

Getting the Best From Your Teaching Assistant

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Note: “She” and “he” are used interchangeably, from paragraph to paragraph, to refer to teaching assistants.

Every professor wants a teaching assistant (often called a TA) who is reliable, efficient, and low-maintenance. The keys to this experience are planning and communication. Find out what a TA is expected to do at your institution and in your department. Do not assume that it will be the same as what you did as a TA. You need to have your TA’s duties already in mind when planning the course, so you know before the semester begins what you will want her to do. You need to plan when assignments are due so your TA will have the time to grade them. You need to know how many hours a week she will be working so you can plan her time. You need to build discussion sessions into the course if your TA will be leading discussions. In other words, you need to set your team’s goals before you start the race.

Advanced Planning for TA is Key

If your TA will be mostly grading, decide which assignments your TA will grade and which ones you will grade. Will you each do part of each assignment? Will your TA do the weekly work and discussions while you grade the major assignments? Will he grade everything? Keep in mind the amount of time he is working each week. Space out the assignments so your TA has time to get it all done in a timely manner. He will probably take more time to grade than you do.

Make sure that you provide your TA with clear grading requirements and instructions for each assignment. Rubrics are a very useful tool when working in an Instructor-TA team. Also, provide TAs with details about how often you would like them to comment, and directions on providing positive as well as corrective feedback. Additionally, figure out what process you want to use to ‘calibrate’ your TA’s approach to grading with your style of grading. For example: grade a few together, have her grade just a few in pencil and look over them to provide further guidance, or choose some other form of early interaction so your TA can grade in your place. The more help you provide your TA with grading before the task begins, the less effort it should be when students are added to the mix.

If your TA will be leading discussions, plan these into your learning objectives so they make sense to the students. Make sure that discussion grades are weighty enough that students will see the value in attending these sessions. Do everything you can to show your students that they need to respect your TA. Have a section in your syllabus that tells the students what the TA will be doing and includes his contact information.

Instructor-TA Communication and Expectations

Once everything is planned, it is time to communicate your expectations to your TA. If she has taken one of your classes, she may have a general idea of what you want, but it is still very different from the other side of the blue book. Have a specific rubric for each assignment, so your TA can check off whether a student accomplished each part of the task.

Tell your TA when you expect each assignment to be graded. Do you want weekly assignments done by the next class meeting? Do you want all major exams done within a week? Whatever your timetable is, make sure your TA knows it. If your TA is not able to meet your expectations in the first few weeks of the semester, ask him why. Help your TA with your grading style so you can return students' work more promptly.

Tell your TA how much communication you expect. Does she check in with you after each assignment is graded? Does she talk to you once a week? Do you want her not to bother you unless there is a problem? Whatever level of communication you expect, make it clear and in writing. Give her a chance to tell you her expectations and ask questions. Especially if she has never been a TA before, she will not know what to do. Even if your TA has graded for another professor, she will not know what YOU want. Even if she has graded for you before in a different class, she will not know what you want for this class. Typically, TAs are over-achievers who really, really wants to impress you, so let them.

Managing TA and Student Interaction

Tell your TA explicitly and in writing what to do when a student complains. Have a process set up in advance and let the students know what it is by putting it into the syllabus (see planning section). My process is that for any grade question, the student has to ask the TA for explanation first, and only if they do not understand the grading system or think the TA is unfairly grading them can they talk to me about how an assignment was graded. When this happens, they send me a new, unmarked copy of their assignment, and I grade it. Usually my grade is lower than the TA's grade.

However, if you ever find that your TA is in fact grading unfairly, you need to stop this at once. Either have a frank and calm conversation with the TA, or report this to your department head or other person who has responsibility for the TA. This process differs between departments and sometimes from instructor to instructor. Yet, the situation has to be dealt with promptly. Review all grading for students affected. Change grades upward if necessary. Changing grades downward is not a good idea. You will need to grade the assignments of all affected students for the remainder of the semester. Good training, calibration exercises, and communication will usually prevent a disaster like this from happening.

Training

Make sure your TA undergoes any required training. This will vary by university and sometimes by department. This often means some sort of ethics training, technology training, and more. Do not let your TA begin working without the required training.

Another aspect of training is that being a TA is part of learning to be a professor. Explain to your TA why you have the assignments you do and what you want the students to learn from each assignment. Not only will this help your TA explain grades to the students, but he will be absorbing the process of creating a class. Keep this mentoring aspect in mind at all times.

Wrapping Up the Semester

At the end of the semester, have a de-briefing session. Ask your TA what she wishes she had known at the beginning of the semester. Get her input on what worked and what did not. Use this to plan next semester's classes. Last but not least, reward your TA with lunch, a gift card for the bookstore, or whatever else seems appropriate. Do something nice. You want to have a reputation of being good to work for so you will have the best TAs in the future.

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