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# (AGAINST) THE SYLLABUS AS INSTRUMENT OF ABUSE

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## **ARTICLE: (AGAINST) THE SYLLABUS AS INSTRUMENT OF ABUSE**

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There is a sadism to syllabizing.

"I wish it went without saying," the educator and scholar of teaching and learning Jesse Stommel [wrote in a Tweet](#) in February 2019, "that syllabi should not be instruments of abuse." Stommel was responding to [a news report from Inside Higher Ed](#) about a Howard University professor who refused any excuses for students missing an exam, including family deaths.

We may not notice the cruelty embedded in our syllabi until a significant event makes it clear. Responding to Stommel on Twitter, the historian and professor [Amanda Seligman wrote](#), "I stopped making my syllabi about policing behavior after reading an article about a mother who obeyed her professor's decree to turn off her cell phone in class and missed the call from the daycare saying her child had suffered an allergic reaction and was taken to the hospital." Too many syllabi are premised on the idea that students are untrustworthy, that they're trying to get away with something and the course policies exist to prevent them from doing so. Such syllabi start from a punitive position, a place of "thou shalt not," and foreclose opportunities for conversation and collaboration.

Our work can take on new possibilities when it begins from the premise that students should be trusted. Instead of seeking to figure out all the things students might try to "get away with," we can seek to make policies that create conversation when things go wrong. When I realized that my attendance policy was intimidating and inflexible, I asked myself what I wanted students to know about *why* their attendance matters, started the policy with that information, and then asked students to contact me whenever they got beyond two absences for the term. "I'm not going to yell at you, or, for that matter, criticize you in any way," the policy says now. "I don't need to see doctors' notes. We just need to chat to make sure you're okay and that you've got a plan." My students' lives are busy, hectic, and sleep-deprived. Attendance and late work policies should acknowledge the barriers students may face, while also emphasizing the positive value of attendance and turning work in on time for both the individual student and the class as a whole.

We can remove the sadism from other policies and practices as well, moving to emphasize feedback, reflection, and revision over graded evaluation; to distinguish between soft deadlines and hard deadlines; to guide students through the difficult, confusing, and often contradictory terrain of life in higher education.

While removing abusive, cruel policies from syllabi may require a shift in perspective, it does not need to create a less rigorous or productive classroom. A syllabus based on [generosity](#) (Fitzpatrick) that seeks to

create conversation, and uses what we know of [how humans learn](#) (Eyler) — that is a syllabus that will set up an environment to keep students more engaged with the work and better able to participate in the shared creation of knowledge.

## WORKS CITED

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