upfront your expectations regarding the use of technology in your classroom. What kinds of technology will you be using in and out of class? How will students be expected to use that technology? How will they access it? For face-to-face sessions, will students be expected to bring a laptop? Do you restrict the use of cell phones during class or do students need their cell phones to accomplish class activities? What is your policy about recording a class? If your class meets online, what are the expectations for camera use? etc. Putting these policies together in one place will help your students find what they need and will save you countless emails, too.

Formatting your syllabus

Once you've finished our syllabus will include a fair amount of information, and it can be a challenge to create an accessible and visually appealing document. You can really delve deep with a book like [Graphic design for course creators](#), but here are a few quick pointers:

- Make sure that there is [sufficient contrast](#) between the color of your text and background
- Avoid unnecessary images (like clip art) that don't contribute to the meaning of your syllabus
- Make use of the [style sheet option](#) in your document (header 1, 2, etc.; normal text, etc.) so your document will accommodate a screen reader.
- Use alt text to describe any graphs, charts, images

How do I get students to read the entire syllabus?

It is a perennial lament of instructors that students don't read the course syllabus—so if you've been experiencing this issue, you are clearly not alone! There is no magic solution for this age-old problem, but here are some ideas to encourage students to read your syllabus.

Give a low-stakes quiz or assessment that focuses on important policies

You might want to have an in-class or online open syllabus quiz that students can complete individually or as groups to give the class a chance to review important parts of your syllabus. (After the assessment, you can use it as an opportunity for students to ask questions or for you to review and clarify parts of the syllabus.)

Play a game

Consider turning key information about your class into a game like [Kahoot](#) or a [virtual escape room](#) as a way to review and encourage engagement with your syllabus.

Embed easter eggs into your syllabus (but tell students first!)

Some teachers have used [easter eggs to demonstrate that students don't read the syllabus](#). If you do embed easter eggs, you could tell your students to expect prizes or points for finding the easter eggs you put into your syllabus.

Play with the structure of your syllabus

While having a clean, accessible text version of your syllabus is important for accessibility, you can also present that information elsewhere in other ways depending on your interests, skills, and needs. For example, perhaps [an infographic](#) or a slide deck might work really well for conveying learning goals and objectives, or perhaps your students would be more likely to watch a short video where you present some or all of your syllabus.

Consider making your syllabus a central part of your teaching

Many of us only discuss the course syllabus in the beginning of a course. Instead, you might think about ways you can bring your syllabus back into view as a way to support your teaching. For example, as you finish one unit and begin another, you might show that section of the course schedule to your students as a way to remind them of how the class activities relate to course goals and objectives. Or, you might want to review the syllabus participation policies (or another policy) a few weeks into the semester when students are still getting used to the rhythm of the class. Alternatively, you could periodically return to the course description to help students make connections between an assignment and the larger themes of the class. Your syllabus can be a great teaching tool, and your students will be more likely to refer to it the more you bring it into your class time together.

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