
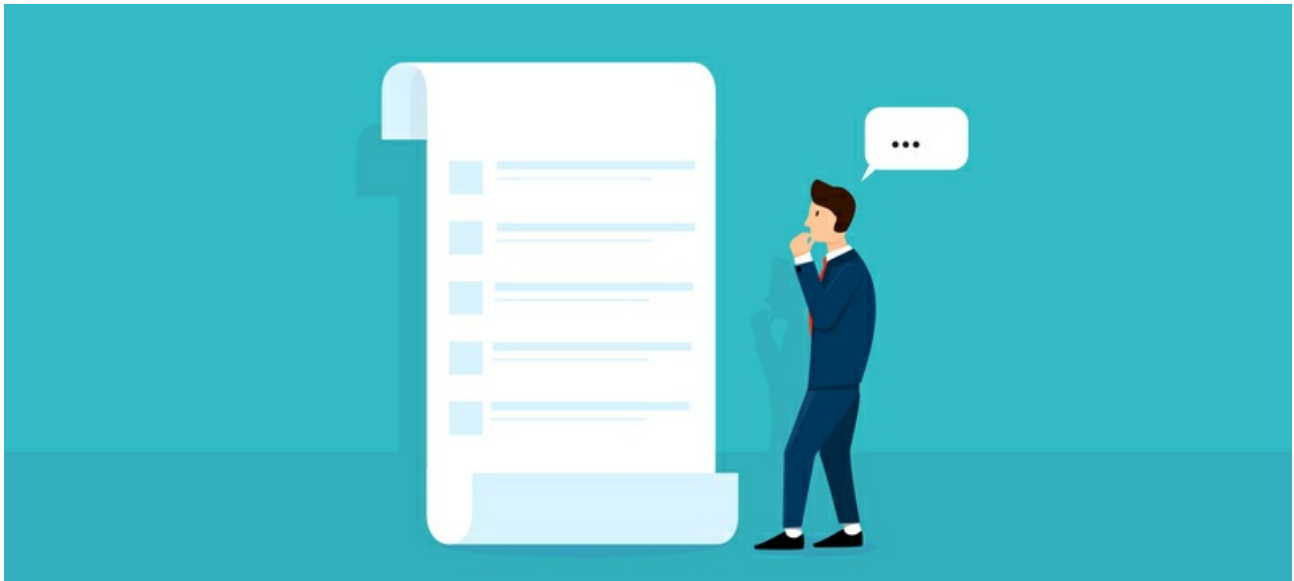


Yes, Your Syllabus Is Way Too Long

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By Tom Deans

If you're a faculty member, you've spent the last few weeks preparing your syllabus for the spring semester. You've updated the document and added a little to it. This latest round of edits may have pushed your syllabus another page longer – most now run about five pages, though nearly every campus has lore of some that exceed 20.

Lamentations about syllabus bloat started emerging about seven years ago in moods ranging from nostalgia to bemusement to curiosity to irritation to full-blown ideological critique. Based on 20 years of serving on curriculum committees and working with academics across the disciplines on teaching, I agree that, yes, the typical syllabus has now become a too-long list of policies, learning outcomes, grading formulas, defensive maneuvers, recommendations, cautions, and referrals. As a writing-center director who has encouraged instructors to add a pitch for tutoring services, I'm complicit.

About a year ago I started asking students how much they typically read of a multipage syllabus. Most told me they simply stop reading on Page 2. Even the high achievers rolled their eyes at long syllabi.

That led me to experiment with limiting my own syllabi to a single sheet, back and front. I liked it. My students liked it. And the sky has not fallen.

My preference for a shorter syllabus started inching in this direction about six years ago when a cluster of faculty members who regularly teach the same course in my department shared

their course materials with me. I found all of their syllabi to be smart and dutiful – but one stood out because it read like an invitation to a party, even as it promised just as much intellectual rigor as the others and articulated clear ground rules.

My syllabus, by contrast, read more like a mortgage. I was trying to cover every contingency. The core problem, I realized, was that I was thinking of the syllabus as a contract. Indeed, that seems to be the default metaphor of syllabus design, and multiple pages amplify the effect.

Some argue against framing the syllabus as a contract, such as the writer and educator John Warner, who prefers "a mix of plan, promise, and manifesto," which I quite like. Others have proposed different governing metaphors for syllabus design: It's a first impression of you and your course, it's a map/journey, it's an instruction manual.

Whatever approach you settle on, a two-page limit forces a distillation of essentials.

It also allows you to easily bring hard copies to the first class. I've noticed a pleasantly jarring effect when I hand out my own syllabus on a single sheet of paper (with information on the back and front). Students flip it over a few times, as if looking for hidden pages. They look up, expecting more. When we review it together, there are no faces behind screens, and we move through it pretty swiftly. (For me, syllabus review is never the centerpiece of the first day of class – I give it about 10 minutes and then move on to the reading assignment I have sent students in advance ... but that's a topic for another column.)

I can already hear the objections:

"But there are so many add-ons and policies that my institution requires." On my two-pager I include campus policies – or quick summaries of them – that I think most significant. Whatever policies and procedures don't make the cut (details on the grading system, for example, or on academic-support services) I make available on the course-management system. Posting additional pages online may seem to contradict the spirit of my two-page limit and invite the old problem of students ignoring long documents, but moving supplementary material to the course-management system can meet both the institutional demand to include complete policies and your inclination to inform students about support services.

Better yet, you can introduce or reintroduce items when they are most relevant. For example, I now ask faculty members to make a plug for the writing center not on the first day of class as part of a syllabus read-through, but instead during the week that the first major paper is due – or right after students get that first paper back and feel jostled by their grades.

"But my schedule of assignments goes on for pages." So does mine. I relish a detailed schedule of assignments and assemble one before each semester, but I create that as a separate document and have it available in the course-management system. I know that students who are working full time, playing sports, or parenting need predictability across the semester; at the same time, I like to build in some flexibility to change readings if circumstance or student interests steer the course in directions I didn't expect.

By keeping the schedule separate and digital, I can make minor changes as the semester goes along but keep all the major assignments, tests, and deadlines firm. The two-pager still includes my major readings, themes, and assignments. It is akin to the abbreviated table of contents we find in some books. This approach allows students to see the basic shape of the semester and for me to explain why I do what I do much better than a detailed grid of weekly readings and assignments does. The more simplified initial approach takes us closer to the etymology of "syllabus," which came from a misreading of Latin *sittybas*, from Greek *sittuba* for parchment label, title slip, or table of contents.

"But the syllabus functions as a legal contract." According to journal articles by Kent D. Kaufmann and Martha M. Rumore, that just isn't true. As Rumore writes, "A review of the legal precedents reveals that syllabi are not considered contracts because the courts refuse thus far to recognize educational malpractice or breach of contract as a cause of action. Syllabi do, however, represent a triggering agent for instructional dissent and grade appeals."

Still, you should provide students with reasonably comprehensive versions of campus policies – just do so in the supplementary documents you offer online. And if you want to play defense to ward off bad behavior or grade appeals, do it in the course-management system. Don't bring an adversarial tone to your two-pager.

"But my university requires me to include detailed learning outcomes." Fine – though I suspect that including the full version in a separate but readily accessible document (as part of a syllabus folder you create in the course-management system) will satisfy such institutional demands.

In my two-pager I include an abbreviated version of learning outcomes, but in my own voice. Here's what I included for a recent course on technical writing: "No single course can teach you everything you need to know about technical writing, but this seminar can impart a pragmatic approach to problem-solving and composing that features context analysis, audience analysis, genre analysis, design thinking, revision, editing, collaboration, reflection, and ethical inquiry."

That's 43 words, whereas the full set of seven learning outcomes that I wrote when getting the course approved runs 105 words and is rendered in the format and jargon that the genre demands. One of the outcomes reads: "Understand elements of the rhetorical situation – writer, audience, subject, exigency, purpose, constraints – and related concepts, such as context, culture, and discourse community." Yes, I get around to introducing those terms in class, but taking up a chunk of the syllabus for them or trotting them out on Day 1 would alienate more than inspire.

This semester, why not give the single-sheet syllabus a try? If feeling more ambitious, you might also think about how to make those pages more visually appealing. Few faculty members may have the skill or the inclination to integrate custom-made comics into a

syllabus, but most of us can take a few steps toward better design to signal a break from the syllabus-as-contract metaphor. This could involve doing a [full visual makeover](#) or be as modest as using columns or including an epigraph.

Even more important than visual appeal is the simple attraction of a single, two-sided page.

Tom Deans is a professor of English at the University of Connecticut, where he also directs the University Writing Center and works with the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to promote writing across the curriculum. He is a founding series editor for the [Oxford Guides to Writing in the Disciplines](#).

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