



ARTICLE

Creative Strategies to Get Students to Read Your Course Syllabus

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Published: September 1, 2020

“It’s in the syllabus!”

I can’t even remember the number of times I’ve wanted to shout those words at my computer screen when reading an email from a student asking what my late assignment policy is or when an assignment is due. The seemingly endless stream of reply emails telling students to “please see the syllabus” ate away at my time to do other important tasks and caused me needless frustration.

So, at the beginning of each academic semester, I would dutifully update and revise my syllabus. Sometimes I closed a loophole that a student had identified the previous semester or I added a provision suggested by another faculty member, such as a gender-neutral pronoun policy or a new computer policy. But I always approached my syllabus with reluctance and trepidation. As sound as my addition might have been, I would sit facing the computer screen, contemplating my multi-page syllabus, sigh, and ask myself, “What’s the point? The students won’t read it. They never do.”

As cynical as that sounds, it’s not an incorrect assessment. A cottage industry has built up around the “seemingly universal student trait” of students not knowing what’s in the syllabi their professors put so much blood, sweat, and tears into

¹ The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and not those of the United States Air Force or the United States Air Force Academy.

drafting.² “It’s in the Syllabus!” gear, including t-shirts and coffee mugs, as well as memes and hashtags on social media joke about students not reading the syllabi for their courses.

But the students’ failure to read the course syllabus isn’t really a laughing matter. The syllabus plays a vital role in a course. It’s a “detailed blueprint for a carefully constructed learning experience.”³ It lays out not only the structure of the course and the schedule for assignments, but it also identifies learning outcomes for the course and provides policies on attendance, late submission of assignments, communications with the professor, computer and cell phone usage in class, the honor code and plagiarism, and a plethora of other topics that impact the class and the individual student. It’s *the* place to get an answer about the course. A student’s failure to review the syllabus can negatively affect her grade. Moreover, receiving repeated questions from students can tax the professor’s time, as she will spend an inordinate amount of time each semester responding to questions already answered by the syllabus.

Given the importance of the syllabus, I embarked on a quest to find a strategy that might get my students to read my course syllabi. I discovered that I was not alone on my quest. Many faculty in higher education are experimenting with creative strategies to get students to read their syllabi. Some strategies these professors tried include adding cartoons and graphics, filming videos, requiring students to acknowledge in the online course page that they’ve read the syllabus, adding a link to the syllabus in their email signature line, burying “Easter eggs”⁴ amid the policies as a reward for attentive readers, drafting short online syllabi formatted as the FAQ section of a website, and having students complete a syllabus quiz.

While filming a syllabus video seemed like a fun endeavor that *might* get student viewers, I immediately ruled out that strategy given I am somewhat technologically challenged. I doubted my ability to make a video, edit it, and upload it to my online course page or YouTube. Additionally, though I liked adding a link to my syllabus to my email signature line, I decided that it couldn’t be the only strategy I utilized. This strategy would encourage students to read the syllabus by making it easy for them to find it. However, this strategy would not allow me to gauge whether students had read the syllabus. Moreover, if you teach more than one

² Kevin Gannon, *How to Create a Syllabus: Advice Guide*, THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/advice-syllabus> (last visited Feb. 24, 2020).

³ James M. Lang, *The 3 Essential Functions of Your Syllabus, Part 2*, THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION (Mar. 30, 2015), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-3-Essential-Functions-of/228909>.

⁴ An Easter egg is “[a] hidden item placed in a movie, television show, or otherwise visual media for close watchers.” Urban Dictionary, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=easter%20egg> (Apr. 15, 2004). Easter eggs get their name “because they mimic the idea of an Easter egg hunt to find them. They can be a hidden message, character or image.” Sam H. Arnold, *10 of the Best Easter Eggs in Films*, <https://medium.com/@samharnold/10-of-the-best-easter-eggs-in-film-d1f698dd6113> (Aug. 6, 2018).

course, your signature line would be really long. You could have more than one signature line, but that could get confusing.

I also ruled out adding cartoons and graphics to my syllabus—what good would they do if I couldn't even get students to *look* at the syllabus? I further rejected requiring students to acknowledge that they had read the syllabus. If students didn't go to the course page to look at the syllabus, they wouldn't know they had to acknowledge reading the document. Moreover, even if I threatened students with an honor code violation, I couldn't guarantee that students were not just checking the mandatory acknowledgement box without reading the syllabus. I seriously considered the other three strategies—hiding an Easter egg in the document, creating an online FAQ syllabus, and employing a syllabus quiz. I considered the advantages and disadvantages of each approach and finally settled on having students complete a syllabus quiz.

This Article introduces these three strategies— the ones I considered the most promising with regard to getting students to read my course syllabus. It explores the advantages and disadvantages of burying Easter eggs in the syllabus, creating an online FAQ syllabus, and employing a syllabus quiz. The Article also provides tips on creating a successful FAQ syllabus and a syllabus quiz that will test student knowledge without being too invasive or punitive. Finally, this Article will share my experience using the syllabus quiz.

Easter Eggs

Some professors bury an Easter egg in their syllabi to discern how closely their students read the document. These Easter eggs may take a variety of forms—examples include asking students to email the professor a photo of Alf (an alien from a 1980s sitcom), a cartoon of a dinosaur, or the words “brown M&Ms.”⁵ Easter eggs are a lighthearted and clever way to determine whether students have read the syllabus without being too invasive or punitive.

However, this approach has two drawbacks. First, while a few industrious students may discover the Easter egg, the responses from the first few students will be the only responses a professor can count on as legitimately meaning they closely read the syllabus.⁶ The second group of responses may not necessarily mean that the students read the document closely but that their more industrious classmates tipped them off to the ploy. Second, this approach may have a “limited shelf life.”⁷ Students talk from semester to semester, and word will spread that the professor hides such gems in her syllabi. The professor would need to change the

⁵ Fernanda Zamudio-Suaréz, *Is Anybody Reading the Syllabus? To Find Out, Some Professors Bury Hidden Gems*, CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION (Aug. 31, 2016), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Is-Anybody-Reading-the/237641>.

⁶ Even the early responses are suspect in light of the fact that information travels so quickly and effortlessly via text message.

⁷ Zamudio-Suaréz, *supra* note 5.

Easter Egg and hide it better each semester to prevent some students from simply skimming the syllabus looking for the Easter egg, finding it, and emailing the appropriate response without having closely read the important information contained in the document.

FAQ Syllabus

Another strategy employed by some faculty to get students to read the course syllabus is to create a syllabus that looks and functions like the FAQ (frequently asked questions) page of a website.⁸ A digital FAQ format allows you to offer brief responses to predictable student inquiries and address many matters that would be cumbersome to address in a traditional paper-based syllabus. Consequently, an FAQ syllabus can include more information than most traditional paper-based syllabi and save professors considerable time because they will avoid answering repeated emails from students.

If you wish to adopt this strategy, your FAQ syllabus should be the home page for your online course page. The FAQ syllabus should list several categories, such as “attendance,” “grade policies,” and “course schedule.” When a student clicks on a particular category, the section should expand to include questions related to that category. Students can then click on any question in the FAQ syllabus to obtain a brief answer.

An FAQ syllabus offers several benefits. First, and most important, it permits quick and simple navigation of the information you want students to know about your course. Students can easily locate the relevant section of the FAQ syllabus and quickly receive an answer rather than flipping or scrolling through the pages of a traditional syllabus and having to discern the answer based on the information located. The easier the syllabus is to navigate and the more accessible the information, the more likely students will use it to answer their questions. Additionally, students are more accustomed to this type of reading due to technology.

Second, an FAQ syllabus allows professors to embed links to documents or websites in the answers. If the answer page doesn't have everything students need to answer their questions, they should be able to just click an active link to get to the relevant website or file. For instance, you could directly link students to a homework assignment on your course page, an instructional video on how to number pages in an appellate brief, or websites such as Core Grammar for Lawyers or the Interactive Citation Workstation.

Third, an FAQ syllabus allows professors to easily amend or update the syllabus as the semester progresses. For instance, if a professor receives a follow-up

⁸ Eric Loepp, *How to Turn Your Syllabus into an FAQ, and Why You Should*, CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION (Oct. 2, 2019), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-to-Turn-Your-Syllabus-into/247248>.

question about an issue that isn't addressed in the syllabus, she can easily respond to such questions once through the FAQ instead of multiple times via email.

As appealing as the FAQ syllabus strategy is, it does have drawbacks. First, it requires a fairly large investment of time and energy to convert a traditional paper-based syllabus into a digital FAQ syllabus. Second, some online platforms (*e.g.*, TWEN, Canvas, and Blackboard) are more conducive to this method than others. Some online platforms are more user-friendly for creating a digital syllabus; others are more difficult to maneuver within as a user. Third, there is no guarantee that more students will read the syllabus just because it's in digital form. While it seems likely that more students will read it, there is just no way to know ahead of time whether an FAQ syllabus will reach a greater number of students than a traditional syllabus. Thus, one will need to decide whether the initial investment of time outweighs the possible benefits or whether one of the other strategies would be better.

I rejected this strategy because, as interesting and promising as it seemed, I wasn't sure that the return would be great enough to justify the initial expenditure of time. In the past, I created and posted a FAQ section in an online web page for a certificate program I directed, and I did not experience a decrease in questions. That experience caused me to doubt the effectiveness of an FAQ syllabus.

Syllabus Quiz

The final strategy is the syllabus quiz. A syllabus quiz tests a student's comprehension of the significant aspects of a course syllabus. It requires students to read the syllabus to become familiar with the policies in it and verifies students' understanding of important elements of the document. The quiz can also contribute to a culture where students feel responsible for their own learning. Consequently, a syllabus quiz should help professors avoid receiving repeated questions about matters answered by the course syllabus.

If using a syllabus quiz to ensure that students read the syllabus, have students read the syllabus for the first homework assignment and then assign the syllabus quiz to be completed by the end of the first week of school. This way, the professor doesn't spend the first day of class going over the important policies in the syllabus that may affect the students, which sets a negative tone for the course. Like the syllabus, the first day of class is an opportunity to set the tone for the course. Don't turn that class into a "syllabus day."⁹ Use the first day of class for more productive purposes.

The efficacy of a syllabus depends on the students' ability to figure out what is important and to remember that information. A syllabus quiz forces students to read the syllabus and focus on points the professor thinks most important. The

⁹ Gannon, *supra* note 2. Moreover, if you discuss the course policies in the first class, students may assume they don't need to read the syllabus because you've told them everything they needed to know. *Id.*

quiz can test students on any aspect of the syllabus using true-false, multiple choice, or short-answer questions. The questions should be based on the policies the professor thinks most important for the students to know, the policies that surprised past students, or on the questions that past students have repeatedly asked. The goal for the syllabus quiz should be to ensure that students understand important course policies that will affect them, such as attendance, the honor code, rules for plagiarism, late submission of assignments, the professor's preferred method of communication, etc.

If more adventurous, a professor could use the syllabus quiz to emphasize her learning outcomes for the course. Linda Nilson, who introduced the concept of the syllabus quiz in her book *Teaching at Its Best*, suggests asking short-answer questions such as "Which of the learning outcomes for this course are most important to you personally, and why?" or "Of the four papers assigned, which are you least (or most) looking forward to writing, and why?"¹⁰

Some examples of questions you might ask include:

- What is the preferred method of scheduling a conference with the professor?
- Are there opportunities to earn extra credit?
- What happens if a student plagiarizes material?
- What should you call your professor?
- What percentage of overall points will be deducted from an assignment twenty-seven hours late?

If concerned with seeming punitive or with creating a negative tone for the course, the syllabus quiz need not be graded. To ensure that the quiz isn't punitive, even when graded, a professor can require the students to take it as many times as necessary to answer all the questions correctly.¹¹ If it's easy for students to earn a 100% on the quiz, they will not perceive the quiz negatively. However, given that students are, unfortunately, grade-obsessed, you may grade the quiz so the students take it seriously. The quiz need not be heavily weighted to get the students' attention.

If the syllabus quiz is on an online course page, you can construct it so it's self-graded. A self-graded quiz provides immediate feedback to minimize student confusion.¹² If the online platform for your course page allows it, you could also provide immediate feedback after each individual question. Feedback letting a student know that her answer was incorrect and referring the student to the part of the syllabus that will aid her in answering the question would be helpful to the students. Such feedback would also do a better job of reinforcing the notion that

¹⁰ LINDA B. NILSON, *TEACHING AT ITS BEST* 70 (4th ed. 2016).

¹¹ Karin Kirk & Mel Huff, *Syllabus Quiz*, TEACH THE EARTH, <https://serc.carleton.edu/NAGTWorkshops/online/activities/46956.html> (last accessed Feb. 24, 2020).

¹² *Id.*

the syllabus is the place to look for answers about the course than would a quiz that simply tells the students the correct answer.

Moreover, if the online learning platform for your course page allows it,¹³ you could require students to acknowledge that they have read the syllabus before allowing them to complete the syllabus quiz. To require this, when adding the syllabus to the course page, you need to check the permission box that makes it mandatory for students to acknowledge that they have read the syllabus. Additionally, some professors lock down everything beyond the syllabus quiz so that students must complete it before they can access the rest of the course page.¹⁴

The syllabus quiz has several advantages. First, it's a fairly noninvasive way to ensure that students read the syllabus and learn where to find answers to their questions about the course. Second, the initial creation of the quiz isn't time intensive. A professor will need to identify the questions she wishes to ask and the types of question she wishes to use to ask those question, and then build the quiz in the online course page. The last part isn't difficult, even for those who are not particularly tech-savvy. The creation of quizzes in TWEN, Campus, and Blackboard is fairly user-friendly and intuitive.

Third, the syllabus quiz does not have a limited shelf life like Easter eggs. The effectiveness of the quiz will not be diminished by using the quiz each semester. If students sharing the answers from semester to semester is a concern, the questions could easily be rearranged or tweaked so they address the same policies but ask somewhat different questions. The professor could also create a pool of questions from which the online course could randomly select questions. Third, because students are more familiar with the syllabus and the policies in it, the professor will receive fewer questions that could be answered by reading the syllabus.

In terms of drawbacks, the syllabus quiz has few. It's more invasive than the FAQ syllabus because it *requires* students to read the syllabus and take the quiz. (But getting students to read the syllabus is the point, isn't it?). Further, it's more punitive than Easter eggs when graded. However, these drawbacks are easily remedied, as discussed above.

Conclusion

I have used a syllabus quiz in my core Legal Writing classes for four semesters. My quiz has ten questions and combines true/false, fill in the blank, and multiple

¹³ Given that my institution uses Blackboard for its online platform, I know that its quiz function allows you to provide immediate feedback after each individual question. TWEN also allows you to provide an explanation after the student has answered a question. TWEN Quizzing Administrator's Guide, https://lscontent.westlaw.com/images/content/TWEN-Quizzing-Admin-Guide_L-389325.pdf (2014). Since I have not used the online quiz function in Campus, I am uncertain as to whether that online platform allows you to provide feedback after each individual question.

¹⁴ *Id.*

choice questions. It emphasizes those course policies that can negatively affect the students' grades and impact the daily classroom experience, and practical matters that generate lots of questions. For example, three questions ask about the penalty for submitting an assignment late; these questions require students to calculate the correct percentage of points that will be deducted from their score when they submit an assignment three minutes, three hours, or one day and three hours late. Another question, a true/false question, asks whether students must submit an assignment on time even when they are absent from class on the day the assignment is due. I emphasize the absence and late policies because they have the greatest effect on the students' grade and I want to ensure that they understand what is required.

My quiz also asks two questions about my computer policy. Since I have a three-strike policy for the class, I want to ensure that the students know that their misconduct can not only affect their computer usage but that of all the students in the class. The remainder of my questions focus on practical matters, such as what to call me,¹⁵ my email address,¹⁶ how to schedule a conference with me, and when particular assignments, such as Core Grammar, are due.

I require the syllabus quiz to be completed by the end of the first week of school. It's on my Blackboard page for the course and is self-graded. It alerts the students after each question whether their answer was correct, and if incorrect, directs them to the relevant section of the syllabus. I require the students to take the quiz as many times as needed to earn 100%. I require them to earn 100% on the quiz because I want to ensure they are familiar with the important sections of the syllabus.

The results from implementing the syllabus quiz have been positive. As hoped, I have received fewer questions from students that are answered by the syllabus. For those questions I do receive, if the answer is in the syllabus, I simply direct the student to the syllabus. Another benefit I did not anticipate is that students complain less about negative consequences (such as a grade reduction for submitting assignments late) because they are familiar with the course policies. Moreover, the tone for the course has been more upbeat and positive from the first day of class now that I no longer spend that class laying out the policies in the syllabus. I have encountered no problems with using a syllabus quiz to ensure that students are familiar with the course policies.

While there are advantages and disadvantages to each strategy examined in this article, the syllabus quiz seemed to have the fewest drawbacks. Using such a quiz has garnered the results I sought without an undue expenditure of time or

¹⁵ Working as a civilian female at a military academy, students not only struggle with whether to call me "Ms.," "Doctor," or "Professor," but also whether to call me by my legal name (Beardsley) or by my professional name (Sheppard). (The Air Force requires my email to be in my legal name, which is my married name, but I use my maiden name as my professional name.) Thus, I like to clarify at the beginning of the semester what the students should call me.

¹⁶ Since my email differs from what students call me, I emphasize this in the syllabus quiz.

energy. Building the quiz in Blackboard (my university's online learning management platform) was fairly easy and stress-free, even for this somewhat technologically challenged professor. The time I took to develop the questions and build the quiz online was only a little more than the time I would've spent that semester responding to questions from students that were answered by the syllabus.

I would highly recommend that you consider adopting the syllabus quiz to get your students to read your course syllabi. Your students will actually read the course syllabus and become familiar with the course policies, and you will enjoy more time and experience less frustration.

APPENDIX

Creative Strategies to Get Students to Read Your Course Syllabus

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This is the syllabus quiz for my two core legal writing courses. The answers are italicized.

Syllabus Quiz

1. If you submit an assignment 3 minutes late, the professor will deduct ____% of the overall points for the assignment.

10%

2. If you submit an assignment 3 hours late, the professor will deduct ____% of the overall points for the assignment.

10%

3. If you submit an assignment 1 day and 3 hours (27 hours total) late, the professor will deduct ____% of the overall points for the assignment.

20%

4. If you must be absent from class, whether due to other duties or an illness, you are expected to submit assignments that are due that day on time.

True *False*

5. If you are trying schedule a conference with me, you should:

- a. Just show up at my office and assume I will have time to meet with you.
 - b. Assume that the meeting is set if you send me an Office invite even if you do not hear back from me and I have not accepted the invite.
 - c. *Do not assume the meeting is set if you send me an Office invite but do not hear back from me and I have not accepted the invite.*

6. Core Grammar for Lawyers is an online grammar course that you must complete as part of Law 221. Core Grammar Exercises are assigned in the syllabus during the first half of the course. These exercises are due:
 - a. On the day they are assigned in the syllabus
 - b. *By the end of the week in which they are assigned in the syllabus*
 - c. The Monday following the assignment

7. The use of computers is permitted during class, but only for note-taking purposes or drafting purposes. If you are caught sending an email that is unrelated to class or checking social media sites, what will the penalty be for you?
 - a. *You will lose participation points for the class period.*
 - b. You will lose the privilege of using a computer in class after only 1 violation.
 - c. You will suffer no penalty unless you personally have been caught violating the rule 3 times.

8. The use of computers is permitted during class, but only for note-taking purposes or drafting purposes. Assume that you are caught checking social media site, and that two other students had previously been caught violating the computer policy. What penalty will the class, as a whole, be subjected to?
 - a. Nothing.
 - b. The students in the class will not be able to use computers for a week.
 - c. The students in the class will not be able to use computers for a month.
 - d. *The students in the class will not be able to use computers for the remainder of the semester.*

9. What should you call me?
 - a. Dr. Beardsley
 - b. Ms. Sheppard
 - c. *Professor Sheppard*
 - d. Dr. Sheppard

10. What is my email address?
 - a. jennifer.shepard@usafa.edu
 - b. jennifer.sheppard@usafa.edu
 - c. jennifer.beardsley@usafa.edu
 - d. jennifer.sheppardbeardsley@usafa.edu