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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Creating a "Warm" Syllabus
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Teaching Toolbox: Creating a “Warm” Syllabus **by Emily O. Gravett**

A couple of weeks ago, I had the opportunity to meet with a group of dedicated faculty who are participating in the [2017 Spring Institute for Summer Online Course Development](#) through Innovation Services. I was invited to talk about how to make online course syllabi more welcoming, but I realized that much of what I shared was applicable to other contexts too. Although many of us will not be teaching again until the fall, it’s never too early to start thinking about our syllabi.

Beyond fulfilling [basic institutional requirements](#), the syllabus serves a number of other important functions. It can communicate a plan or course of study, it can set the terms and expectations for the semester, it can even invite students into a discipline or an exciting line of inquiry. The syllabus has been called anything from a contract to a cognitive map to a promise. In many cases, it is also a first impression; students draw a lot of conclusions about the course and especially the faculty member teaching the course from this document alone, so it’s in our best interest to make the syllabus as welcoming as possible.

One of the easiest adjustments we can make is to adopt a “warm” tone. [Harnish and Bridges \(2011\)](#) conducted an experiment in which students shared their perceptions of a syllabus manipulated to reflect a friendly or an unfriendly tone. In the end, “students rated the instructor whose syllabus was written in a friendly tone as being warmer, less cold, more approachable, and more motivated to teach the course compared to the instructor whose syllabus possessed an unfriendly tone” (p. 326).

(A caveat: They also found that students thought the course with the warm syllabus would be easier, so we’ll have to think about how to affirm rigor, if we follow this tack.)

If you’d like to make your syllabus warmer, Harnish and Bridges provide examples on pages 323-324 and suggest that instructors include the following six components:

- Positive or friendly language
- Rationale for assignments
- Personal experiences or self-disclosure
- Humor
- Compassion
- Enthusiasm

While more extensive course design (such as those faculty embarking upon [jmUDESIGN](#) will

experience this summer) can involve a great deal of time and effort, using humor or showing enthusiasm in a syllabus can be an easy way of conveying to students that you care about them, that you are approachable and invested, and that your classroom is a supportive place for inquiry and discovery.

About the author: Emily O. Gravett is Assistant Director of Teaching Programs at the Center for Faculty Innovation and a faculty member in the Philosophy & Religion department. She can be reached at graveteo@jmu.edu.

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