

How to be a Successful Teaching Assistant

Jessica Brannon-Wranosky, Doctoral Student
University of North Texas

As colleges and universities strive to accommodate increasing enrollments on strict budgets, the Teaching Assistant (TA) is becoming a norm in most academic departments. These graduate, and sometimes undergraduate, students are entrusted with responsibilities that allow instructors to teach larger classes. While each institution/department has its own requirements, universally the position of TA is a complicated job. Anyone who has been a TA or worked with one knows how important it is to stay on top of all the responsibilities the post entails. The TA wears at least four hats during their service: as a professional assistant, grader, student-relations specialist, and student. Each of the four roles needs simultaneous juggling and care to find an adequate balance for all involved.

In general, you (the TA) should always check with the department for any official job requirements. Furthermore, before the semester begins, meet with the instructor you are working for so that you can outline all expectations before students are added to the equation. Also, if you are not clear about something, or think you need more information, ask questions. Ask the professor, and check with others who have TAed in the department or for that professor. Make sure that you know what you need to do for a successful semester.

The professional assistant

These responsibilities directly impact the instructor's ability to teach on a daily basis. They can range from taking attendance to preparing the classroom in advance.

- Absolutely be at least 10 minutes early to class. This sets an example for the students and provides the instructor with your help with any last minute details.
- Ask where the professor wants you to sit. Different people want different things from their TAs, and where you sit in the classroom can have an effect on your readiness when called upon.
- Have anything requested from the instructor on time and in an organized manner.

The grader

This is straightforward; you are grading students' assignments for the instructor. Yet, this will often require most of the time you put into this job.

- You are grading for someone else. Therefore, make sure you have all the information and understanding you need to grade in their place.
- Ask the instructor how they want assignments organized when returned—usually, in alphabetical order with grades for each segment of the assignment listed and totaled.
- Have the assignments graded and ready for the instructor on time. Plan and start far enough in advance so that if you have questions or problems there is enough time to contact the instructor for help.
- Find out how many comments the instructor wants you to put on the assignments. Comments are great for the students, but too many can slow the grading process down a great deal. On the other hand, there is truth in the saying that the more explanation you give to students, the less arguments you should get in the long run.

Student-relations specialist

Depending on what the department/instructor requires, TAs may hold office hours and tutoring services for students in their assigned classes.

- Students want as much as you are willing to give. You have to be the one to place limits on your availability. Whether you meet extensively with students outside your office hours, or give them your private contact information, etc., is up to you. Word to the wise, placing limitations is not “mean;” it is necessary for your own success and sanity.
- Be calm with students regardless of their reaction. Give respect, and demand respect. If a student is disrespectful, remove yourself from the situation and avoid escalation.
- Do not criticize the instructor, other TAs, or other students to any student. It is not professional behavior.
- Maintain a professional distance with your assigned students—your department sets the tone for this particular suggestion.
- Remember, students attach personal worth to their grades. Thus, try to help a confused student understand that it is the assignment that needed improvement, but do not be surprised if that suggestion is not heard.
- Professional ethics include being sensitive to students’ gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, and other aspects of their identities.

The student

With all that is required of a TA, you still have to maintain your successful student work production.

- Time management will never be more difficult or more important than balancing your work as a TA and as a student.
- Get your own class work done early. That is the timeline you have control over.
- The end of the semester has an entirely new and complicated meaning when grading and students are added to the workload. Try to finish all of your own class work the week before final exams or earlier.
- If you hold office hours, bring class work or reading to do when students do not show up.
- When TAing a course, keep in mind you might teach it someday. Keep good class notes, not just for the TA’ship but also for future use, and keep in mind what you would change if you taught the course. Also remember, though, that the course material and organization still belong to the instructor. You will have your chance eventually.

Finally, many universities have courses, seminars, or workshops to prepare teaching assistants for their new job. Make sure you check into these, but even if these are not available there are a number of resources on the subject. For further information, see the following sources.

Prieto, Loreto R., and Steven A. Meyers, ed. *The Teaching Assistant Training Handbook: How to Prepare TAs for Their Responsibilities*. Stillwater, Oklahoma: New Forums Press, 2001.

Smith, Janice A., et al. *Communicate: Strategies for International Teaching Assistants*. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2007.

Wilhoit, Stephen W. *Longman Teaching Assistant's Handbook: A Guide for Graduate Instructors of Composition and Literature*. New York: Longman, 2007.

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