



Time for a syllabus tune-up?

The topic of this month's Teaching Tip focuses on revising your syllabus. In this newsletter, I'll discuss use of standard syllabus templates, small tweaks, big changes, and inclusive language. Teaching Tips are designed to provide ideas, share educational resources, and promote faculty discussion across campus.

Use of Standardized Department/Course Syllabi: Although syllabus creation has traditionally been the responsibility of the course faculty of record, use of standardized templates has become more common. These templates can provide curricular consistency across course sections and programs and are especially helpful to new adjunct and contingent faculty who may be teaching online and often lack mentors (Weimer, 2020b). When used across an institution, inclusion of standardized language for University policies such as non-discrimination and disability accommodations emphasize their importance (Weimer, 2020b). For students, standardized syllabi provide uniformity and decrease anxiety. Prior to initial syllabus creation or revision, faculty need to be aware of how much flexibility of content, instructional methods, assessment and grading scales is allowed within their program or department. For numerous examples of syllabus templates visit [TemplateLab](#). To review recommended NMU policies and helpful student service information, see the School of Nursing's [standard syllabus](#) (Flood & Menard, 2022). Faculty should note due to recent university webpage revisions; some commonly used syllabus links may have changed.

Small tweaks: For those of you who've already finished your syllabi or are prepping for new courses, the following simple changes are easy to implement.

- List your preferred pronouns with your contact information.
- Rename your office hours calling them 'student hours' which is a more accurate description and conveys a welcoming tone (Weimer, 2020a).
- Use the word 'opportunity' frequently when discussing assignments and grading (Saucier and Jones as cited by Weimer, 2020a).
 - For example, *You have the opportunity to earn 10 points on each weekly quiz.*
- Add some flexibility to your attendance policy and assignment due dates.

Big changes: Faculty who are interested in creating a more student-centered syllabus might consider one or more of the following revisions.

- Reorganize your syllabus using the following three categories: about the class, about the teacher, and about the students.

- Another reorganization strategy is to arrange content to answer specific questions such as: *What books do I need? What will I learn? How will I be graded? When are assignments due?* (Vicki Ingalls as cited in Weimer, 2020a)
 - Consider placing these questions in shaded boxes followed by the answers.
- Add some graphics to enhance the visual appeal of your syllabi.
 - [Lillian Nave](#) (n.d.) provides an example of how to link course goals to learning activities as well as ways to use photos and other graphics throughout her syllabus.
 - Add illustrations to your favorite quotations and memes (Weimer, 2020a).
- Provide students with an opportunity for input into one part of your syllabus such as an attendance policy or a grading rubric during your first class meeting.
- Allow students to direct their learning by offering menu choices for assignments or paper topics (Supiano, 2021).
- For online courses, provide a narrated overview of the syllabus and an orientation to the EduCat layout.
 - For examples, visit the Faculty EduCat Showcase course.
 - To access go to: <https://educat.nmu.edu/moodle2/course/view.php?id=11927> and enroll by entering the code: nmufaculty.

Inclusive language: The review of a syllabus for inclusive language will take considerable faculty time and likely ongoing effort. The American Psychological Association (APA) offers [general guidelines](#) for reducing bias in writing about people and their personal characteristics that faculty might find helpful. The University of Michigan created an excellent [syllabus guide](#) that faculty can adapt for their respective courses. Syllabus language that demonstrates inclusive pedagogical practices are included. For example, specific discussion guidelines are provided to communicate faculty expectations for classroom interactions.

Whether or not you make any syllabus changes, if students don't read your syllabus or fail to grasp key information, what's the point? One way to encourage students to read your syllabus is to create a low-stakes quiz. This quiz could be taken in-class using an audience response program such as Kahoot or after class in EduCat. In an online course, I've had success using a low-stake syllabus quiz that students may repeat up to three times along with a related Q & A discussion forum. The forum remains posted for the entire semester and can be used for future syllabus revisions, to write quiz questions, and to create a course FAQ document.

As you prepare for winter courses, please know the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) staff and I are available to assist with all of your course design and instructional technology needs. To schedule an appointment, go to [CTL appointments](#) or email ctl@nmu.edu. Please share ideas for future Teaching Tips or faculty workshops with me via email: lflood@nmu.edu.

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