

Chapter 6 — Especially for TAs

This chapter discusses the unique roles and responsibilities of both Graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) and graduate students and offers advice on improving professionalism and managing workloads. This chapter also covers the various components of the Program for Instructional Excellence (PIE), which supports teaching enhancement for TAs.

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Managing Dual Roles of Student and Teacher

Classroom Issues

How do I manage students who may be close to my own age?

Not only are many TAs close in age to undergraduates, but some have also graduated from the same program in which they are now teaching. As a result, often a TA's most pressing concern is how to gain respect and credibility in an instructor role. Maintaining a professional distance is one way to establish your presence as instructor -- ways to accomplish this distance are discussed later in this chapter. If you feel you cannot fairly evaluate someone whom you have known socially, it might be best to request the student enroll in a different section, if at all possible. If that is not possible, establish clear rules ahead of time with the student.

How can I be perceived as credible and in control of the classroom – and still be liked?

Instructors at any level want to be seen as likable, approachable, and in touch with undergraduate concerns; however, being too sociable and extroverted can undermine credibility, especially for TAs. We suggest that TAs establish explicit, reasonable guidelines early in the term and adhere to them consistently. The guidelines and the rationale for each one should be included in the syllabus or distributed as a separate handout. By establishing boundaries at the course onset, the TA is then free to focus on those strategies that will make learning fun and enjoyable.

What are some personal qualities and attitudes useful in

working with students and colleagues?

Students mention such qualities as warmth, friendliness, caring, enthusiasm, accessibility, and a sense of humor. Wilbert McKeachie, author of *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, now in its 12th edition, mirrors the comments of many students with his research findings. In general, if an instructor is enthusiastic, friendly, and seriously interested in the subject, the students will also be interested. Use your own experiences as a student to help determine which professional qualities and attitudes you want to incorporate into your teaching -- the qualities you admired in the excellent instructors you have had are the same ones you should cultivate as an instructor.

How do I manage the interpersonal problems that may arise when I teach?

It is important to remember that the University serves a diverse student population, and you can expect a range of student abilities, attitudes, and learning styles. Socially, students also differ in their maturation levels; some are still rebelling against authority and will test you. Others do not notice that their behavior is disturbing to their peers, and some simply do not care. Some students enjoy learning; others merely tolerate classes and focus on their social life. In spite of all this, TAs generally get along well with students.

Providing a safe and tolerant learning environment is one of the requirements for any instructor. Often, just talking to a student one-on-one and calmly pointing out a problem will solve it. If the problem continues, you might invite your faculty mentor to observe your class and offer suggestions. If the behavior is especially disruptive or difficult, you may wish to consult the staff at FSU's Counseling Center (644-2003) or encourage the student to seek assistance from them. It will usually exacerbate the problem if you embarrass the student in front of the class or if you resort to sarcasm or anger.

Balancing of Roles

How do I balance the conflicting roles of being a student and a teacher simultaneously?

Reinforced by their teaching successes, TAs may increasingly spend more and more time on teaching preparation at the expense of their own coursework. TAs need to remind themselves continually that their **primary objective** as graduate students is to complete their degree. TAs who find they are falling behind in their own coursework because of the demands of the courses they teach should see the Director of Graduate Students in their department, their major advisor, or their own course instructors to discuss ways to create more balance in their schedules.

Consultants in the **Program for Instructional Excellence (PIE)** are also available to talk with you about this situation. Suggestions on time management in this chapter may also help.

How do I manage simultaneously my personal life, my studies, and my teaching responsibilities?

Ultimately, graduate students' ability to manage their time effectively is one predictor of immediate and long-term success. The responsibilities involved with a teaching assistantship underscore the importance of time management. A direct and honest discussion among experienced TAs, faculty, and new TAs about these responsibilities is time well spent during the initial TA training program.

Managing time effectively requires developing a strategic plan of action. In addition to laying out a semester-by-semester program of study, it is useful to outline weekly and daily schedules. The plan should include actual classroom contact and office hours, teaching preparation and grading time, seminar readings and writing assignments, exercise routines, leisure activities, and other important personal obligations. Often students determine that "there isn't enough time in a day to do everything," at which point prioritizing responsibilities will help meet both academic and personal objectives. A written schedule clearly demonstrates that time associated with teaching, by necessity, cannot consume a disproportionate amount of the workday. Acquiring the ability to manage time effectively both adds to the overall learning experience as a TA and is a critical part of becoming a professional in academe or in the business world.

***Advice from
Experienced
TAs***

To Increase Integrity

- Tell students about yourself, sharing academic and professional interests.
- Make your expectations of their performance clear.
- Convey seriousness and be consistent.
- Dress professionally. Do not wear clothes that are too revealing or too casual (e.g., ripped jeans).

To Increase Competence

- Remind students they are responsible for their willingness or unwillingness to learn.
- Get into the essential content of the course early.
- Demonstrate enthusiasm for your subject.
- Get feedback from students on whether or not you are doing a good job, so that you can improve if need be. Offer students

the chance to evaluate you in mid-semester, so that you may make the necessary adjustments to benefit their learning experience.

- Bring extra chalk, erasers, and other teaching materials to class.
- Take into consideration that students learn differently.

To Increase Composure

- Spend time preparing for the first week of classes. Be organized.
- Remember the students are new learners in your subject.
- Check out the room before class. Become comfortable using the classroom equipment (e.g., computers, projectors) and know whom to ask for help in case of difficulties.

To Increase Sociability

- Pass out a “get to know you survey” on the first day of class or post one to your course website.
- Find out who your students are. Use index cards to collect information on background, goals, and interests as they relate to your class.
- Convince them during the first classes that you see them as individuals, not numbers.
- Before class, spend a few minutes interacting with students.
- Call the students by name. Create a **Photo Roster** (356Kb PDF) to associate names with faces.

[Excerpted from Daryl Weisman and Ancilla Parducci, Teaching Associates. *First Day and Syllabus* (1997). Fall Teaching Conference.]

Maintaining Professionalism

Undergraduates expect a TA to conduct class with the same professionalism as faculty. Consider the following pointers on maintaining professionalism:

- Avoid discussing departmental faculty, other TAs and their classes, assignments, grading, or course policies.
- Do not overly socialize with students outside of class (e.g., date, flirt, party with), unless it is a whole-class activity. Even the appearance of flirting with a student can create misunderstandings and cause problems – be careful to avoid it.
- Make certain you understand the University’s policy on sexual harassment/sexual battery. Sexual harassment policy training

is required of all TAs. More information is available at the **Office of Audit Services**.

- Evaluate students' work fairly and impartially and avoid discussing students' marks in public or giving out a grade to anyone but the student to whom it belongs.
- Prepare for all student-instructor encounters. Meet classes as scheduled and keep scheduled office hours.
- Use appropriate language and humor.
- Try to stay on track with the course topics.

Workload Management

Consider the following scenario:

Time: Late on a Saturday evening near the end of the semester.

Place: Your room.

Situation: You are sitting at your desk. In one corner of the desk sits a mountainous pile of ungraded student papers; in the other corner, is an equally towering pile of books for the final paper or exam in one of your graduate courses. In the center of the desk are the materials for the class you are to teach on Monday.

Question: Where do you begin? The most natural reaction would be to begin the preparations for Monday's class -- after all, that is the most immediate pressure because you must walk into class on Monday and face the class -- prepared or not. Failure here means immediate failure in front of a large group of people; success provides immediate gratification. This task, then, becomes the most seductive one, and the sense of concrete achievement it provides may allow you, at least temporarily, to forget the burden of papers and graduate work. Very soon, however, the feeling of pressure will again begin to build up, intensified because deadlines have drawn even closer.

Guidelines

To avoid crisis situations, begin the semester by creating some rules for yourself. You may not always be able to keep them, but you should try to adopt them as general guides.

- If you must establish priorities (and sometimes you must), remember your own graduate work. One of your greatest responsibilities is to your graduate program. Thinking practically, you must realize that your teaching assistantship is dependent upon successful completion of your own courses.
- Do not let the work pile up. Break down long-term goals into short-term goals. Large blocks of free time are difficult to find once the semester gets underway; instead, calculate how many papers you would have to read every day to return the papers to students in a reasonable time. If you have 30 students in a class, reading four or five papers each day would

enable you to read them all in one week.

- Be willing to ask for help. If, as the semester progresses, you find yourself consistently behind with both your graduate work and your teaching, it is time to reassess your methods. Speak to your faculty advisor or TA supervisor about your problem.
- Learn to say “no.” Many TAs take on too many responsibilities. It is much better to do a few things well and completely, than to do numerous things poorly and incompletely.

Recommendations to help you organize your time

- Rank all tasks in their order of importance, which will give you a realistic perspective.
- Make an outline of all deadlines you must meet during the semester; this way, you can quickly determine at any given moment what is due and what you can delay.
- Enter all tasks and deadlines in a date book or calendar. Looking at this date book daily will allow you to maintain a realistic notion of what remains to be done. Flag important dates in the calendar, and write a reminder in your calendar before the due date for each task, allowing yourself enough lead-time to complete it.
- Each evening, make up a prioritized “to-do” list for the next day. Each morning, before you begin your work, go over this list to plan your day, starting with the most critical tasks first.
- Consider creating a wall chart with critical tasks and dates marked. Post it over your desk so that you can read it every day.
- Use a project management software system on your personal computer to help you schedule critical tasks and dates.
- Find out what hours of the day you work most efficiently and schedule important tasks during these hours of peak performance.

[Adapted with permission from *The Teaching Assistant Handbook* (1988). Teaching Assistant Project, The Graduate School, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.]

Program for Instructional Excellence (PIE)

The Program for Instructional Excellence (PIE) is the central means by which TAs receive support for teaching enhancement. The same teaching support services provided to faculty are available to TAs. PIE has three major thrusts by which support is administered: Fall and Spring university-wide teaching conferences, periodic workshops, and teaching observation and consultation.

Fall and Spring University-wide Teaching Conferences

Each January and August, conferences are held for new and experienced TAs. Award winning faculty and TAs conduct “how-to” sessions on a variety of topics, including course planning and delivery, interactions with students, and assessment of student performance.

Workshops and Panel Discussions

A series of workshops and panel discussions, which deal with issues particularly relevant to TAs, are offered each year. Past workshops have included: Introductory Teaching, Advanced Teaching, Professional Development, Using Graduate School Strategically, and Instructional Technology. Review the **Online Catalog**, which lists current and upcoming workshops.

Teaching Observation and Consultation

TAs may request observation of their class by a teaching consultant and the videotaping of either a short, prepared teaching segment or an entire class. In addition, PIE provides consultation to help the TA use the videotaped session as a tool for improving course delivery. Instructors may also request that the interim assessment TABS (Teaching Assessment by Students) be administered around mid-semester of any term to help identify ways an instructor can increase student learning. TABS may be administered in class or through your course website.

Other Instructional Support Programs

Teaching Associate Program – Provides assistance to academic departments to enhance discipline-specific preparation and training of TAs. Teaching Associates, who are experienced, also serve as leaders in university-wide programs and on the committee for the selection of Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award recipients.

Interdisciplinary Teaching Society (ITS) -- Prepares leaders for teaching, research, and service. ITS is a Congress of Graduate Students (COGS) registered student organization for TAs or students who desire to teach in the future. The Center for Teaching and Learning serves as the home administrative department for ITS.

ITS holds a number of events throughout the year, including fall and spring Speaker Series, colloquiums, and service projects. The Society also sponsors TA panel discussions and department showcases, which allow TAs to visit on-campus departments to learn how each department assists TAs in becoming better instructors, and which provide opportunities to learn from experienced TAs about instructional topics.

For more information, or to sign up:

- Log onto: campus.fsu.edu.
- Click the **Organizations** tab.
- Type “ITS” in the **Organization Search** field.
- Click **GO!**
- Click the **Preview** button for more info or the **Enroll** button to sign up.

Recognitions

PIE Teaching Certificates

During the Fall Conference, TAs can earn a PIE Teaching Certificate. Examples of topic areas from previous conferences include: Course Development, Course Delivery, Assessment and Evaluation, Social Interaction, and Professional Development.

Outstanding TA Awards

Each year, undergraduate students and faculty members nominate outstanding teaching assistants. Up to 15 recipients of this University award are recognized at the Spring Celebration of Graduate Student Excellence, held in April.



Resources on TA Training

Books/Articles

- Anthony, W. P. (1981). *Management: Competencies and incompetencies*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- McKeachie, W. J., & Svinicki, M. (2005). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (12th ed.). Lexington, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Nyquist, J. D., Abbott, R. D., Wulff, D. H., & Sprague, J. (Eds.). (1991). *Preparing the professorate of tomorrow to teach: Selected readings in TA training*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing.

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