

Ten tips for developing a more inviting syllabus

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ABSTRACT In higher education, syllabi have traditionally served as written contracts between instructors and their students, providing first-hand information about the course and expectations. Reading the syllabus may provide students with first impressions or mental images of the instructor, thereby initiating a student-instructor relationship even before any interaction has occurred. Instructors can use syllabi to directly communicate values and practices of equity and inclusion, but students can perceive indirect messages through tone and language that may support or contradict stated values. Here, we share empirically derived recommendations for improving the tone of syllabi with inviting language and stylistic features that promote relationship-building with students.

KEYWORDS syllabus, syllabi, inclusive, equitable, inviting, student-instructor relationship

Syllabi have long served as contracts, providing important course information, expectations that instructors have for their students, outcomes for meeting the expectations, and penalties for falling short (1). Some instructors use syllabi to share details about their personal attitudes, values, and philosophies toward teaching (2), and increasingly, to communicate their support for equity and inclusion—explicitly through language (e.g., a diversity statement) and/or through a welcoming tone and style (3). These latter features may be especially important for first-generation, first-year college students, transfer students, Persons Excluded because of Ethnicity or Race (PEERs), and other students with identities that have been marginalized in STEM (4, 5).

Research has shown that a syllabus can create a powerful first impression of a course and, consequently, influence student-instructor relationships (6). Findings from studies analyzing student responses to syllabi show that students perceive the instructor as more caring and approachable when the syllabus tone is warm or friendly (6, 7). Furthermore, when a syllabus was “warm,” students were more inclined to reach out to instructors (8). These first impressions may be especially important for STEM students with marginalized identities, who may lack a sense of belonging and have “imposter syndrome.” Our study aimed to identify language, tone, and stylistic features of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) syllabi that are perceived as inviting and supportive. In this article, we share our findings in a format that instructors can easily use to improve the inviting attributes of their own syllabi (Table 1). This work also adds to the current literature by focusing on college STEM disciplines and using authentic (rather than experimental) syllabi, and it provides instructors with easy-to-implement tips for creating a more inviting syllabus.

To arrive at our recommendations, we used a qualitative analysis approach to examine syllabi from 17 instructors across six STEM departments (eight from Biology, one from Chemistry, four from Mathematics and Statistics, two from Physics and Astronomy, one from Environmental Studies, and one from Civil Engineering) during the fall 2020 semester at a four-year public university in California. Two student researchers used an iterative, holistic coding approach (9) to initially define the tone of the 17 syllabi and a

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TABLE 1 Representative quotes from STEM syllabi aligned with recommendations for creating a more inviting syllabus

Recommendation	Examples of quotes from syllabi
Invite students to get help and provide multiple ways to communicate	[student hours], "or by appointment (I love talking with my students! Please email me to schedule an appointment!)"
Use welcoming statements/statements of self and community care	"We all feel stressed sometimes... Stress is a common part of the university experience. Even though it's normal, it can be really rough! Please connect with me or other campus resources if you are struggling. "
Provide pronouns and invite students to share theirs	"I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate/preferred name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I can make appropriate changes to my records."
Use 1st person language to personalize/share information about self	"Teaching Goals: First, I want you to know that I care deeply about your success; not just in my class but in life. Therefore, my goal is to connect with each of you so that we can work together to help you accomplish your learning goals."
Provide rationales with requirements/recommendations	"Many of you aspire to professional careers. We have looked at what professional schools (MD/PT/OT/PA/etc.) look for in their students, and critical reasoning skills are among the most important skills that you can have. Therefore, everything we do in class should be considered PRACTICE at developing those skills."
Use collaborative and growth mindset language	"My goal is to create opportunities for this growth by "starting out small" for the tests and then increasing the weight as you become more comfortable and confident with our subject material!"
Include diversity, equity, and inclusion statement	"Diversity & Inclusion: Members of this class represent a rich variety of backgrounds, skill-sets, and perspectives..."
Indicate flexibility where possible	"We all need flexibility, understanding, compassion, and accommodations – because we all learn differently! If there are aspects of this course that prevent you from learning or exclude you, please let me know as soon as possible. Together we'll develop strategies to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course."
Use bold, underlined, CAPS to emphasize POSITIVE statements	Your ability to learn and maintain your mental health are THE MOST IMPORTANT things.
Include images, cartoon, inspiring quotes, and/or emojis	"I am an ordinary man who worked hard to develop the talent I was given. I believed in myself, and I believe in the goodness of others."—Muhammad Ali

template syllabus provided by our institution ("Institutional Template"). Three categories—Harsh, Inviting, and Neutral—emerged from this approach. Next, three student researchers (including the two above) and three faculty researchers independently reviewed all syllabi, categorizing each as Harsh, Inviting, and Neutral. During this step, two additional categories emerged: Supportive, to describe a syllabus that contained supportive policies without inviting language/tone, and Mixed, when a syllabus had elements of harsh and inviting language/tone. Finally, all six researchers independently reanalyzed the 17 syllabi and the Institutional Template, assigning each to one of the five categories. In the next phase, each researcher used an open, descriptive coding strategy (9) to identify characteristics that supported the categorization, and the group arrived at a consensus for all categorization/coding decisions through discussion. Two researchers identified representative quotes aligned with the five categories. This study was approved under institutional review board protocol #19–20-281.

PROCEDURE

Here, we pose a two-step strategy for instructors revising their syllabi with a focus on language and tone. First, we recommend reflecting on impressions your current syllabus may create for students you teach. You can examine your document as a whole and see if you recognize your syllabus among the following categories that we created during our holistic coding: Harsh, Inviting, Neutral, Supportive, and Mixed. The harsh syllabi were cold, impersonal, and/or authoritative, used punitive language, and focused on "what the student should not do" rather than what they "should do" to succeed in the course. Neutral syllabi read like a contract, with few or no personal touches to provide insight into an instructor's personality, values, or attitudes. Our Institutional Template fell into this category. Inviting syllabi were warm and welcoming with personal information, inclusive language, and indications of how a student could succeed in the course. Inviting syllabi often provided insight into the instructor's personal teaching philosophy

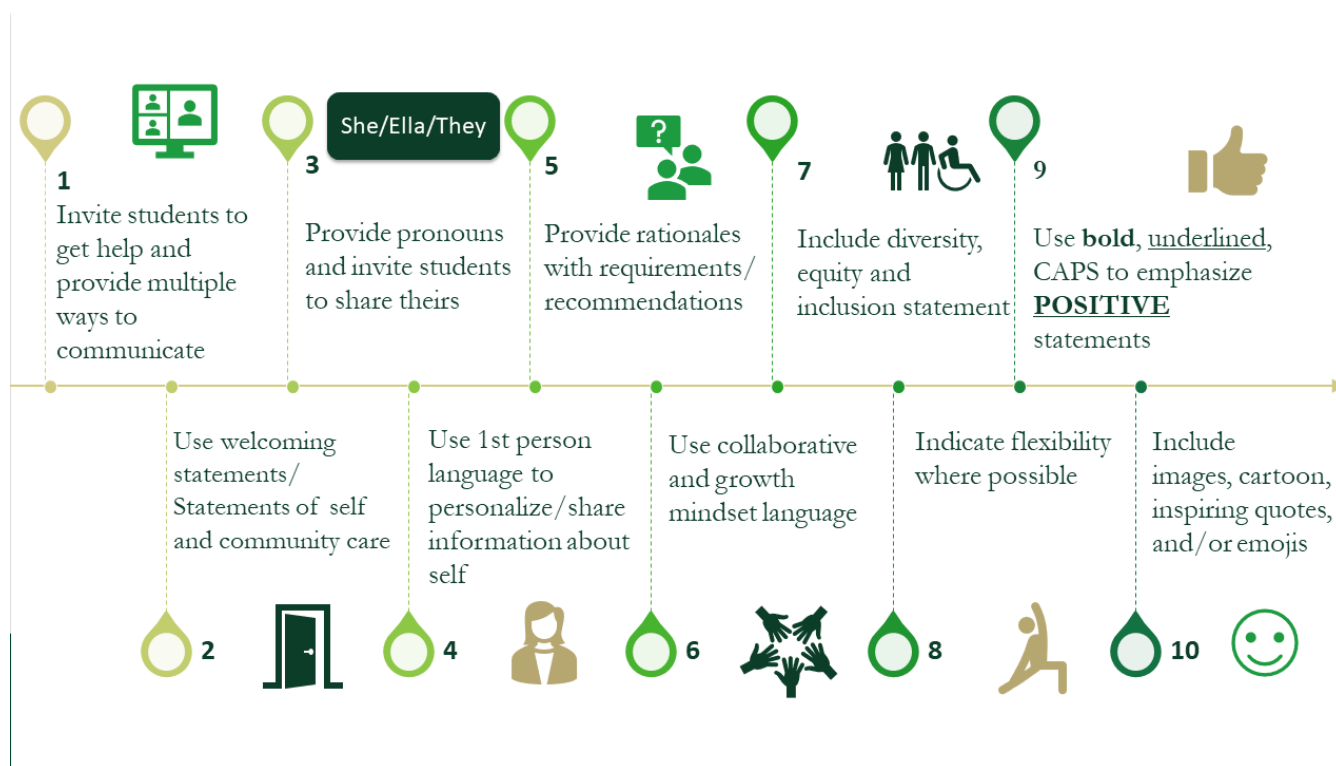


FIG 1 Ten tips for an inviting syllabus infographic created with descriptive codes emerging from syllabi categorized as Inviting, Supportive, and Mixed.

and contained growth mindset language. Supportive syllabi included equitable policies and helpful information, but the tone, language, and style were mostly impersonal. For example, supportive syllabi may have had policies such as “full faith, full effort” intended to help students but fell short of encouraging student-instructor collaboration or relationship-building. Finally, some syllabi contained a mixture of harsh and inviting characteristics (“Mixed” category).

In step two, we suggest using our “Ten Tips for an Inviting Syllabus,” infographic (Fig. 1) to transform any harsh or neutral portions of your syllabus. We developed these tips by coding the syllabi in our Inviting category. This infographic can be easily printed and distributed, and you can select the items that best align with your personality and course context to tailor your syllabi. We provide representative examples of language from the Inviting syllabi in our study in Table 1.

CONCLUSION

Our work differs from most syllabus research because we solely looked at STEM syllabi, and we used (i) actual documents from existing courses and (ii) participation of student researchers to create our “Ten Tips” infographic. This work also adds to the recent expansion of articles, online tutorials, and open-source templates centered on creating inclusive and inviting syllabi (4, 5, 10). In agreement with Thompson and colleagues (11), we suggest that a positive tone, using collaborative language, pictures, welcome statements, and background information about the instructor helps create a welcoming environment for students. Furthermore, language and tone are important factors in influencing a student’s perception of an instructor’s approachability (6), and creating a welcoming environment and promoting student-instructor relationships is critical for motivating a diverse group of students (4). While we focus on the inviting characteristics of syllabi here, our analysis found substantial variation in the language, style, and policies of syllabi from our STEM instructors. In addition to the variability, we also found little evidence that our faculty were using our Institutional Template. Variation across syllabi

and failure to use language or content required/recommended by the institution was similarly reported by Gin and colleagues (3) in their study of syllabi from biology classes at a research-intensive university. For faculty who have access to an institutional or departmental syllabus template with university policies embedded, we suggest starting with this and enhancing it with our “Ten Tips for an Inviting Syllabus.”

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