

**Diversifying Our Syllabi – Some Practical Guidance**  
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*The following advice is informed by various initiatives that aim, in particular, to counter gender stereotypes and implicit bias so as to improve the representation of women in certain areas. But it is intended to be helpful for all disciplines and for all efforts to diversify syllabi, in respect not just of women but other under-represented groups too, e.g. socioeconomic, racial, and LGBT groups, and in some areas men. Where the same issues arise, the same guidance applies. Please see the foot of the document for advice for HoSubs and Teaching Directors.*

• **Which should I diversify: a course's content, or the list of authors on the syllabus?** Should the aim in History, for instance, be that we pay greater attention to *women throughout history*, or that reading lists recommend more *female historians*? Often, the answer to that sort of question is: both. Regarding content, the issues might vary among subjects. For instance, pure mathematicians might argue that their subject is not about humans, but numbers and so on, hence talk of diversifying *content* makes no sense in their area. But that's no bar to ensuring diversity *among authors on reading lists*.

• **What if there are no women for inclusion in the content of my course?** In some areas (e.g. history of philosophy, English literature) a course's content might just be a group of authors and their work, and sometimes (e.g. in ancient philosophy) that group might contain few women we know about. But even if so, and if choosing a different group isn't an option, this is no bar to ensuring women are well represented in the *secondary* literature. (Consider including in your syllabus a short explanation of *why* the focus is less on the work of women, e.g. that women were, in the relevant period, excluded from the domain being studied.)

• **Thematic approaches.** If approaching a topic *chronologically* makes it harder to include women, consider approaching it *thematically*. Introductory philosophy courses often trace an historical narrative through the main views in an area, focusing on who most influentially advocated each during its heyday. If this makes it harder to cite women, given women's great under-representation in the past, then consider moving from narrative to themes and presenting the views *as they are represented today*. (One can also do *both*, of course.)

• **The where and how.** It matters *where* and *how* women feature in reading lists. (i) Consider including *all* authors' first names, not just initials, to make women visible. (ii) Crucially, avoid limiting women to what might be thought of as women-focused topics. (iii) If you distinguish required and recommended reading, ensure this doesn't end up being a distinction between male and female authors. (iv) Avoid leaving female authors to the final lecture. Tacking onto the end of a philosophy of science course a final lecture on feminist perspectives on philosophy of science, and restricting your citations of women to that lecture, gives the impression that the contribution of women is limited and secondary. Aim to integrate women into syllabi *fully*.

• **What if the most cited and influential work on a given topic is by men?** This isn't obviously to the point. Consider which matters to your students: citation rates or quality. These don't always coincide.

• **What if the only good work on a given topic is by men?** A female academic has said to me: "In week 3, I want to teach topic X, but only five people in the world work on X, only one of whom is a woman, and it just so happens that I think her work poor. Won't citing it simply because she's a woman backfire?" Well, the aim is indeed not just to cite women, but also to give students access to high-quality work by women. If there really is a niche where the under-representation of women is so severe that you can find no such work despite your best efforts (see below) and if you have reasons not to teach a different topic instead, then your options are limited. But context can help, e.g. the presence of women on the reading lists for other components of your course. And it's worth keeping the situation under review (see below).

• **Diversifying my syllabi would take too much time.** It *will* take time, but the pay-offs are significant: countering stereotypes and biases that are constraining female students and academics; giving proper recognition to research done by women; and revitalising tired reading lists and becoming aware yourself of good work that has previously eluded you. Note that if only members of under-represented groups diversify their syllabi, this sends an unhelpful message: that only they rate the work of members of that group. A philosopher said to me: "It's time for white, straight men to take the lead on this".

• **There are online resources** to help you find women and members of other under-represented groups working in particular areas. Many of these are collaborative; users can add suggestions. If there is no such resource in your area, consider setting one up. Here are some examples (from philosophy and classics):

<https://updirectory.apaonline.org/>

[https://www.apaonline.org/members/group\\_content\\_view.asp?group=110430&id=380970](https://www.apaonline.org/members/group_content_view.asp?group=110430&id=380970)

<https://diversityreadinglist.org/teach/>

<https://sites.google.com/site/zdrayson/mindsyllabus>

<https://wcc-uk.blogs.sas.ac.uk/resources/>

• **Other sources?** Consider asking fellow academics—personally or on blogs or in social media—for suggestions of work on specific topics by under-represented groups. At some universities, GTAs have been paid to help academics diversify their lists; and students in groups such as MAP (Minorities and Philosophy) have also helped. If students are involved in “co-creating” a course, that’s another context in which they might contribute.

• **Keeping on it.** Your reading list’s diversity, once achieved, can be eroded as you update it over the years. An academic said to me: “Even though I’m a woman and women are well represented in my area, my reading lists become male-dominated after a few years unless I make a conscious effort each time I update them to ask myself, ‘Which women have written on this topic?’, ‘Am I citing X because it’s the best source, or because others do, or because of a bias, etc?’”. Also, monitor the resources of the kind mentioned above so that when women start working more in a particular area you know about it.

• **Have I failed if less than half of the authors I cite are women?** Opinions differ. So does the difficulty of achieving half given sharply differing rates of under-representation. What is arguably most important is that female authors are not neglected or an after-thought or pigeon-holed but are instead represented significantly and integrally in your syllabi. If there are fewer women than men on your lists, think about *why* and whether you should explain this to your students and what you might do to improve it.

• **But membership of other under-represented groups won’t always be clear from a name on a reading list.** True, but note two things: (i) the point of diversifying syllabi is not *only* to combat stereotypes and biases, but also to give proper recognition to the work of members of under-represented groups; and (ii) some recommend that syllabi include links to authors’ online profiles so as to make group membership more salient (<https://diversityreadinglist.org/teach/>). If you do this, do it for *all* authors with a profile. Avoid giving the impression that you’ve cited someone only because of group membership.

• **How might departments help?** At a minimum, as follows. ► The above could be thoroughly discussed at both a department meeting *and* a staff-student meeting. ► The head of teaching could biannually remind colleagues (e.g. just before the summer break) of the importance of keeping a close eye on diversity and balance in one’s syllabi. ► Departments might also consider whether their own documentation is sufficiently diverse, ensuring for instance that sample citations in student style guides don’t refer only to men.

• **Related guidance beyond syllabi:** ► Subject the work of members of under-represented groups to the same critical scrutiny as the work of others: not more, not less. ► Don’t convey that you systematically think less of that work by saying so, grumbling about political correctness, or implying it’s interesting only because of the author’s group-membership. ► If you use PowerPoint slides that include pictures of authors you’re discussing, include images of *all* those discussed, not just those from under-represented groups. ► If set reading has racist or sexist elements, mention it: not doing so risks conveying it’s insignificant. (See Jenkins, Katharine and Jennifer Saul (forthcoming), *The Pragmatics of Inclusivity*, quoted on the *Diversity Reading List* website above.)

Some more links:

<https://www.swipuk.org/>

<https://bpa.ac.uk/women>

<https://bpa.ac.uk/resources/women-in-philosophy/good-practice>

[https://www.apaonline.org/general/custom.asp?page=diversity\\_resources](https://www.apaonline.org/general/custom.asp?page=diversity_resources)

<http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/gendertutorial/transbib/gt4trans.pdf>

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/humanities/athenaswan/>