

Your Syllabus Is Your First Dialogue Move

Practical strategies for building constructive dialogue into course objectives, grading, and class expectations.

When it comes to infusing your classroom with dialogue practices, the syllabus is a great place to start. For students, it's the first place they go to understand the tone and culture of the class they're walking into – what counts as participation, what happens when they disagree with a reading or with each other, and what role you, the instructor, might play in all of that.

If engaging constructively across different views deepens student learning in your course, it should be reflected in your syllabus.

This guide offers concrete moves you can make when designing dialogue practices into your syllabus. No need to rewrite the entire thing – small changes can make a big difference.

Why does this matter?

Designing the conditions for dialogue is as powerful as facilitating in the moment. Your syllabus is where you set those conditions on day one. Here's why:

- **You're already doing it.** Syllabus prep is one of the tasks every instructor does in August — this sharpens what you're already writing instead of adding to your to-do list.
- **Students treat what you grade as what matters.** Dialogue that lives only in good intentions reads as optional — instead, put it where they'll see it counts.
- **Prep in advance pays off later.** Setting expectations in advance keeps everyone centered when things heat up.

Build it into your syllabus

Three places to embed dialogue: course objectives, grading, and class intentions.

1. Course objectives

Make engaging across differences a stated outcome, not a nice-to-have. Tailor the language to your discipline so it doesn't read as bolted-on.

Examples:

- **Humanities / social science:** “By the end of this course, students will be able to engage across disagreement — listening to understand, articulating their own view clearly, and staying curious about perspectives unlike their own.”
- **STEM / quantitative / pre-professional:** “Students will be able to evaluate contested claims or interpretations using evidence and reasoning rather than appeals to authority or personal certainty.”

2. Grading

Attach even light credit so students read dialogue as a skill, not an option. Fold one or two competencies into an existing assignment or the participation grade. Score how someone disagrees, not whether they disagree, so it isn't interpreted as compliance theater or viewpoint policing.

Sample competency language:

- Responds to disagreement constructively rather than avoiding or escalating it.
- Asks questions and listens actively when presented with unfamiliar views.
- Restates another person's view accurately and fairly before responding.

Grading (cont.)

Sample rubric (1–4) – “Responds to disagreement constructively”:

- 1 — *Dismisses or shuts down opposing views.*
- 2 — *Tolerates opposing views but doesn't engage them.*
- 3 — *Engages opposing views with some follow-up questions.*
- 4 — *Engages opposing views directly and accurately restates them before responding.*

3. Class intentions

Name in plain language how your class handles disagreement. If your school has standard civic dialogue language, start there — then connect it to your class's specific intentions to make it relevant.

Sample intentions:

- Assume the good intentions of others.
- Stay curious, especially when you disagree.
- Listen to understand, not to win.
- Speak from your own experience.
- Make room for other voices.
- Disagreement is welcome; contempt isn't.

Two moves help this land better than handing students a finished list:

- **Co-create it.** Draft the list with students in week one rather than presenting it fully formed. Buy-in is higher when students contribute to the norms they're asked to follow.
- **Add a mutual-accountability line.** Include one commitment you'll make back— e.g., “I'll name when I don't know something.” or “I'll redirect if a comment targets a person rather than an idea.” Student-only norms read as top-down; a shared commitment reads as modeled practice.

Making Your Syllabus Come Alive

Syllabus language works only if you revisit it – not read it once in week one.

Course objectives

- **Reference objectives by name at unit transitions.** “This discussion is where we practice engaging across disagreement.”
- **Build in a midpoint self-check.** “Where have you seen yourself practice this objective, and where haven't you?”

Grading

- **Give formative feedback before it counts.** Comment on the competency in early low-stakes moments (a discussion post, a small-group debrief) so students know what a “4” looks like early.
- **Show strong examples (with permission).** Share an anonymized response from your own class to concretely illustrate more abstract rubric language.
- **Revisit the rubric mid-semester** to check how it's landing and ensure students understand expectations.

Class intentions

- **Co-write them live in week one.** Be sure to get full input or approval from students.
- **Discuss what they look and sound like.** “What does ‘stay curious’ actually sound like in this room?”
- **Keep them alive on an ongoing basis.** Before a big discussion, ask “which intentions matter most today?” Afterward, name when you saw them upheld.
- **Have a repair plan.** Say once, early: “When it goes wrong, we pause, name it, and return to it — we don't sweep it under the rug.”

Additional syllabus policies worth including

- **Sensitive topics and recording.** A brief statement on how the class handles contentious topics and whether sessions are recorded, tied to the class intentions reads as proactive, not defensive.
- **Accessibility and opt-out.** A line acknowledging that some students may need modified participation, with a pointer to office hours to discuss accommodations.
- **Calendar sequencing.** Flag which weeks are more dialogue-heavy, so students aren't blindsided.