

The Syllabus as Communication Tool

Four main principles can guide you to creating an effective syllabus:

1. Write with Your Audience in Mind
2. Set a Welcoming Tone
3. Establish Communication Expectations and Values
4. Use Student-Centered Syllabus Language

In this video, we will explore evidence-based best practices for writing your syllabus.

Knowing Your Audience

USC Upstate students are incredibly diverse. This is part of what makes teaching at USC Upstate so fun.

- 45% identify as a race or ethnicity other than white
- 25% are over 25
- 40% are first-generation college students
- 60% receive Pell Grants

With so many non-traditional students, our classrooms are often multigenerational spaces, and it helps to remember the variations in values and communication expectations across different generations. For instance,

- Baby Boomers were authorities
- GenX questioned authority
- Millennials are more interested in individuality than authority
- GenZ or iGen: What was authority again? Anyone can make a Web site, anyone can launch a business, anyone can friend anyone on social media. Authority just isn't relevant to them anymore.

Writing a syllabus that can communicate across generations will help establish a civil and successful relationship among students in the course.

Setting a Welcoming Tone

- Convey Authority v. Authoritarianism
- Use the language of Growth Mindset and Academic Resilience to prepare students for learning and improvement
- Welcome learners into the academic Culture of Power, a concept described by Lisa Delpit to explain the set of values, behaviors, and unspoken assumptions about academia that we must help socialize our students to understand in order to ensure their success
- Provide a road map for the learning journey, showing students the outcomes in terms of skills and knowledge that they will develop in your course.

Establishing Communication Expectations

Remote and Online learners cannot fall back on the common conventions of face-to-face communication. Give them signposts—both large and small—to foster communication from the start.

- Talk about communication to show its importance in the class.
- Tell students when they can expect email or phone responses from you—typically within 24 hours weekdays or 48 hours on weekends.
- Identify when and how you will conduct virtual office hours for those who can't come to campus.
- Stress the communication values that your class will embrace.

- Share common netiquette guidelines.
- Prepare students for discussion of controversial subjects by laying ground rules for civility, respect, and academic inquiry.
- Show students where in the course to find your contact information and peer contact information for study groups.

Use Student-Centered Syllabus Language

Consider using syllabus language that research has found to be effective in increasing retention and promoting student success. Here are some samples:

- Attendance is expected to enable you to work with your peers and with me to achieve learning goals.
- Please come and talk to me.
- The driving question behind this course is... (shows relevance)
- Some of the essential concepts you will encounter are...

Growth Mindset Syllabus Language Examples

- By the end of this course you will be able to...
- We will develop the skills and knowledge you need to...
- Use visuals, say “you” or “we,” know *their* names, use positive language, link to helpful resources, and put their learning center stage.

Equitable Syllabus Language

- Remove hidden barriers (avoid secret rules, assumptions, unstated resource demands)
- Tell the truth about your policies; transparent, solid structure = equity
- Emphasize the benefits of positive behaviors, not the punishments for negative ones.

Inclusive Syllabus Language

- Overcome imposter syndrome by signaling they belong here.
- Point out that you open up the course to multiple voices in multiple ways (small groups, written comments, etc.).
- Be intentional about the importance of diversity in your discipline and your classroom.

Universal Design for Learning Syllabus Language

- Design with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in mind (alt text for images, color contrast, headings, minimal use of tables).
- Offer access to materials in multiple ways and show students Ally Alternative Formats.
- Provide a full schedule up front for planning (reduces anxiety).

Orienting Syllabus Language

- Clarify where and when they will do assignments.
- Explain the online schedule and routine.
- Point out how they will get feedback from you and where to find it.
- If you are having synchronous meetings, show them where, when, and how to attend.

For more ideas, check out some sample syllabi, or contact the Center for Academic Innovation and Faculty Support.