

Faculty Matter Teaching Tip #34:

Thinking carefully about your course syllabus – setting the tone for your course

Your course syllabus serves many functions. It is a combination of a contract and a roadmap, in that it provides details pertaining to the **course content**, to the **requirements it fulfills**, to the **background or knowledge expected (or required)** of students as they enter the class, to what students will have the **opportunity to learn and do**, and to **how their work will be evaluated**. But syllabi can do more than simply convey facts about a course. They can communicate a **tone for the class**. They can serve to **create, right off the bat, a welcoming “feel.”** This Teaching Tip draws upon suggestions contained in [Maryellen Weimer’s recent article in the Faculty Focus newsletter](#) (January 10, 2018) (<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/youre-preparing-syllabus/>). Before you post or distribute the final version of your course syllabi, consider the following:

If you were a student reading the syllabus...

Would you have a sense of how taking this course might benefit you – as you move through your major, as you deepen your understanding of the discipline, or as you determine or progress along your career path? Would you be able to identify how this course expands upon your prior knowledge and experiences?

Would you be clear about the academic requirements of the course – what assignments would entail, how much they counted, when they were due and how they were going to be evaluated? Would you be able to begin to plan how to juggle your academic and personal responsibilities? (Note: Do all of the days, dates, percentages etc.. match up, wherever they are mentioned in the syllabus? And are they aligned with what is posted on Canvas or elsewhere?)

Would you be clear about special features of the course that might take particular planning or preparation - field trips, service-learning placements, required equipment or materials, allocating time for coordinating with classmates for out-of-class work? (Note: Statements about course policies on late assignments, missed exams, classroom protocol, group work, and the like are also helpful, as practices pertaining to these topics vary enormously from one instructor to another.)

Would you have the sense that the instructor was interested in ways to help you succeed – by communicating their own availability, and by enumerating relevant support services or resources? Have they made you feel that you would be comfortable approaching them, as needed and in a timely way? (Note: This can be especially helpful if the course *is* or has *a reputation for being hard*.)

And would you have the sense that the instructor is excited about teaching this class – have they made it sound engaging?

The staff at the Center for Faculty Development and at eCampus are more than happy to review your syllabi with you. Please don’t hesitate to contact us or to drop in (IRC, 2nd floor). We also invite you to join us at the [Spring 2018 Course Prep Marathon](#), Thursday, January 18th, 9-3.

Note: At SJSU, instructors must make a course syllabus available to their students by the first class meeting, and there are requirements specifying what this document must contain (see [Academic Senate policy S16-9](#), the Course Syllabi policy). To assist you in preparing your syllabus, an [accessible syllabus template](#) is available for your use. When used appropriately, this template ensures that your syllabus is “readable” by students with a broad range of sensory, cognitive and learning needs.

You can read all previous tips on the [Faculty Matter Tips](#) page of the CFD website, and share your own thoughts and ideas on the [Provost’s Academic Spotlight blog under the category “Faculty Matter”](#). Please **add your own strategies using the comment link** on the [Provost’s Academic Spotlight blog under the category “Faculty Matter”](#).