

Learner-Centered Syllabus Checklist

A learner-centered syllabus is a syllabus that positions students as vital, agentive forces in their own learning. It provides students with information not just about WHAT they will be learning, but HOW they will be learning it and WHY those materials and methods were chosen, demonstrating alignment between learning outcomes, assessments, and instructional methods. Special attention is paid to creating space for student choice and collaboration, embedding opportunities for students to receive feedback on their work, and ensuring the learning environment is accessible and inclusive of a diverse range of students.

How to use this resource:

1. Use the points marked with checkboxes to ensure your syllabus is meeting the benchmarks of a learner centered syllabus.
2. Consult the linked resources for tips or strategies for reaching these benchmarks.
3. Once you're confident your syllabus reaches the stated benchmarks, read the points marked with checkmarks to identify areas for further improvement.
4. We recommend starting by focusing on just one or two of these "further improvement" areas, rather than trying to overhaul your syllabus all at once, keeping in mind that this is an iterative process that can be repeated each time you teach this course.
5. As you teach, reflect on what is and isn't working
6. Next time you revise your syllabus, pick a new area for further improvement.

Overall Tone

- Written for a student audience (i.e., "You will" or "We will" instead of "Students will")
- Uses positive and welcoming language (i.e., "Late work is eligible for 80% of the original points," or "Regular attendance will not only boost your participation grade, it will give you a chance to synthesize and test your knowledge in advance of the final exam")
- Briefly explains rationale for go-to assessments or instructional methods, focusing on why these choices were made and how they are designed to support student learning (i.e., "Weekly quizzes are worth only a small percentage of your final grade because they are designed to help you test your knowledge and identify areas for further study, and thus to help you on the midterm and final exam" or "I regularly use polling to gauge the understanding of the class. This helps me figure out what areas we should review more in depth as a class.")

Course Information

- Course description captures interest by outlining major course themes or "big questions" students will explore, or describing the value of the subject matter and how students will use the skills they learn in class in later study/outside the classroom (i.e., "By engaging in case-based and team-based learning, together we will explore some of the most pressing issues in the

discipline including X and Y while developing the communication and teamwork skills vital to future careers in Z”)

- Pre-requisites and anti-requisites are stated, if applicable
- Mode of delivery, class time, and location are all clearly visible on the first page
- Course materials are listed in full, along with where to acquire them. To enhance access to course materials, Open Educational Resources are used when possible and alternatives to purchasing required course material (such as having copies on hold at the library for students in this course) are offered. Clear delineation is made between required and recommended materials. [Click here to access the Western Libraries Guide to Finding Open Educational Resources.](#)
- If course materials will be made available throughout the course via OWL, it is clear how far in advance students will be able to access them (i.e., “I will post all required readings no later than 2 weeks in advance of the date by which they must be read”)
- Instructor’s name, email, physical office location and any other relevant contact information is included on the first page.
 - ✓ Consider also sharing a brief statement about what you would like to be called (preferred name, what pronouns you use, etc.) and inviting students to do the same. (i.e. “Instructor: Margaret Price, Ph.D. I prefer to be addressed as Dr. Price and I use she/her pronouns. If you would like me to address you by a name other than what appears on your transcript or if you would like to share your pronouns with me, please email me”). [Tips for creating welcoming environments around gender and sexuality are discussed more fulsomely in this guide from the 519 Community Centre.](#)
- Time and purpose of office hours is communicated to make it clear that these are hours set aside for student needs and an offer of alternative meeting times or modalities is extended (“These office hours are the time set aside in my schedule each week for the exclusive purpose of talking to students so I encourage you to call or visit my office with any questions you have about the course material, upcoming assignments, or study strategies. If you want to meet with me but are unavailable during these office hours, please email me to arrange a time to meet over Zoom”.)
- Communication expectations are outlined to help ensure students contact you in a timely manner, via the most appropriate channel (i.e., “I endeavor to answer all student emails within 48 hours excluding weekends and holidays. I encourage students with questions that may merit a lengthy discussion, such as re-grade requests or advice on tackling the next assignment, to visit me in office hours”)

Learning Outcomes

- Approximately 5-7 learning outcomes are stated separately from the course description, ensuring they are easy to find. These outcomes make it clear what knowledge and skills students will build through the course's learning activities. For detailed guidance on writing learning outcomes, [visit the CTL Learning Outcomes webpage](#).
- All learning outcomes use measurable active verbs to show how students will demonstrate their learning. [Click here to access a CTL resource \(PDF\) on choosing appropriate verbs for learning outcomes](#).
- Learning outcomes pull from multiple levels of Bloom's taxonomy of learning, Fink's taxonomy of significant learning, LaFever's Medicine Wheel of outcomes that support Indigenous ways of knowing, or similar framework. To learn more about these frameworks, you can [click here to read an expanded taxonomy based in Bloom's work](#), you can [click here to consult Fink's ebook](#) which is available through Wester Libraries, or you can [click here read LaFever's article](#)
- ✓ Learning outcomes demonstrate that the instructor has thought through the "soft", or "hidden" skills embedded within course outcomes – such as ability to work in a group, knowledge of disciplinary writing conventions, etc. – and has a strategy for teaching these skills prior to assessing them.
 - If, for example, your course includes graded groupwork, you may want to click here for some strategies for assessing teamwork from the CTL or review the ["Project and Team Charters" resources](#) available through Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum
 - Alternately, if your course involves providing peer feedback or peer review, you may want to consult the ["Giving and Receiving Feedback" resources](#) available through Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum for examples of exercises you can give your students to help prepare them for this work. Uncovering the Hidden has a wide range of skill building resources for teachers and students covering multiple skills related to communication, executive function, critical thinking, intra-and interpersonal skills, and social accountability.

Assessments

- Each assessment clearly evaluates one or more of the stated learning outcomes. Generally, summative or final assessments should assess multiple learning outcomes, while formative or lower-weighted assessments may only assess one or two. [For detailed instruction on ensuring alignment between outcomes and assessments, visit this asynchronous learning module from Queen's University](#).
- ✓ One or more assessments allow for some degree of student choice (i.e., in the format the finished product takes, the topic the assessment focuses on, etc.) to increase student motivation and allow for multiple ways of expressing understanding. This would

be an example of Universal Design for Learning, a framework for anticipating learner variability. [You can read a brief summary of the core principles of Universal Design for Learning on this CTL webpage.](#)

- ✓ One or more assessments mimic how students might apply this knowledge outside of the classroom. [This is called “authentic assessment” and a detailed overview is available through this learning module from Queen’s University.](#)
- ✓ Assessment descriptions follow the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TiLT) framework by providing students with the following for each assignment
 - Purpose: let students know what skills they are practicing, what knowledge they are gaining, or how this assignment will prepare them for life-long learning
 - Tasks: articulate the steps to completing the assignment
 - Criteria: give students an idea of how their work will be assessed, and what they can do to succeed
 - To learn more about Transparency in Learning and Teaching, [visit TiLT in Higher Ed](#)
- Assessments are weighted properly to add up to 100%
- Assessment descriptions explicitly state deadlines and where/how students will submit (i.e., in class, via OWL, over email)
- Each assessment descriptions provide a sense of what purpose the assessment serves and when students can expect more detailed instructions and/or a rubric
- Mention of relevant campus resources (such as [Learning Development & Success](#) and the [Writing Support Centre](#)) normalize help-seeking and are explicit about how these services may be of use in tackling the assessment(s). When possible, these mentions are written in the instructors’ own tone, rather than copied and pasted.
- If participation is graded, multiple ways of participating are outlined (i.e., contribution in group discussions, attending office hours, or posting to the OWL forum) with a focus on how student participation is expected to contribute to the learning environment
- If attendance factors into participation grades, measures are taken to ensure this policy does not overly penalize students with chronic illness, disabilities, or caretaking responsibilities beyond the classroom (i.e., allowing all students 2 unexcused absences before grades are impacted, or providing ways to make up for missed classes)
- Doctors’ notes are not required for excused absences
- A policy for late submission of student work clearly articulates the process for requesting extensions (eg. “Everyone has one late “token” that they can use, no questions asked, to request a one-week extension on one assessment”) or provides flexible deadlines. Whenever possible, discussion of deadlines is focused on how they benefit the learner, rather than how failure to meet deadlines will be penalized. (eg. “Students who submit their project proposals on time will be able to get feedback on their research plan before beginning data collection”)

Teaching Approach

- The teaching approach section lets students know about common assessments or classroom activities and links them to desired student learning
 - ✓ At least one strategy identified in the teaching approach section is an example of how “active learning” will be integrated into class time. [Evidence on the effectiveness of active learning, and examples of popular active learning strategies, can be found on this CTL webpage.](#)
 - ✓ If participation expectations are laid out, more than one mode of participation is offered (i.e., “This class involves regular small group discussions as a place to test out new theories so I encourage you to take advantage of these opportunities to raise questions and work on problems together. If you find yourself unable to or uncomfortable taking part in these in-class discussions, you can bring questions to me during office hours or use our class’s OWL forum to pose questions to your classmates”). This would be an example of Universal Design for Learning, a framework for anticipating learner variability. [You can read a brief summary of the core principles of Universal Design for Learning on this CTL webpage.](#)
 - ✓ The active learning strategies you have selected allow students to practice “soft skills” or “hidden skills” they will need to succeed on assessments. Consideration has been given to when these skills will need to be taught or modeled before students can practice

Schedule

- Assessment deadlines allow adequate time for the instructor (and teaching assistants, if applicable) to grade and return assessments, and that students will have time to integrate instructor feedback before submitting subsequent assessments
- Assessment deadlines allow the instructor adequate time to provide students with a minimum of 15% of their grade prior to the deadline for dropping the course without penalty
- It is clear when required readings need to be completed by (i.e., before tutorial, before lecture, or by the end of the week)
 - Readings include knowledge from beyond Western European traditions
- Major deadlines or in-class assessments do not fall on religious or cultural holidays. [Western’s multifaith calendar provides an overview of such days \(this resource requires you to login with your UWO ID\).](#)

Policies

- The required Western policies on Academic Integrity, Support Services, and Retention of Electronic Version of Course Outlines, and Accommodated Absences are included. If applicable policies on Use of Electronic Devices and Use of Personal Response Systems are included. [To access these policies, click here for the relevant section of Western’s Academic Handbook.](#)

- Explicit mention is made of campus resources to support student mental and physical health and a clear pathway is articulated for students seeking accommodations
 - ✓ Notify students in writing if using a plagiarism detection tool like TurnItIn, and provide students who wish to opt out of the use of these tools for privacy reasons options for doing so
 - ✓ The policy on accessibility informs students what steps you are taking to ensure course content is accessible and lets students know the best way to communicate with you about their access needs. [For some best practices of accessible education, consult page 4 of this resource from the Council of Ontario Universities](#)
 - ✓ Communication expectations for creating a welcoming learning environment are clearly outlined for students.
 - ✓ Consider creating your own policy for how students can make up for work/class missed due to non-medical or non-religious reasons (as medical and religious accommodations are covered by Western's Academic Handbook, but other unexpected absences may occur. Flat tires and cancelled babysitters can happen any time!)

Next Steps

If you are looking for more feedback on your syllabus, consider exchanging it with a colleague for peer review. This checklist may help focus your conversation and feedback.

If you are looking for further feedback about the use of your OWL site or other eLearning methods and tools, consider attending one of the CTL's eLearning drop-in consultations. [Click here to learn more about eLearning consultation and Q&A sessions.](#)

If you are looking to improve or re-design an assessment in your course, consider attending one of the workshops in the CTL's Assessment Series. [Click here to read about upcoming workshops and find slides from previous sessions.](#)