

Transcript Video 5 Principle 4: Tone and Rhetoric – Inclusive and Motivating Language

In this video, we will explore how you can design a warm syllabus by considering its tone and rhetoric.

Syllabi function rhetorically. The language we choose and the way we frame course content, student engagement and our course policies communicate explicitly and implicitly our values, expectations, and how we view our students as learners. As students read your syllabus, what will they expect from the classroom climate, your relationship with them, and how the semester will go? The fourth principle of an inclusive syllabus asks you to consider carefully the language you use in your syllabus to communicate with your students.

What type of student are you thinking of when writing your syllabus? The syllabus as a rhetorical text communicates issues about power and authority between instructor and students. Many syllabi present problematic assumptions because instructors write them with the “problem” student in mind. The tone is often confrontational, authoritarian, or even condescending. Negative punishment language or defensive policies communicate mistrust. Such language distances students instead of inviting them as learners into our classes. In other words, many syllabi feel cold rather than warm and welcoming.

Reframing our language is one way to demonstrate inclusiveness. Research has shown that students perceive their instructors to be warmer, more approachable and caring when the syllabus is characterized by friendliness, enthusiasm, and anticipation of student success. In addition, a positive, respectful, and inviting tone that addresses the students as competent and engaged learners fosters positive motivation. Consider using language that emphasizes a collaborative spirit and an orientation towards learning, flexibility, and possibility rather than performance and punishment.

You can begin building a relationship with your students by personalizing your syllabus. Include a photo of yourself, add a section where you introduce yourself and say a bit about your background, interests, passions, and even hobbies).

If you work with teaching assistants, include a section where they introduce themselves. Let your students know about your teaching philosophy in a ‘My Hopes and Vision for the Course’ section.

How about sharing some personal experiences, using humor, showing enthusiasm, and providing rationales for the assignments? Doing so humanizes you and your students, and it helps to build high-quality relationships with your students from the get-go.

One simple but powerful shift is to use personal pronouns (e.g., I, you, we, us) instead of the traditional “the students,” “the course,” or “they.” When you do so, be mindful of how you use these pronouns though. Pay attention as to whether you use them to blur responsibilities and

coerce cooperation, or if you use in them in a way to show genuine intent to cultivate an inclusive and supportive learning community with your students.

Consider replacing the predictable, mundane section headings in your syllabus, such as Course Policies, Learning Outcomes, Course Materials, Assignments with ones that are learning-oriented. Why not instead use headings such as “What will help you to be successful in this course?”, “What will you learn along this way?”, “What will you be doing?” and “How will you know you’re learning?” Such headings provide signposts for your students. By using a question format, you communicate that you are using the syllabus to answer important questions that your students will have about the course.

Rather than using commands highlight common values, goals, and ideals, share how you envision the learning environment, emphasize the importance of community building, offer words of encouragement, assure students that you will support them, and invite them to work with you and each other.

This table shows some examples of cold versus warm language used in a syllabus.

- Instead of saying “Students must...”, say “I encourage you to...”
- Instead of saying “I only accept...”, say “You have the opportunity to...”
- Instead of saying “Late work will be penalized by a reduction of 40%.”, say “Late work is eligible for partial credit of 60%”
- Instead of saying “Students are expected to attend every class session. Unexcused absences will result in a lower grade.”, say “It is important that you attend every class session. Otherwise you will miss out on the many learning activities that we will engage in.”
- Instead of saying, “Students are expected to comply with the following course policies, or will face consequences.”, say “The following course values will guide our interactions and help you learn.”

It’s time to pause so that you can reflect on the language that you use in your syllabus.

What is the rhetoric and tone of your syllabus?

1. Is it warm, welcoming and inviting?
2. Do you express that you want to nurture your students, care for them and support them?
3. Do you directly address your students, and use personal pronouns (you, I, we)?
4. Does the language express values and expectations rather than punishments?
5. Do you invite your students to connect with you and each other?

Check out the next video to learn more about how to write supportive and helpful course policies.