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# Human centered syllabus design: Positioning our students as expert end-users☆

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**Abstract**

This study examines how the layout of syllabi in first-year writing courses can aid or obscure content that is key to student success. Understanding the function of a syllabus as a charter document in a genre ecology helps to underscore the importance of the syllabus as a regulatory document that can have a significant impact for students. This study makes the case for considering students as expert end-users that have valuable knowledge useful to composition programs interested in redesigning first-year writing course syllabi using a human-centered design approach.

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*Keywords:* Human-centered design; syllabus design; genre ecology; charter documents

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## 1. Introduction

When our students enter our classrooms each semester, whether online or in face-to-face (f2f) courses, the standard protocol for most instructors is to distribute a course syllabus, explain the course objectives and expectations, and introduce the major assignments required in the course. Ideally, students are to use the syllabus and the interrelated texts (assignment sheets, activity prompts, handouts, and other documents) as a guide to help them succeed in the course. The syllabus and corresponding texts form an ecology of tools and technologies designed to help students to complete the important task of meeting course goals, achieving programmatic student learning outcomes, and applying what they learn beyond the classroom. The course syllabus becomes the foundational document, tethering other documents within the ecology.

Charter documents are part of a larger genre ecology (Winsor, 2007). Our composition courses are often one of students' first college-level courses. These students are typically just beginning to learn the academic discourse community's landscapes. Syllabi in first-year writing courses, many times, are one of the first syllabi that incoming-freshmen encounter and must decipher. Further, the principles of human-centered design require that our texts and technologies be developed and implemented in ways that allow our users (in this case students) to learn more easily and complete tasks with fewer errors (Oviatt, 2006, para. 4). Syllabi, the cornerstone document in most courses, should

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support students in a way that does not impede “their ability to attend, learn, and perform” (Oviatt, 2006, para. 4) in our courses.

From a curriculum and a human centered design perspective, it is important to examine the role of syllabi in relation to student success (i.e., students’ ability to use the syllabus to achieve course goals) in our composition courses while also involving students in the design process. Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of scholarship focusing on syllabus design solely for composition courses. There is, however, scholarship on different approaches to syllabus design as pedagogical practice that offers useful perspectives and approaches that we can then use to think about our first-year courses. This scholarship, addressing syllabi in general *and* scholarship centering on syllabi in first-year composition courses, typically interrogates the best practices for developing content in a syllabus. For example, Somayeh Biparva Haghighi (2012) reviews a number of approaches to the design of syllabi, including task-based syllabi, text-based syllabi, and content-based syllabi (p. 258). The author also advocates for a needs-based syllabus that is developed with student tasks in mind. Advice about the development of course syllabi often privileges an instructor and/or a program-centered approach. Best practices for designing syllabi (Roen, Pantoja, Yena, Miller, & Waggoner, 2002), can help instructors think through content development for the syllabus. These best practices can range from the general to the specific, for example, encouraging the instructor to “underscore that this is a writing course,” and including “a statement on plagiarism and accommodation of disabilities in your syllabus” (Villanueva, 2002, p. 101-102). In addition, Jeanne M. Slattery and Janet F. Carlson (2005) address content that should be covered in course syllabi. For example, the authors note that including course goals, ways to meet those goals, and even motivational messages can be included in a course syllabus.

As indicated, content typically takes precedence in scholarship about syllabus design. However, there are limited studies that consider syllabus design in relation to human centered design. Few scholars acknowledge the importance of thinking about how our students use our course documents to complete tasks, even though human centered design can “free up mental resource,” allowing users to focus on other tasks and goals (for example, in the case of our classrooms, mastering student learning objectives) (Oviatt, 2006, para. 36). Some studies in curriculum design do move beyond restrictive discussions of content to examine more subjective aspects of the ways in which syllabi can help to promote student success. Acknowledging that, in addition to providing a framework for successful achievement of course objectives and programmatic outcomes, the course syllabus often sets the tone for a course and begins to do the work of building a rapport between instructors and students. Some authors focus specifically on tone, building rapport, and student motivation. Thinking beyond curricular content, research has suggests that the tone that instructors develop in their syllabi can help students feel more engaged in a course, but also helps frame instructors as more approachable and motivated (Harnish & Bridges, 2011). Syllabi that have a “warm” and inviting linguistic tone “explain expectations in a clear and friendly fashion, encourage and motivate students, and anticipate positive student outcomes, rather than merely attempting to prevent problems” (Slattery & Carlson, 2005, p. 159).

While focus on approaches for designing, developing, and delivering content for syllabi are valuable, there is little scholarship that examines the best *document design* approaches for increasing the usability and usefulness of the content in printed and electronic syllabi. In other words, how can the visual design of a syllabus fundamentally support student success? What should a syllabus look like in order to align with course goals, programmatic outcomes, and instructor expectations? Slattery and Carlson note that the syllabus should be “attractive without distracting, and should be consistent with the tone of the course” (p. 163). The authors further argue that the organization of the syllabus, revealed in content placement within the syllabus and use of headings, as well as consideration of relevant graphics included in the syllabus can make “syllabi more attractive and user-friendly” (p. 163). Moreover, Slattery and Carlson argue that “syllabi should be easy to navigate” and that some syllabi are ineffective due to “weak organization” (p. 163).

This is important because scholars and practitioners have demonstrated that the design of documents is central to reading comprehension and usability. Layout, defined as the “use of whitespace and type characteristics to reveal emphasis and organization” can impact reader comprehension and perception in positive or negative ways (Jones, McDavid, Derthick, Dowell, & Spyridakis, 2012, p. 361). In fact, headings, density of text, and white space can work along or against other design elements to increase accessibility of information or to cause readers to disengage with the text. Further, “readers valued layouts that were not cluttered (many provided ample white-space and were not text-heavy), included thoughtful and meaningful images ... and were appropriate in length” (Jones et al., 2012, p. 363). Design features do impact reader perception and comprehension, and although best practices in design encourage application of certain guidelines, the approaches to design that work best and what reader value “vary across documents

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