

Learner-Centered Syllabus Checklist

The syllabus is the first introduction students receive to you as an instructor and to the content of the course. Harnish and Bridges (2011) have explored the effect of “warm” and “cold” language in a syllabus on student perceptions of the instructor. An example of “warm” language in a syllabus is “My student hours are between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Please feel free to drop in or to set up an appointment by contacting me. If these hours don't work for you, please let me know and we can find another time to meet.” “Cold” language, on the other hand, expresses the same idea using different words: “Office Hours: MWF 3:00 p.m.–6:00 p.m.” Students who read the syllabus with the “warm” language rated the hypothetical instructor as more approachable and were more motivated to participate in the class. A well-designed inclusive syllabus welcomes students, establishes your commitment to their learning, and encourages them to engage with you, their peers, and the content.

Your syllabus conveys your priorities as an instructor and sets the tone and expectations for the course. With careful thought about the language used in your syllabus, it can be a powerful tool for creating an inclusive learning community. An effective student-centered syllabus also gives your students the information they need to be successful.

Instructor Information

- Your name and what you would like students to call you. Consider adding your pronouns.
- Physical office location or information for meeting with students virtually
- Student hours: Consider using "Student Hours" instead of "Office Hours" to promote that these times are explicitly set aside for students in case they need help outside class.
- Telephone number or the best way to communicate with you
- Share the days of the week and times when students can expect to hear from you. For example, if they should not expect a response to an email or text after 7:00 p.m., let them know.
- Email address and other contact information

Course Policies

Policies are clearly stated in the syllabus, including the following:

- Expectations for attendance, assignments, late assignments, make-up options, extra credit, and examinations
- Steps to report absence
- Cheating and plagiarism
- Grading policies

Additional Learner-Centered Information

- Include a list with links to academic and social supports they may find useful.
- Inform students about sensitive or potentially disturbing information or activities addressed in the course.
- Estimate student workload.
 - Give students a sense of how much preparation and work the course requires. But be realistic; they will not believe either scare tactics or soft-pedaling. (Remember that yours is not the only class they are taking.) One way to determine the workload is to use the Rice University Course Workload Estimator web tool (<http://cte.rice.edu/workload>).

Tips for Student Success

Share information on how to succeed in your course. For example:

- Note-taking tips
- Academic support centers on campus
- Accessing help in the LMS

Overall Tone

- Language is warm and friendly
- Vocabulary used is familiar to the students or definitions are included for unfamiliar language

Source

Harnish, R. J., & Bridges, K. R. (2011). Effect of syllabus tone: Students' perceptions of instructor and course. *Social Psychology of Education*, 14(3), 319–330. https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/sites/default/files/basic-page-supplementary-materials-files/effect_of_syllabus_tone_student_perceptions_of_instructor_and_course_spe_2011_0.pdf