

## Syllabus: Read Me!

Mike Shier

The syllabus is a dynamic document in an activity system with many different viewpoints. In this article, Shier explores the syllabus genre using his own identities in the university—as a student, a teacher, and an author of his own syllabi. Through this exploration of viewpoints, he argues that the syllabus mediates classroom relationships in interesting ways (and not always completely intentional ones).

I've been a student for a long time. I mean, I guess I hope I'm a student for my entire life, learning something new every day, but in a strict institutional sense I guess I've been a student for twenty years now? And I have at least three more years left after this. And I guess that's the distinction between "student" and "person who wants to learn every day of their life" for the most part—the institution. I have been in a number of long-term relationships with various schools, and some have ended better than others, but there's one thing they all had in common: the syllabus. It seems like that syllabus is one of the mediating factors in what makes a student a student, if my experience is any indication.

I have typically gotten the syllabus on the first day in most every class I've taken. There's a reason for this (yes, even one beyond "because you need something to do on the first day") though, and I'm pretty sure it's because it establishes a sense of student identity right off the bat. The teacher hands this thing off to you (or gives you a link on your class ReggieNet or other online space) and then the ceremony begins—here are the teacher's expectations of you, and here's how they're going to decide your grade (or, how you're going to earn your grade, depending on how you look at this sort of thing).

But I also know this because I've recently begun teaching and creating my own syllabi for students. It's a bizarre feeling having to create these things for your very own, especially after always being on the other end of it for so long, but the entire time I was crafting my syllabus, I saw it as a way to establish my own teaching persona in the classroom and relay to my students what was expected of them. This is the same aim as when I was solely a student, of course, just from a different angle—I wanted to understand what was going to be expected of *me*. And when I walk students through the syllabus on the first day, I almost feel like an expert guiding them through a new experience—but I know the experience is going to be decidedly new for all of us. And maybe I get this expert feeling for myself because that's the persona I've always projected onto my various instructors through the years; I see them as the expert. Now being on the instructor side of things, I know this isn't totally the case. Yet somehow the syllabus mediates and reinforces this idea, which is no small feat for a piece of paper.

That all being said, if the syllabus is just supposed to make the student feel like the student, then it seems like an evil thing. Almost like a form of punishment before anyone's ever done anything to be punished for. But taken with the fact that the instructor of the class wrote it, it can also be presumed that it will say a lot about that instructor, if it's read closely. So, in this way, it can serve critical purposes for both teacher and student, and whatever position people find themselves in a classroom, there's something to learn from the syllabus. Any cursory glance at a syllabus will reveal a certain anatomy, certain sections in a certain order and layout. And I think those parts (taken as a whole and as individual sections) reveal a lot about the instructor and the students alike. Let's take a look at some of those sections now.

<p>ENG 101: Composition as Critical Inquiry   Fall 2013          Section 036 - MWF 1:00-1:50   STV 250E          Section 046 - MWF 3:00-3:50   STV 250A</p>	
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Figure 1: ENG 101 Sample Header Matter

## Header Matter: Also, Call Me Maybe

This is something I've seen countless times, and it's pretty much *de rigueur* for syllabus construction everywhere I've encountered one. Contact info, course title, days, times. At the very least, this is a good moment for certain

wayward students to realize they're in the wrong classroom and slip out quietly (I might be guilty of this). It seems like basic stuff, but this stuff is going to go at the top because it can function like a business card—however the students need to contact their professor, that information is ready and waiting for them. It also positions the instructor's name at the top of the document, which isn't much unlike a student putting his or her name at the top of a paper. It establishes a kind of ownership or responsibility for everything that comes next.

The header matter is also the time for the reader to get an idea of what the syllabus will look like, in a design sense. I can only speak from my own experiences as a student, but I know that the syllabi I remember most had some kind of memorable design. (My favorite? A queer theory seminar in my MFA program where the “Q” in the title was a bright color and the borders were pictures of famous “Q” things, the best being John de Lancie's *Star Trek: The Next Generation* character) I mean, maybe it isn't even memorable design so much as that the design told me something about the professor (and yes, he was fun and *engage-ing* . . . I'll let myself out). So I figured for many teachers, the idea is to make the syllabus look clean, have a sense of professionalism, but also not look exactly like everything they've already seen. So it probably wouldn't be a good idea to use a font with any “negative connotations” (sorry, Papyrus, Comic Sans, and Curlz MT—y'all were disqualified immediately), but when I made my syllabus, I also didn't want it to be a font that any of my students could go and pick from their MS Word font selector, so I did a little internet digging. That one you see right there in Figure 1 is called “Advent,” and the body font I ended up using is called “Avenir,” in case you were wondering. It's a subtle choice, but I think it says something about me when I was creating the document.

<p><b>According to the course catalog:</b></p> <p>Composition as Critical Inquiry (ENG 101) challenges students to develop a range of rhetorical and intellectual abilities. Students learn how to analyze the multiple dimensions and meet the multiple demands of a variety of written rhetorical situations. Students also develop an array of strategies to help them navigate different genres and writing situations. These strategies include: reading, brainstorming, writing to learn and think, drafting, research (both textual and empirical), giving and receiving helpful responses, revision, editing and proofreading, publication, and techniques for researching writing processes, including their own.</p>	<p><b>For our class:</b></p> <p>In our investigation of composition, we will be analyzing the rhetorical modes and strategies of various Internet-related communications—from social media to memes and viral videos to more long-form content like blogs. We will work to identify various “genres” of internet communication, create our own examples of those communications, identify the technologies that lead to their creation, pinpoint the mechanisms that contribute to their proliferation, and understand the cultural and societal contexts in which they exist.</p>
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Figure 2: Sample Course Description

## Course Descriptions: By the Book

Typically, syllabi will then move on to the course description section. Because, well, the course title is rarely descriptive enough. Sometimes you'll find the description lifted directly from the course catalog, and other times you'll find the teacher's description of what the course means to them. Teachers might choose to use the catalog description and then put their own description right next to it in another column—the idea being to compare the official language with their own interpretation of it. Other syllabi only use the catalog information or the teacher's own language, but I think even a decision like that is illuminating, just like all of the choices the creator makes when composing this text. If an instructor only use the official language, then students might interpret that the class is probably going to be very by-the-numbers, not particularly different or surprising. If the teacher only uses his or her own language, you might infer that they don't want to draw any comparisons between their course and the official model. Using a comparison could result from wanting students to see an alternate interpretation of the course so students can draw their own connections about how the instructor had interpreted it themselves. For my own neuroses, the "official language" helps to add some legitimacy just in case my ideas seem crazy, right? (Right?)

### Required:

- Grassroots Writing Research Journal, Issue 4.1
- Access to ReggieNet
- Email access
- Flash drive/Dropbox/a method of saving and accessing your in-class work

Figure 3: Sample Requirements Section

## Requirements: Because You Have To

This might seem like an obvious section, with not much to learn beyond what a student needs to bring to class or buy at the bookstore. But beyond that, there's more to see here—in the case of Figure 3, a strong emphasis on ReggieNet, email, and other electronic requirements. Here's a syllabus that places a lot of emphasis on technology. On the other hand, there might be a syllabus where there's only books listed or something like a notebook and pen/paper—in that case, it can probably be presumed that the teacher isn't going to use technology in the classroom all that often. Not that pens and paper aren't technologies in their own right, of course, but an emphasis on either older or newer technologies will say a lot about the teacher in that setting. And there's nothing wrong with either approach, but the syllabus can reveal which

the teacher privileges and whether or not that meshes with the student's own strengths or weaknesses. While the explicit uptake from the document is one of classroom preparedness, the document can also have a slightly different reception from the audience's point of view and be used to assess the instructor.

## Etiquette: Cotillion for the Classroom

After requirements, there are other sections, like an etiquette section. Some people call this “etiquette,” some people call this “behavior,” “manners,” or whatever—and the word choice is probably indicative of what the instructor thinks about this sort of thing. And really, it's the most indicative section of the entire syllabus. See, in a lecture hall, this will tend to have some language about how talking of any kind is verboten unless called on after raising one's hand and asking a question directly of the professor. In a composition or literature course (any course where the group is nice and small), however, discussion is a cornerstone. In a class like that, where discussion will be encouraged, the syllabus might say something about polite discourse and being engaged in class discussion. I know mine makes a reference to respect being contextual—students get to talk unless someone else is speaking to the class, get to have technology out when we're looking at websites or doing other research, are encouraged to be out of their seats and moving around the class depending on the exercise, etc. One of my students produced a syllabus from one of his classes in a different department and he had (no joke) two pages of etiquette information. “Don't walk in front of me during lecture,” “sit in the back of the room if you're late,” “no cellphones,” etc. Now, there are a number of ways to interpret this barrage of etiquette requirements in a syllabus, but one of my very own students posited that it could indicate that these very specific things have happened to this professor before and they must piss him off immensely. In that way, this syllabus can be a cheat sheet to not be noticed (and in a 200-person lecture, that's likely kinda what you want).

I remember thinking of the syllabus as a cheat sheet of sorts like this when I was an undergrad, and so when I had to design one myself, I wanted to make it so my students could use mine as such if they so desired. The most specific reference I have is to people thinking they're being sneaky by holding their phones under their desk or looking at them in their purses/backpacks (seriously—has that ever fooled anyone?). Sometimes I illustrate this moment of the syllabus by demonstrating how it looks to onlookers when a phone is being held crotch-level underneath a desk (lewd—the answer is lewd) but really, it's there because that behavior totally annoys me! I would think that much is clear from the document. This is the easiest and least friction-y way of explaining to a student “texting is a little disrespectful, but trying to fool me in another ballpark altogether,” and it manifests the way it

is not only because of my personal peeves, but my own personality as well. But, overall, this section of the text also has a lot of personal information about the instructor, including their prior experiences in the classroom.

## **Policies, Miscellany, and Grades**

Most syllabi also have a clear-cut attendance policy. These tend to vary by department (due to there being department guidelines for these things), but they can be illuminating in their own way. Clear tardiness policies (being more than 10 minutes late counts as a 1/2 absence, etc.) indicate that the instructor is not very fond of tardiness (although, who is, really?), and it would probably be a bad idea to interrupt him/her by walking into a classroom late. Of course, this might not be the case for everyone. Maybe the teacher isn't always on time, or maybe in their own university career they were habitually late and vowed to never punish students the way they were punished (that's the thing—every teacher has a whole bunch of personal education experiences to draw from). Still, this is another opportunity to learn something about the teacher. It's like a first date that keeps on giving.

Other sections like grade breakdowns and academic honesty tend to show up on most all syllabi, but they serve similar purposes. The breakdown is rather utilitarian information in that it's simply revealing how much certain assignments will count for through the semester (and also where a student should focus their diligence—I think we've all been in the position of mathematically figuring out the bare minimum we have to do to pass a particular class), but students often also use it to determine what's privileged. If participation has a high percentage, then it stands to reason that the class will be one where being talkative is crucial to success. Again, using the syllabus, students can negotiate their own tastes with what they can see the instructor expects to have in class and determine if the class is going to be beneficial to their specific personality and learning style.

The syllabus mediates this relationship between instructor and student, re-inscribes it and reinforces it. Right when it's handed out at the beginning of that first class, the instructor is probably thinking how much they've thought through this document and how helpful it will be to both them and their students down the line. But students are thinking about their own perspective—using the document to interpret who the teacher is and what he or she will expect from them. But writing or even reading the document leaves this interaction only half-finished—because it's only finished when both teacher and student enter the classroom and react to it. So thinking through the syllabus as a genre can be a big help to both a teacher and his/her students as they build this relationship, helping them to interpret the other's perspective and how this will affect the ways they mediate the classroom space. Students who learn to take up the

document in a slightly different way stand to learn a lot (maybe too much) about the instructor, and teachers who think about how the syllabus might define them in the eyes of students can also present themselves in more purposeful ways. Maybe the teacher has a whole section on not talking when they're talking, because that really gets under their skin. They probably think that's enough to drive the point home, but maybe a student just thinks the teacher *really* loves the sound of their own voice (because "don't talk over me" is kinda a given if you have any manners whatsoever, right?). So because of the syllabus, the student decides against verbally participating at all. But then the teacher is all "Oh no they hate me why won't they just participate?" and in some butterfly effect-y way, a simple line in the syllabus has led to the breakdown of a discussion course.

Maybe, just for this example, this is a case of there actually being such a thing as looking too deeply into something (don't tell my old literature professors!), but the point remains that it's clear that this document has a lot of intended (and unintended!) consequences once it's introduced into a classroom space. And that's what the point of this is, I guess. The syllabus is not merely "this piece of paper (or PDF file)" that just happens to exist. Like all pieces of writing, it's created in response to a specific situation and is an agent in an activity system. It creates a relationship. Not because it's fallen out of the sky and wants to do us all a favor, but because it was written for a purpose. It was researched by an instructor—that research may include some obvious and traditional outlets like seeing other concrete examples of the genre and adapting them, but it more likely than not includes the instructor's real lived experiences, both inside and outside the classroom. But it is also interpreted and received by students who similarly build their understanding of it from their own classroom experiences. The purposes might be many and the document might only be *intended* to give a student basics like class information and ways to contact the professor, but intent is barely worth considering. Especially when a little bit of research into this genre reveals *so much more*.

If a student wants to learn about the teacher, the information is pretty much right there. If the aim is to antagonize the teacher (Dennis the Menace? Bart Simpson? Those are way too dated. Help! Who is the prankster of our modern times?), then the syllabus can be exploited to those ends, too. But then, in turn, teachers can use that perceived uptake to learn about their own students. The syllabus facilitates this too, because a teacher can read a lot into how students react or respond to the syllabus. People still do prank calls, right? Anyway. Maybe in some classrooms, the teacher doesn't care for the syllabus all that much and just does it as a genuine requirement put upon them by the institution they're teaching for, but if the student thinks it's the most important thing and clings to its every word in the hope of getting an A in the course, the document still holds power, whether the teacher wants it

to or not. Regardless, the syllabus is always going to be doing *something*. And maybe the intended parties on either end of it (teachers and students) are just completely misreading/miswriting the whole thing. It's all possible—but it is only possible with this incredibly dense document we know as the syllabus, and that's worth paying attention to.





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