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How to Turn Your Syllabus Into an FAQ, and Why You Should

By *Eric Loepp* | OCTOBER 02, 2019



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Like many faculty members, I approach my syllabus before a new semester begins with some trepidation: Do I need to add anything new?

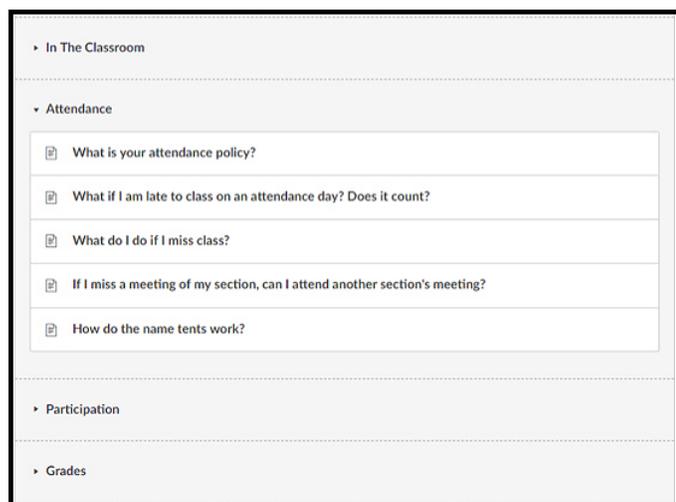
Usually the reasons for inserting additional language are quite valid: Perhaps a student identified a loophole last semester that needs to be corrected. Maybe a colleague suggested a new provision that has been

neglected on course syllabi, such as contact information for mental-health resources or gender-pronoun policies.

Yet while such updates serve important purposes, they also contribute to the ubiquitous and oft-lamented syllabus bloat. There often seems to be an inverse relationship between syllabus length and syllabus scrutiny. Overwhelmed by an overlong document, students may not bother to read much of it — which defeats the purpose of adding new information in the first place.

With that problem in mind, I have come up with a simple solution to replace the multipage, narrative document I used to hand out in class: Create a syllabus that looks and functions much like the FAQ (frequently asked questions) page of a website.

Here's how it works: I designed my syllabus in a Q&A format on my university's learning-management system, Canvas. My course page on Canvas displays a series of themes, such as "attendance," "grade policies," and "course schedule." When students expand any particular section, a series of questions related to the theme appears. Below is an image from my Canvas home page, with the "attendance" module expanded:



Students can click on any question on my FAQ syllabus to get a brief answer. For example, if they click on, "What if I am late to class? ... Does [my attendance] count?," a short answer appears: "No. If you are late to class and miss the attendance sheet, you cannot sign it."

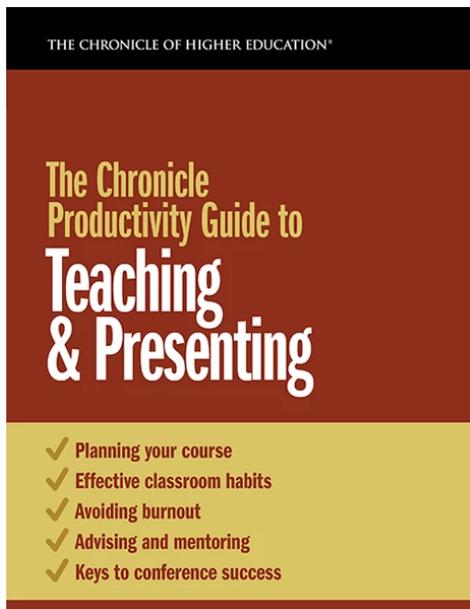
The FAQ syllabus offers a number of advantages:

- It allows quick and simple navigation. Rather than flipping or scrolling through pages of a traditional syllabus, students can easily locate the appropriate section of an FAQ syllabus and obtain a quick answer. The more accessible the information is, the more likely students will attempt to find it (as opposed to emailing me in a panic at 2 a.m.).
- Instructors can embed links to web pages or documents in the FAQ answers. For example, on my FAQ syllabus, I connect students directly to homework assignments, research sources, contact information for campus services, and more. My goal is for students to rarely have to click the "back" button. If the answer page does not have everything they need, they should be able to simply click an active link to get to the relevant website or file.
- An FAQ syllabus allows instructors to prepare answers to follow-up questions about things that aren't on the syllabus but may pop up as the semester progresses. For example, instructors routinely place grading scales on the syllabus, but sometimes we get specific questions later on — once the grades start rolling in — about issues like curves, rounding, and extensions. Students may have other questions unique to

the discipline or course. For instance, my field is political science, so I include a common query on my FAQ syllabus: "Will I be required to share my political views out loud?" Many of these types of questions are too cumbersome to attach to an already text-heavy print syllabus. In a digital FAQ form, however, you can offer brief responses to predictable inquiries that can save you considerable time later in the form of averted emails.

- Finally, integrating your syllabus with the campus learning-management system (LMS) can help students develop more familiarity and comfort with that system generally. Some students rarely log in to the LMS — perhaps just to locate a due date or check their grades. An FAQ syllabus encourages them to log into the LMS more frequently, not just to read the syllabus but to use the rest of the site, too. For instance, if students aren't sure how to submit a homework assignment for my class, they can click on a corresponding question on my FAQ syllabus. The answer explains how to upload written work to the LMS and includes a direct link to the page where they can do so. In a world where there is far more information available than we can possibly expect students to commit to memory, learning to manage and navigate an organized set of information within an online system is an important life skill.

Like any syllabus strategy, the FAQ approach is not without its drawbacks.



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Chief among them is the initial investment of time and effort that goes into converting a paper document to a digital FAQ syllabus. Also, some learning-management systems are more conducive to this method than others. Finally, some universities, departments, or individual students may simply prefer — or, in some cases, require — a traditional print syllabus be made available.

I do offer students a downloadable version of the basic syllabus with all university-required course information, but I make clear that far more information is available on the FAQ version. As a result, few students even open the downloadable version.

For me and my students, the FAQ syllabus is a net positive. Once digitally constructed, it is no more difficult to update and maintain than any other syllabus, yet is far more versatile.

Moreover, your own students are a good source of ideas for what needs to be updated on your FAQ syllabus. For example, create a syllabus quiz that you can also use as an assessment tool: Ask students to identify a question about the course that you *haven't* answered on the syllabus. What piece of information would they like to see added? What is unclear? (Students who ask a question that's already answered on the syllabus earn zero points.)

A syllabus quiz not only requires students to read and familiarize themselves with the document, but also helps the instructor identify policy voids. If enough students point out the same problem, that's probably something you need to fix.

Across higher education, we are seeing more and more faculty interest in finding creative — and demonstrably effective — ways to present course information. Professors are experimenting with all sorts of syllabus strategies, including filming videos, adding infographics or cartoons, drafting short and simple syllabi that leave most course information to an online repository, mandating graded syllabus quizzes, and burying "Easter eggs" on their syllabi that reward diligent readers.

The FAQ syllabus contributes to that worthwhile enterprise: It provides students with access to a rich online database that is simple to navigate, but contains more information than most paper-based syllabi. The approach has been an asset in my courses; I hope it may prove equally fruitful for other instructors, too. If anyone is interested in trying it out for themselves, there are many resources online with tips and best practices for designing FAQ pages.

Regardless of *what* we include on a syllabus, we must be cognizant that *how* we deliver that information matters, too — assuming we want students to actually use and benefit from it throughout the term.

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