



MOTIVATIONAL SYLLABUS

WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO USE IT IN TEACHING



WHAT IS IT?

A motivational syllabus can be understood as an approach to course design with an explicit and intentional focus on supporting student growth and success by motivating students in their learning. As discussed by Harrington and Thomas (2018), the purpose of a syllabus is not just to communicate course information to students or to help course instructors to plan out the trajectory of their courses. Rather, a syllabus can also be understood as a *motivational* tool to inspire student learning and help to motivate students to succeed inside the classroom. Unlike traditional syllabi formats, which are typically viewed as contractual agreements that dictate the relationship between students and instructors within a particular course context, a motivational syllabus moves beyond simply presenting students with a layout of course content and administrative policies. Instead, it goes one step further by exciting students and opens up new learning opportunities for students to succeed in their education and presents an opportunity for instructors to engage with students in a meaningful way.



WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Within the context of post-secondary education, the course syllabus represents one of the earliest points of contact between course instructors and students. Not only does a syllabus outline the expectations placed on students for enrolling in a particular course, but students' perceptions of the course — and the instructor — can be influenced by *how* the syllabus is presented to them.

As a result, the syllabus is the first chance an instructor is given to make a lasting impression on their students and to set the tone for the semester. Motivation and support are key factors for continued student success. To that end, a motivational syllabus can positively motivate students in their learning by reflecting an instructor's values and passion towards teaching and can signal to students that an instructor is approachable, encouraging, and supportive in their learning journey. Carefully crafting a syllabus with student motivation in mind can help keep instructors on track and assess whether the learning outcomes are being realized in the course. Finally, the use of a motivational syllabus can be beneficial for instructors as it may help reduce questions frequency from students because all the key information about the course is readily available and accessible to all students.



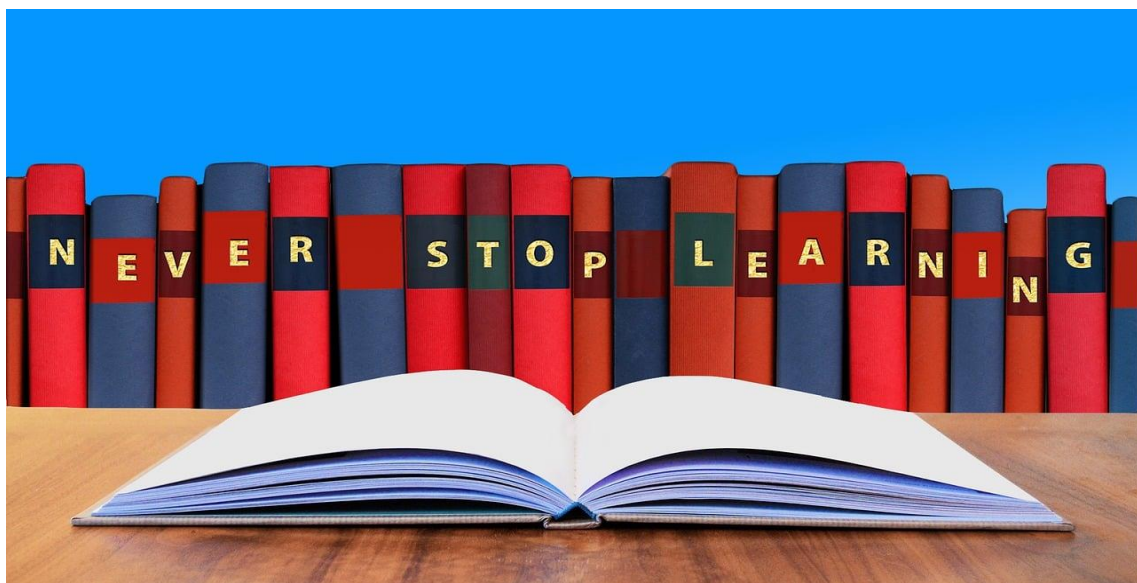
HOW CAN INSTRUCTORS IMPLEMENT A MOTIVATIONAL SYLLABUS IN THEIR TEACHING?

For instructors who are interested in creating a motivational syllabus for their course, or redesigning a syllabus with these principles in mind, here are some tips for getting started:

1. **Be mindful of language and tone to create a welcoming atmosphere.** Personalizing the tone of your syllabus to make the course feel more inviting can go a long way in making students feel welcomed and excited to engage in the course. For example, a motivational syllabus can include elements such as a welcome statement to students, it can also include a short summary of your personal teaching statement, and it can include personal pronouns (“you”, “we”, “I”, “us”) to transform the syllabus into being less formal and more interpersonal and relatable for students.
2. **Clearly communicate course expectations and provide detailed assignment breakdowns.** For instance, giving a rationale for the course assignments, and clearly indicating how assignments align with course learning outcomes, can provide students with additional insight into why these

assessments strategies are necessary to meet the expectations for the course. Moreover, providing detailed assignment breakdowns, attaching grading rubrics to your syllabus so that students know exactly what they are being evaluated on, and even using graphs to outline percentage of grades (instead of just relying on text) increases transparency and can keep students on track and engaged throughout the course.

3. **Provide students with options and opportunities to engage in the course in a variety of ways.** While structure is important to help keep students focused and on track, incorporating some degree of flexibility (in terms of deadlines) and choice (in terms of modes of assessment) in how students complete the course can help tremendously in keeping them motivated. For example, when thinking about major course assignments, give students the choice to write an essay or test, prepare an individual or group presentation, or other types of [formative and summative assessments](#) to keep students engaged in ways that are meaningful to them directly
4. **Raise awareness of available supports and resources on campus to promote student success.** For example, including detailed and up to date information about [student accessibility services](#), the [Writing Centre](#) on campus, the [libraries](#), the [Learning Commons](#) and providing other resources to support students can help students feel well-equipped to succeed not only in your course but in their other courses as well. Moreover, sharing these resources with students indicates to them that you care about their success and well-being and that recognition of care can help motivate students as well.
5. **Use technology to your advantage and be creative.** Although a detailed and thorough syllabus can contain all the important information and resources to provide students with the tools needed to thrive, the content of the syllabus need not be restricted to a single Word document or PDF file. A motivational syllabus can include visuals, illustrations, and even videos in a creative way to take advantage of the technological tools at our disposal. Furthermore, embedding the content of the syllabus into the design and structure of your eClass course, and implementing technological tools, such as [HSP](#), in the creation of the course shell provides instructors with an opportunity to be creative in how they present core course content and information to students. For example, you can record [a short video welcoming students to your course](#), you can create [timelines to breakdown assignments and track important course dates](#), and use other eClass features to transform a static syllabus document into a dynamic, living document to engage students and keep them motivated.





ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (Internal)

York University Academic Standards Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee. (2021). Guidelines for the preparation of course outlines. https://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/wp-content/uploads/sites/107/2021/06/Course-Outline-Guidelines_FINAL_May-21-2021.pdf

York University Libraries. (n.d.). Curriculum & Course Support. <https://www.library.yorku.ca/web/about-us/departments/curriculum-course-support/>

York University Teaching Commons. (n.d.). Course Design. <https://www.yorku.ca/teachingcommons/course-design/>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (External)

Explore in 15-30 minutes

University of British Columbia Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology. (n.d.). Learner-centered syllabus toolkit. <https://ctl.t.ubc.ca/resources/teaching/learner-centered-syllabus-toolkit/>

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Office of Graduate Studies. (n.d.). An introduction to the learner-centered syllabus. <https://graduate.unl.edu/connections/introduction-learner-centered-syllabus>

Norther Illinois University Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning. (2022). Creating a learner-centered syllabus. <https://citl.news.niu.edu/2022/08/15/creating-a-learner-centered-syllabus/>

Brown, K. L. (2003). From Teacher-Centered to Learner-Centered Curriculum: Improving Learning in Diverse Classrooms. *Education*, 124, 49-54.

Harnish, R. J., McElwee, R. O. B., Slattery, J. M., Frantz, S., Haney, M. R., Shore, C. M., & Penley, J. (2011). Creating the foundation for a warm classroom climate. *Association for Psychological Science Observer*, 24. <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/creating-the-foundation-for-a-warm-classroom-climate>

Richmond, A., Morgan, R., Slattery, J., Nathanael, G., & Cooper, A. (2019). Project Syllabus: An Exploratory Study of Learner-Centered Syllabi. *Teaching of Psychology*. 46. 6-15.

Explore in 30-60 minutes

Fukuda, S., Sakata, H. & Takeuchi, M. (2011). Facilitating autonomy to enhance motivation: Examining the effects of a guided-autonomy syllabus. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. 8. 71-86.

Harrington, C. M., & Gabert-Quillen, C. A. (2015). Syllabus length and use of images: An empirical investigation of student perceptions. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 1(3), 235–243. <https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000040>

Jones, B.D. & Zhu, X. (2022). The Effects of a Syllabus on Students' Perceptions of the Motivational Climate in a Course. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 16: No. 3 <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2022.160303>

Richmond, A., Slattery, J., Mitchell, N., Morgan, R. & Becknell, J. (2016). Can a Learner-Centered Syllabus Change Students' Perceptions of Student–Professor Rapport and Master Teacher Behaviors? *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*. 2. 10.

Explore in 60+ minutes

Harrington, C. & Thomas, M. (2018). *Designing A Motivational Syllabus: Creating a Learning Path for Student Engagement*. Bloomfield: Routledge.

Mameli, C., Grazia, V. & Molinari, L. (2020). Agency, responsibility and equity in teacher versus student-centred school activities: A comparison between teachers' and learners' perceptions. *Journal of Educational Change* **21**, 345–361. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-019-09366-y>

Tapp, S., Boye, A., & Winkelmes, M. eds (2019). *Transparent Design in Higher Education Teaching and Leadership: a Guide to Implementing the Transparency Framework Institution-Wide to Improve Learning and Retention*. Sterling: Stylus.

Would you like to learn more?

Contact us at Teaching Commons for additional resources, handouts, applications, courses, workshops, examples, advice, assistance, one-on-one consulting, and everything else related to teaching and learning. We are happy and eager to assist you!



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