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To: ["TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU"](mailto:TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU)
Cc: ["Palmer, Michael S. \(mp6h\)"](#)
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The Learning-Focused Syllabus

by Emily O. Gravett

In "[Does the Document Matter?](#)" (Palmer et al., 2016), researchers from UVA sought to discover whether different kinds of syllabi affected student motivation. They surveyed 127 undergraduate students, with 66 reading a "content-focused" syllabus and another 61 reading a "learning-focused" syllabus, both from History. Students were asked to rate their perceptions of the syllabus (e.g., "the syllabus is well-organized"), the course described in the syllabus (e.g., "this course would help me understand how experts approach this topic"), as well as the instructor associated with the course (e.g., "the instructor is approachable").

The researchers found that after reading the "learning-focused" syllabus, students had significantly more positive perceptions of the syllabus itself, the course described in the syllabus, and the instructor associated with the course. As Palmer et al. conclude, "It is not enough to require syllabi, we need to require the *right* type of syllabi" (36). It turns out, in answer to their titular question, the document matters a great deal.

So what is a "learning-focused" syllabus? According to Palmer et al., it is characterized by:

- Engaging, question-driven course descriptions;
- Long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals;
- Clear, measurable learning objectives;
- Robust and transparent assessment and activity descriptions;
- Detailed course schedules framed in what [author Ken Bain \(2004\)](#) calls "beautiful questions";
- A focus on student success; and
- An inviting, approachable, and motivating tone.

These researchers have kindly [published](#) a "learning-focused syllabus rubric," which you can access on [their center's website](#), in order to determine just how learning-focused your own might be. The rubric is organized around four main criteria: learning goals and objectives, assessment activities, schedule, and overall learning environment. According to their website, the rubric "is flexible enough to accommodate a diverse range of levels, disciplines, institutions, and learning environments yet nuanced enough to provide...formative feedback to instructors interested in gauging the focus of their syllabi." The researchers have also helpfully provided a rubric [user guide](#), annotations of [sample syllabi](#) according to the rubric, as well as an [Excel spreadsheet](#) for instructors to use to score

their own syllabi.

With this rubric, a syllabus can earn a score along a spectrum from “content-focused” to “learning-focused.” If you evaluate your own syllabus, you may find your it scores lower in some of the four main criteria than others and then you can focus any improvement efforts accordingly.

We hope this rubric will be a useful tool over winter break, as you work on creating or fine-tuning your upcoming spring courses. You may also find inspiration in looking at the published syllabi (as well as other teaching materials) found in the journal [Syllabus](#).

About the author: Dr. Emily O. Gravett is an assistant director in the [Center for Faculty Innovation](#) and an assistant professor in the [Philosophy & Religion department](#). She can be reached at graveteo@jmu.edu.