Value Neutral Instruction and the Curriculum

General Guide for Applying Neutral Tone to Curriculum Components

This guide is intended for faculty, academic departments, and colleges to engage in curricular discussions, development, and reviews on incorporating a neutral tone into curricular components. It serves as a foundation for exploring potential curriculum modifications.

Course Titles: Principles and Practices

Core Principles:

Course titles should be:

- Descriptive: Accurately convey course content and scope

- Discipline-Appropriate: Use established terminology from the field

- Ideologically Neutral: Avoid terms signaling predetermined conclusions

- Academically Professional: Maintain scholarly rather than activist framing

- Student-Accessible: Clear to prospective students regardless of background

Signal Words to Avoid in Course Titles:

Words that indicate advocacy rather than inquiry:

- Dismantling, Decolonizing, Interrogating, Challenging, Centering, Combating

- Liberation, Resistance, Activism, Justice-Oriented, Transformative (in political sense)

- Anti-[Group], Pro- [Political Position]

Neutral Alternative Frameworks:

Advocacy Frame	Neutral Academic Frame
Action-oriented (changing society)	Knowledge-oriented (understanding society)
Prescriptive conclusions	Open inquiry
Moral imperatives	Analytical exploration

Advocacy Frame	Neutral Academic Frame
Political positioning	Scholarly investigation

Examples of Neutral Course Title Construction:

- **Instead of**: "Dismantling Systemic Racism in Healthcare"
  This is an example: "Race, Medicine, and Public Health in America" or "Healthcare Disparities: Research and Analysis"

- **Instead of**: "Antiracist Approaches to Education"
  This is an example: "Race and American Educational Systems" or "Equity Issues in Educational Policy"

- **Instead of**: "Decolonizing the Curriculum"
  This is an example: "Comparative Global Perspectives in [Discipline]" or "Non-Western Approaches to [Subject]"

- **Instead of**: "Climate Justice and Activism"
  This is example: "Climate Change: Science, Policy, and Society" or "Environmental Policy and Ethics"

- **Instead of**: "Queer Resistance Movements"
  This is an example: "History of LGBTQ Communities in America" or "Sexuality and Social Change"

Course Descriptions: Language and Structure

Essential Components of Neutral Course Descriptions:

1. **Objective Statement of Content**
   - What topics, theories, methods, or periods will be covered
   - The disciplinary context and intellectual lineage
   - The scope and boundaries of the course

2. **Methodological Approach**
   - How the subject will be examined (historical, empirical, comparative, theoretical)

- What analytical tools students will learn and apply

- The intellectual frameworks employed

3. **Skills and Competencies**

- What students will be able to do upon completion

- Transferable skills developed

- Disciplinary methods mastered

4. **Content Overview**

- Major themes, questions, or problems addressed

- Representative texts, cases, or materials examined

- Chronological or conceptual organization

Language Patterns That Maintain Neutrality:

Purpose	Neutral Phrasing Examples (Remember to always begin course description with "This course"....)
Introducing topic	"This course examines…", "Students will explore…", "The course investigates…", "This class analyzes…"
Describing controversial content	"Students will examine competing perspectives on…", "The course evaluates various approaches to…", "We will analyze debates surrounding…"
Indicating complexity	"Students will grapple with…", "The course addresses the complexity of…", "We will examine multiple factors influencing…"
Methodological approach	"Using historical analysis…", "Through empirical investigation…", "Employing comparative methods…", "Drawing on theoretical frameworks from…"

Purpose	Neutral Phrasing Examples (Remember to always begin course description with "This course"….)
Skill development	"Students will develop the ability to…", "The course builds competency in…", "Students will learn to analyze/evaluate/synthesize…"

Possible Red Flags: Language That Compromises Neutrality

Avoid these patterns in course descriptions:

1. **Prescriptive Outcomes on Beliefs/Values**

   o ✖ "Students will recognize their privilege"

   o ✖ "Students will develop antiracist consciousness"

   o ✖ "Students will commit to social justice"

   o ✓ "Students will analyze theories of social inequality"

2. **Assumed Conclusions**

   o ✖ "This course examines how capitalism oppresses workers"

   o ✓ "This course examines competing theories of labor relations and economic systems"

3. **Advocacy Requirements**

   o ✖ "Students will engage in activist work"

   o ✓ "Students will study social movements and civic engagement"

4. **Ideological Litmus Tests**

- ❌ "This course centers marginalized voices and challenges dominant narratives"

- ✓ "This course examines diverse perspectives and analyzes historiographical debates"

5. **Politically Loaded Language**

- ❌ "Exposing systemic oppression," "Resisting colonialism," "Dismantling white supremacy"

- ✓ "Analyzing institutional structures," "Examining historical power relations," "Studying racial ideologies"

Complete Example: Before and After

❌ **Non-Neutral Description:** "This course centers Indigenous perspectives and challenges colonial frameworks that continue to oppress Native peoples. Students will recognize their complicity in settler colonialism and develop decolonial practices. Through engagement with Indigenous activists and resistance movements, students will commit to anticolonial action and learn to dismantle systems of oppression in their own lives and communities."

✓ **Neutral Description:** "This course examines Indigenous perspectives on history, culture, and contemporary issues in North America. Students will analyze the relationship between Indigenous nations and the United States from multiple viewpoints, including tribal perspectives, government policy approaches, and scholarly interpretations. Through historical documents, ethnographic studies, legal materials, and contemporary sources, students will develop understanding of tribal sovereignty, cultural persistence, and ongoing policy debates. Students will learn to critically evaluate competing historical narratives and analyze the complex factors shaping Indigenous experiences from the colonial period to the present."

Learning Objectives: Cognitive Focus and Measurable Outcomes

Bloom's Taxonomy as Neutral Framework

Using Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) helps maintain neutrality by focusing on cognitive processes rather than ideological outcomes:

Cognitive Process Dimensions (from basic to complex):

1. **Remember**: Retrieve relevant knowledge

2. **Understand**: Construct meaning from material

3. **Apply**: Use procedures in given situations

4. **Analyze**: Break material into parts and determine relationships

5. **Evaluate**: Make judgments based on criteria

6. **Create**: Put elements together to form coherent whole

Neutral Learning Objective Formula:

[Action Verb] + [Object/Content] + [Context/Condition] + [Criterion/Standard]

Examples:

- "Analyze primary sources from the Civil Rights Movement using historical methods"

- "Evaluate competing economic theories of poverty using empirical evidence"

- "Compare multiple perspectives on environmental policy and assess their assumptions"

Value-Neutral vs. Ideologically Loaded Learning Objectives

Domain	❌ non-neutral	✓ Neutral
Knowledge	"Identify oppressive systems in contemporary society"	"Identify major theoretical perspectives on social inequality"
Comprehension	"Explain how privilege operates to maintain injustice"	"Explain various theories of social stratification and their critiques"
Application	"Apply antiracist principles to course material"	"Apply sociological frameworks to analyze racial dynamics"
Analysis	"Analyze how systemic racism affects all institutions"	"Analyze the role of race in institutional development and policy"

Domain	❌ non-neutral	✓ Neutral
Evaluation	"Critique white supremacist assumptions in traditional scholarship"	"Evaluate historiographical debates and assess evidence for competing interpretations"
Creation	"Design an action plan to dismantle oppressive structures"	"Design a research project examining institutional change and reform movements"

Affective vs. Cognitive Domain: A Critical Distinction

Bloom also identified the Affective Domain (attitudes, values, beliefs), but this domain is generally inappropriate for required course objectives in value-neutral instruction:

Affective Domain (Use with Extreme Caution):

- Receiving (awareness)

- Responding (participation)

- Valuing (commitment)

- Organization (systematizing values)

- Characterization (acting consistently with values)

Why Affective Objectives Compromise Neutrality:

- They assess beliefs rather than knowledge or skills

- They cannot be measured objectively

- They violate student autonomy in forming values

- They create compelled speech concerns

- They substitute indoctrination for education

❌ **Frequently Flagged Affective Objectives Examples:**

- "Students will value diversity"

- "Students will demonstrate commitment to social justice"

- "Students will recognize their privilege"

- "Students will develop empathy for marginalized groups"

- "Students will embrace antiracist identity"

✓ **Potential Alternatives and Examples (Cognitive/Behavioral):**

- "Students will analyze diverse perspectives"

- "Students will examine social justice movements and their goals"

- "Students will identify various forms of social advantage and disadvantage"

- "Students will evaluate research on intergroup relations"

- "Students will compare different approaches to addressing racial inequality"

Special Considerations for Sensitive Topics

Teaching Controversial Material with Neutral Framing

Many important topics in higher education involve contested questions of values, politics, or morality. Neutral instruction does not avoid these topics but approaches them differently:

Framework for Controversial Topics:

1. **Acknowledge Multiple Legitimate Perspectives**

   o   Present strongest versions of competing viewpoints

   o   Avoid straw-man representations of positions you personally reject

   o   Include perspectives from across the political/ideological spectrum

2. **Emphasize Evidence and Reasoning**

   o   What evidence supports each perspective?

   o   What are the logical structures of different arguments?

   o   What assumptions underlie each position?

3. **Distinguish Description from Prescription**

- What do we observe? (empirical questions)

- What should we do about it? (normative questions)

- Make this distinction explicit

4. **Model Intellectual Humility**

- Acknowledge uncertainty and complexity

- Identify questions that remain unresolved

- Distinguish between scholarly consensus and ongoing debates

5. **Focus on Process Over Outcome**

- How do we reason through difficult questions?

- What methods help us evaluate competing claims?

- How do we weigh evidence and construct arguments?

Case Study: Teaching About Race and American History

❌ **Non-Neutral Approach:** "This unit examines how white supremacy was deliberately constructed to maintain racial hierarchy and continues to structure all American institutions. Students will recognize how they benefit from or are harmed by this system."

✓ **Neutral Approach:** "This unit examines the historical development of racial categories and their legal, social, and economic implications in American society. We will analyze primary sources, historical scholarship, and contemporary social science research to understand how racial definitions changed over time, how different groups experienced and resisted racial hierarchies, and how scholars interpret these historical developments. Students will evaluate competing explanations for persistent racial inequality, including structural, cultural, and economic theories, and assess the evidence supporting different interpretations."

Academic Freedom: Faculty Rights and Responsibilities

What Faculty May Do:

- Share their own scholarly perspective when relevant

- Assign texts representing particular viewpoints (within a balanced curriculum)

- Discuss normative questions and ethical implications

- Model intellectual engagement with difficult questions

What Faculty Should Not Do:

- Grade based on agreement with instructor's views

- Require students to express particular political/ideological positions

- Use classroom as platform for political advocacy unrelated to course content

- Present personal opinions as disciplinary consensus

- Penalize students for respectfully expressed disagreement

Implementing Neutral Curriculum: Practical Strategies

1. Curriculum Review Process

Self-Assessment Questions:

- Could a reasonable person with different political views teach this course effectively?

- Are course objectives focused on knowledge/skills rather than beliefs/values?

- Does the reading list represent intellectual pluralism?

- Could students with various viewpoints succeed in this course?

- Are assessment criteria based on demonstrated competency rather than ideological alignment?

Red Flag Indicators:

- Course materials from only one political/ideological perspective

- Assignments requiring students to advocate for specific positions

- Objectives that assume particular moral or political commitments

- Required participation in activism or advocacy

- Assessment of student attitudes/beliefs rather than understanding/skills

2. Syllabus Language Best Practices

Effective Neutral Syllabus Statements:

On Controversial Topics: "This course addresses topics on which people hold sincere and deeply-felt differences. We will examine multiple perspectives with the goal of understanding the strongest arguments for various positions. You are not required to agree with any particular viewpoint, but you are required to engage seriously and respectfully with course material and your peers' ideas."

On Classroom Discussion: "Vigorous intellectual debate is central to this course. You are expected to support your arguments with evidence and reasoning, engage respectfully with competing viewpoints, and maintain academic discourse standards. Disagreement is encouraged; disrespect is not."

On Assessment: "Your grade is based on demonstrated mastery of course content and learning objectives, quality of analysis, and strength of evidence and reasoning—not on your personal beliefs or opinions. You may argue for any position on course topics provided you support your argument effectively."

3. Assignment Design for Neutrality

Neutral Assignment Structures:

Comparative Analysis: "Compare and contrast two competing theories of [topic]. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each approach based on evidence and logical consistency."

Multiple Perspective Essays: "Present the strongest arguments for three different positions on [controversial issue]. Then, explain which position you find most persuasive and why, using evidence from course materials."

Evidence-Based Argumentation: "Develop a thesis about [open question] and support it using at least five scholarly sources. Address potential counterarguments and explain how the evidence supports your interpretation."

Historical Analysis: "Analyze how historians have interpreted [event/period] over time. What factors explain changing interpretations? What new evidence or methods have influenced scholarly debate?"

4. Grading Rubrics That Ensure Neutrality

Content-Neutral Assessment Criteria:

- Depth of understanding demonstrated

- Quality and relevance of evidence

- Logical coherence of argument

- Engagement with course concepts

- Writing clarity and organization

- Proper use of sources and citation

- Critical thinking and analysis

What Should NOT Be Graded:

- Whether student agrees with particular ideology

- Personal political opinions

- Social identity or background

- Willingness to share personal beliefs

- Participation in activism or advocacy

- Expressed values or commitments

Benefits of Value-Neutral Instruction

For Students:

- **Intellectual Growth**: Develop independent critical thinking rather than absorbing prescribed views

- **Career Preparation**: Learn to analyze complex problems from multiple angles

- **Civic Competence**: Engage productively with those who hold different views

- **Personal Autonomy**: Form reasoned convictions based on evidence and reflection

- **Academic Confidence**: Succeed based on merit rather than ideological conformity

For Faculty:

- **Professional Integrity**: Maintain scholarly objectivity and credibility

- **Pedagogical Effectiveness**: Reach students across diverse backgrounds and viewpoints

- **Academic Freedom**: Pursue truth without political constraints

- **Reduced Conflict**: Minimize student complaints and legal challenges

- **Intellectual Honesty**: Model the best traditions of academic inquiry

For Institutions:

- **Public Trust**: Maintain credibility across diverse constituencies

- **Legal Compliance**: Reduce risk of viewpoint discrimination claims

- **Academic Reputation**: Strengthen institutional commitment to genuine inquiry

- **Student Recruitment**: Appeal to families seeking genuine education

- **Alumni Relations**: Build support from graduates of all backgrounds

- **Legislative Relations**: Reduce political intervention and oversight

Common Objections and Responses

Objection 1: "Some positions (e.g., racism, sexism) don't deserve neutral treatment."

Response: Condemning racism and sexism is not incompatible with neutral instruction. We can:

- Teach historical facts about discrimination and its effects (descriptive)

- Analyze moral arguments against discrimination (normative)

- Examine policy responses and their effectiveness (evaluative)

- Maintain that students, not instructors, form ultimate moral judgments

Neutrality concerns *how* we teach, not *what* we teach. We can cover any topic, including obvious moral wrongs, through analytical rather than prescriptive framing.

Objection 2: "Neutrality is impossible; all teaching reflects values."

Response: While perfect neutrality may be impossible, meaningful differences exist between:

- **Unavoidable Framework Values**: Commitment to truth, evidence, reason, academic integrity (inherent to higher education)

- **Contested Political/Ideological Values**: Positions on controversial policy, social, or moral questions (should not be institutionally prescribed)

The goal is not absolute neutrality but professional restraint in leveraging institutional authority to advance contested positions.

Objection 3: "Students need guidance on moral and political questions."

Response: Students do need ethical development, but:

- Moral education differs from moral prescription

- Teaching ethical reasoning differs from mandating specific conclusions

- Students are adults capable of forming their own reasoned judgments

- Faculty authority applies to disciplinary expertise, not personal morality

We can teach *how* to think about difficult questions without dictating *what* to conclude.

Objection 4: "My discipline has a social justice mission."

Response: Many disciplines address justice, equality, and human welfare, but:

- Studying injustice differs from requiring specific political activism

- Professional codes (social work, counseling, etc.) can be presented as professional standards within that field

- Skills for serving diverse populations can be taught without ideological litmus tests

- Research on inequality can be examined without prescribing particular policy solutions

Distinguishing professional competencies from political activism preserves both rigor and neutrality.

Objection 5: "This limits academic freedom."

Response: Value-neutral instruction *protects* academic freedom by:

- Defending faculty from political pressure to reach predetermined conclusions

- Ensuring students' freedom to form their own views

- Maintaining institutional autonomy from external ideological control

- Preserving the university's core mission of inquiry over advocacy

Academic freedom includes the right to controversial scholarly conclusions—but not to leverage classroom authority to compel student agreement.

Conclusion: Renewing Commitment to Academic Principles

The principle of value-neutral instruction represents a core commitment of modern higher education, rooted in centuries of academic tradition. As higher education faces increasing scrutiny from diverse stakeholders, renewing this commitment serves multiple crucial purposes:

1. **Intellectual Mission**: Maintains universities as places of inquiry rather than indoctrination

2. **Student Development**: Fosters independent critical thinking and moral reasoning

3. **Professional Standards**: Upholds scholarly objectivity and ethical boundaries

4. **Public Trust**: Preserves confidence in higher education across political divides

5. **Academic Freedom**: Protects genuine freedom of inquiry and expression

6. **Institutional Sustainability**: Ensures long-term viability amid political pressure