

Syllabus

The Importance of Tone when writing a Course Syllabus "Your belonging document"

What do students "hear" when they read your syllabus?

Or when you go over it on day one?

What kind of tone do the words you select (and emphasize) evoke for you and the students in your class?

Are the words you use on your syllabus welcoming, encouraging, and enthusiastic?

Or do they come across as adversarial, callous, or jaded?

These are important questions to consider. Research points to a link between syllabus tone and student perception of a class and its instructor. A friendly syllabus increases student trust in the instructor, interest in the class, and likelihood of success. An adversarial tone has the opposite effect. Indeed, the adversarial tone - the scolding, finger-wagging voice - tells students that the instructor either does not trust or like them, or is more concerned about their own comfort and convenience (or attention) than the needs and desires of the students.

In our efforts to eliminate barriers and blockages to student success, one simple thing we can do is to reconsider the words and presentation we use on our course syllabi and to intentionally make them more welcoming and encouraging documents. Studies show that this alone will create a more positive learning environment for both students and teacher alike.

The following examples are taken from actual course syllabi. Read through them and discuss ways (if any) to make them less scolding or unfriendly in tone. Which of these courses would you rather be a student?

1. Examination Policies (caps and bold are in the original):

Sample A: There will be three exams in this course: two mid-terms and a final. Bring a new (nothing written in it or on it) Greenbook to class for each (all 3) of the exams. It is **YOUR RESPONSIBILITY** to bring this! **DO NOT** ask me for a Greenbook on the day of the exam as I will simply direct you to the bookstore and you will **NOT** be able to make up the time missed on the exam - Be Prepared! There are **NO MAKE UP EXAMS**. Students may **NOT** leave the classroom at any time during the exam. If a student does leave the room, his/her exam will be collected and graded on the work at the time of his/her departure. Students **MUST** complete **BOTH** mid-terms **AND** the final to pass the class.

Sample B: There are **NO make-up midterm exams** except in cases of **extreme and officially-documented** emergencies. Acceptable documentation includes: a signed note from a doctor/hospital, a letter from a lawyer, or forms documenting jail/incarceration. Any "special circumstances" **MUST** be made prior to the date of the exam. Making a trip to Disneyland, going on vacation, or attending a concert is not a legitimate "special circumstance." There are **NO make-ups for the final exam**. If you miss the final then you ***fail the course***.

Sample C: I understand that sometimes life can make completing school work difficult. For this reason, I will give each student a late pass at the beginning of the semester that they can use to turn in any assignment, except the final project, up to one week late no questions asked. If you retain your late pass throughout the entire semester, you may turn it in at the end for extra credit.

Sample D: **NO LATE WORK ACCEPTED. NO EXCUSES ACCEPTED.**

Sample E: See me if you miss an exam or did not turn in an assignment. Exams and assignments can be made up provided there is an acceptable reason for doing so.

Sample F: I do not accept late work. I am not trying to be mean. It is expected behavior at this level of academia. All assignments are due at the beginning of class.

How would you like communicate your examination policy?

2. Attendance Policies:

Sample A: According to the CLPFA (Chabot-Las Positas Faculty Association) contract, “Faculty have the right under academic freedom, to determine grading, and may assign a failing grade to a student who fails to meet specified attendance standards that are determined by faculty—either program-wide or individually.” So, with that being stated here is my policy. I am assuming you are an adult and will handle your business accordingly. Please do not make doctor, dentist, etc. appointments during class time. These are not excused absences. Please do not call/text/email me telling me why you are missing class.

Sample B: I expect you to be in class every day, seated and prepared **BEFORE I WALK IN THE DOOR!** Tardiness is not only **RUDE** and **IRRESPONSIBLE** it is also **DISRUPTIVE** to the whole class. Therefore, if you are late you **MUST WAIT** outside the classroom door until I give you the signal to enter. FYI, as a professor, I am allowed to be up to 20 minutes late before students can leave.

Sample C: IF YOU ARE ABSENT MORE THAN 4 TIMES YOU WILL RECEIVE ZERO PARTICIPATION POINTS FOR THE SEMESTER. Being tardy more than 10 minutes or leaving early will result in one class absence. And **please use the facilities** before you come to class so that you do not have to get up during my lecture. I do not like being interrupted. It’s rude, disruptive to other students, and unprofessional.

Sample D: I expect you to be present and ready to learn for all class meetings. If, for whatever reason, you cannot come to class I expect you to take responsibility for your own learning and get the notes from a classmate and turn in assignments ahead of time or after the due date using the late pass. Because it is not my position to establish what are “excusable” or “inexcusable” reasons to miss class, you do not need to inform me of your absence or why it is occurring. If you have something that is impeding your ability to regularly attend class, please make an appointment to come speak to me.

How would you like to communicate your attendance policy?

Tips for a More Inclusive Syllabus, (aka Making a More Inclusive Classroom)

One of the easiest and most immediate equity actions we can take is to review our syllabi for the three “cultural “R’s”. Is my syllabus:

- **Culturally Relevant.** Does the chosen material make sense for the contemporary student to learn (in this format), in their current cultural contexts?
- **Culturally Responsive.** Does the chosen material respond to the social/cultural needs of students?
- **Culturally Reflective. Can the student see themselves in the chosen material?**

Many confuse “culture” with race and/or ethnicity. While race and ethnicity can and does influence culture, they are separate and distinct. Most of our incoming students are digital natives who are well-versed in technology and social media platforms. They are accustomed to getting instant answers to their questions. They have different and mercurial ideas around traditional gender roles, race, class, and sexuality—their language around these topics change at a rapid pace. Many are open about their mental and physical health challenges. These are things to consider. Not kowtow to, but keep in mind when crafting your syllabus. When considering which materials to introduce to your students, please consider the intersecting contexts and the multitude of stories your students bring to class.

Here are some ways to make your syllabus more accessible:

- A standard canon isn’t a real thing. It is a thing agreed upon by a small group of people. It is okay to diversify “established canon.” It is okay to introduce material that directly challenges what some considered to be canon.
- Review your materials. How many are produced by living authors? When were the materials created? Are any of the materials created by marginalized or disproportionately impacted populations?
- Instead of wielding knowledge like a hammer, make classes about collective curiosity by turning course titles into questions; e.g., “How Can Shakespeare be Relevant to Contemporary Society?”
- Review the rules/expectations of your course. How many of them are framed as “don’ts”? How many invitations to participate are detailed in your syllabus? What can your students do? Leave room for the students to help develop some of the class expectations.
- What is your assessment criteria? Is it explicitly stated on your syllabus? Is it punitive or generative?
- Is there an explicit invitation to students to attend office hours? Some cultures dissuade students from questioning the instructor. An explicit invitation gives students permission to seek out the instructor.
- For assignments: Is there only one way to complete them? Is there a way for students to show understanding in diverse ways? Are these explicitly stated on your syllabus?
- Does your syllabus include information regarding how to access on-campus services such as mental health help, our on-campus market, and the location of DSPS?
- Are your SLOs explicitly stated? Is the mission of the course explicitly stated? Do the SLOs or mission reinforce power differentials or otherwise marginalize students?

While there are many more ways to make your course syllabus, these are just a few tips to consider when selecting content for your students.

If you're interested in studies that delve deeply into this subject, please email me at: staylor@laspositacollege.edu and I will forward some to you.

Ways to communicate with students (Day 0 and Day 1

Welcoming email / announcement

Purpose:

The purpose of a welcome email is to welcome the students. Be sure your email is not simple a list of no's, try to generate excitement about the upcoming experience. Many student experience anxiety surrounding a new class especially if it is a topic they feel uncomfortable with. You can get the tone for the entire semester by your first interaction. Give the students a feeling that you want them there and that you are looking forward to taking them on this journey of learning.

Welcome Email

Welcome to Bio 1B Zoology,

This semester will be a challenging and exciting tour through the large and diverse world of animals and animal like unicells. I will provide you with hard copies of most of the material currently on Canvas but if you want to check out what we will be doing take a look. Please read chapter 1 in your text before Wednesday. Your first quiz will be due turned in to Canvas by 11:59 PM on Friday 8/23. Please note we will be holding labs this week so be ready to go on Tuesday. Please read the lab posted on Canvas and wear shoes that completely cover your feet no sandals, Tivas or flaps.

See you Monday.

Dr. Judd

How do you or would you make your students feel welcome in your class ?	What are three new techniques you would like to try

Community Building

Teams and peer to peer discussion

Purpose:

Forming smaller group of students especially in a large class allows the student a home base, a safe zone to try out new material and new ideas. It is best to randomly assign the groups if fosters staying on task. Give the new group a task that they can do together something that will build cohesion within the group, example 1 is one such assignment but there are many ways to do this. Also build in time where the student are encouraged to discuss class material with each other such as example 2, this is a short 5 to 10-minute discussion period at the mid-point in the lecture .

Team Work

As a team you will write a one-page (typed double spaced) summary of the natural history of the animal your team is named for. I have named the groups with general common names you must select a specific species of that group to write about.

You must include but not be limited to:

- A picture (does not count toward the total length)
- Where it is found ?
 - (habitat, range, community, biome etc. be specific)
- What it eats ?
- How it reproduces ?
- What eats it ?
- What or who are its main competitors.

Due one week from today in lab. Worth 10 extra credit points if it is done well.

Half-Time Questions

Get with a partner and answer the following questions

- What did we just learn?
- What will we be learning next
- What you would like to go over again

Write out your answers and be sure that both of your names are on the paper

How would you group your students and facilitate peer to peer discussion?

Ice breakers

Purpose:

Some sort of icebreaker helps the student feel less awkward and helps them feel like they belong in the class and that they are part of the fabric of the class. They start to feel connections to the material, you as the professor and the other people in the class.

Example 1

Icebreaker

Welcome!!!

At Las Positas, we are dedicated to providing you with the best academic opportunities so you can achieve your learning goals. This course is designed to provide you with learning supports while you are enrolled in a math course at Las Positas College.

This semester you will be encouraged to participate in group study sessions using proven strategies that lead to increased understanding and success. To get to know your fellow students better, participate in this Whip Around.

Whip Around Directions

- One person reads the questions below one at a time.
- Everyone at the table whips around clockwise with their answer in 30 seconds or less. The point is to answer quickly and honestly.
- The same person as before reads the next question and then everyone whips around answering until all the questions are answered.

“Getting To Know You” Whip Around Questions

1. What is your name and what is your dream job?
2. What are you excited about this semester at LPC?
3. What are you nervous about this semester?
4. What quality do you value in a study partner?
5. Do they think that intelligence is fixed or dynamic?

Example 2

Icebreaker

- Pair up with someone from your team that you do not know.
- Spend 5 minutes getting to know something about them.
- Be sure to get at least the following information
 - Name
 - Year in school
 - Background in the sciences
 - Career goal
 - One word that best describes them and the reason they chose that word.
- You will then introduce each other to the rest of the class and tell us each what you found out about the other person.

Getting to know your students

Purpose:

These interactions are there to show the student you see them as people and you want to know something about them, their experiences, goals, dreams, and fears.

You can include normative questions such as:

- How do you want to be treated in this class? By the instructor? By fellow students? How would that look to you?
- Think of a positive learning experience that you have had. How did it make you feel? What made it a positive experience?
- If someone disagrees with you in class, how do you want them to let you know? How do you want to response to them?

How would you build a feeling of belonging in your classroom and ownership of the class and material?

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Here are a couple of ways to get to know your students “Getting to know you surveys” and “Day 1 writing assignment”

Example 1 Student Survey

Concurrent Support Getting To Know You

This semester I would like to get to know each and every one of you as learners. In order to do that, I want to know a little bit about you. Please spend the next 5 minutes filling out this sheet so that I can learn a little something about you... This will be an on-going process all semester.

1. What is your ideal job? What aspects of the job appeal to you?
2. What do you enjoy doing in your free time? What about it appeals to you?
3. What are the characteristics of an ideal colleague? Employee?
4. Do you believe “intelligence” is inherited or do you believe that “intelligence” is a learned behavior?

Many students have a difficult time being successful in math classes. I would like to get to know a little about your prior experiences in math classes and your goals.

What was the last math class you enrolled in?

Approximately when did you take it? Where?

Why are you in THIS Math section? What is your goal?

What is your declared area of study/degree?

This semester we will be focusing during our support course on HOW we learn. WHY?! Learning about how we learn can reduce your workload as you learn how to streamline your process and can give you better results!

Think back to a positive learning experience you have had. What was it? Why was it a good learning experience?

Think back to a bad learning experience you have had. What was it? What were the difficulties?

What about NOW. What areas of studying do you find difficult? What comes easily?

We are going to the diverse expertise in this class to help us summarize how people learn.

Summarize: What made your positive learning experience GOOD?

What kind of different things can you do when you are trying to understand something?

What can you do if you STRUGGLE?

There are many strategies you can incorporate to help you succeed in learning a new physical skill or subject! This semester we are going focus on learning strategies. The more you know about yourself as a learner, the better you will be able to capitalize on your strengths and learn from your weaknesses!

Example 2 Student Survey

Math Jam Getting To Know You

This week we would like to get to know each and every one of you as learners. In order to do that, we want to know a little bit about you. Please spend the next 5 minutes filling out this sheet so that we can learn a little something about you... This will be an on-going process all week.

1. What is something that you really understand well? This can be any skill from fishing, painting, cooking, etc.
2. How did you get to understand this well?
3. How do you know you understand it?
4. Do you believe “intelligence” is inherited or do you believe that “intelligence” is a learned behavior?

Many students have a difficult time being successful in math classes. your prior experiences in math classes.

I would like to get to know a little about

5. What was the last math class you enrolled in? When?

Why are you attending Math Jam? What is your goal?

This week we will be offering some lunch-time workshops designed to teach you strategies you can incorporate to help you succeed in Math! The more you know about yourself as a learner, the better you will be able to capitalize on your strengths and learn from your weaknesses!

In groups of 3 to 4, collectively discuss the following and generate a table for your group.

How did you get to know something well?	How do you KNOW you know it?

What kind of different things can you do when you are trying to understand something?

What can you do if you STRUGGLE?

Many students have a difficult time being successful in math classes. Research shows that similar strategies can be used to get to know ANYTHING new.

Example 3 Day one writing assignment

Tell Me Something about yourself

In the next 15 minutes, write a page about yourself. Be sure to include but not be limited to the following things:

- Where are you in school
- One word that best describes you and why did you pick that word.
- What are your career goals?
- What experience do you have in the sciences?
- Tell me something that is unique about you
- Anything else you want me to know about you
- This one page should be in paragraph form, using complete sentences, capitalizations etc.

How would you or how do you get to know your students ?

What are three things you would like to know about your student's academic history	What are three things you would like to know about your student's personal history?