
THE SYLLABUS AS ESTABLISHING TONE

Ethan J. H. Knight, University of South Carolina

ARTICLE: THE SYLLABUS AS ESTABLISHING TONE

A syllabus's course policies, grade breakdowns, and intensity of scheduled readings and writing assignments communicate more than their content: they also set the tone for the course's style, intensity, and trajectory. Emphasizing lower-stakes writing assignments and opportunities for revision, rather than focusing on the intense pressure of a final paper or exam, can communicate to our students that studying writing itself emphasizes the content, the process, and critical thinking rather than finding some mystical "answer." Further, the emphasis on and adherence to the standard syllabus communicates important information, particularly for inexperienced graduate instructors who are learning to utilize these documents: the amount of autonomy instructors are allowed in using and adapting standard syllabi vastly impacts how they approach the material and learn to teach. Ultimately, we should think about standard syllabi serving the pedagogical needs of and establishing tone for (at least) two groups: undergraduate students and the graduate instructors who instruct them.

Standard department syllabi (documents where the actual instructors themselves do not set policy, assigned readings, or major assignments) guide the pedagogical growth of new graduate students and set the tone for their early instructional careers, as these documents guide their developing classroom personas and point to what has been deemed important in terms of pedagogical approaches. Just as the scholarly work graduate students produce later in their careers is shaped by the departments that produce them, their pedagogical approaches are too, and arguably reach a larger audience. Similarly, the syllabus is likely to be the first line of exposure to departmental policy for undergraduate students, which can influence their entire outlook on a field. Carefully curating the materials that will influence their attitudes towards a subject is absolutely crucial and helps set the tone for our entire discipline.

Graduate student instructors, too, rely heavily on standard materials to help them learn to teach. In crafting standard syllabi myself, I have focused on the careful balance between overly prescriptive materials and those that leave new instructors unmoored. My materials always include an "instructor version," with notes throughout offering opportunities to adjust to their own style. This practice shows instructors how tone is delicately employed—sometimes syllabi use strict language to compensate for mid-semester problems that might arise, or to reflect personal preferences, but without explanation they can appear to emphasize the very things we hope to avoid and can encourage new instructors to privilege deadlines, adherence to attendance policies, and other punitive aspects rather than focusing on process, learning, and student success.

For example, the way we approach assignments and grade breakdowns in syllabi can have a profound impact on how students approach our field. The grading process for classes that focus on reading and writing can feel unclear to new students, many of which have been trained to focus on scores, points, and rankings. My students have often expressed frustration when assignment descriptions appear overly broad and nebulous. Phrasing assignments and grade breakdowns as opportunities to practice and

improve their writing, and therefore their grades, rather than as point systems to track their daily progress and penalize what is "wrong," can offer students and instructors a way to view these classes as process-focused instead of simply product-focused.