

Making Your Class and Syllabus More Equitable

Here are five simple things you can do to make your syllabi and your classes more inclusive, welcoming, and equitable. Feel free to amend, adjust, or outright copy-and-paste.

1. Instructor Self-Assessment of the Syllabus and Class

Spend some time considering the following questions.

How will my class and/or syllabus...

- incorporate processes of **self-reflection** and **self-critique** (for both students and you)?
- implement a **commitment to understanding** and **respecting different points of view**?
- implement processes to **engage with others humbly and authentically**, from a place of learning?
- incorporate **social justice consciousness** and education?
- incorporate **multiple narratives** to decenter and question traditionally dominant narratives?
- incorporate **students' background knowledge** and honor **different lived experiences**?
- **engage students' feedback** of your development and implementation of the course?

2. Sensitive Subjects Warning *(for classes with sensitive and controversial topics)*

Include a paragraph like this in your syllabi.

Many of us may get triggered while in this class because engaging with academic material can evoke strong emotions. For some of us, the emotions are evoked because the issues are very real in our everyday lives. Others of us will get triggered because we are just finding this stuff out and it upsets us. Then there are some that will get triggered because we feel guilt or shame for not having known or understood how things have been working in our society. All of these feelings are okay. It's how we handle them that matters. I hope we can challenge ourselves to pay attention to our emotions, consider what's triggering us, listen to and respect one another, and share this honestly with the class (or with me in private if you prefer). This is how authentic learning and growth take place.

3. Inclusivity Statement

Include a paragraph like this in your syllabi.

- Every student in this classroom, regardless of personal history or identity categories, is a member of this group. Your experiences are important and you should share them as they become relevant to our class. No student in this class is ever expected or believed to speak for all members of their group(s).
- In this classroom, you have the right to determine your own identity. You have the right to be called by whatever name you wish. You have the right to be referred to by whatever pronouns you wish. You have the right to adjust those things at any point in your education.
- If you find that there are aspects of course instruction, subject matter, or class environment that result in barriers to your inclusion, please contact me privately without fear of reprisal.

4. Respectful Dialogue

Include a paragraph like this in your syllabi.

“Everyone thinks; it is our nature to do so. But much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed or down-right prejudiced. Yet the quality of our life and that of what we produce, make, or build depends on the quality of our thought. Shoddy thinking is costly, both in money and in quality of life. Excellence in thought, however, must be systematically cultivated.” -Linda Elder and Richard Paul, *Critical Thinking: Teaching Students How to Study and Learn*

In this class, I would like us to cultivate “excellence of thought” by creating a learning environment that supports a diversity of thoughts, perspectives, and experiences, and that honors all our identities (including race, gender, class, veteran status, sexuality, religion, ability, etc.). With this in mind, let’s discuss what we all need in order to slow down, recognize our own positions (including unexamined biases), and take another look at someone’s ideas, experiences, or values. How can we listen and hear different opinions, even if we don’t accept them or understand them, with an open heart and mind? In this class, let’s practice these skills together.

5. Syllabus Reflection Questions for Students

Use these Syllabus Reflection questions yourself to see your syllabus through your students’ eyes, or have them respond to these questions after they’ve seen your syllabus.

- a. What do you see when you look at the syllabus? How does it make you **feel**?
- b. What is most strongly communicated in this syllabus? In other words, what’s your main **take-away**?
- c. How clearly is the instructor’s personal teaching philosophy stated? What is clear to you about what the **instructor values** and what is important in this class?
- d. What **resources for course success** and overall college success are included?
- e. Does the syllabus emphasize **inclusion, student-centeredness, and commitment to your success** as a student? How so?

A few additional tips

- Use the term “**Help Sessions**” or “**Student Hours**” instead of “Office Hours,” since some students think “Office Hours” means “I’m working; don’t bother me.”
- Use “**We**” in syllabus instead of “Students” or “You”: *We respect each other’s ideas, etc.*
- Include **pronoun preferences** and how students should/can address you (e.g., *I’m Emily Moss, and I’m your instructor for this course. My pronouns are she/her/hers, and you are free to call me Emily.*)
- Include **links to important student resources** in your syllabus and on your Canvas site (e.g., Food Pantry, Veterans Services, EOPS, Scholarship Office, Student Wellness Counseling, Tutoring, DSS, etc.).
- Spend half an hour **fixing up the classrooms** you’re in: What’s posted on the bulletin boards? Is there trash that’s been sitting around for semesters? Consider putting up one of the Racial Justice Task Force flyers or student posters and helping to make the space more welcoming.

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