

Designing a Learner-Focused Syllabus: A Checklist

This checklist is adapted from: Michael S. Palmer, Dorothe J. Bach, and Adriana C. Streifer, "Measuring the Promise: A Learning-Focused Syllabus Rubric," *To Improve the Academy* 33, no. 1 (2014): 14–36.

1. Learning Goals & Objectives

- Course-level learning objectives are in a prominent and easily identifiable location (i.e., labeled section).
- Course-level learning objectives are clearly articulated and use specific action verbs to describe in measurable terms what students will be able to do, value, or know at the end of the course.
- Learning objectives with non-quantifiable terms, such as "understand" and "know," are avoided.
- Learning objectives are appropriately pitched to the course level, class size, position of the course within the curriculum, and characteristics of students taking the class.
- My syllabus has 3 to 6 course-level objectives.

2. Assessment Activities

- It is clear that the objectives and assessments are aligned. Each major assessment activity maps onto one or more learning objectives.
- The basic features of the major summative assessment activities are clearly defined. The assessment instructions provide students with a rationale and, whenever possible, with an authentic task.
- Course-level assessments are in a prominent and easily identifiable location (i.e., labeled section).
- There is evidence of plans for frequent formative assessments with immediate feedback from a variety of sources (e.g., self, peer, instructor, computer-generated, community).
- The assessments are paced and scaffolded (i.e., increasing in complexity) throughout the course, and at least one is scheduled early in the semester.
- Grading or student evaluation information is included in the syllabus but clearly separated from information about assessment of learning.
- The grading scheme should clearly reflect the importance of each learning objective. For example, if learning to write in the discipline is a key learning objective, writing assignments should dominate the grading scheme.

3. Course Schedule

- My syllabus offers fully articulated and logically sequenced course schedule, listing topics/readings/questions in chronological order along with assignment due dates.

4. Tone

- The tone of my syllabus is positive, respectful, inviting, and directly addresses the student as a competent, engaged learner.
- The syllabus uses personal pronouns (e.g., you, we, us) rather than “the students,” “the course,” or “they.”
- The focus of my syllabus is on learning and possibilities and not policies and punishments.

5. Encouraging Positive Motivation

- The course description makes clear that students will have opportunities to wonder and connect it in meaningful ways to things potentially important to them.
- The student is left in control of his/her learning. The instructor encourages students to “discover” value in the course by giving them choices along the way, such as choices in project topics, reading assignments, grading schemes.
- Mastery-based grading mechanisms (e.g., criterion-referenced, task-based, and absolute grading schemes) are used rather than performance ones (e.g., grading curves and other relative or group-referenced grading schemes).
- Various course components—description, objectives, schedule—frame the content through compelling questions or big ideas.
- The document describes the potential value of the course in the learner's current and post-course life (cognitive, personal, social, civic, and/or professional) in a clear and dynamic way.

6. Rigor and Inclusivity

- The learning objectives, assessments, activities, and grading scheme all indicate a high level of academic rigor (e.g., objectives that promote high-order thinking and skills development, challenging assignments, appropriate amounts of reading/writing).
- The syllabus communicates that the instructor cares about students and believes each student can succeed. The syllabus communicates these beliefs by offering tips and strategies for how to meet and exceed expectations, through review sessions, appropriate office hours, additional background material, etc.
- The document is readable, meaning the organization is clear, whether it contains major section headings or not, and ordered in a way that re-enforces the focus on learning.