

# The Sherrerd Center Guide to Creating Inclusive Syllabi

## Why does a syllabus matter?

A good syllabus serves as a cornerstone to learning. It communicates pedagogical principles, course goals and design, classroom cultural expectations, and specific policies and activities. It extends compassionate flexibility in pursuit of academic rigor. Of course, a syllabus—even a very good one—is only one part of course design; it must complement and work in concert with all of your pedagogical choices. Nonetheless, it is through our syllabi that we begin the process of welcoming students, building strong learning communities, and affirming each student's value and identities within it. Rather than a contract full of warnings, a syllabus ideally invites students in by outlining a course's substance and articulating what meaningful engagement and accountability looks like in the service of deep learning.

At Smith, instructors are given tremendous discretion over their course syllabi. Unlike at other institutions, there is no required language that all instructors must use, though there are some required elements related to course expectations. Because syllabi reflect our many voices, learning goals, and pedagogical philosophies, they will vary across instructors, disciplines, and class type. Even for one instructor, a syllabus can shift and change across semesters, in response to new learning challenges, experiments with different policies, and the evolution of best practice pedagogy in a discipline.

Since the founding of the Sherrerd Center for Teaching and Learning, many in our community, especially those new to it, have asked for guidance and expertise in creating effective syllabi. Over the years, the Sherrerd has provided such advice through its programming and teaching consultations as well as an earlier iteration of this guiding document. As we returned to our campus following pandemic's disruptions, we recognized a need to benchmark and recalibrate our guidance. Thus began a joint collaboration between the Sherrerd Center and the Student Government Association during the 2023-24 academic year that gathered feedback from instructors, staff, and students about what, from their perspective, makes a good syllabus.

The purpose of this document is to share this feedback and provide useful guidance to help you write a syllabus that reflects your teaching and learning principles and priorities. We hope that the information provided here will help you to make an engaging and [promising](#) syllabus of your own.

## Student and Instructor Perspectives

Smith instructors and students understand and use a course syllabus differently. Recognizing these differences can help us craft a stronger syllabus and more clearly and explicitly communicate its role to our students.

Instructors tend to envision the syllabus as a singular component of the larger course design, one that needs to be considered in context. While some instructors lean heavily on the syllabus to convey the essence of the course and flesh out details, others focus more on presenting information in the first class or via Moodle sites, blogs, or other media forms. This results in syllabi of varying length, form, and heft. Regardless of their approach, most instructors regard the syllabus as a social contract of sorts and expect that students will read the syllabus exhaustively at the start of the semester, ask questions immediately, and plan their semesters around the information it contains.

In contrast, students are typically managing four or five very different syllabi each semester. Each instructor's syllabus and course is organized around different expectations and procedures, different assessment styles, and a different set of deadlines. Students receive all of these syllabi within the same week, which can leave them feeling inundated with information. As a result, the syllabus tends to remain rather abstract to students until the course is in progress and deadlines arrive or challenges arise.

Students report that they often do not read and digest a syllabus in its entirety at the start of the term, as instructors might expect. Instead, in the early days of the semester, they regard the syllabus as a window into the general experience of the course and the approach of the instructor. Many students are looking to see a balance between clear and explicit expectations and a general sense of regard for the complexities of student life. They quickly note inconsistencies in policy or approach.

Students tend to return to the syllabus once the semester is underway. They read it carefully and strategically when they are looking to solve a problem or answer a specific question. And they expect it to include up-to-date information about assignments, deadlines, and expectations. Students report that they are not intimidated by the length of a syllabus. Instead, they tend to emphasize their desire for clarity, organization, and accessibility of the information contained within it, regardless of the length.

## Crafting a Smart Syllabus

How might we reconcile these differing perspectives and create a syllabus that serves the needs of both instructors and students? We offer a few insights and suggestions:

It is important not to assume that our students see things as we do. Students arrive to our courses with vastly different experiences with syllabi, or sometimes with no experience at all. Communicate with your students early and often about how to use your syllabus to be successful in your course.

Consider finding small ways to weave the syllabus into everyday classroom practice, and revisit the syllabus with students throughout the semester, especially as exams approach or deadlines change. This is particularly important because our students' [executive functioning skills](#) are still developing.

Envision your syllabus as a living document that will need to be updated throughout the course of the term. Use the syllabus as an opportunity to keep everyone on track, to formalize updated deadlines and requirements, and to keep messaging clear and consistent.

Consider a syllabus that centers students (including features such as compassion and structured flexibility) as a mechanism for achieving deep learning. Clearly communicate policies and consider multiple ways for students to engage with and achieve the key learning goals of your class. Students thrive with a balance of firm expectations and compassionate flexibility.

Consider using your syllabus policies to manage common pedagogical complexities and reduce your own workload. Anticipate where students may struggle with content or approach, and build a set of clear, adaptable, and durable practices around these pressure points.

## How to use this guide

This guide is not prescriptive but instead engages the user in a process of reflection and iteration. The Sherrerd hopes that this document helps colleagues to communicate their pedagogical commitments through their syllabi policies and language. We envision this guide as a living document that will change and expand as we gather feedback, engage with emergent research in the learning sciences, and confront new challenges in the classroom and beyond. The examples below weave together and rework pieces of colleagues' actual syllabi with the aim of demonstrating just one possible configuration or approach. Just as there are many ways to teach well, there are many ways to assemble a successful syllabus.

## Essential Components of a Syllabus

Despite the relative freedom afforded instructors, there are some essential components required by the college and/or necessary for inclusive, accessible, and effective teaching. All syllabi should communicate the following:

- Description of the course and its learning goals
- Your contact information (name, pronouns, office location, email, etc.)
- Your availability
  - Via email and office hours (indicate time and form)
  - Minimum of two student office hours per week, preferably on different times/days
- Academic expectations
  - Academically engaged time related to course credit hours
    - According to longstanding federal regulation defining a credit hour as well as [Smith's Code of Faculty Governance](#) (section VII.F.), a 4-credit course must be designed to expect approximately 12 hours per week of academically engaged time from our students (through the combination of both in-class contact hours and out-of-class assignments, reading, etc.). Over time, instructors have begun to articulate the college's guideline more explicitly to students in order to establish shared expectations for course workload, especially post-pandemic, and ideally the syllabus should include this information.
  - List of required texts/materials
  - Weekly reading/assignments and course topics
    - Major assignments with dates, even if they are provisional
  - Course grade breakdown/rubrics and grading practices and policies
  - Student assessment
- Essential course policies
  - Communicating syllabus policies is done most effectively when instructors outline how the policies fit with their approach to student learning *along with* how those policies are explicitly enacted. Any policy needs to work together holistically with a course's broader design, language, activities, and content. Consider a syllabus that centers students (including features such as compassion and structured flexibility) as the mechanism for achieving deep learning. Clearly communicate policies with a welcoming tone and consider multiple ways for students to engage with and achieve the key learning goals of your class.

Policies to include in your syllabus may include (but are not limited to):

- [Attendance/Absence Policies](#)
- [Extension/Late-Assignment Policies](#)
- [Responsible Technology Use Policies](#)
- [Policies on Use of Generative AI \(ChatGPT etc.\)](#)
- [Statements on Academic Honesty](#)
- [Accessibility Statements](#)
- [Participation Statements](#)

## Attendance/Absence Policies

This is an essential component of a syllabus as it sets expectations for class engagement. A strong articulation of attendance policies will provide clear and explicit guidelines about how many classes students can miss, what to do if they are absent or will arrive late, and the

consequences for missing or arriving late to class. It should also address why presence matters to you/the class community.

## Questions to Guide Your Thinking

- Why does a student's presence in class matter? Why should they attend to begin with?
- Absence is probably inevitable: how can you shape policies that acknowledge and anticipate—but also limit—student absences?
- How is sickness or emergency defined? Who decides? When does the class dean become involved?
- What should students do if they cannot attend? Whom do they contact and how? What does appropriate communication look like?
- How should students make up for missed classes/work? How do they fill in gaps?
- What are consequences for (excessive) missed classes? How does attendance/absence get factored into students' grades or assessment measures?
- What are the consequences for late arrival? What counts as "late"? What should students do if they need to arrive late? Does (excessive) lateness impact a student's grade?

## Example

Our ideas benefit from the active and thoughtful participation of all community members. Effective group work in particular relies on the regular and active participation of all group members. I also recognize, however, that illness, family emergencies, and other extenuating circumstances are part of life and cannot be avoided. If you cannot make class, I ask that you send me a quick note via email as a courtesy. *Even more importantly*, you need to connect with your group members to determine what you missed and how you can stay on top of your project's work. All students may miss up to two class sessions without penalty. Missing more than two classes will lower a student's participation grade as outlined below. Students should reach out to their class dean in the event of extended illness or emergency; they can help you to navigate these situations with your instructors. Consistent with the college's policy on student academic standing, if you miss more than four weeks of class meetings, you are in danger of failing to earn credit for this course (receiving a grade of E).

Please be sure to borrow notes from a group member if you have to miss a class, and offer that classmate the same courtesy when they must miss a class. If an assignment is due in class on a day you will be absent, you are still accountable for any work that is due, unless I provide an extension. In the extraordinary event that students fail to contribute to a team's work (including failing to communicate and/or repeatedly miss class/team meetings), I reserve the right to withdraw them from their group. In such a case, a student will work solo to complete the course's assignments.

## Extension/Late Assignment Policies

This section articulates clearly your policies on two interlocking pieces of course design: deadline extensions and late submission of work in the absence of an extension. You should explicate whether and how you grant extensions and/or accept late work as well as any potential implications (for grades/feedback) when students take advantage of either of these policies. Instructors seeking inclusive practices recognize that students sometimes cannot meet the deadlines explicated in their syllabus. They work to balance policies that help students to do their best work when faced with challenging circumstances while managing their workload without falling behind.

## Questions to Guide Your Thinking

- Why do you have the late policy you do? If your policy is tied to specific features of your course design and/or weekly schedule, articulate that.
- What flexibility, if any, is there for assignment due dates?
- How/when do students request an extension? When and how can they expect your decision about a requested extension?
- Do you accept late work and if so, under what circumstances? Are there grade/feedback implications for late submission?

## Example

Because the assignment schedule takes you through the course's learning goals in sequence, it's important that you turn in work on time. These deadlines will help to keep you on track and pace your thinking and writing. In turn, I have planned deadlines so that you can count on me to provide feedback to you on any assignment before the next one like it is due. All that being said, I understand that unanticipated circumstances and personal difficulties can sometimes make it challenging to get your best thinking done and your work in on time. So let me also say, I want your strongest work over your timeliest work, within reason. Thus, I allow every student one automatic extension, if requested. Send me an email at least 24 hours before a due date to tell me if you plan to use your extension (automatically granted for up to 48 hours, no penalty). More time can be given on a case-by-case basis but only after a conversation with me in person or via Zoom. Even with this class' extension policy, sometimes an assignment will be late. All assignments must be uploaded into your assigned google drive by the deadline I indicate (there is a fifteen minute grace period). If an assignment is late, there will be a 5% reduction for every 24 hours it is tardy (up to one week). Late papers cannot be revised and I do not accept any submissions after a week beyond deadline. Any student repeatedly struggling with deadlines and/or workload is encouraged to come talk with me proactively during an office hour appointment so that we can come up with a plan together for how to get the most out of the class.

# Responsible Technology Use Policies

Given the ubiquity of technology generally and as a tool in teaching, this portion of the syllabus clarifies your expectations of how students should and should not use their phones and computers during class sessions. Be explicit in helping students to understand which uses you approve and encourage versus any that you forbid. Explain why you make any differentiation. Be aware that some students have accommodations for certain assistive technologies and be thoughtful about how you will meet those needs if you restrict technology use at all. Share the consequences for instances in which students violate this policy.

## Questions to Guide Your Thinking

- Are there technologies that are forbidden or encouraged? What undergirds your philosophy for your stance on these different policies?
- In what ways does technology serve the learning goals of the course? In what ways might it lead to distractions, especially during class time?
- How do you meet the needs of students who need to have technology accommodations if/when you put restrictions on technology? And how do you do so in a way that is both equitable and respectful of the privacy of students with accommodations?
- How do you handle it/what are the consequences if a student violates your responsible technology use policies?

## Example

Yes, I trust you, and I also know that using computers in class opens up the temptation to use (and misuse) the Internet and social media during class time. I want to create a computer policy that lends itself to accessibility but also respects the important scholarly work we will do as a class. I allow computers in the class for all appropriate uses (viewing PDFs of our readings; working on a team google document; taking notes) but I do not accept off-task use of technology (engaging in social media; surfing the web; shopping/chatting/texting) during class time. When that happens, it not only interferes with your own learning but it also distracts others and detracts from our sense of community. Multitasking using social media and the Internet is disrespectful and can make the classroom inaccessible. In other words, if you are texting or using SnapChat during class, you may very well be engaging in ableist behavior that renders the classroom inaccessible to a classmate. Please keep this in mind and silence/close/turn-off and/or use "Freedom" or some other program to shut down your access to inappropriate technology for the duration of the class. If I detect that a student is ignoring this policy, I will ask you to refocus. If it happens repeatedly within and/or across classes, your participation grade will be likely to suffer. If I find that computers repeatedly prove to be a distraction to learning for the class as a whole, I reserve the right to change the flexibility of this policy.

# Policies on Use of Generative AI

Given the evolving capacities of and landscape surrounding generative AI, it is essential for instructors to provide clear expectations of its use within the context of all class activities. As educators collectively wrestle with generative AI's pedagogical opportunities and pitfalls, individual instructors must make legible to students their own perspectives and policies. Syllabus and assignment statements about appropriate use of AI provides key communication that the Honor Board relies upon when called to adjudicate any apparent violations of academic honesty. Lance Eaton's open access [Syllabi Policies for AI Generative Tools](#) offers a wide array of sample policies and is well worth consulting.

## Questions to Guide Your Thinking

- In what ways will generative AI technology serve the learning goals of the course? In what ways might it interfere with learning?
- For which specific activities of the class is generative AI allowed or forbidden?
- What is your stance on the promise and perils of generative AI?
- When is use of generative AI considered a violation of other class and/or college policies (e.g., Honor Code violations)?

## Example

The purpose of this course is to help you become a better, more confident writer. Using Large Language Models (LLMs) (aka generative AI, such as ChatGPT, Bard AI, etc.) to write your paper defeats this purpose. LLMs write terrible papers. Thus, you are not allowed to use LLMs to create drafts of papers in this class. You may use it to help you brainstorm ideas, generate a basic outline, or check the syntax of a sentence. These are all great ways to make use of these LLM tools. However, using one to generate the actual content of your papers is considered plagiarism. One of the main reasons is that LLMs use other writers' intellectual property to create the text they generate. As you are not citing these authors in your paper, it is considered plagiarism. Another reason to avoid using LLMs is that the data they are trained on often contains stereotypes and positions that you yourself may not embody. While LLMs are useful, they are not intelligent. If you do use ChatGPT etc. to assist you in the paper, please disclose this in your references. If you use LLMs to generate content or fail to disclose any approved use of AI in your assignment, I consider that a violation of this class' academic integrity. So, if you are stressed or under pressure and feel that using AI is the only way to get a good grade, please come see me. I am here to help you grow as a writer, student, and human; I want to help you thrive. We can work on alternative deadlines, different approaches to composition, etc. to help you achieve your writing goals. I would be happy to discuss any of these topics with you during office hours.



# Statement on Academic Honesty

Students must abide by Smith College's [Academic Honor Code](#). This is a communal commitment and all members have responsibility for upholding it. Be sure to include a link to the Code in your syllabus. Beyond reminding students of the parameters of the Code, instructors need to make clear their definition of honor code violations within the context of their course. The college's Honor Board carefully considers your expectations and standards for compliance with the Code as articulated in your class syllabus and other relevant written assignment materials, if a hearing must occur.

## Questions to Guide Your Thinking

- What is the college's Honor Code and why is it important?
- What are their and your responsibilities for abiding by the college's Honor Code?
- What do you consider violations of our Code?
- What happens when a suspected violation has occurred? What are the potential consequences from the Honor Board in the case of a violation?

## Example

True learning is difficult to achieve without academic integrity. Smith's [Honor Code](#) bestows all kinds of privileges to students (like non-proctored exams and self-scheduled final exams). I treasure being part of an academic community based on this kind of principled integrity and respect. So please be aware that you are doing a disservice to yourself and to the privileges you have been given if you violate our Code. Having an important communal standard such as this one obliges us to uphold it as a community. Students should be familiar with their responsibilities within our code. In this class, that includes attention to citing sources appropriately and refraining from plagiarism. I will review my expectations for each assignment but if you are still not clear, please be sure to ask me. Any suspected Honor Code infractions—even if minor or unintentional—have to be reported to the Academic Honor Board by any of us (that's both you and me). Violations can result in serious academic consequences (such as a failing grade on an assignment). Let's all agree to abide by the code and protect the learning and privileges it affords us all. Also remember that if you are struggling and feel pushed up against a deadline, please reach out and talk to me before cheating or using resources inappropriately.

## Accessibility Statement

A successful accessibility statement will validate the belonging and inclusion of students with disabilities. It will provide clear guidance for how students requiring accommodations should communicate their needs and work with the instructor proactively to meet course expectations.

Consider consulting with the staff at the [Accessibility Resource Center](#) (ARC, formerly called ODS) for how to handle any particularly challenging cases. The experts there are quite helpful in

talking through the range of reasonable accommodations that might be possible to meet the student's needs within the context of your course design and pedagogical goals. They can help you balance boundary-setting and flexibility.

As we learned during the pandemic, recording class meetings may be a more accessible way for students to engage with your course. At the same time, there are ways in which recording a class may feel unwelcome to some. Consider having a conversation with your students and including clauses in your syllabus about the nature of the usage and sharing of recordings of classes. Make sure students understand that their discussions may be recorded to enable an equitable experience for all students. Distributing class recordings without permission of the instructor is considered a violation of the Honor Code.

### **Question to Guide Your Thinking**

- Why does accessibility matter to you and what does it involve?
- Who is eligible for accommodations? Should/must a student work through ARC, or are you willing to arrange informal accommodations?
- When and how should a student communicate their needs for accommodations? What process do you advise for seeking accommodations and coming up with a plan?
- What should a student do if they run into challenges or find some aspect of the course inaccessible?
- What resources are available for students who require accommodations? Where should a student go if they require official accommodations or if they need additional support?
- How do you handle requests to record the class?

### **Example**

I strive to make the classroom, office visits, and your overall experience of this course as accessible as possible. Our communication is key to achieving this goal, as my understanding of what accessibility means is always evolving. Therefore please feel free to let me know if there's anything I can do to make the course more accessible. If you have a disability or a personal experience that you think impacts your experience of the classroom, I recommend that you contact the Smith College Accessibility Resource Center (ARC). ARC facilitates communication between you and your instructors by generating a letter specific to you that indicates the support you need in the classroom or on assignments. If you have this letter already, please come visit me with it during my office hours during the first two weeks of class so we can talk about what you need in detail. Alternatively, you may email me a copy of the letter and your ideas to begin this communication; but please, let's start the conversation early. During our exchanges, it is not necessary for you to divulge the nature of your disability or personal experience, only if you think it will be beneficial to you. Importantly, there may be issues that the ARC letter does not address or, conversely, perhaps you do not wish to avail yourself of ARC. In either case, if you have any concerns about accessibility in my classroom, please come visit my office hours or email me as early as possible so I can address the concern.

# Participation Statement

A strong participation statement clearly articulates what active, engaged, and dynamic learning looks like in your classroom. It advises students about what participation specifically involves, why it matters, and how it impacts student learning outcomes and course grade.

## Questions to Guide Your Thinking

- What specifically does participation involve? What do you expect your students to do as active participants in your course?
- Why is participation important? Why should students participate?
- Does a student's participation in the course impact their grade? If so, how specifically?
- What should a student do to prepare for class and set themselves up for successful participation?
- What are your principles and expectations regarding group and collaborative work?
- What does effective and respectful participation look like, particularly when dealing with fraught or sensitive subjects? How do you expect your students will manage difficult moments? Will you offer trigger warnings for particularly challenging content?

## Example

I have done my best to prepare a thoughtful sequence of readings, activities, and assignments, but the success of this course also depends upon your meaningful investment and engagement. Indeed, studies have shown that the “best learning takes place when learners articulate their own unformed and still developing understanding and continue to articulate it through the process of learning” (R. Keith Sawyer 12). This kind of active work can take many forms: arriving well prepared, asking questions, responding to others' questions, offering a comment or argument about a text, reading texts aloud, or sharing your writing. It can also mean being especially engaged in forum posts (including responding thoughtfully to your classmates), taking a lead role in group work, or giving an especially thoughtful presentation.

At the midpoint and end of the semester, I will ask you to holistically evaluate your participation, keeping in mind that an “A” constitutes near-perfect attendance in combination with close and frequent engagement with classroom activities (to include the larger group discussion). These evaluations will help inform my own assessment at the end of the semester.

At all times, the classroom environment must be one of respect for conflicting viewpoints, opinions, and experiences. In this course, we will engage in active debate and exploration of complex, sometimes fraught issues. As we try out new ideas and grow as scholars, we sometimes find that our ability to express ourselves in speech and writing lags behind. It is thus imperative that we foster a classroom space where we feel

comfortable speaking and revising our thoughts, failing and trying again, and experimenting without fear of judgment. We will engage each other with a spirit of generosity and grace.

## Helpful Resources

There are a host of other resources—both for instructors and students—that might be helpful to you as you assemble your syllabus.

### Sherrerd Center Resources

- Each year, the Sherrerd Center partners with the Associate Dean of the Faculty to offer an inclusive syllabus workshop open to all instructors before the new academic year begins. Consider joining us!
- We also offer Teaching Arts Luncheons on various syllabus-related topics. You can find a full schedule of events [here](#).
- Consider scheduling a one-on-one appointment with one of the Center's [Teaching Mentors for Equitable and Inclusive Teaching](#). Our teaching mentors regularly review syllabi with instructors and help them think through course design, policy-making, and other syllabus- and pedagogy-related matters.

### Other Smith Resources

- Smith offers various [funding streams](#) to support students' academic (including textbook purchases), co-curricular, emergency, health, and other needs. Some instructors choose to provide this information in their syllabi.
- There are various academic resources that students can access to support their academic progress. You may consider including in your syllabi links or other information about the [Spinelli Center for Quantitative Learning](#), the [Jacobson Center for Writing, Teaching, and Learning](#), and the [Teaching, Learning and Research Librarians](#).
- Some instructors choose to include contact information for mental health and wellness support, including [Crisis Resources](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Wellness Programming](#), and [Gender Identity and Expression Resources](#).
- You may consider offering a link to the online platform for [reporting sexual misconduct and other forms of discrimination](#).
- Some faculty include advice from students who've previously taken the course.
- Consider consulting with faculty in your department or program who teach similar courses.

### Online Resources

- Kevin Gannon, [How to Create a Syllabus. Advice Guide](#)
- Sathy and Hogan, [How to Make Your Teaching More Inclusive](#)

- Useful [overview](#) of Universal Design for Education
- Beckie Supiano, [The Student-Centered Syllabus](#)
- David Gooblar, [Your Syllabus doesn't Have to Look Like a Contract](#)
- Center for Urban Education's [Syllabus Review Guide for Equity-Minded Practice](#)
- Champlain College's [Creating an Engaging Syllabus](#)

## Acknowledgments

This document is the result of the collaborative efforts of many campus community members over several years. The Sherrerd Center leadership would like to acknowledge members of the Sherrerd Center Advisory Board and the Student Government Association Curriculum Committee, who provided feedback on this document and offered insights into what makes a good syllabus from their respective vantage points. We would also like to thank the instructors who shared their syllabi with us for this effort; we have woven together pieces of their syllabi to create the examples above. We extend gratitude, too, to Associate Dean of the Faculty and the Provost's Office for their contributions and support.