



Scholarly Teaching

Doing What Works!

A Short or Long Syllabus: What Works Best?

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Is it better to only include basic information on the syllabus and provide assignment details and other information later? Or is it better to include details explaining course and assignment expectations in the syllabus? We explored this very question using an experimental study.

In our study (Harrington & Quillen, 2015), 149 undergraduates were randomly assigned to short (6 pages), medium (9 pages) or long (15 pages) syllabus groups. The medium and long syllabi included additional content such as details about assignments rather than an overview, study tips, and campus resource information. The long syllabi provided students with additional details about the assignments such as grading rubrics. To see the actual syllabi, visit www.scholarlyteaching.org. Students in each group reviewed the syllabus, completed a survey and participated in a focus group.

The medium and long syllabus as compared to the short syllabus were linked to more positive student impressions. Specifically, here is what we found:

The **Medium** Syllabus was associated with

- a more positive impression of instructor, and
- a more positive impression of the course.

Students in the **Medium AND Long** syllabi groups

- expected the professor to be more caring
- expected the professor to be more helpful, and
- were more motivated to take the course.

When asked whether they would prefer a syllabus with assignment details versus a shorter syllabus with details following, **66.6% of the students in this study indicated they preferred the longer syllabus with detailed assignment information.**

It seems that students appreciate the details provided in longer syllabi. This allows students to clearly know what is expected. Too much information can become overwhelming though. Syllabi are course resources similar to textbooks. Students therefore do not need to read and memorize all of the

information at once. For example, rubrics for assignments can be included so it's easy for students to find this information when needed, but they may not need to read this information carefully during the first week of the class.

References:

Harrington, C., & Gabert-Quillen, C. (2015). Syllabus length and use of images: An empirical investigation of student perceptions. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology, 1*(3), 235-243.