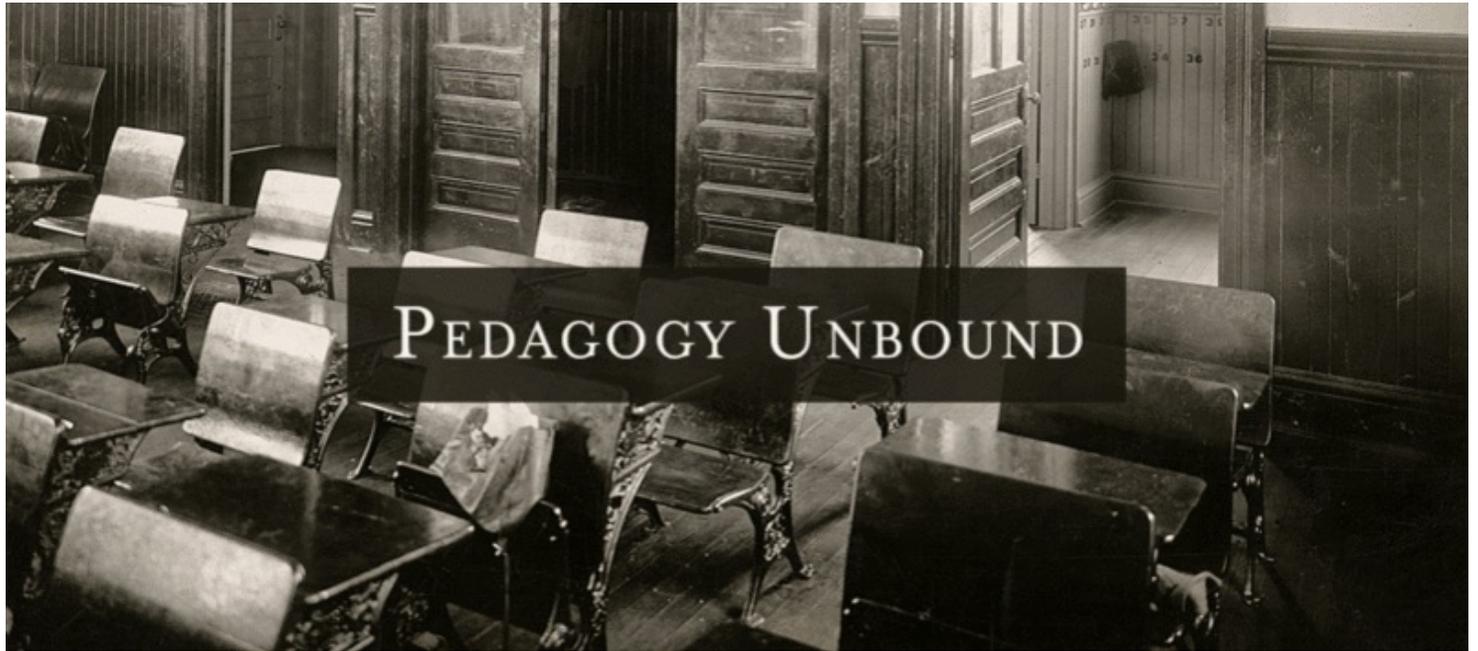


# Your Syllabus Doesn't Have to Look Like a Contract

[chroniclevitae.com/news/1864-your-syllabus-doesn-t-have-to-look-like-a-contract](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1864-your-syllabus-doesn-t-have-to-look-like-a-contract)



July 26, 2017

Looking for more advice on teaching? Browse the [Pedagogy Unbound archives](#).

Zac Wendler needed a new syllabus. An [assistant professor](#) of English, literature, and world literatures at Ferris State University, he was tired of the same routine at the beginning of every semester: He would hand out his syllabus — five or so pages of text — and students would glance at it and wait for him to walk them through it. Then for the rest of the semester, they would ask him questions that could be easily answered if they had read the syllabus.

Does that sound familiar? It rang a bell for me. As I listened to Wendler's presentation at this year's [Conference on College Composition and Communication](#) in Portland, Ore., I thought about my own syllabus. It has swelled to 11 pages of single-spaced text, even after I changed the departmental policies section to a nine-point font.

Were my students actually reading it? Did I even expect them to? What, exactly, is the point of this document?

As a scholar of technical writing, Wendler could see the problem from an interesting angle. He'd been approaching his syllabus as a contractual document (as many of us do). Trouble is, people usually don't read contracts. How long do you spend reading through the end-user agreements that pop up when you update your operating system? As Wendler pointed out in his conference talk, students are familiar with legal documents: "They know very well that even if they do read those documents, they won't be able to understand the information covered. Better to let the instructor explain what the language means, right?"

It may be important to create a legalistic contract between yourself and your students at the beginning of the semester, but I think Wendler is right to argue that we shouldn't expect them to read such a contract very closely. If we want a syllabus to be an effective pedagogical document — one that engagingly introduces our course and entices students to fully invest in it — we should probably change the way we think about that document.

When Wendler remade his syllabus, he turned to technical-writing scholars who have studied document design,

particularly instruction manuals. Which kinds of manuals actually get read? Not surprisingly, complex and visually drab documents are often not read closely, he said, while “instructions written in plain language, with beautiful, simple, durable designs were much more likely to be read, to be used, and to be effective in protecting users and companies.]”

So he started over. He threw out any information that wasn’t absolutely necessary, and created a syllabus that looked more like a spread from a comic book than a contract. You can see it here.

**JUST IN CASE YOU DIDN'T NOTICE... THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF THE CLASS**

**COMPOSITION I** ENGLISH 150

by: ZAC WENDLER  
at: 8:00-9:15  
in: STARR 220  
office: ASC 3091  
office hours: T/TH, 9:30-11:00, 4:15-5:00  
contact: ZACHARYWENDLER@FERRIS.EDU  
ZACWENDLER@GMAIL.COM  
501-3046

**AND HERE'S THE PART WHERE HE TELLS YOU WHAT YOU GOTTA DO**  
(HAIL LOOK AT THIS SYLLABUS. HE MUST BE SOME KIND OF NERD OR SOMETHING)

**IN THIS CLASS, YOU WILL**  
ORGANIZE AND DEVELOP PAPERS FOR DIVERSE AUDIENCES AND PURPOSES; INCLUDING HOW TO DISCOVER AND FOCUS ON A TOPIC, DEVELOP IDEAS, GATHER SUPPORT, AND DRAFT AND REVISE PAPERS EFFECTIVELY.

**WHAT WE'RE GONNA READ:**  
ON WRITING WELL BY WILLIAM ZINSSER  
LOTS OF STUFF FROM THE INTERNET.

**WHAT WE'RE GONNA WRITE:**  
ESSAYS ARE WORTH 70% OF YOUR GRADE  
A CREATIVE STORY FOR 20%  
AN ANALYTICAL ESSAY FOR 20%  
A PIECE OF RHETORICAL CRITICISM FOR 30%  
YOU HAVE TO HAND THEM ALL IN TO PASS. NO EXCEPTIONS.  
LATE WORK BE SHARPLY PENALIZED.

**HOW YOU'LL BE GRADED:**  
A: 93% & UP ← THIS IS AMAZING  
A-: 90%-93%  
B+: 87%-90%  
B: 83%-87% ← THIS IS QUITE GOOD  
B-: 80%-83%  
C+: 77%-80%  
C: 70%-77% ← THIS IS PASSING  
D: 60%-69%  
F: 59% & BELOW

**WHAT'LL HELP YOUR GRADE BESIDES WRITING:**  
ROUGH DRAFTS AND WORKSHOPS ARE WORTH 15% OF YOUR GRADE  
SHOWING UP AND TALKING IN CLASS IS WORTH 15% OF YOUR GRADE

**HANDING STUFF IN:**  
YOUR WORK IS ALWAYS DUE AT 10:00 ON A THURSDAY. SUBMIT IT ON BLACKBOARD.

THIS IS ALSO HOW COURSE GRADES ARE FIGURED OUT

<p><b>LATE WORK:</b> AS ADULTS, GETTING YOUR WORK DONE ON TIME IS AND SHOULD BE A PRIORITY. I UNDERSTAND THAT THINGS HAPPEN, THOUGH. LATE WORK MUST BE SUBMITTED NO LATER THAN TWO WEEKS AFTER THE ORIGINAL DEADLINE, AND WILL BE MARKED DOWN ONE FULL LETTER GRADE.</p>	<p><b>FORMATS:</b> PROJECTS MUST BE BLACKBOARD-COMPATIBLE. <b>NO OTHER FORMAT WILL BE GRADED!</b></p>	
<p><b>NEED HELP?</b> AWESOME! THAT'S WHAT OFFICE HOURS ARE FOR. COME AND SEE ME! I WANT ALL OF MY STUDENTS IN THIS CLASS TO DO WELL. IF YOU NEED ACCOMMODATION TO DO YOUR BEST WORK, CONTACT DISABILITY SERVICES IN STARR 818. ACCOMMODATION WILL NEVER RESULT IN A LOWER GRADE.</p>		
<p><b>SHOWING UP:</b> ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION ARE 15% OF YOUR COURSE GRADE. MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE FASTEST WAY TO FAIL THIS CLASS IS TO NOT SHOW UP. YOU WILL FAIL THE COURSE IF YOU MISS CLASS 6 TIMES. NO EXCEPTIONS.</p>		
<p><b>WHAT YOU'LL BE ABLE TO DO:</b> BY THE END OF THE SEMESTER, YOU'LL BE ABLE TO: WRITE &amp; REWRITE TARGETED ESSAYS FOR A SPECIFIC AUDIENCE WITH A CLEAR PURPOSE. ANALYZE INFORMATION AND USE IT TO PERSUADE IN YOUR WRITING. THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT YOUR OWN WORK, &amp; BE ABLE TO IMPROVE IT AS A RE-</p>		
<p><b>WHEN DO I HAVE TO HAVE STUFF DONE BY?</b> ESSAY DUE DATES: CREATIVE WRITING: OCT. 8 ANALYTICAL ESSAY: NOV. 12 RHETORICAL CRITICISM: DEC. 17 ROUGH DRAFT DATES (BRING A DRAFT OF YOUR ESSAY TO CLASS): SEPT. 24, OCT. 1 &amp; 29, NOV. 5 &amp; 24, DEC. 10 CONFERENCE DATES (NO REGULAR CLASS): OCT. 13 &amp; 15, NOV. 17 &amp; 19</p>		
<p><b>WHEN DO I HAVE TO HAVE STUFF READ FOR</b> SEPT 8: ZINSSER, CHAPTERS 1 &amp; 8. SEPT 15: ZINSSER, CHAPTERS 5 &amp; 9. SEPT 20: ZINSSER, CHAPTERS 2-4. OCT 6: ZINSSER, CHAPTER 10 &amp; 20. OCT 20: THE PARDUE OWL, MLA AND APA CITATION STYLE OVERVIEW PAGES. NOV 3: ZINSSER, CHAPTER 22. NOV 17: ZINSSER, CHAPTER 23.</p>		
<p><b>PLAGIARISM:</b> IF YOU PLAGIARIZE YOUR WORK, YOU'LL RECEIVE NO CREDIT FOR IT. IF I THINK IT SOMEHOW ACCIDENTAL, I MAY ALLOW YOU TO REWORK THE ASSIGNMENT FOR PARTIAL CREDIT. YOU CAN SEE MY POLICY IN FULL ON PAGE 41 OF THE FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENT HANDBOOK.</p>		

The effect was almost instantaneous: Students were clearly engaged in reading the new syllabus and seemed to take delight in its novelty. What's more, as the semester wore on, the obvious questions dried up — more evidence that students had actually read the thing.

Eager to test out his hunch that the revamped syllabus had resulted in more engaged students, Wendler conducted a study of around 60 students, spread out over four courses. Half of the students received conventional, text-heavy documents (the syllabus, and three assignment prompts). The other half received colorful, graphically interesting documents. Keeping in mind the small sample size, the results were encouraging: The group that received the unconventional materials reported far higher engagement and higher levels of confidence, and were at least somewhat better able to transfer their learning from their courses to other contexts.

Wendler's small study aligns with the findings of another, larger study — [conducted by Mary-Jon Ludy and others](#). It showed that students with a “graphic-rich engaging syllabus” were more interested in a course than those with a “text-rich contractual syllabus.”

As the fall semester approaches, perhaps this is a good time for faculty to rethink their syllabus design. Here are a few tips.

**Keep it simple.** The syllabus is one of the first opportunities you have to communicate with your students. It is a chance to introduce your course, and to invite them to collaborate with you over 15 weeks. Don't let competing objectives muddy that central purpose. Remember, as well, that students are starting several new courses at the same time, and are generally being bombarded from all sides with new information. This is not the time for elaborate language and ambiguity. Strive for clarity, and don't try to force the document to do too much.

**Limit how much you write.** You don't need to tell your students *everything* — *right away*. If only as an exercise, see if you can get your syllabus down to two pages, as Wendler has. One way to shorten the document: Leave for later in the semester the stuff that can wait until later in the semester. You don't need to tell students in August all the details about their fourth assignment, due in December.

But (I can hear you shouting) what about all of the university-mandated policy information I have to include? Try [Rebecca Schuman's solution](#): “Go ahead and include that admin boilerplate, but do it at the end, in six-point type, and label it ‘Appendix A: Boilerplate.’” Students should be able to figure out which parts of the syllabus came from you, and which parts came from the assistant vice dean in charge of student-success initiatives.

**Put all of the contractual material online.** There may be very good reasons to communicate departmental and university policies and requirements, but I don't see why you need to do that at the same time you're trying to sell your course. Put the boilerplate online as a reference, and insert a couple of sentences in the syllabus: “The university requires me to pass along to you a whole litany of contractual information, some of which you may find important, some of which you may not. I have placed this information on our course website; I suggest you refer to it as necessary.”

**Make your syllabus at least somewhat visually engaging.** Not everyone has great design chops. I certainly don't. But Wendler's syllabus and others I've seen have convinced me that the old model — black text arranged on a white page with no thought to design — is not doing us, or our students, any favors.

Think about how you might break up information in eye-catching ways. Look for inspiration in magazine layouts, posters, brochures, and infographics. Mess around with design software (many universities hold licenses so their faculty can use such software free of charge), or an online infographic maker like [Piktochart](#). Take a look at some of the [many examples of visually engaging syllabi on the web](#). Or, as one academic suggested in a [2014 blog post](#), “consider finding a graphic design student and offering them their first paying job.”

Many of us have our hands tied to some extent when it comes to syllabus-making. Our departments may require certain formats as well as certain information. But even if you can't turn your syllabus into a mini graphic novel, you can work to make it simpler, clearer, and more visually appealing. Just remember the chief rhetorical purpose of the syllabus — to convince your students to buy in to your course — and go from there.