

Teaching Tip Tuesday

Your Course Syllabus

The course syllabus serves a variety of functions, including setting the tone for the course, outlining learning goals, motivating students, presenting schedules of meetings and assignments, communicating course and university policies, providing a permanent record of the course content and organization, and outlining expectations for instructors and students.

Different instructors often focus more on some aspects than others. Although there are no unambiguous best-practices for syllabus construction, here are some considerations that may help you to increase the effectiveness of your syllabus.

Mandatory Content: The UWSP faculty handbook outlines what **must** be included in your syllabus.

- Course Outline
- Minimum bibliography
- Statement of course objectives and requirements
- GEP Learning Outcomes
- Description of grading system
- Tentative exam schedule
- Clear attendance policy
- Equal access for students with disabilities statement

Use “warm” language.

“Warm” language is more personal and less formal than “cold” language, and students respond more positively to it. To better connect with students, strike a tone closer to that of an email to a friend than to that of a legal contract.

Instead of instructions like “Prepare for class by completing readings in advance,” try “I’d like it if you finished the assigned reading before class, because it is my experience that this will help you to do better and learn more in class.”

Be a booster, not a nag.

Whenever possible, use positive, enthusiastic language. Avoid negative language, like lists of “don’ts.”

For example, state the benefits of attendance, rather than the costs of not-attending. Describe how you would like students to comport themselves in class and online, rather than telling them what NOT to do.

Read through your completed syllabus to make sure you sound “friendly,” rather than “mean.”

Avoid use of the pronoun “we.”

This pronoun may be interpreted as presenting a false solidarity. It also often artificially places the instructor at the same level as students.

Instead, make the roles of both instructor and student clear and personal.

Use “I will” for things you will do as the instructor. Use “You will” to represent what your students will do.

Provide details on how to get help.

College can be difficult during the best of times, and of late, we have not been in the best of times.

Show students that you are focused on their success by providing details about how and where to get academic, medical, and psychological help.

Respect cognitive load limitations.

Syllabi are only valuable when students use them. Because all syllabi are different, every course presents a new challenge of learning where to find information.

Consider collaborating with other members of your department to standardize syllabus design to reduce the cognitive load on students.