

DECOLONIZE THE SYLLABUS

Remember:
**A SYLLABUS
IS A
VALUE
STATEMENT**

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A syllabus tells us:

- Who and what the teacher values
- What information and skills are important to know
- Which people and voices are important to listen to
- Which forms of knowledge are valuable
- Who holds power in the classroom
- Which types of learning are important to master
- What role students are expected to play in learning
- The teacher's view on the purpose of schooling

#DECOLONIZEYOURCURRICULUM

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[Two blocks of text: Remember the Syllabus is a value statement. | A Syllabus tells us: Who and what the teacher values; What information and skills are important to know; Which people and voices are important to listen to.; White forms of knowledge are valuable; Who holds power in the classroom; What role students are expected to play in learning; The teaching view on the purpose of schooling; #decolonizeyourcurriculum @lit_c.i.r.c.l.e]

DECOLONIZE THE SYLLABUS

VERSION 1.3

This document was drafted by Jae Williams, a Black Queer faculty member at Loyola Marymount University; however, they insist that this is a living document that should be modified and amended by the community.

They thank the many people who have already contributed their time and thoughts to making this resource what is it.

If you have any comments, questions, suggestions, resources, or strategies please don't hesitate to email them
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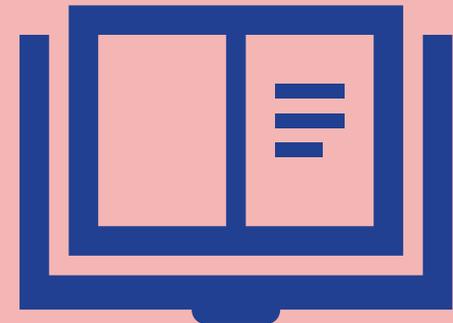
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Definitions

DECOLONIZE is a process whereby individuals, groups, and institutions divest from colonial/settler interests and ideologies. Decolonizing works to center indigenous communities by unsettling and ending systems of power that erase, diminish, and/or valorize imperial and racist projects.¹

ANTI-RACIST is “acting in ways that identify and actively eliminate prejudicial and discriminatory practices that maintain a racial hierarchy, by changing or eliminating systems, structures, policies, practices, and attitudes so that power is redistributed and shared equitably.”²

ANTI-IMPERIALIST is acting in ways that reclaim and value marginalized communities and their cultures; particularly Indigenous & Black peoples, as well as other groups who have been oppressed because of colonial and racist powers and peoples, past and present.



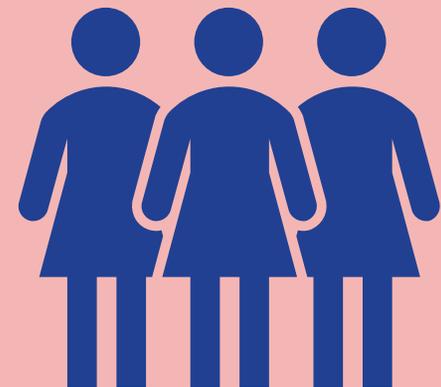
¹ Curiel-Allen, T. (2018, March 05). What Decolonization Is, and What It Means to Me. *Teen Vogue*. From <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-decolonization-is-and-what-it-means-to-me>;

Appleton, N. S. (2019, February 04). Do Not 'Decolonize' . . . If You Are Not Decolonizing: Progressive Language and Planning Beyond a Hollow Academic Rebranding. *Critical Ethnic Studies*. From <http://www.criticaletnicstudiesjournal.org/blog/2019/1/21/do-not-decolonize-if-you-are-not-decolonizing-alternate-language-to-navigate-desires-for-progressive-academia-6y5sg>

² Anti-Racism Defined. (n.d.). *Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre*. From <http://www.aclrc.com/antiracism-defined>

PRIVILEGE is “a set of unearned benefits, and largely unacknowledged, advantages, that society and its agents give to a people who fit a specific social group.”³

INTERSECTIONALITY “is a critical social theory that address the multiple dimensions of identity and social systems as they intersect with one another and relate to inequality, such as racism, genderism, heterosexism, ageism, and classism, among other variables...Individuals are located within a range of social groups whose structural inequalities can result in marginalized identities.”⁴ Moreover, intersectionality interrogates how overlapping practices and ideologies of social systems maintain social hierarchies and exclusionary practices.



³ Ferguson, S. (2014, September 26). Privilege 101: A Quick and Dirty Guide. *Everyday Feminism*. From <https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/09/what-is-privilege/>

Rothman, J. (2014, May 12). The Origins of "Privilege". *The New Yorker* From <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-origins-of-privilege>

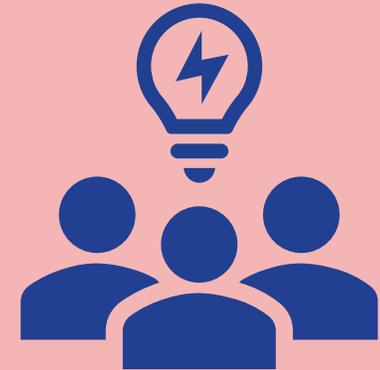
⁴Intersectionality. (n.d.). Retrieved August 21, 2020, from <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/intersectionality>

THE MISSION OF DECOLONIZING THE SYLLABUS

Decolonizing is about valuing and revitalizing difference and being critical about how our beliefs and practices support the ongoing hegemony of oppressive systems.

We must aim to include materials and thoughts by marginalized groups, as well as identify the systems of power that maintain ideological and social hierarchies which impact

- how we select content for our courses;
- what strategies and perspectives we teach,
- what traits and backgrounds we expect to engage with, and
- our expectations for success.



By consciously creating anti-imperialist, anti-racist syllabi and curriculum, we set up our teaching to dismantle the settler colonialism and white supremacy foundations of higher education that assumes non-white/European/American ideas and cultures are inferior and must be controlled. These values existed at the institutionalization of higher education, and they persist even after many significant changes to its constituencies and structures.

SYLLABUS CONSTRUCTION: INSTRUCTIONS

This document is a guideline.

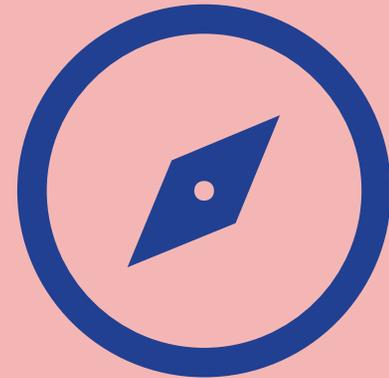
Not every idea will be applicable to your course, and not every suggestion will mesh with your personality or teaching style.

Use these recommendations to interrogate how you approach the teaching of knowledge, and determine what strategies you can adapt and adopt to demonstrate your commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Decolonizing the syllabus, the curriculum, and the university are all goalposts that we strive to reach, but as student & faculty populations shift and change, so will our practices and thoughts.

No syllabus or course will be 100% decolonized.

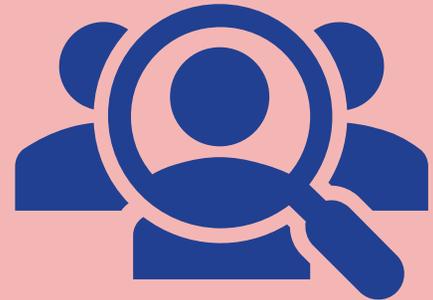
But, we can hope to lessen maintaining and replicating systemic oppressions in our teaching by being conscious of our biases, and actively demonstrating how we value the cultural and social identities and experiences of our community.



SYLLABUS CONSTRUCTION: QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU START

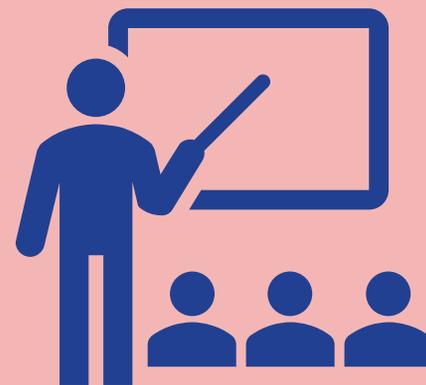
Personal/University Objectives

- What are your personal goals for the course? [What do you expect to learn? What do you hope to accomplish? What kind of teacher do you want to be for this course? How does this course fit in with your career goals?]
- How will you practice the mission [The encouragement of learning. The education of the whole person. The service of faith and the promotion of justice] explicitly in your course content and pedagogy?
- How will you address your privileges (race, gender, class, religion, ability, sexuality, and nationality) in your pedagogy?
- What university resources will you need to keep yourself, your department, and your college accountable to the goals you hope to achieve in your syllabus?



Student Ideals

- Who are your ideal students? What are their gender, race, class, religion, ability, sexuality, nationality, learning styles, etc.?
- What are the experiences and traits of a student might you be forgetting? If they were your only student, how would you design a course for their success?
- What are the experiences and traits of a student you fear will be in your classroom? If they were your only student, what would you need to overcome your fears, while fostering their success in your course?
- How could you maintain/challenge hierarchies? [The teacher-student dynamic is often practiced in a hierarchal manner with faculty acting as authority figures, and students as subordinates.] What practices or terms can you use to unsettle the power dynamic to establish a more equitable class environment?
- What expectations of conformity do you expect of your students in terms of their language usage, communication patterns, behaviors, professionalism, urgency, emotionality, and compliance? [Assimilation ideology furthers the notion that people from all backgrounds should conform to the dominant culture's practices and beliefs. One's desire for their students to



“succeed in the real world” may come at the price of demeaning marginalized communities’ customs and philosophies. It also ignores how students must engage in culturally traumatizing practices to perform the expectations of the dominant culture, e.g., code-switching. For more information: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCmT9m6l4rB/?igshid=1hm4i2g8q3db4>]

- How will you balance your expectations of conformity with the right for students to maintain their cultural identities and creative freedom?
- In what ways can you collaborate with students to disrupt and/or interrogate imperialist and racist ideologies that you all may carry?

Curriculum choices

- In your discipline, what is canonical? Does teaching these canonical texts limit your ability to practice the mission? If the canon furthers the exclusivity of peoples and cultures, how will you challenge the rigidity of the canon in your course?
- How will you rethink, reframe, and reconstruct value-laden aspects of your course content? [There are many assumptions about the quality of knowledge that goes unquestioned by its believers. The term ‘classic’ is often only applied to European aesthetic products, and its elevated position situates other artforms as derivatives or secondary to European culture. Terms such as “folk,” “common,” “slang,” “subculture,” and “minority” exemplify this hierarchical arrangement .”]

- How will intersectionality appear in your course materials and assignments? How do you explore the complex identities of people and how systems of oppression impact people differently due to the complexities of their identity? For example, Black & Brown transwomen are incarcerated at a higher rate than the general population. They are often sent to prisons that do not house their gender. In those prisons, they are often sexually abused. To address these issues, one must look at how the dominant system treats their race & gender simultaneously, and not as individual components.

Solidarity

- How will you collaborate with a colleague, and/or your department/college to ensure your course is in line with the mission, and promotes an anti-imperialist and anti-racist framework?

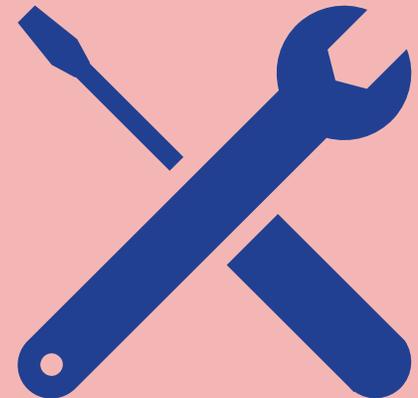
SYLLABUS CONSTRUCTION: AFTER THE FIRST DRAFT

General Information: University & Course

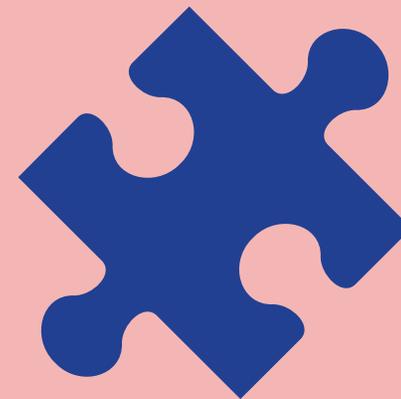
- I included my gender pronouns.
- I included a section on how students should address me. [First name basis, Dr. Lastname, Prof. Firstname, etc.]
- I included a section on communication etiquette. [How you want students to address you in an email. What information is appropriate to state in an email, in-person, zoom video call, phone call, and other meeting types].

Textbooks and Lab Fees

- I have a variety of course materials for different learning styles [textbooks, articles, podcasts, videos, art pieces, etc.]
- The required texts and fees of the course do not exclude students who may be financially insecure or have other circumstances that make it difficult for them to acquire course materials. In your syllabus, you include alternative locations where course materials can be accessed, or supply



information about where they can acquire financial assistance through the university, college, or department. OR, Your course has no extra fees because you opt to use open-access textbooks, and other free materials. [While some believe that students investing in their education through course fees guarantees their commitment to the course, it also develops a stratification between the students who can afford fees and those who cannot. Therefore, students who cannot afford course fees often do not stay in disciplines with expensive textbooks and lab fees. Lastly, there is an inequity in time spent acquiring course materials over the semester. Students who can afford textbooks gain more ‘free time’ by being able to read at their leisure, while those who have to use public resources spend more time to gain access to course materials because they have to physically go to a library. Financially insecure, disabled, first-generation students, and others often do more “work” to learn than those who have resources and fit the ideal able-bodied, financially secure, student model.



Instructional Methods

- I have a statement about my teaching philosophy, and how this course has an anti-imperialist and anti-racist framework.

- My syllabus explains my plans for cultivating individual learners, class community, and/or other styles of wholistic organizational management.

Grading Scheme

- My grading scheme promotes individual growth and aims to lessen punitive tactics to compel students to attend class, do assignments on time, etc. It cultivates students' intrinsic motivation to complete work and, hopefully, increases their enjoyment with the subject matter. [For example, Ungrading is a set of alternative approaches to assessment whereby a teacher relies on other tools in place of, or in conjunction with grades. For more information: <https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>]
- My grading process will be transparent to students. I aim to post rubrics or other assessment tools for my students to review and question.]

Assignments, including Readings, Projects (with grading rubrics, if available), etc.

- My course materials sustain a variety of cultures and identities. It does not favor perpetuating the unstated dominance of groups with white privilege and continue the erasure and invisibility of other cultures.
- My course materials do not cause undue harm to my students because of its racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or other problematic content. For those texts that are entangled in these arenas, I use them as tools to interrogate the historical and/or contemporary systems of power that maintain ideological and social hierarchies.

- My course materials include scholars from various backgrounds, and white and/or male scholars to not dominant the schedule.
- A majority of my course materials are written by people from groups who are not well-represented in my discipline.
- In my syllabus, I offer a variety of course materials about marginalized groups, and not just items that explain their problems in relation to dominant powers.
- I avoid segregating marginalized voices in my syllabus design into a special topic module. Audre Lorde argued that scholars further 'othering' people by assuming marginalized people only have things to say about their marginalization, and have no thoughts about other aspects of society.
- I make systems of power visible in my course materials. If I am explicit about the social identities of marginalized authors, I also include the social identities of those who are white and/or male, i.e., "Thomas Jefferson, a white male president, wrote the declaration of Independence."
- I have a variety of course materials that accounts for multiple learning styles and are accessible. (Videos have captions, screen readers can read articles and books, podcasts have transcripts.)
- I have declared my need for accessible materials to the university/college/department so they continue to commit to providing and maintaining such resources.

- My assignments account for a wide variety of learning styles, and support my students' intellectual, creative, and cultural freedom.
- I may not be able to address all these concerns in my course materials, but I make an effort to uphold diversity, equity, and inclusion in other aspects of my pedagogy.

Other Policy Statements

- I have included 'recommended' policy statements on "Student Self-care", "Reporting requirements of sexual or interpersonal misconduct", and "Emergency preparedness."
- I have rethought, reframed, and reconstructed my expectations for classroom behavior to avoid assimilationist ideology.
- I have a statement about the use of racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, etc., language and ideologies in the classroom.
- I have a statement about respect between students, and between faculty and students.
[This can be addressed with the Lion Code.]

SYLLABUS CONSTRUCTION: DESIGN

- My syllabus design reflects my teaching philosophy and the university mission.
- I avoid making my syllabus look like a contract. I use alternative formats such as visual syllabi that still includes all pertinent information but rejects pages of block text. [For more information: <https://community.chronicle.com/news/1864-your-syllabus-doesnt-have-to-look-like-a-contract>.]
- My syllabus is designed to allow for multiple learning styles and abilities to understand its content. [I use clear language and avoid idioms [or complement them with explanations]; I use white space; my syllabus can be read with a screen reader. I make sure non-decorative graphics have alternative text. [For more ideas about the graphic design elements of the syllabus: <https://accessibility.blog.gov.uk/2016/09/02/dos-and-donts-on-designing-for-accessibility/>]

LAST THOUGHTS

Teaching from who you are: There is a practice where people teach experiences unfamiliar to them, and they have students who may appear from that background, that the faculty member will rely on their students to educate the class. There have been stories of faculty (maybe unintentionally) looking in the direction of students or explicitly asking them to discuss their personal experience when addressing social issues that the faculty member perceives to be related to their social identity. The presumption that students should speak about their experiences publically when asked by a faculty member demonstrates an abuse of the student's cultural labor, exhibits the inequitable power dynamic of teacher-student, and further tokenizes the student. Students have a right to keep their personal information private in the classroom, and faculty should not expect students to use their social identity for participation credit.

Instead, faculty should teach from where they are. If you are unknowledgeable about an area, then you can admit your desire to learn more, and explain your steps for learning more about a group, or a culture. If you plan ahead, ask an expert to come to your class to teach that lesson; if they are from a marginalized community on your campus, give compensation (not all compensation has to be financial) as to not expect individuals from those communities to do the free labor of educating others about social issues. Faculty must aim to be bold, courageous, but also vulnerable in their service to students and society.⁵

⁵ John Sebastian, IAC Committee Meeting, August 21, 2020.

Anti-racist and Anti-imperialist work is a journey, not a destination. Addressing all the questions and suggestions in this document doesn't make one's syllabus "decolonized." On the other hand, making only one change does not necessarily mean your syllabus is insensitive and traumatizing. This type of activism is just one step we can take to keep ourselves and the university accountable to our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We have to make a lifelong commitment doing anti-racist and anti-imperialist work, so that we can thrive in a society that rectifies past injustices, makes space for difference, and is equitable for all.

“Those of us who have been forged in **the crucibles of difference** — those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older — know that **survival is not an academic skill.**”



#decolonizeyoursyllabus

It is learning how to stand alone, **unpopular and sometimes reviled**, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world **in which we can all flourish**. It is learning how to take our **differences and make them strengths.**

AUDRE LORDE

Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (1984, 2007)
Berkeley: Crossing Press Feminist Series. p. 112.

[Picture of Audre Lorde. #decolonizeyoursyllabus. “Those of use who have been forged in difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older – know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths.”

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984, 2007) Berkeley: Crossing Press Feminist Series. p. 112.

RESOURCES

Definitions

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality*. John Wiley & Sons.

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The impact of miseducation

Baldwin, J. (1963). A talk to teachers. *Child development and learning*, 7-12.

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Syllabus Decolonization

Bryn Mawr College, Teaching and Learning Institute. Creating and Rethinking Syllabi to Open Learning: Tools and Resources.
<https://www.brynmawr.edu/tli/syllabusdesign/resources>

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Jones, C. (2020, June 21). Not Just the Syllabus, Throw the Whole Discipline In the Trash. *Medium*. Retrieved August 16, 2020, from <https://medium.com/the-faculty/not-just-the-syllabus-throw-the-whole-discipline-in-the-trash-777d19201cb5> .

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Valdes, David. (2020, February 21) Beyond “Decolonizing” the Syllabus: Finding a Path to Anti-Racist, Actively Inclusive Theatre Education *HowlRound Theatre Commons*. <https://howlround.com/beyond-decolonizing-syllabus>

Warren-Grice, A. (2018, September 13). Show Don't Tell: Decolonize your classroom, syllabus, rules, and practices. *Liberated Genius*. Retrieved August 16, 2020, from <https://liberatedgenius.com/2018/decolonize-your-syllabus/>.

Ungrading:

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Stommel, J. (2018) How to Ungrade. *Jessie Stommel Blog*. <https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>