

# Six Principles of an Inclusive Syllabus Design

COURSE SYLLABI ARE “UNOBTRUSIVE BUT POWERFUL INDICATORS OF WHAT TAKES PLACE IN CLASSROOMS”  
(BERS, DAVIS, & TAYLOR, 2000, P. 899)



**Resource Folder:** <https://tinyurl.com/InclSyllabus>

The content of course syllabi are in part constrained by institutional policies or departmental demands. However, as course instructors we can determine the tone of our syllabus and how we frame the organization and content of our course. We can write in ways that are mindful of our student audience and the messages we want them to receive. As we think about transforming our course content and pedagogy in ways that reflect attention to teaching our students in inclusive and equitable ways, focusing on the re-design of our syllabus at the front end is an important starting point. After all, creating an inviting and inclusive classroom culture begins with the syllabus. The syllabus also provides instructors with the opportunity to clearly communicate their teaching philosophy and describe their best pedagogical intentions.

## Learning Goals

- Learn about six principles of an inclusive syllabus design and how you can use it as a guiding framework for your syllabus and course (re)design.
- Analyze your own syllabi through this framework.
- Apply the principles into your course and syllabus design.

## 6 Principles of an Inclusive Syllabus



**1** Learning-focused



**2** Essential Questions



**3** UDL Connections



**4** Inclusive Motivating Language



**5** Supportive Course Policies



**6** Accessible Design

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## Principle 1: A Learning-Focused Syllabus



Content-focused



Learning-focused

What the course will do...What you [the student] will do...What the students **WILL NOT DO**...What we [the class, including the instructor] will do...

Source: Palmer, M. S., Wheeler, L. B., & Aneese, I. (2016). Does the Document Matter? The Evolving Role of Syllabi in Higher Education. *Change: The Magazine Of Higher Learning*, 48(4), 36-46.

**Time to reflect and assess your syllabus for its orientation.****Is your syllabus content- or learning-focused?**

1. How does your syllabus provide your students with a pathway of learning through the course?
2. Do you provide information on what students need to do and what resources are available so that they can be successful learners?
3. Do you state both high-level long-term goals and shorter-term measurable learning objectives?
4. Do you explain to students how content, learning activities and assessments connect?
5. Are you transparent about what students need to do to successfully complete assignments?
6. Are you transparent about how you will evaluate students' learning?
7. What may be confusing for your students?
8. What do you need to clarify?

Your Notes:

## Principle 2: Organize Your Syllabus around Big Questions & Themes



Use a backwards design process for your course design. Begin with the end in mind and identify the essential questions big ideas and themes that you want to explore with your students. By using questions, you frame your syllabus as containing a “promise” through language that invites students to enter the course with a sense of curiosity and high expectations about how the course will be meaningful for them.

Wiggins and McTighe define essential questions as those that “push us to the heart of things – the essence” (p. 107) and that “serve as door-ways through which learners explore the key concepts, themes, theories, issues, and problems that reside within the content, perhaps as yet unseen” (p.106).

1. What are the essential questions and big themes that you and your students will explore throughout the course?
2. For each session?
3. How do these themes and questions provide a coherent narrative arc through the course content?
4. How do you communicate these questions and themes in your syllabus?

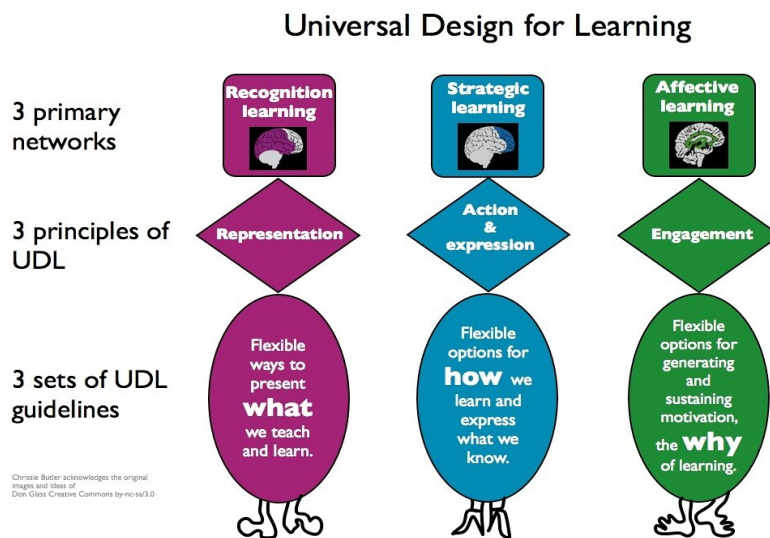
Your Notes:

IDEAS: When you write the course description make it engaging. Include some of these thought-provoking, intriguing questions or statements to stimulate student curiosity.

Introduce the class sessions in your course schedule with the essential questions or big ideas that you will explore instead of just providing the topic or chapter title. Here is an example:

Questions/themes we will explore this session:	How to prepare for this session:	Live Class Session
Who are you? Who are we? What’s this course about?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watch: Video “Overview of the course”</li> <li>• Do: Complete the brief online questionnaire</li> <li>• Do: Annotate the syllabus</li> </ul>	Community-building activities Q & A
How do we want to learn together? Setting norms for courageous conversations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watch: Video <a href="#">The Expanding Comfort Zone Model</a></li> <li>• Read: <a href="#">Margaret Wheatley - Willing to be disturbed</a></li> <li>• Do: Introduce yourself through the Flipgrid assignment</li> </ul>	Hopes & Concerns activity Class Participation Agreements

## Principle 3: Considering Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Principles



Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a research-based framework for designing curricula—that is, educational goals, methods, materials, and assessments—that enable all individuals to gain knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm for learning (CAST). UDL offers a two-pronged approach by reducing barriers to learning and providing rich supports.

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### How universal is your course and syllabus design?

A syllabus that reflects UDL design principles allows students to see how you intend to create a flexible learning environment. It illustrates how you design the course with learner variability in mind by providing students with multiple paths for learning and success through options and choices.

1. How do you design the course with learner variability in mind by providing students with multiple paths for learning and success?
2. How do you provide options, choices and flexibility for accessing and processing course content, participating in the course, and assessing skills and knowledge?
3. How do you communicate this through your syllabus?

Consider offering:

- Multimodal presentation of course content (i.e. images, graphics, videos, blogs, podcasts, or websites that feature real-world applications of content).
- Students choices about readings and topics for readings, assignments or projects
- Students various ways of demonstrating their learning that go beyond quizzes, exams, or written papers (i.e., through oral presentations, projects, performances, or products).
- A detailed course schedule allows students to see how course content, learning objectives, learning activities, and assignments connect.
- Information in the syllabus about resources and supports that will facilitate student success.

## Principle 4: Rhetoric and Tone – Inclusive & Motivating Language

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.

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



### What is the rhetoric and tone of your syllabus?

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?

	Current Language	Revised language
Directly address students and use of personal pronouns		
Learning-oriented section headings		
Section in which you introduce yourself to students		
Well-articulated statement about the values and experiences that guide your teaching practice		
Warm, welcoming and inviting language		
Invitations and encouragements that communicate trust and high expectations instead of commands		
Cooperative rhetoric, student- and learning oriented		
Information on how to succeed in the course		
Language that communicates approachability, respect, empathy, caring and commitment to student success		

## Principle 5: Supportive Course Policies

Reframing course policies in ways that communicate support and interest in students' success optimizes students' motivation and facilitates personal coping skills. Write your course policies in ways that will help students understand the rationale behind expectations, norms and values. Use these statements to provide students with comprehensive information about resources and supports that will help them be successful learners. You can include this information as electronic hyperlinks to external resources.



1. How supportive and motivating are your course policies?
2. How do your course policies clarify important expectations and values?
3. How do the course policies empower your students as learners and facilitate personal coping skills?

Consider this.

- Include an expanded "Inclusive Learning and Disability Accommodation Statement" that you begin by stating "Your success in this class is important to me." Where in your syllabus is this statement? At the very end where students might miss it, or more in the center?
- Write a statement that motivates students to come to office hours. Offer flexible options for meeting with you, use a scheduling system, and explain to your students what they gain from connecting with you.
- In writing the Academic Honesty statement through the lens of inclusiveness, assume your students' best intentions and ask yourself what they need to know to be able to comply with academic honesty.
- Include a statement in your syllabus in which you acknowledge your commitment to ensuring that students chosen name and pronouns will be respected at all times in the classroom.
- Build flexibility from the start into your policies about attendance and deadlines for assignments (as much as possible). Explain the rationale for your policies.

**TIP: Check out the Online Inclusive Syllabus Template for sample course policies.**

## Principle 6: Accessible Design

“Accessibility cannot be an afterthought and it cannot be assumed.”





([accessiblesyllabus.tulane.edu](http://accessiblesyllabus.tulane.edu))

Traditional syllabi are often dense, text-heavy and very hard to read, especially for students with dyslexia, AD(H)D, learning disabilities, or non-native speakers of English. In addition, many syllabi do not comply with accessibility requirements or they are hard to navigate. The following steps will help you visually design an accessible and easy-to-read and navigate syllabus.



1. Is your syllabus easy to read and navigate (i.e., hierarchical headings, electronic hypertext, course schedule in table format)?
2. Do you use images and visual representations of information?
3. Is your syllabus accessible?

- Create an online syllabus using Google documents. Benefits: can be accessed from anywhere, updates are immediately viewable, Google docs automatically creates a document outline from the headings so that readers can easily navigate the document, Google docs can be used with screen readers, screen magnifiers, and a braille display.
- Use interactive tools such as document-internal links and electronic hyperlinks to external web-based resources. Benefits: cut text, easy access to academic and social support services on and off campus. Make sure to use meaningful labels that indicate where a link goes.
- Create a course schedule in table form. Benefit: concise overview of what students can expect to learn and what they need to do for each session.
- Trade some text for accessible images and visual representations of content. Block together icons to illustrate essential course information, such as your email, office hours, the class location, class meeting times, and course texts. Benefit: quickly conveys information and increases understanding.

Contact Me	Meet with Me	Class Location, Day, and Time	Course Materials
			
Instructor Name Pronouns: Email:	Drop-in hours: Scheduled hours		Textbook Information Other course materials available on Moodle or Blackboard



## Making your syllabus reader-friendly

- Assign styles** (Title, Heading 1, Heading 2) to establish a hierarchical structure within the document.
- Create a **table of contents** on the first page of the syllabus with document-internal hyperlinks that will allow readers to easily navigate the syllabus on their electronic devices.
- Create **document-internal hyperlinks** to connect to information located later in the document and hyperlinks to external resources and your course learning management site (LMS). Make sure to use meaningful labels that indicate where a link goes.
- 12-14 sans serif **font**.
- Dark font** on light background.
- 1.5 line** spacing.
- Text **aligned to left**.
- Paragraphs** of between 2-4 sentences.
- Headings** differentiate sections.
- Text boxes** block together related information.
- Tables** show information compactly (e.g. course schedule)
- Arranging the text in **columns** provides easy chunking. (6-9 words per line)
- Bulleting and numbering** to organize lists.
- Hyperlinks** to information found elsewhere (e.g. Moodle, UMass offices, disciplinary style guides, the library)
- Bolded** or underlined for emphasis.



## Checklist

### What and how students will learn: The Learning-Centered Syllabus

- Vision/Goal Statement
- Detailed **course schedule**
- Research and writings from authors of **diverse backgrounds** and offering **multiple perspectives**
- Experiential learning**: Relevant and connected to **students' life experiences** and **funds of knowledge** and **real-world issues**
- Variety of in-and out-of-class **learning activities** that allow students to learn in different ways and through various modalities
- Clear student **learning objectives** related to course content AND the required learning processes
- Assignments** offer multiple **options, flexibility, choice**, various ways of developing and demonstrating knowledge
- Scaffolding** of extensive assignments with options for review, feedback, revision
- Fair** and **clear assessment criteria**: Rubrics, checklists, rationales for grading
- Learning **objectives** and **assignments/assessments** are **well aligned**

### What will help students to learn: Inclusive and Supportive Course Policies

- Disability Accommodation and Inclusive Learning Statement with hyperlinks to campus and other resources
- Inviting Office Hours Statement
- Expansive Academic Honesty Statement with hyperlinks to campus and other resources
- Pronoun Policy
- Course Value & Norms Statement

### Rhetoric

- Welcoming and inviting tone
- Use of personal pronouns
- Cooperative language

### Redundancy across modes

- Use of icons & logos
- Images of key authors, textbooks
- Visuals to represent main concepts
- Word clouds
- Visual representation of grade distribution
- Digital syllabus on course website

### Readability & Accessibility

- Clear hierarchical structure of document, using headings
- Table of Contents with in-document hyperlinks
- Text: 12-14 point sans serif font; 1.5 line spacing; bold or underline to emphasize text
- Text distribution: digestible sections for learners with reading disabilities, non-native English speakers, attention-deficits
  - Text boxes
  - Columns
  - White space
  - Margins
  - Bullet points
  - Tables
- Accessible color design
- Alternative text for images (Format picture, Properties, Alt Text)
- Check with accessibility checker
- Flexible text that can be altered by the user

### Readings & Resources

#### Articles

- Bers, T. H. Davis, B. D., and Taylor, B. (2000). The use of syllabi in assessments: unobtrusive indicators and tools for faculty development. *Assessment Update* 12(3), 4-7.
- Palmer, M. S., Wheeler, L. B., & Aneece, I. (2016). Does the Document Matter? The Evolving Role of Syllabi in Higher Education. *Change: The Magazine Of Higher Learning*, 48(4), 36-46
- Womack, A. (2017). Teaching Is Accommodation: Universally Designing Composition Classrooms and Syllabi. *College Composition & Communication*, 68(3), 494-525.

#### Web Resources

- [CAST-UDL On Campus - UDL Syllabus](#)
- [Diagram Center - Making Images Accessible](#)
- [Ensuring Access through Collaboration and Technology \(EnACT\) project - Universal Design for Learning and your Syllabus](#)
- [Kairos PraxisWiki - Suggested practices for syllabus accessibility statements](#)
- [Tulane University - Accessible Syllabus](#)
- [A Guide to Assessing the Focus of Syllabi - University of Virginia](#)
- [How to Create a Syllabus - Advice Guide – The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)
- [Mike Wesch - Steps toward a big idea syllabus](#)
- [CAST - About Universal Design for Learning](#)