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2019

## Syllabus Design for Place-Based Gen-Ed Courses

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### Scholarly Commons Citation

Oler, A., & Liu, Y. (2019). Syllabus Design for Place-Based Gen-Ed Courses. , (). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/publication/1288>

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# Syllabus Design for Place-Based Gen-Ed Courses

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## Visual Design

### A Design Tutor's Perspective

The Florida syllabus utilizes design to make it feel more like a brochure than a conventional syllabus. As a student, I find that most syllabi are usable, but not user-friendly. As a digital design tutor, I find them devoid of basic design concepts. They accomplish their goals of providing information, but they could do it better.

Brochures disseminate information quickly and effectively. The use of a multi-column layout breaks up the single column format of typical syllabi, making it so that more information can fit in the same amount of space. Headings encourage faster intake of information. Accordingly, in *Designing a Motivational Syllabus*, Christine Harrington and Melissa Thomas write, "Simple tools such as font features can also help organize content. For example, attention will be drawn to headings with a larger font size or fonts that are bolded or in color" (101).

Florida-oriented graphics help students quickly understand the goals of the class. An initial scan of the document shows aspects of Florida's culture, such as sunshine, palm trees, oranges, alligators, racing, and the color orange. Visual representation of content is one of the most effective design tools we use at the Digital Studio to make informative documents look better. To help Dr. Oler make these changes, we recommended Curtis Newbold's *The Visual Communication Guy*.

We can find multiple distinct levels of information from the text-based contrast in the headings. For example, I consider the names of the textbooks (in orange) vastly more important than the information underneath. Contrasting text formats allows students to scan through for an effective preview before diving deeper and absorbing all of the information, along with quickly indexing content for faster searching.

Syllabi are useful as a reference for the professor's office hours, email, and policies. Using iconography makes it easy for me to locate key info since it shows a visual representation of it. For example, in the Policies section, showing a man running against clock represents tardiness, allowing students to quickly scan through and jump to that section. The use of graphics and iconography makes "Greetings from Florida" much more usable than conventional syllabi.

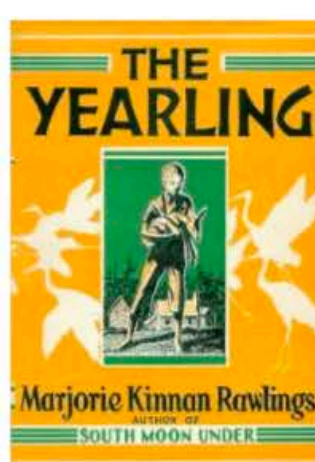
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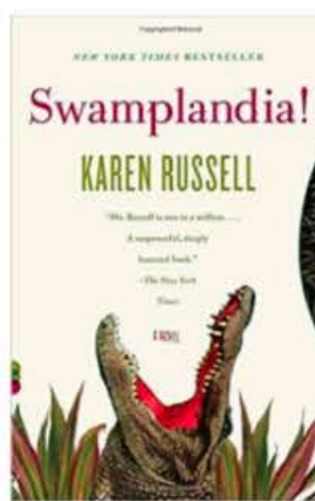


**What People Say About Florida**  
"In visiting Florida in dreams, of either day or night, I always come suddenly on a close forest of trees, every one in flower, and bent down and entangled to network by luxuriant, bright-blooming vines, and over all a flood of bright sunlight."  
— John Muir, 1916

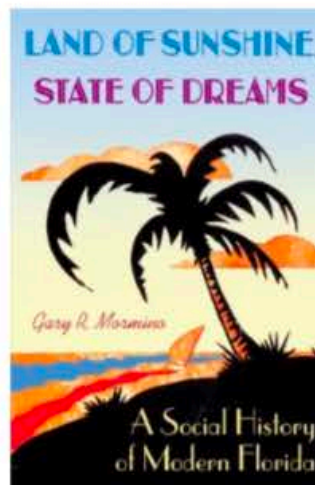
"The Florida in my novels is not as seedy as the real Florida. It's hard to stay ahead of the curve. Every time I write a scene that I think is the sickest thing I have ever dreamed up, it is surpassed by something that happens in real life."  
— Carl Hiaasen, 2004  
**What Will You Say?**



**The Yearling**  
Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings  
ISBN 978-0-68984-623-6  
Required



**Swamplandia!**  
Karen Russell  
ISBN 978-0-30727668-1  
Required



**Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida**  
Gary Mormino  
ISBN 978-081303308-2  
Optional

## Welcome to HU 145!

### Course Description

In "Greetings from Florida," we will study the interplay between Florida's natural, man-made, and cultural characteristics. To do this, we will read novels about Florida, read essays discussing the state's key features, and examine movies, music, photos, and maps focused on particular places or problems.

You will come to know Florida as both a resident and a tourist, writing up those experiences along the way. Ultimately, this course aims to increase your understanding of the ways that Florida literature, history, and the natural world relate to each other and to your life. Over the course of the semester, you will acquire and enhance the tools to think critically about the place you have chosen to live for your four years at Embry-Riddle as well as the places you will live and visit after completing your college education.

### Course Goals

Because of its interdisciplinary emphasis, HU 145 exercises students' abilities to analyze, compare, and synthesize significant ideas/themes that have found expression through works of art, literature, philosophy, history, social and scientific theory, etc. Students will explore the dimensions and manifestations of selected formative ideas. Because HU 145 is a continuation of COM 222, emphasis is placed on effective writing about and from multiple sources.

See Canvas for university course descriptions and learning outcomes.

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Assignment	Description & Length	Percentage of Total Grade
Paper 1: Expository Writing	Write and describe one tourist destination in Florida. 4-5 pages.	20
Paper 2: Close Reading	Analyze one paragraph in a novel. 3 pages.	10
Documentary Video	Documentary video depicting Paper 1 with research. 3-7 minutes.	10
Final Exam	Essay synthesizing several readings.	50
Quizzes & Short Assignments	Quizzes, drafts, reading quizzes, writing activities, etc.	10

**Attendance & Tardiness**  
Notify me in advance if you cannot make a class. Reasonable requests for excused absences will be granted. The required number of excused absences will be determined by your instructor. Notify me in advance if you cannot make a class. Reasonable requests for excused absences will be granted. The required number of excused absences will be determined by your instructor.

**Participation & Technology**  
Participation in class is a measure of how successfully you have completed a task. Grades are not based on the number of papers submitted or the number of papers graded. Participation in class is a measure of how successfully you have completed a task. Grades are not based on the number of papers submitted or the number of papers graded.

**Civility**  
The Writing Center offers FREE tutoring. Refer to the Writing Center document on Canvas for information about location, hours of operation, and the tutoring process.

## Regionalism in Syllabus Design

### Tourism Guides "Greetings from Florida"

"Greetings from Florida" studies Florida literature and culture from the perspective that the state's subtropical environment has an outsized influence on life in the Sunshine State and the narratives we tell about it. In *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, Gary Mormino argues that because it is "abundantly endowed with sugar-white beaches, emerald water, and eternal sunshine, Florida converted nature into dream vacations. As charming and understated as it was later brash and universal, tourism sanctioned fun and profit in an era when consumption was replacing production as a national template" (78). I use Mormino's cultural history to supplement course readings, which include several personal essays by

Florida writers as well as two novels: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's *The Yearling* (1938), a tale of boyhood in the Florida Scrub, and Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* (2011), about a family who runs a tourist trap gator farm in the Everglades.

The front page of the syllabus reflects course themes in three ways. First, the layout and bright colors mimic the brochures tourists might find on a display stand next to the motel check-in desk. Second, the vintage postcard in the header refers to the history of tourism in Florida and all the ways the state has burnished its image as a tropical paradise.

The first quotation by John Muir underscores the state's reputation as a dreamland, though the later dreams referenced by Carl Hiaasen seem to have become nightmares. The ways Muir and Hiaasen describe the image of Florida points to the third way this first page of the syllabus communicates the central work of the course: the header "What People Say About Florida" and the question "What Will You Say?" turns from course readings to the student's own experience, which forecasts the type of travel writing and personalized historical research that students will complete for this course.

### Infrastructure Undergirds "Inhabiting the Midwest"

The first page of "Inhabiting the Midwest" has less textual content than "Greetings from Florida," as I chose to communicate more fully through the main image, a 1938 John Vachon photograph of grain elevators along the railroad tracks in Sisseton, South Dakota. I specifically searched for a horizontal photo of railroad tracks in a rural landscape to emphasize (1) the space of the Midwest and (2) the connections between that place and all the others linked into the infrastructural systems represented in this photo by the railroad and grain elevator. Another key difference between these syllabi is that this particular image of the Midwest lies under every part of the page—a design decision that I would repeat throughout the document as much as possible. Furthermore, to accentuate how the photo's horizontal layout gestures toward the breadth of Midwestern space, I would design the syllabus to scroll to the side rather than down (this is possible by manipulating the .pdf in Adobe Acrobat).

Beyond the photo's status as backdrop, its flat gray color palette sets the tone for the design, with black, white, and gray tones marking a key visual difference with "Greetings from Florida." Certainly, this grayscale coloration plays into stereotypes of Midwestern drabness (think *The Wizard of Oz*). While the drab gray title somewhat reinforces this notion, I draw it from Wright Morris's experimental photo-text *The Inhabitants* (1946), which also describes one of the key challenges of representing rural Midwestern life: "Everywhere you look there is a man leaving something – or something that a man left. And everywhere you look you see that nobody left anything." Morris alludes to the spaces and structures of rural life, as well as to the humans who built and lived in them. This text's combination of poetry, story fragments, and photographs will encourage students to answer the course's central questions, which emerge from the darker portions of the cover image. These questions mirror students' work in the course, which is to think through the ways Midwestern writers represent place, particularly balancing local idiosyncrasies with people's and communities' connections to regional and national cultures.

## Inhabiting the Midwest Writing Rural Spaces & Communities

**Required Texts**

- Poor White* by Donald Anderson, ISBN 1948742009
- NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER* by LANG TON HUGHES, ISBN 0143191861
- THE INHABITANTS* by Wright Morris, ISBN 11112916629
- SULA* by Toni Morrison, ISBN 1400033430
- Tracks* by Louise Erdrich, ISBN 0060972455
- AMERICAN SALLIAGE* by BONNIE JO CAMPBELL, ISBN 0393339192

**What does it mean to be from a place? How do Midwestern writers articulate a vision of the region? To what extent do they privilege personal stories, community norms, and broader cultural narratives?**

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## Student-Centered Design

My goals in redesigning the "Greetings from Florida" syllabus were to make the document briefer, the information easier to access, and the design more attractive. As it turns out, the first two of these are related to core principles of **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**:

- Multiple means of representation, to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge
- Multiple means of expression, to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know
- Multiple means of engagement, to tap into learners' interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation (Dolmage)

Befitting the varied content in "Greetings from Florida," I organized the course around multiplicities of representation, expression, and engagement. For instance, its assignment sequence—a close reading to paper, travel story, and documentary video—offers several ways for students to express their understanding of and engagement with course content.

I set the tone for the course in the syllabus, in which I focused on creating a document using multiple means of representation and engagement. Because I wanted to make my documents both briefer and more accessible, I ended up creating a syllabus that relied

heavily on visual cues, an approach consistent with studies of visual learning. For example, Linda Nilson advocates for **graphic syllabi** that chart course learning outcomes and thereby make them more intuitively understandable for a range of learners. She argues that because traditional, text-focused syllabi present information sequentially, they require interpretive skills that students may not have when first encountering a course's syllabus. On the other hand, when using graphics, "the various elements are easy to locate, facilitating the extraction of information, and the interrelationships among the elements are evident in the spatial arrangements, shapes of enclosures, and colors, without the mind having to interpret or infer them" (20).

"Greetings from Florida" clearly displays these benefits in its use of color, columns, text boxes, and iconography. Most importantly, students responded favorably. According to one student who had me for two classes (the first with a more text-oriented syllabus), the "Greetings from Florida" syllabus was "honestly one of the best syllabi I've seen when it comes to communicating the course in its entirety. [...] One thing I liked about it is the colorful portrayal of class policies and expectations. As I was reading through the syllabus it caught my attention and made the policy stick." My student's positive response to the syllabus's color and iconography show that small design tweaks can make a notable difference in student engagement.

Design-oriented revisions cannot solve all accessibility issues in a course, but through them I hope to acknowledge that UDL is an ongoing process. Along these lines, Thomas Tobin and Kirsten Behling urge educators to "think of UDL as merely plus-one thinking about the interactions in your course. Is there just one more way that you can help keep learners on task, just one more way that you could give them information, just one more way that you could demonstrate their skills?" (134). These courses reflect such a "plus-one" mindset. In "Greetings from Florida," I added iconography and a more accessible layout. In "Inhabiting the Midwest," I have retained those design elements. I also altered the page orientation, using the landscape layout to represent course content. The next "plus-one" in such a course would be to develop non-traditional assignments that similarly reinforce attention to the space of the Midwest.