

Writing as a Teaching Tool in Syllabus and Assignment Design

Chapter 2



My first class as a freshman, I didn't know what a syllabus was! First I thought it was some kind of a big project! Of course, I quickly figured it out. To me a syllabus is an outline for the course. The things that I look for in the syllabus are requirements about papers, assignments, due dates, the course schedule, readings and all that. I like a syllabus that is detailed and also gives a description of each project, that way even if I don't start doing the assignment, I can at least think about it ahead of time to get some ideas.

Senior in Policy Studies

A syllabus should be put together with the perspective of students in mind. Ideally, a syllabus should be able to capture students' attention and enhance their interest in the subject. So, one has to make sure that students feel some connection with the subject's theory and people's everyday experiences. The syllabus can draw the student into the subject, as it sets the tone in so many ways. So I ask myself how can I invite the student into the syllabus and into the course?

Teaching Associate/Graduate Student

Assignments are about getting feedback on students' understanding and perception of material.

Undergraduate in Accounting

Course documents such as syllabi and assignment sheets are a traditional part of any university class. They provide information and set the tone for the class. They name learning goals, expectations for student work, and evaluation criteria. They can also be used as teaching tools to engage students' interest and actively solicit participation. By using such texts strategically, teachers can encourage students to take a role in designing the course throughout the semester. Since writing is an interactive process in which both teachers and students participate, the idea of using writing refers not just to student writing, but also the writing teachers do when they craft and use syllabi and assignments. This chapter focuses on ways to encourage student engagement with such documents and presents ideas for crafting texts to promote learning.

Creating Syllabi That Use Writing to Learn

The syllabus is commonly designed to outline the course, and it contains key information about course requirements, assignments, and other details, which students frequently use as a reference. However, one can think of the syllabus in other ways when considering how writing can be used to teach. Other than describing the details and requirements of the course, the syllabus functions in two interrelated ways: as a written teaching tool itself and as a method of describing the writing of the course. For example, by including a well-designed, detailed, and reflective course objective section, the instructor can demonstrate how certain written assignments will emerge from the objectives. In the next section, I will discuss how to design a syllabus that can be used as a teaching tool and as a place to describe the writing involved in the course. The following chart shows briefly how a syllabus is commonly conceived.

The Syllabus Can Be Thought of As:	
Outline and Roadmap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List of assignments, labs, exams & due dates • Chronology of weekly topics & readings • Policies, expectations, & requirements
Contract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ground rules between students & instructor • Students responsibilities & requirements • Policies, guidelines, & penalties
Teaching Tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing used for critical thinking • Interactive space for students' engagement • Reflections and annotations illustrate writing methods for written assignments



Designing The Syllabus as a Teaching Tool

This section will discuss how the syllabus may be constructed as a teaching tool that can be used to draw students' interest and make them active participants by utilizing some writing-based strategies.

As an instructor, you can effectively set the tone for your course with a carefully crafted and planned syllabus that takes into account some of the questions below. Several aspects of a course, such as student enrollment, backgrounds, and class duration influence which teaching strategies or assignment types will work well and which will not. Although it might sound self-evident, it is crucial these factors be taken into consideration before designing the course and its assignments. For example, a course with a large enrollment may not be ideal for long research papers that require intensive guiding at every step. Similarly, group projects requiring multiple outside-of-class meetings may be difficult for non-traditional working students to manage easily. A course broken up into three 50 minute class sessions per week has to be planned slightly differently than for a course with two 80 minute sessions.

Before You Start Writing Your Syllabus

- *What are the course basics: student preparation, class size?*
- *What are the departmental and assignment requirements?*
- *What exactly is this course about?*
- *What can students get out of this course?*
- *Do the requirements suit students' diverse needs?*
- *Which features of the course have worked best?*
- *What campus/local resources are available?*

Generally, most syllabi are divided into sub-sections (course objectives, required readings and grade distributions), which outline specific information relevant to the course. These sub-sections can be designed as places where the students are invited to participate and write-in. This way, the syllabus itself can be used as a teaching tool. The following chart shows how different syllabus sub-sections can be used to group pertinent information about the course and draw students in. It also includes some ideas that instructors can use to show students how different aspects of the syllabus are relevant to the course and how students can become active participants in the learning process.

Syllabus Sub-Sections: Purposes and Classroom Uses

Subsection	Pedagogic Purpose	Incorporating Writing
Course Objectives	<p>To define course content.</p> <p>To reflect upon and specify your course goals, objectives, and expectations.</p>	<p>Students can offer examples, questions, statistics and articles on course topics and/or reports and case studies to illustrate course objectives. Students can also specify their own objectives and goals.</p>
Texts and Readings	<p>To include the range of materials covered and to explain how they apply to course goals.</p>	<p>Students <i>personalize</i> this section with notes about authors, text histories, and commentaries. These can become course resources.</p>
Assignment Details	<p>To specify goals, objectives, timeline, requirements.</p> <p>(Adding a “tip of the week” note to each description in this section gives students advice on time management, due dates, and work timelines.)</p>	<p>This section can include an assignment progress chart that identifies steps involved towards completion. It can begin to answer questions like these: <i>What are the tasks involved? What resources are necessary and available? Where will I seek help? How will I budget my time? How will I know if I am on the right track?</i></p>
Grading Distribution	<p>To help students understand course progress and evaluation.</p>	<p>Leave space for students to calculate grades. Return to this section throughout the course to remind students and/or revise expectations.</p>
Policies, Expectations, and Plagiarism	<p>To walk students through requirements and explain why each is important in the writing and learning process.</p>	<p>Student can write about the implications of expectations. <i>Why are these skills important? Why are these policies important? How do they relate to the learning process?</i></p>
Participation	<p>To explain why and how class participation is related to the learning, and writing process.</p>	<p>Leave space for students to list comments and questions including ideas not raised in class. Use these in teaching. Ask students why participation is important for learning and writing. Write down how they like to participate. Exchange peer-contact information.</p>

See Chapter 8 for more about academic honesty.

Creating Assignments That Use Writing to Learn

Students often participate in a range of activities and tasks during a course, many of which can be categorized as assignments. Assignments can be formal (papers, research projects, lab assignments), or relatively informal (class discussions, freewrites, group work).

See Chapter 8 for ideas on designing effective assignments.

Any instructor who has written an assignment knows that it is not always an easy task. Despite a teacher's best efforts, students often struggle with understanding the assignment or some aspect of the task involved in it. Instructors may also be torn between giving students latitude to be creative and interpretive in their engagement with the assigned tasks, and giving students precise instructions that are to be followed strictly. In many cases, instructors use a combination of both.

The chart to the right offers some strategies on planning and writing assignments that can be tailored to meet the needs of specific courses and student learners. It also highlights how students can become active participants in the process. Student participation is conceived in two broad ways:

1. To get student feedback on and to assess their understanding of the assignment; and
2. To involve students in the planning and designing process itself, by engaging and empowering them in identifying assignment objectives, appropriate methods, format, and evaluation.

For example, selecting test questions from a broader pool of questions written by students during active reading assignments is one way of engaging them in the design process. For students, part of an assignment might be to come up with appropriate method and format requirement when given a set of assignment objectives. Peer review of written work is another way of including student involvement in the evaluation process.

Elements of Writing and Planning Assignments

Assignment Design	Questions to Consider	Student Participation
<p>Objective: Specify assignment objective clearly.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Why this assignment?</i> • <i>What is the goal?</i> • <i>What will students learn?</i> • <i>How does it relate to the course?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to name goals. <i>How can these be incorporated?</i> • Ask students if objective is clear. <i>How do students relate assignments to course and topics?</i>
<p>Assessment: Specify what will be tested and evaluated (application of formulae, theories, or concepts, etc.).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Are questions commensurate with the objectives?</i> • <i>Are questions or tasks adequate?</i> • <i>How are questions related to the material?</i> • <i>Can students give feedback to each other and in how?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students if questions are clear. • Ask students to compare questions with assignment objective, and generate questions to prepare problem set or study-guide. Students can participate in evaluation, (group or peer review, self-critique, etc.)
<p>Method: Specify methods and how to plan each step involved in the assignment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What background information is needed?</i> • <i>Where to find them?</i> • <i>What resources may be used?</i> • <i>What will students learn from this method?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to lists steps, materials, skills, time, and methods involved. Given task objectives, students can design an appropriate method. • Ask students about specific needs to achieve these goals.
<p>Format: Specify expected assignment format and presentation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What should a specific product look like? What skills do students need to know and use for this format?</i> • <i>Why are the requirements important? How closely should students follow the format?</i> • <i>Can students use some other style? How may they be used and why?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask if students understand the format. Students can participate in format design based on goals and methods. • Ask the class to analyze the assignment goals and write requirements as a group.

Things To



Consider

Some Assignment Structures and Examples

This section discusses four broad ways of structuring assignments, giving examples from different disciplines. Each method helps students draw on information and present it in different ways.

The Scaffolding Assignment

Scaffolded assignments build upon other course readings and writings to encourage student engagement with and understanding of a course topic. Using a combination of assignments (class discussions, reading notes, freewrites, paper drafts), students move toward the completion of a larger project. There are a variety of reasons for incorporating scaffolding into your teaching. Scaffolded assignments can be used to:

- Estimate possible smaller steps towards larger project or paper. Plan, create, and spread-out each step into several smaller assignments.
- Revise and polish individual pieces of work.
- Incorporate use of different skills.
- Prevent end-of-semester panic.
- Prevent academic dishonesty.



Scaffolded Assignment from Education

The following assignment sequence illustrates how scaffolding can lead students to engage critically with research materials as they produce an education paper. Students produce a variety of writing—some formal, some informal.

1. Freewrite: *Why am I interested in this issue?*
2. In class or homework written analysis: *What do other researchers have to say about this issue? Exploring education abstracts, finding relevant sources and shaping research question.*
3. Written reflection: *What have I found so far? Note-taking and preparing annotated bibliography.*
4. Summaries of key articles & findings: *How do these speak to class texts and discussion?*
5. Paper outline, with particular focus on research findings for peer review.
6. Draft for peer comments and instructor review.
7. Final paper.

The Reframing Assignment

Writing that reframes class discussions or lab activities can help students to think about and articulate different topics during discussion and/or group activities. Students then can write a more formal piece in which they engage the text or research materials more closely. This kind of assignment makes a strong connection between the more hands-on or discussion-based tasks and their more formal corollary, the written paper. There are two ways to *reframe* student thinking: open-ended questions and focused questions. Reframing assignments can be used to:

- Encourage students to freely *think outside the box* (e.g., open-ended questions).
- Encourage students to engage closely with material (e.g., focused type questions).
- Promote participation in class or out of class.
- Enrich discussion.
- Compare and contrast learning and writing strategies.

Using Reframing of a Class-discussion Leading to a Paper in a Religion Class

The following assignment demonstrates the reframing strategy in a religion class. Students could answer the questions in small groups or individually, through in-class or homework freewrites, and/or in reflective writings that precede the final product.

Open-ended discussion question:

(Example 1)—*Do you think god exists? Why or why not?*

(Example 2)—*What does it mean to make a free choice?*

Focused question for paper:

(Example 1)—*Explain Aquinas's argument for the existence of God found in the following passage.*

(Example 2)—*Explain why Frankfurt believes making a free choice does not depend on the availability of options.*



The Multi-Media Assignment

Writing that uses multiple media/alternative ways of knowing can give students with different learning styles opportunities to articulate their understanding of the materials by drawing on different assignment formats. Using alternative assignment formats can:

- Encourage creative ways of addressing and presenting certain course topics.
- Provide guided latitude over format and presentation style.
- Break monotony of typical assignments.
- Allow students to engage creatively.
- Encourage different forms of articulation.
- Accommodate a variety of learning styles.

Using Multiple Media/Alternative Formats in a Sociology Class

The following assignment was given in an introductory sociology course on social problems, and it turned out to be quite successful. One group of two students produced their own video documenting how students across the university campus responded to images of women from magazine ads. They screened their video in class, described the production process and had a discussion. Another group wrote and acted out a skit about sexism that had three analytical levels, and another group created a collage of Hollywood images on sexuality and critically responded to these images through a poster presentation. They also wrote detailed reflections about their projects.

Assignment Objective: In this project you will creatively demonstrate your critical analysis of a social problem, and you will address what makes the problem a social problem and how racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia (and other systematic and institutional oppression) influence the problem.

What you need to demonstrate: You should be able to present your topic and adequately describe how your project addresses a social problem, and describe how it comments on the key issues involved.

Method: You can pick any issue and you can choose any one or several forms of media to demonstrate your point. For example, you can make a poster about homelessness, bring in a video about sexism in the media for discussion, make a collage of images of race related violence in society, or act out a skit that is demonstrates your creative thinking and critique about the social issue. You will also turn in a 2-3 page, double-spaced report where you discuss your project in relation to the social problem that you have picked for analysis.



The Translation Assignment

Writing that translates technical or visual work can be used to supplement work done in science labs, ceramic and art studios, or design classes. This type of assignment can:

- Translate abstract or visual materials into a written report.
- Develop skills important for presenting technical material to diverse audiences.
- Demonstrate conceptual and contextual understanding.

Two Translation Assignments	
<i>Translating technical language in a Ceramics Class</i>	<i>Translating technical language in a Math Class</i>
Objective: to write a professional guide to a class art show that presents technical, historical and cultural information.	Objective: to write word problems that both demonstrate understanding of mathematical concepts and create exam review materials.
<p>Assignment Sequence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select work to highlight in guide and discuss format of guide (print, visual, audio, web-based). • Divide class into writing groups (by perspective, specific artwork, location, etc.). • Ask technical group to write about the art-making process. • Ask the historical group to research and write about some aspect of the genre, form, etc. • Ask the cultural group to research and write about the cultural significance. • Groups present writings and solicit feedback from sample audience. • Students design and produce guide. 	<p>Assignment Sequence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to design a word problem and correct solution for each mathematical concept covered in each unit. • Engage students to exchange and review peer word problems. • Collect, read and comment on papers. Ask students to revise each problem until the solution is correct and the concept is clearly demonstrated through the word problem. • Organize exam or exam review using student-generated word problems.

