

# Commitment Statements: Making Safety Visible on Your Syllabus

*Courtesy of Tieanna Graphenreed and Mya Poe*

Creating non-violent spaces that affirm marginalized students means that instructors must not only **change our genres**, but also ensure that those changes align with **a set of visible, explicit commitments** to our students.

*\*A special thanks to Tieanna Graphenreed, Amber Simpson, and Professor Qianqian Zhang-Wu for sharing their commitment statements.*

# Making a Commitment to Safe Classrooms

*“While I cannot ensure that every person of every identity will feel completely safe in my classroom, the act of explicitly stating my intention and communicating my commitment to safer spaces is one way I have chosen to address and promote greater psychological safety.” (p. 308)*

Melissa Tayles, “Trauma-Informed Writing Pedagogy: Ways to Support Student Writers Affected by Trauma and Traumatic Stress”

Guidance for reconsidering the language used in syllabi is also provided by Anne-Marie Womack in her article about implementing universal design in composition classrooms and syllabi. Womack points out the distinction between viewing the syllabus as a contract that delivers information and approaching it as a rhetorical situation that offers the opportunity to extend a tone of negotiation and flexibility. Based on this distinction, she offers strategies to guide writing instructors through a shift that employs universal design to create a tone of accommodation (501–20). Using her recommendations, I altered the language of my syllabi to extend a message of psychological safety that would potentially accommodate all students’ identities, backgrounds, and experiences. Currently, my syllabi explicitly communicate my commitment to establishing a greater sense of safety in the time and space we will share during the term: “I aim to create an environment where you feel safer to take risks, share your challenges and victories, and express your ideas throughout the writing and learning processes we will be using this quarter.” While I cannot ensure that every person of every identity will feel completely safe in my classroom, the act of explicitly stating my intention and communicating my commitment to safer spaces is one way I have chosen to address and promote greater psychological safety. The way I communicated my late-work policy also changed after reviewing my original language with a more nuanced awareness of trauma. This awareness helped me see the arbitrary and punitive tones that previously emerged in my course document. While I have revised the language to decrease the potentially triggering language, I have not altered my expectations for timely work:

I completely understand how hectic life can become, so I encourage you to talk to me if you believe you will not be able to meet an upcoming due date. Email me at least 8 hours before the due date, and we will find a reasonable extension. A reasonable extension is defined as an electronic or hard copy submission within 48 hours of the original due date.

Other language has been altered throughout my syllabi, which now include statements such as the following: “You are invited to complete three formal essays.” “When we are all in attendance and participating in the classroom, we are allies. The perceived risks of participating in and contributing to class will reward you and the classroom community.” As a buffering role model, I cannot expect to eliminate all risks and threats to psychological safety for all identities in the classroom; moreover, I am not willing to sacrifice rigor and expectations. However, the minor adjustments noted here do allow me to communicate my intentions to foster psychologically safer environments and remain open to accommodations and flexibility. Since I now explain my policy rationales in a tone that is less authoritarian, in an attempt to decrease the risk of retraumatization, I am not exacerbating the chronic stress that my students experience due to adversities outside of the classroom. Furthermore, I am embracing the central concepts of UD by communicating my willingness to be flexible with all students and to work with them to discover acceptable accommodations.

Similarly, when I turned a trauma-informed lens on my conferencing practices, I noticed problematic routines that might unintentionally retraumatize students

# Example

## Language Diversity/Linguistic Justice Statement

***Courtesy of Tieanna Graphenreed, Amber Simpson***

The graduate students of the English Graduate Association (EGA) commit to an ethic that centers, encourages, and uplifts language difference and linguistically diverse writing and speech. Occupying dual roles as “student” and “teacher” with varying research interests and writing styles, we simultaneously navigate and bear witness to the tensions between traditional academic writing and our own identities. Similarly, we recognize that conventions of Standard American Edited English writing and English Language Learning impede access to academic spaces for our students and, ultimately, exclude student writers who are non-white, non-wealthy, non-Christian, and occupy unstable positions of citizenship with or without documentation. That is, our students most victimized by this system occupy one or multiple zones of oppression, being non-white or unwilling/unable to pass, of a non-Christian religious belief or spiritual practice, learning English as a language beyond their first language fluency, and/or identifying as gender-nonconforming, trans, or woman.

**As graduate student teachers of composition, we explicitly stand with our students, especially our students of Color and multilingual or translingual writers who are disallowed language use when white students often do not experience the same barriers. We vow to operate from a united commonplace: *Language diversity is the right of all student writers and learners.***

*PART II: Additive and Optional Statement for Overall Class Descriptions*

Composition courses will prepare students to recognize the conventions of writing for English-speaking universities, and how to employ audience-oriented strategies of writing and meaning-making. Language and language use are strategic and stylistic choices made by writers. Linguistically diverse writing that does not correspond with English-Only models **are not only welcome, but are viewed as valuable and innovative contributions to the writing process. Students have a pronounced and sovereign right to access, employ, and experiment with their inherited and learned languages when speaking and writing for the classroom and beyond.**

This class will not only examine language use as a valuable strategic writing practice, but as a composing process informed by racial and cultural membership, knowledge, and lived experience(s). On that same note, this class will examine the codemesh--when, where, how, and to what ends linguistically diverse writing and speech are employed, especially when code-switching is employed to maintain safety or gain access to spaces rendered off-limits. Students can expect to read and discuss linguistically, racially, and culturally diverse writing. Selections on the syllabus include Black, Brown, and Indigenous writers, multilingual writings, translingual writings, and writing from otherwise disenfranchised or underrepresented individuals.

# Example

Courtesy of Dr. Qianqian Zhang-Wu, Northeastern University | Director of Multilingual Writing

## MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY/STYLE

***Building a community of practice.*** This is a space for multilingual writers to support each other and learn from each other. In this online course, you will have various opportunities to engage in peer reviews and other activities.

***Don't be afraid of making mistakes.*** In this safe space, our goal is to help each other to grow as multilingual writers. I myself is also a multilingual person who speaks English as my second language. As your instructor, I present myself as a role model, a facilitator, and a co-constructor of knowledge. I am not here to judge, but instead to support you and to grow with you.

***Writing is a process.*** Good writers treat writing as a process, and good writing is often done with multiple revisions and constant reflections. In this class we will have multiple drafts in writing, and I will grade you based on your final draft. In other words, **what I value the most is your growth in this process.**

***Pro-multilingual class environment.*** **In my class, all languages are welcomed in the classroom as long as you use them as tools to enhance your academic excellence.** If desired, you are free to use your first language in earlier drafts of the writing. I respect and welcome your home language and culture and hope to create a pro-multilingual class environment where students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can feel safe and comfortable to participate.

Read more of Dr. Qianqian Zhang-Wu's work, like

“(Re)Imagining Translingualism as a Verb to Tear Down the English-Only Wall: “Monolingual” Students as Multilingual Writers” (2021) in *College English*