

CAST's UDL Syllabus

A syllabus is typically the first form of communication between instructors and their students. Beyond presenting course information and requirements, think of it as an opportunity to engage students in the learning experience you've designed for them. Speak directly to your students and convey your enthusiasm for the content, your compassion for their position as learners, and your high expectations of their performance. Throughout the syllabus, highlight the UDL features of your course, from the learning goals to the assessments. And make sure that your syllabus is accessible and provided in formats that every student can use.



Apply Accessibility Practices

With 19% of undergraduates reporting a disability (NCES, 2019), an accessible syllabus is essential to ensuring that every student begins the semester with necessary course information. Practices that apply:

- Logical structure with headings for title and sections
- Descriptive links
- Alt text for images
- Proper use and creation of tables

Resource: [Creating Accessible Documents](#)

In addition to the accessibility of the document, consider multiple ways to disseminate the syllabus to your students. If your class meets in person, provide the syllabus electronically before the first meeting so that students who use assistive technology can access the information at the same time as their peers. In general, the syllabus should be available in multiple formats: web-based through an LMS and in an accessible format such as Microsoft Word that can be downloaded and accessed offline or printed as needed. If you prefer to distribute documents as PDF, note that added steps are necessary to ensure accessibility.

Resource: [Inclusive PDFs by Design](#)



Course Information

Traditionally required:

- Institution, course number, course title
- Physical or virtual location of the course
- Instructor's name and basic contact information

UDL features to include:

The most basic section of a syllabus is typically the course information. There are ways, however, to go beyond the traditional information to personalize your course, thereby immediately engaging students in your syllabus.

- A copyright-free image that conveys the course content (sources include [Creative Commons](#), [Pixabay](#), [NASA](#), [CDC's Public Health Image Library](#), [Pexels \(biology\)](#), [Pexels \(chemistry\)](#), [Pexels \(physics\)](#), [USGS](#), [Wikimedia Commons](#))
- Course location
 - If course is in person, location marked on a campus map
 - If virtual, hyperlink to a login screen
- A photo or caricature of yourself
- Supplemental contact information such as your Twitter handle or LinkedIn profile
- Your bio, including your interest in the course content
- Video introduction of yourself with an overview of the course
- Office hours
 - In addition to your schedule of office hours, include a personal statement that encourages students to seek your assistance outside of class if they experience difficulty for any reason
 - If course is in person, your office location marked on a campus map
 - If online, clearly communicate the connection information (platform, hyperlink, call-in option, etc.)
 - Offer flexible hours (e.g., twice per week and upon request)



Course Schedule

Traditionally required:

- Day of the week/time (in person or online synchronous meetings)

UDL features to include:

The course schedule is an area where instructors can both model and scaffold executive functioning by offering a shared calendar and other organizational supports.

- Share a course calendar of meeting times, office hours, assignments, and exams
- Provide a checklist with due dates for assessments and major assignments



Course Materials

Traditionally required:

- A list of required textbooks

UDL features to include:

High quality course material extends beyond the content to include access for students with disabilities who use assistive technology. Regardless of the format of the material (print, digital, audio, video, simulation, etc.), accessibility considerations are necessary. It's likely that your college or university provides some level of assistance with selecting accessible materials, as well as services for improving the accessibility of existing content. Consult with your IT and academic technology departments. Your Disability Services Office is another important resource for understanding accessibility and how you can improve the efficiency of student accommodations. A key to ensuring timely access for every student is to identify and/or create your materials several months before your course begins.

In addition to accessibility, consider the affordability of the course materials you select. The rising cost of textbooks has had a disproportionate impact on students of lower income, resulting in a different kind of barrier to learning. Open Educational Resources (OER) are online digital educational materials, tools, or even techniques that are offered freely and/or through open licensing. In addition to addressing barriers of affordability, the licensing attached to most OER allows for retrofitting a material to make it more accessible; something not possible with commercial publications or media.

- Provide information on all required and recommended textbooks and materials
 - Providing the ISBN (if applicable) simplifies the process for students to search for the book in varied formats and for Disability Services to acquire the book through accessible media producers.
 - Noting the format of the material enables students to identify potential barriers early in the course (e.g., print, digital text, audio, simulation)
- Offer the same content in varied formats (e.g., principles of solubility may be explained in text materials, demonstrated in video, and discussed in a chemistry podcast)
- Confirm accessibility of each material
 - Video
 - Closed captions (not automatically generated)
 - Audio description preferred
 - Resource
 - [What Makes for High Quality Accessible Videos?](#)
 - Audio
 - Text transcripts
 - Digital text

- If commercial, request a Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) from the publisher to understand the extent to which the product will be usable by every student.
 - If downloaded from an OER repository, look for accessibility information
 - If acquired through a web browser, conduct a check for accessibility
 - Be wary of PDF. In many cases, a PDF is an image rather than digital text and may have additional accessibility barriers.
 - Resources and examples
 - [Understanding the VPAT](#)
 - [Using the VPAT in Purchasing Decisions](#)
 - [VitalSource's Transparency Initiative to Promote Accessibility](#)
 - [W3C's Easy Checks - A First Review of Web Accessibility](#)
 - [Inclusive PDFs by Design](#)
 - Print
 - For material that is purchased commercially and available in print only, consider alternatives. Is the same content available in an accessible digital text format? If alternatives aren't an option, inform your Disability Services Office that students with alternative format accommodations may be requesting the material.
 - Simulation
 - Software and web-based simulations are designed with multiple elements that present barriers to users with disabilities, such as audio, video, and interactivity that requires the use of a mouse or trackpad only. Request a VPAT from the maker to understand the extent to which the product will be usable by every student.
 - Resource
 - [Accessible Simulations](#)
- Inform students about free and low cost UDL tools available to support reading of course materials
 - Resource
 - [Personalizing the Reading Experience](#)



Course Assignments and Assessment

Traditionally required:

- Dates of exams
- Due dates, instructions, and materials for assignments

UDL features to include:

To be academically successful, students need to express their learning through methods that are accessible to them. Because assessments are derived from clearly communicated and measurable objectives, start with those. For each, what are at least two ways that students can demonstrate progress toward mastery? For the rare objective with a construct that prohibits options for expression, inform students about the reason why. For example, if an objective is tied to the writing process, explain to students the rationale behind it and why the product of their learning must be in a written format. At the same time, assure students that the processes for developing their written product can vary (advanced organizers; use of online dictionaries; grammar and spell check; text to speech; speech to text, etc.).

- Ensure assignments and assessments are designed to measure attainment of course objectives
- Follow the UDL Guidelines for providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression
- Provide product descriptors and rubrics with assignments
- Break up large projects into smaller components (e.g. submit an outline for a written assignment).
- Provide feedback and revision periods
- Resource
 - [UDL and Assessment](#)



Grading Procedure

Traditionally required:

- Weight given to quizzes, reports, class participation, examinations, etc.
- Makeup policy
- Late policy and related penalties

UDL features to include:

Offer supports and opportunities for assessment to be both of and for learning. While grades are the traditional form of notifying students of their academic achievement, they may not be the most useful communication of what a student has learned. More informative than a grade is actionable feedback that students can use to improve their performance throughout the semester.

- Base assessment on progress a student makes toward achieving objectives
- Provide descriptive feedback via rubrics that show progressive criteria toward meeting objectives
- Build revision periods into assignment timelines



Disability Accommodations

Traditionally required:

- Information for students needing accommodations due to a disability, including location and contact information for the Disability Services Office.

UDL feature to include:

Higher ed institutions commonly require that syllabi include information about services available to students with disabilities. This is important because many students are unaware that accommodations are available to them in postsecondary settings.

- Assure students that you're prepared to make accommodations and that you welcome opportunities to discuss their individual needs.



Academic Support

Designate a section of your syllabus to inform students of academic support available on campus to all students. Examples include contact information and location for advising, tutoring centers, math and writing labs, and academic coaching.



Philosophy of Teaching & Learning

Share your principles and beliefs with students. Some points to consider include that:

- You value every student and welcome learner variability.
- The accessibility of your course for every learner is important to you. If at anytime a student experiences a barrier to learning, they should consult with you immediately.
- You strive to use best practices for accessibility when developing your own materials, such as documents and video.
- Accessibility is considered in the selection of all course materials.
- You want students to be engaged in the course and welcome their input on how to increase their interest and motivation.
- You believe in accurate assessment of learning through choices of how students demonstrate what they know and can do.
- You encourage students to partner with you in good faith to submit their best work and use feedback for timely revision.

Image Citations

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