

# First Impressions: Student and Faculty Feedback on Four Styles of Syllabi

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Recommendations about syllabi design have emerged over the last two decades. From a Promising Syllabus, to a Graphic Syllabus, to a Student-Centered Syllabus, faculty are encouraged to purposefully set the tone with this document. Few studies examine students' impressions of these documents. In order to do this, we created four types of syllabi with consistent course content. First, we presented a focus group with four different syllabus types and gathered their comments. Then, larger groups of students rated the syllabi to reflect their impressions of the documents, their instructor, and the upcoming course. Finally, a group of instructors indicated their preferences and reactions. Student ratings revealed a preference for warmth, clarity, and brevity. We discuss notable differences between student and instructor ratings and offer recommendations.

The syllabus has been described as a legal document, a reference guide, and a promise of things to come for a given course. Clearly, a syllabus has several different functions, one of which is introducing students to the instructor's style. Though instructors don't often worry about format, the style and design of a syllabus can set an impression of an instructor and the course. These impressions can serve as an anchor for the tone of the course. In this study we investigate if the strategies outlined in the academic literature are perceived by students as helpful to their understanding and engagement. In addition, we compare instructor perceptions of the syllabi to those of the students. The purpose of this study is to inform faculty concerning their choices for syllabus presentation.

## The Importance of Syllabi

Syllabi serve many functions in addition to orienting students to course content and organization. Fink (2012) outlined how syllabi serve multiple audiences, and each audience values the syllabus for a different purpose, such as, "...a communication mechanism, a planning tool for instructors, a course plan for students, a teaching tool or resource, an artifact for teaching evaluation, and evidence for accreditation," (p. 1). Given the challenges of meeting the expectations of several audiences, it is important to consider the principal audience: the students.

The audience may be overlooked when a faculty member approaches the syllabus as a scholarly product, ignoring the fact that the student user merely wants a scheduling tool or a guide to course assessments. Another consideration with the syllabus is that with the greater flexibility of organization afforded by the online environment, syllabi might become deconstructed into multiple items in a learning management system. Regardless of which function it serves, a document called a syllabus is required by many institutions and expected by many students.

Although students expect a syllabus, syllabus design can vary greatly. McDonald, Siddall, Mandell, and Hughes (2010) found that students reported using the syllabus as a reference tool for the course rather than as a document to read like an essay or an article. As faculty consider designing syllabi, it might be useful to consider that it is used primarily as a reference tool. Eberly, Newton, and Wiggins (2001) describe the syllabus also as a document that reflects the values and goals of the university. An instructor must take into account the other audiences for whom the syllabus is important, such as accreditors, transfer credit evaluators, or program administrators. This mix of audiences and purposes contribute to a complicated design issue. In this study we focus on the student audience, and we explore how the first impression of a syllabus creates a context for the students' perceptions of the course and the instructor.

## Recommendations for Syllabi from Previous Research

There is no lack of recommendations for how to design a syllabus in the literature on teaching and learning, although not all the recommendations include student perspectives.

Breen (1987) and Nunan (1988) discuss how the syllabus structures the learners' experience of the material in a course. Breen (1987) suggests that a syllabus should function as a coherent plan for how a student should understand the content, should convey a sense of the teacher's pedagogical orientation, and should provide an outline of what the course achieves, the means by which learners will be assessed, and documentation of the course for accountability purposes. Nunan (1988), in his book *Syllabus Design*, also speaks of the syllabus as a form of curriculum design. He specifies that a syllabus communicates selection and grading of content as well as the methodology of the course. In presenting a course schedule, the instructor is also

communicating a specific approach to the material. This may be more information than a student wants. This study examines whether students perceive this deeper communication of the syllabus and what students prefer to get out of this document.

Viewing the syllabus as a part of the teaching process, McWilliams (2015) discussed a negotiated syllabus that he described as “democratic syllabus”. He reported that it was favorably received by eight highly motivated seniors in a small seminar. Similarly, Weimer (2002), in her book *Learner Centered Teaching*, suggested that instructors should allow students to “discover” in lieu of “going over” the syllabus content. She proposed providing options and choices in a syllabus that would allow students to personalize their learning experience. Weimer also suggested that the instructor offer students time in class to digest the syllabus, then administer a quiz that fosters a more in-depth examination. These two approaches to syllabus design are predicated on supporting students to become engaged in their learning. The process gives students control through participating in creating the syllabus. This approach may be more successful with experienced students who are more predisposed to find the process engaging. Kaplan and Renard (2015) also recommend student involvement. They assert, “Negotiating the syllabus positively affects learning through increasing motivation and reinforcing course objectives,” (Kaplan & Renard, 2015, p. 415). In this case, students are negotiating types of assignments and assessments.

The Promising Syllabus is yet another approach to fostering student engagement in the content of the course. In his book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Bain (2004) describes the Promising Syllabus as a way to engage students in their own learning by fully explaining how students will benefit from a course, what they will do to realize that benefit, and how they will demonstrate the nature and progress of their learning. Hirsch (2010) enthusiastically endorses the Promising Syllabus in a case study of how she used it in one of her courses and perceived increased student engagement in an upper-level undergraduate course and her graduate courses.

Canada (2013) also agrees that the syllabus should be the first locus of student engagement with a course. Canada recommends creating a document that is easy to read, friendly, supportive, and clear about what the student will get from the course. These recommendations focus on tone and organization of the content, although Canada does not offer any direct data for the success of this approach. Nilson (2007) similarly focuses on organizing the material in the syllabus to give an overview of how the course is structured. Nilson recommends a graphic syllabus that maps topics to learning outcomes, and learning outcomes to assessments, so that students can perceive

the progression of skills and connections with assessments in the course.

Dean and Fornaciari (2014) also view the syllabus as a teaching and learning tool that should respect the relationship between the instructor and the adult student, but they take a more practical approach in their recommendations. They suggest that the syllabus should acknowledge the reading habits of modern students by making the syllabus direct. The electronic nature of reading on mobile devices requires the syllabus to be succinct. They also recommend dispersing larger chunks of text, like assignment descriptions, into separate files to accommodate data limits.

The above authors recommend different forms of syllabus from the instructor’s point of view. In addition, there are studies that include student perceptions as the basis for recommending different syllabus designs. Harrington and Gabert-Quillen (2015) conducted a study with community college students who were randomly assigned to one of six syllabus conditions focusing on syllabus length (i.e., short, medium, and long) and the inclusion of images or not. Participants completed questionnaires and participated in a focus group regarding their perceptions of the course and the professor. Students reviewing the medium or long syllabi, as compared to the short syllabus, had a more positive impression of the course and professor. No significant differences were found for images versus no images. The majority of students, 66.6%, indicated a preference for a long syllabus with all assignment details versus a shorter syllabus with assignment details being provided later in the semester.

In general, there is a consensus in the literature that the syllabus should function as an invitation to the course and be a tool to initiate engagement in a course. Although the proponents of learner-centered syllabi phrase the recommendations as oriented towards the student, frequently the students’ voices in how they actually use a syllabus are often not referenced.

Though there are a number of recommendations and examples for instructors, there is little student reported evidence for one style over another. The majority of the student reports are from the students who were taking the classes with the instructors who were offering the course. In order to inform our own practice and the recommendations we make at various faculty development workshops, we gathered students’ perceptions of styles that are common at our institution. To gain a more general perspective and to standardize ratings across course type, we did not ask students about syllabi in the courses they were currently taking, but rather the syllabus types were different versions of standardized fictitious course content, and we asked students across several disciplines to participate.

### Method Study 1: Focus Group

#### Participants

Participants were eight student ambassadors who completed required volunteer hours by participating a two-hour focus group. These second, third, and fourth-year students had high GPAs (over 3.0), had earned scholarships for their service to the college, and were chosen for their leadership ability. These were highly engaged students from the outset, and by this point in their academic careers, they were highly invested in the disciplinary expectations of their majors.

#### Materials

Four syllabi were created with the same instructor name, course names, course descriptions, dates, and assignments. Other content varied according to the style of the syllabus such as tone, phrasing, and procedural information specific to the style.

1. Newsletter (e.g., Hangen, 2011). This syllabus had graphics to accompany the text and was arranged in the format of a newsletter with headers, columns, attention-grabbing quotes, and call-out boxes. This style highlighted the organization of the course content.
2. Promising (e.g., Bain, 2004). This longer, text-heavy syllabus had extensive explanations of the course content, the rationale for activities, and the relationships of readings to the course content. Student learning outcomes were explained in the context of the assignments, and the teaching philosophy was explicitly outlined in the text of the syllabus.
3. Simple. The Simple Syllabus was direct and concise. Information was provided in tables and bulleted lists. More complex assignment descriptions were provided as separate documents.
4. Warning. The Warning Syllabus was similar to the Simple syllabus but differed in tone. The Warning Syllabus emphasized what student should not do, often in bolded and underlined text. For example, due dates, penalties, and the fact that late assignments are not accepted were emphasized.

#### Procedure

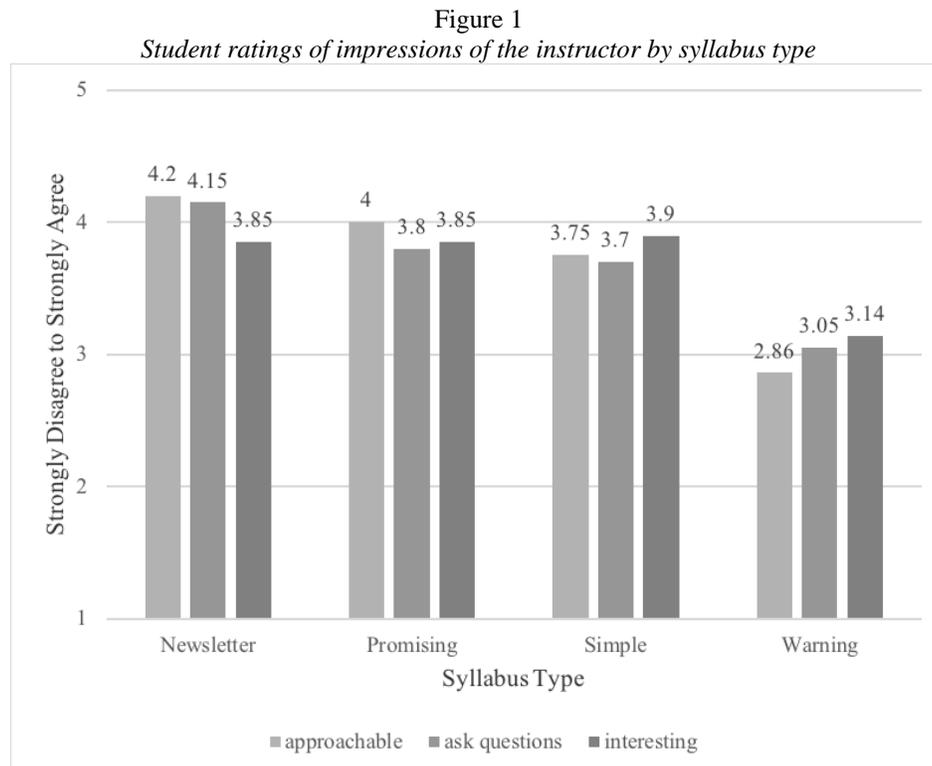
As part of their required service hours, the students in the focus group met with the researchers on campus to discuss the four syllabi. In a two-hour discussion, the students looked at each syllabus and discussed their impressions of each syllabus, including their perception

of the course, their perception of the instructor, and their perception of the content. The focus group session was recorded in the form of researcher notes.

### Results Study 1: Focus Group

Because these were upper level students, this group was sensitive to disciplinary expectations. They asserted that syllabus preference depends on one's major and what one expects from that style. For example, the business students liked the Simple Syllabus, the e-media students were highly critical of the Newsletter design, and the history students were more predisposed to read the Promising Syllabus. Regardless of disciplinary expectations, all of the students agreed that the syllabus is a reference document, not something to read. For these students, due dates and the daily schedule were most important, and they wanted the professor's contact information to be clearly indicated on the front page. They noted that they preferred an explicit invitation to ask questions, for example when the professor included a statement along these lines: "Please come see me if you have any questions about the course." In their discussion, students clearly referenced the document function primarily as a reference document to be scanned, but they did indicate that they found the design to be an expression of the professor. One student, with whom the other heartily agreed, said, "The syllabus is just for reference. Save your jokes and motivational speeches for when you talk about the syllabus with us. Don't put that in the syllabus."

Specifically, the students in the focus group found the Newsletter style syllabus to be unprofessional but friendly. They did not feel that the graphics engaged them any more than the text did because they were only looking for specific information. Nevertheless, they did comment that the graphic organization did communicate a sense of friendliness on the part of the professor. There was unanimous agreement that nobody would read all the text of the Promising Syllabus. They commented that it was too hard to find the necessary information and said that the motivational pieces of the syllabus could be class discussions and did not need to be in what they viewed as a reference document. The Warning style syllabus received mixed reviews. The students liked the direct style of the organization, but they found the warning tone, the emphasis on what not to do, and the focus on penalties to be a negative extension of the professor's personality. One student said that he thought the professor was trying to help students avoid potential problems and was helpful, but most said it was blaming them for something they had not done yet. The simple style, neutral tone syllabus was most favored by all of these students. They indicated this style functioned



*Note.* Ratings were made on a 1(Strongly Disagree) to 5(Strongly Agree) Likert Scale for the statements: This professor is approachable. I would feel comfortable asking this professor questions. This course will be interesting.

best for the purpose they saw for a syllabus. They were satisfied that further information and professor personality could come later, in class.

### Method Study 2: Student Ratings and Comments

#### Participants

Participants were 83 students from first-year courses in psychology, math, and English at an open-access, two-year college. The student population of the college has a high percentage of first-generation students, the majority of the students also hold jobs in addition to their studies, and the campus is the most diverse campus of this university system. In these first-year courses, few have declared a major, and these students are often still acclimatizing themselves to academic cultural expectations. Participation was optional, and the 10-minute activity was conducted during class time.

#### Materials

The same four syllabi from the focus group were used. Students were given the four syllabi and a survey for their impressions of each syllabus. The survey included eight Likert scale questions about the course,

e.g., “I would look forward to taking this course,” eight about the Instructor, e.g., “I will find this professor to be approachable,” and four about the syllabus, e.g., “It is easy to find information.” These were all rated on a 1(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly degree) Likert scale. Students were asked how long they would spend reading the syllabus in minutes and what they liked and disliked about the syllabus. They were also asked to describe a syllabus that they have had that was particularly well done (See Appendix for the entire survey).

#### Procedures

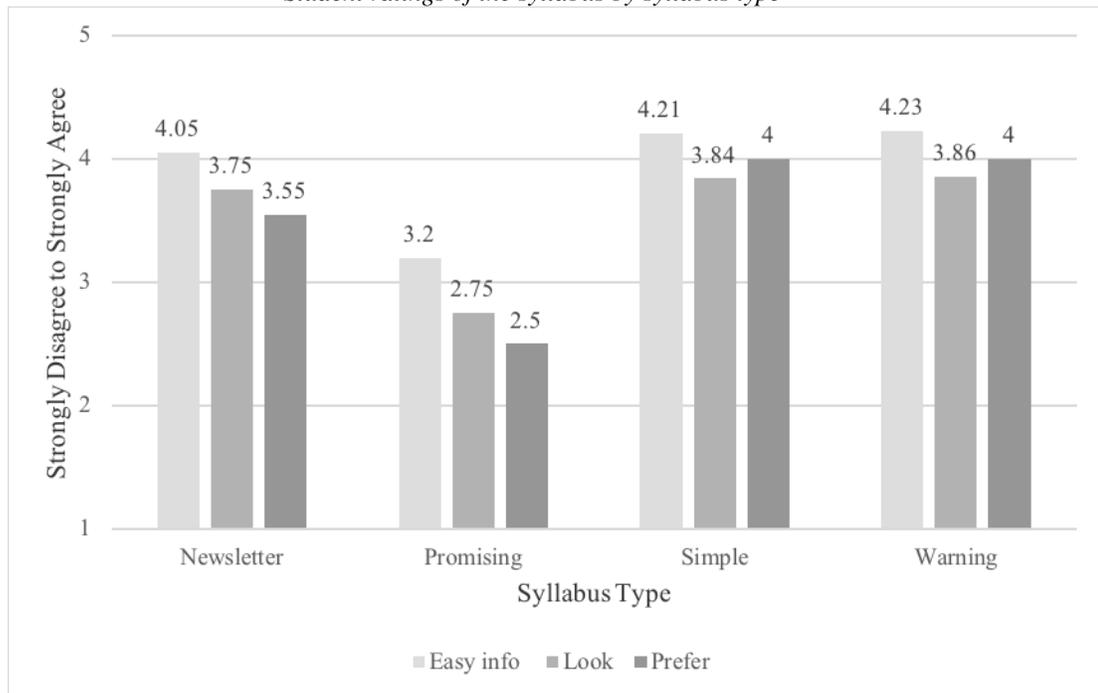
First and second-year students in psychology, math, and English sections were asked to complete the surveys as part of a class activity. Across all sections, 83 students completed the survey for each syllabus. The syllabi were shuffled in order to counterbalance the order in which students rated them.

### Results Study 2: Student Ratings and Comments

#### Numerical Ratings

Figure 1 shows students’ impressions of the instructor and the course by syllabus type. The

Figure 2  
Student ratings of the syllabus by syllabus type



Note. Ratings were made on a 1(Strongly Disagree) to 5(Strongly Agree) Likert Scale for the statements: It is easy to find information. I like the look of this syllabus. I prefer this type of syllabus.

Newsletter style was preferred, as it showed the professor as most approachable and most welcoming of being asked questions. The Newsletter, the Promising Syllabus, and the Simple Syllabus were all seen to communicate about equally that the professor was an interesting person. Not surprisingly, the Warning Syllabus was strongly perceived to show the professor as unapproachable, not welcoming of questions, and not particularly interesting.

Figure 2 shows students' ratings of the four styles of syllabi in terms of ease of finding information, having a pleasing look, and general preference. The Simple Syllabus and the Warning Syllabus were seen to be about equal in all three measures of appearance. The Newsletter style was seen to be easy for finding information but was not rated as highly for a pleasing look nor generally preferred. The Promising Syllabus was strongly disfavored by ease of information, look, and preference.

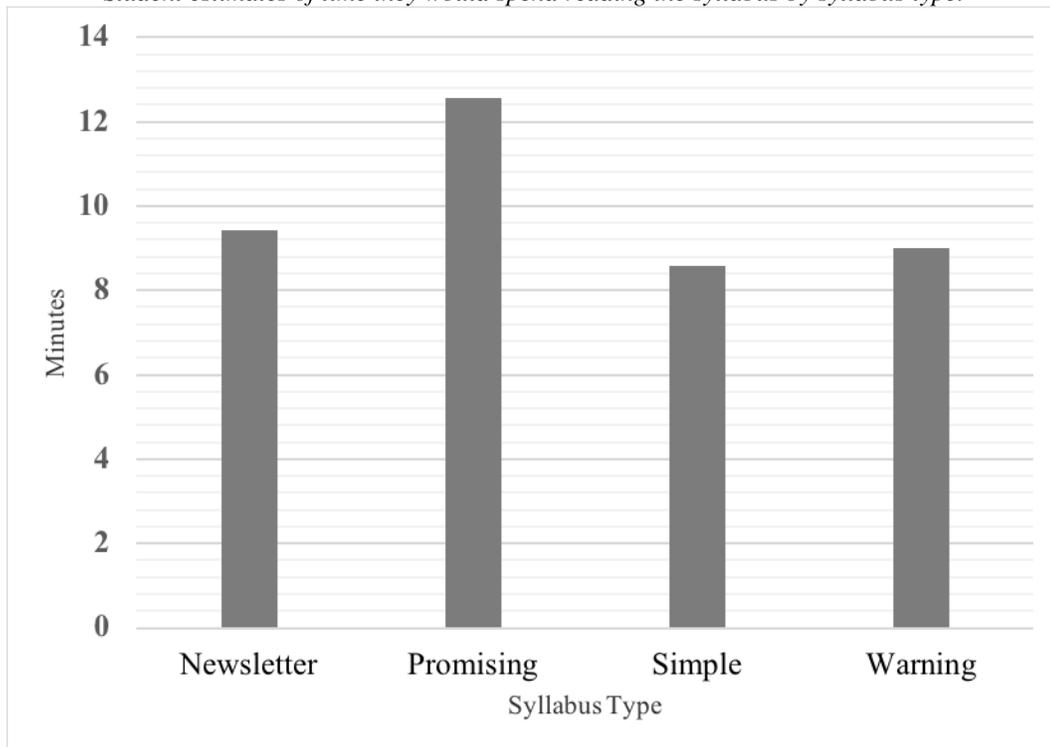
Figure 3 shows students' estimate of the number of minutes they would spend reading the syllabus. In general, students expected to spend about eight minutes reading the Newsletter, the Simple Syllabus, and the Warning Syllabus. They estimated more than twelve minutes to read the Promising Syllabus, which they suggested was much too long a time to spend reading a syllabus.

Students found the Simple Syllabus to be most engaging because it was the easiest to understand. Table 1 shows the student ratings of how they perceive the course content on a five-point scale. Students most looked forward to the course based on the Simple Syllabus and least based on the Warning Syllabus. Students perceived the course to be most challenging based on the Promising Syllabus and not quite as challenging based on the Newsletter Syllabus. Students rated the Newsletter, Simple, and Warning Syllabi as equally easy to understand the purpose of the course, but they rated the Promising Syllabus purpose as least easy to understand. These ratings were elaborated on in the open-answer section of the survey.

### Student Open-Ended Comments

In general, students had rated the Newsletter Syllabus as communicating a friendlier presence of the instructor, and they commented that the fun style is welcoming. However, they reported that this fun, approachable style did not communicate a very serious approach to the subject matter. The Promising Syllabus was seen as being more serious, and one student wrote, "I like how the professor put effort into it. It shows that they really want students to know what's going to

Figure 3  
*Student estimates of time they would spend reading the syllabus by syllabus type.*



Note. Student estimates were provided in minutes

Table 1  
*Average responses to Perceptions of Course Content on a Rating Scale of 1 to 5*

Syllabus Style	I look forward to taking this course	The course will be more challenging than usual	I understand the purpose of the course
Newsletter	3.18	3.15	4.1
Promising	3	4	3.75
Simple	3.86	3.4	3.95
Warning	2.8	3.52	4.14

happen.” Nevertheless, the amount of text in the Promising Syllabus was not perceived to be welcoming by the majority of students who found it to be wordy, overwhelming, and intimidating. The Simple Syllabus received the most positive commentary in the open answers. One student wrote, “Everything is broken down so it is easy to read.” However, some did comment that it was bland and boring, although the commentary did not indicate that this was perceived to be a problem. The Warning Syllabus received the most negative commentary. One student summarized the general consensus: “If the professor is trying to intimidate students, it’s working!” Students commented that the syllabus seemed condescending, and it felt like the professor was blaming students for bad behavior in

advance. They asserted that, “You can be tough and firm, but you can do it nicely”

The consensus from the open-ended questions was that organization was key to a good syllabus. Students agreed that contact information should be up front and easy to find. They commented that they preferred the course schedule to be in a table with clear due dates and that the policies should be clearly labeled for later reference. Long paragraphs of text were perceived to be too onerous to read.

**Method Study 3: Faculty Survey**

Anecdotally, faculty seem to regard the syllabus as a document that a person should read, not scan, in

contrast to student perceptions of the purpose of a syllabus. A common complaint among many faculty is, “The students won’t read the syllabus.” We wanted to find out how faculty perceptions of the syllabus compared to the student perceptions.

**Participants**

As part of a faculty development workshop, 56 faculty participated in a survey comparing their preferences to their predictions of student preferences. These were mostly full-time faculty who taught a range of undergraduate courses for both majors and non-majors. Due to their presence at a workshop for syllabus development, these were faculty who were predisposed to consider syllabus design from a student-centered point of view.

**Materials**

Faculty were asked to consider the same four syllabi that the students in the previous studies had been given. They answered two questions in an electronic poll concerning how much they preferred a given syllabus and how much they predicted students would prefer the given syllabus. Each faculty member rated all four syllabi.

**Procedures**

During a workshop on syllabus design, groups of four faculty were given the four syllabi. They discussed the merits of the four syllabi in their groups, and then

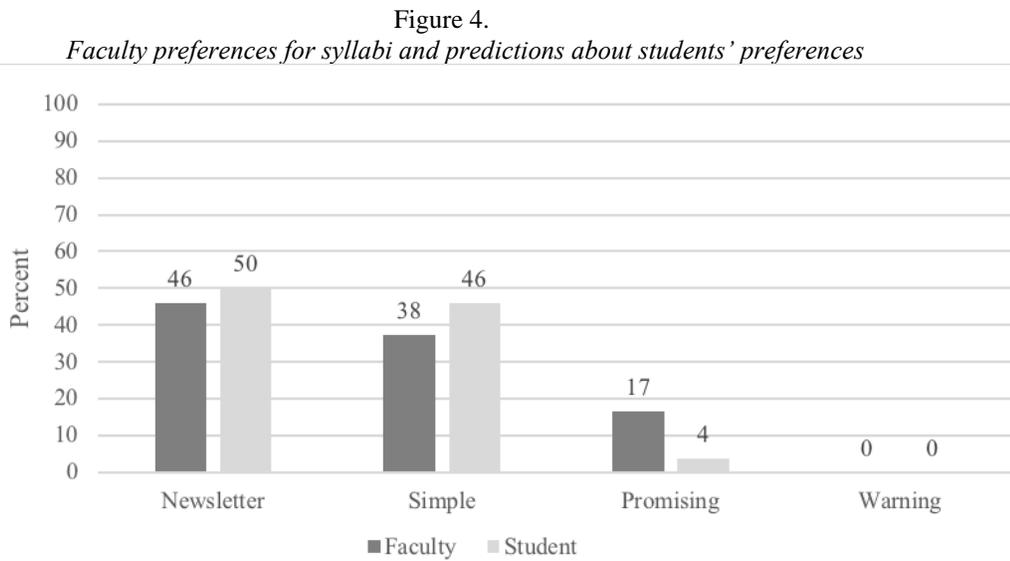
each individual rated their preference and their predicted student preference on the electronic poll for each syllabus.

**Results Study 3: Faculty Survey**

Faculty indicated the greatest preference for the Newsletter Syllabus and also predicted that students would prefer this style most (see Figure 4). Next in preference was the Simple Syllabus, which faculty predicted students would prefer more than faculty would. Faculty indicated a higher preference for the Promising Syllabus than they predicted students would express. No faculty expressed a preference for the Warning Syllabus, and they predicted that students would feel the same way.

**Discussion**

In general, students expressed a strong preference for the Simple Syllabus and a strong lack of preference for the Promising Syllabus. In contrast, faculty expressed a stronger preference for the Promising Syllabus than students did, and they expressed a stronger predicted student preference for the Newsletter Syllabus than the students expressed. Both students and faculty expressed a lack of preference for the Warning Syllabus. Experienced faculty members predict where students will run into difficulty, and though well-meaning, may focus on what can go wrong. This attempt at good advice can create a negative tone that is present in the Warning Syllabus.



*Note.* Faculty selected their favorite syllabus type and predicted students’ preferences.

This contrast between faculty and student preference could be due to the conflicting perspectives on the genre of the syllabus. Faculty seem to view the syllabus as something of great interest that should be read. This could be because the syllabus is often perceived to be a creative work on the part of the faculty member, as well as a representation of the effort he or she has put into the course. From the students' point of view, the syllabus should not involve that much reading. Rather, a syllabus is seen to be a reference document to be scanned for procedural information. It is possible this conflict of reading norms accounts for the student lack of preference for the Promising Syllabus because it is explicitly a document to be read, not scanned.

In general, students in these studies indicated that they preferred a syllabus that included the following elements:

- Neutral tone
- Contact information on the front page in large font
- Due dates in tables or lists
- Policies phrased positively
- Content organized with bold headers
- Length of 3-5 pages with supplements of more detailed content as separate handouts for class

These findings corroborate the findings of McDonald and colleagues (2010). These researchers found, "Based on the more than 800 comments about syllabus user-friendliness, the design elements students most appreciated included clarity (i.e., language and format), conciseness (i.e., complete information), consistency of formatting (e.g., sub/headings, bulleted items, font size/type), sound organization (e.g., easy to locate specific information or sections), and a friendly but professional tone (e.g., approachable language)," (p. 116). Clearly students see the syllabus as reference that should be easy to consult and which does not require effort to find information.

Faculty preference for the Newsletter format and for the Promising format may indicate that faculty may place more emphasis on the syllabus as a key interactional document that functions as a mediator between the faculty member, the content of the course, and the students. This perspective may not be shared by students who see the syllabus as a reference tool. Students expect that the engagement in the course will come from direct interaction with the faculty member and the content of the course rather than this document. The prominence of the syllabus as a communicator of teaching style, structure of content, and over-arching rationale for the course may not be as salient for the students as for the faculty member. Upper level

students who may feel more investment in their courses may enjoy negotiating the syllabus with the faculty member since they have more experience with how a course functions. First-year students, particularly those who may be new to college cultural expectations, may feel more comfortable with a simple declarative syllabus that lays out the path of the course with the true engagement taking place in the classroom as they learn how to "do college."

In designing a syllabus for a course, we advise faculty members to create Simple Syllabi for lower level courses to help students learn the expectations of how to use a syllabus, and then to create more discipline specific syllabi as students become more accustomed to the expectations of a major and the appropriate discourse styles for those majors. Finally, the concern that "students don't read the syllabus" is well founded. These students do report that they indeed don't read the syllabus because they use it for a reference scanned for just-in-time information. Perhaps it is worthwhile to have a discussion with a given class on the first day to clearly communicate expectations about the function of the syllabus for the class, as well as for the faculty member to ask the students how they prefer to use the syllabus so that faculty expectations and student expectations can be more similar.

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## Appendix

## Syllabus Survey

**Syllabus Questionnaire**

Please indicate your agreement with the following items from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree Nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
<b>About the Course</b>					
1) This course will be more challenging than the typical 3000-level college course.	1	2	3	4	5
2) The structure of the course makes sense to me.	1	2	3	4	5
3) I understand the expectations for my performance in this course.	1	2	3	4	5
4) This course looks interesting.	1	2	3	4	5
5) This course will be easier than the typical 3000-level college course.	1	2	3	4	5
6) This course will be useful to my college education.	1	2	3	4	5
7) I understand the purpose of the course.	1	2	3	4	5
8) I would look forward to taking this course.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>About the Instructor</b>					
1) This instructor wants me to be successful.	1	2	3	4	5
2) This instructor will be approachable.	1	2	3	4	5
3) I would be comfortable asking questions to this instructor.	1	2	3	4	5
4) I think this instructor will be interesting.	1	2	3	4	5
5) I think this instructor will be fair.	1	2	3	4	5
6) I think this instructor is knowledgeable.	1	2	3	4	5

- |  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7) This instructor seems very organized.   |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8) I think I like this instructor already. |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**About the Syllabus**

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1) It's easy to find the information I need in this syllabus.  |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2) I like the look of this syllabus.                           |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3) Policies are clearly explained.                             |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4) This is the type of syllabus I prefer to get in my classes. |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

***For the next items, please write in your answers.***

- 5) How much time would you spend reading this syllabus? \_\_\_\_\_minutes
- 6) Is there anything you particularly like about this syllabus?
- 7) Is there anything you particularly dislike about this syllabus?
- 8) If you ever encountered a syllabus that has been very well done, what was it like? (only need to answer once)