

## 28

# Serving as a Graduate Teaching Assistant: Tips and Strategies

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## Introduction

Many graduate students will serve as teaching assistants (TAs, also referred to as instructional assistants) during their time in graduate school. Teaching assistants are less common at liberal arts colleges and teaching-oriented institutions but are a crucial part of research universities where professors must balance their research agendas with teaching large courses. In addition to helping the department deliver courses to students, teaching assistantships are important components of graduate training (Darling and Staton 1989). Serving as a teaching assistant is an important opportunity to develop your teaching style, become comfortable in the classroom, and familiarize yourself with resources that will help you continue to develop as an educator throughout your academic career (Chiu and Corrigan 2019).

## Expectations of the TA

The roles and expectations of a *teaching assistant* vary by institution, instructor, and course. These roles both lighten the workload of the instructor while also providing the TA with teaching experience. Most TAs will attend class, hold office hours, respond to student emails, grade assessments, liaise between the students and instructor, deliver guest lectures, and contribute to the development of syllabi, assessments, and rubrics. At larger universities, TAs may hold discussion sections.

It is beneficial to meet with the instructor before the start of the term to become acquainted and discuss expectations for each other, the students, and the course. Additionally, you should closely read the syllabus for information about the material covered in the course, as well as the types of assignments that you will grade. You should let the instructor know as soon as possible if you notice any difficult scheduling, such as grading a midterm the same week as your comprehensive exams (for additional information about comprehensive exams, see chapter 12).

As a TA you will work directly with the instructor and students to ensure that what is being taught in lecture is being understood by the students and then communicating with the instructor the needs and competencies of the students. Ask the instructor if they would like you to attend lecture. If it is your first time being exposed to the material, you may want to attend lecture regardless of the instructor's requirement. Mastery of lectures and assigned readings is essential for being able to assist students. The startup cost of learning a new course is high so serving as a TA for the same course multiple times is efficient.

Students will communicate with you via email, during office hours, and in-person before or after class if you attend. You should let students know how you prefer to be addressed—by your first name,

Ms./Mrs./Mr., or another salutation. Clear boundaries with students are essential so that they afford you the same respect they give the instructor and do not mistake you for a friend. Office hours are typically held in your graduate student office but can also be in the library or another public place like an on-campus coffee shop. If you meet with students in your office, be mindful of the door position. A student may feel more comfortable discussing sensitive information (e.g., disability accommodations, grades) with the door closed, whereas in other situations an open door may feel more comfortable to either the student or yourself. One strategy is to default to an open door and tell students that they're free to close it if they want.

Grading student work is your main responsibility. In addition to grading protocols specified by your instructor, here are some best practices. Activate the anonymous grading option on the course's online learning system. Grade one question at a time to maintain consistency and maximize efficiency.<sup>1</sup> If there are multiple teaching assistants, divide the exams by question as opposed to individually grading entire exams for a portion of the class. Ideally your instructor will provide you with a rubric of grading criteria and the desired grade distribution. If they do not provide a rubric, you should write your own (you can ask the university teaching center for assistance). Rubrics promote fairness and consistency and communicate to students where they lost/earned points.

Discussion sections (sometimes called "recitation sections" or just simply "sections") are smaller, discussion-based meetings that complement the larger and more passive lectures. In sections students can ask questions in a smaller setting, make connections between the course materials, and practice applying concepts from lecture. Leading sections may entail preparing slides that recap the week's lectures and readings, teaching supplementary readings, or something more casual like preparing questions for a discussion-based meeting. Research methods and statistics courses may require you to teach basic programming, such as Stata or R. Sections are also an opportunity to check in with students to see how they are progressing with assignments (for example, asking students to share their chosen topics for an essay due in two weeks) and to review their performance on exams (for example, going over the correct answers). Teaching sections is an important opportunity to practice facilitating classroom learning and leading classes. This experience will prepare you to your own course and/or pursuing an academic career (for more information about your first solo teaching experience, see chapter 29; for international students teaching their first class, see chapter 57).

The time commitment of your position will be outlined in the contract you sign with your department. If you are unionized there may be limits on how much you can work over a given week or academic term (for more information about graduate student unions, see chapter 33). Moreover, it is unlikely the hours you work will be consistent across weeks. For example, the week before an exam you may be overwhelmed with requests from students to meet while other weeks your office hours are unattended. The most demanding weeks will be the ones in which you grade assignments. You should ask the instructor how quickly you are expected to complete grading.

## Resources to Address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Classroom

*University resources* are available to meet students' personal and life needs so that they may succeed in the classroom. You may consider asking students at the beginning of the course via an anonymous survey if they have consistent access to reliable internet, a quiet place to study, and/or personal, work, or familial obligations that may affect their ability to succeed in the course. Understanding the challenges that your students are facing will help you direct them to the proper resources, which may include a food bank, emergency housing, childcare, subsidized internet subscriptions, access to computers, legal clinics, and student health centers. Familiarizing yourself with campus resources and encouraging students to use them creates opportunities for students to thrive outside of the classroom. Checking in throughout the term shows your students that you care about their wellbeing and allows you to encourage interventions in a timely manner.

Universities contain myriad resources for academic support. Writing centers connect students with workshops and one-on-one consultations to improve their writing. There are also tutoring services and

study groups available for students who need assistance beyond what you are able to provide in office hours. Students for whom English is their second language may benefit from the university's language assistance programs. Some universities also have resources for developing broader academic skills like time management and effective notetaking, which may be targeted towards first-generation or traditionally under-served student populations. If you want to provide students with additional academic resources, The Learning Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has fantastic online resources that are freely available.<sup>2</sup> (See also chapter 30 for APSA and discipline teaching resources.)

Another important resource on every campus is the office of student disabilities (or a similar name). Although the instructor will handle formal arrangements involving the office of student disabilities, it is important to be aware of the process because students may disclose to you their personal situation. Any student with documented disabilities is entitled to accommodations according to their needs. Once the student provides university documentation of the designated accommodations, it is your responsibility to ensure that your student has access to these services. Beyond providing the designated accommodations to which students are legally entitled, you can use inclusive pedagogies to empower students (Scott et al. 2003). The APSA Educate website hosts an online library of teaching materials on inclusive course design. You do not need an APSA membership to access these resources.

A holistic and compassionate approach to teaching is the cornerstone of inclusivity. There is no comprehensive list of things to “check off.” Everyday interactions signal to marginalized or disadvantaged students whether you are an ally. For instance, defaulting to they/them pronouns to avoid misgendering someone and avoiding culturally specific examples signal to students that they are welcome in your classroom. If you are teaching a discussion-based course, it is helpful to set community guidelines and review the campus' standards for inclusivity. Review microaggressions and acceptable language (e.g., LGBT+ people instead of “the gays”) with your students on the first day of class. Your participation standards should address communicating respectfully, contributing to an inclusive learning atmosphere, and following the university's code of conduct.

## Teaching Evaluations

Teaching evaluations are standard practice for educators in higher education. At their best, they offer feedback about what you are doing right and highlight room for improvement. At their worst, they can be a form of harassment and expose the intense gender and racial inequities in higher education (for a larger discussion, see chapter 49). Unconscious and unintentional biases about the race and gender of the instructor often results in lower evaluations than their peers with no true difference in quality of education (Peterson et al. 2019; Esarey and Valdes 2020). Nevertheless, it is common practice for academic job applications to require prior teaching evaluations, so it is important to strive for high scores. (For more information, see chapter 43 about job application statements and portfolios.)

Prior to students completing the official evaluations at the end of the semester you can facilitate anonymous and informal evaluation either by passing out notecards in class or an online survey. Suggested questions include: What is going well in this course so far? What could be going better? What can I do to facilitate your success? Students' feedback will help you adjust your teaching as necessary and will demonstrate that you value the opinions of your students.

In order to increase response rates on official evaluations you will want to email your students a reminder and talk to them in class about how evaluations are important for improving your teaching and securing future employment. You may also consider giving them time in class to complete the evaluations on their laptops.

Student evaluations often won't be available for instructors and TAs to view until after final grades are posted. Many people prefer to wait a couple weeks after the academic term to read evaluations because it gives them time to decompress and approach the feedback with fewer emotions and more neutrality. The course instructor, your advisor, or staff at university teaching centers can help you to understand the feedback and translate it into actionable changes for the next time you teach. Students' answers to open-ended questions will provide more insight than the quantitative scores. Finally, teaching evaluations are meant to improve over time. It matters more that you adapt to student feedback over

the course of your graduate career rather than having perfect evaluations from the onset.

## Common Challenges for TAs

Challenges are opportunities to develop new skills. We discuss two common challenges – facilitating classroom discussions and difficult interactions with students—but there are other situations that arise in or out of the classroom (Luo et al. 2000). The course instructor, your advisor, and your department chair likely all have many years of teaching experience and can help you troubleshoot these issues. The staff at the university teaching center will be able to support you as well.

Getting students to actively participate in classroom discussions can be challenging. Increasing participation in your class will require identifying why your students are not participating and devising a relevant solution. For example, some students do not participate because they fear being wrong will hurt their performance in the class. Address this by creating a classroom environment in which students feel comfortable taking risks and explain to your students that you do not expect them to always have the right answer. To help students become more confident speaking in front of the class, think-pair-share is a good tool for students to run their answer by a classmate before sharing it with the entire class. Additionally, students may want to participate but need more time to fully form their answers. When you pose a question to the class it can be helpful to set a timer for one to three minutes to allow them to think through the question. This can help mitigate the same person repeatedly being the first to raise their hand. There are many reasons beyond the ones mentioned here why students may not participate. If your classroom discussions are suffering from lack of participation, consider giving your students an anonymous survey inquiring what prevents participation in class and ask them what you can do as a teaching assistant to help them feel more comfortable participating.

Two types of difficult student interactions are those that occur in the classroom and those that occur in one-on-one interactions. Establishing clear standards of participation will help prevent disruptive classroom behaviors such as over-participation and disrespectful or offensive comments. Helpful rubric language to minimize overzealous participation may include “Participate actively without rambling consistently or dominating the room” or “Encourages and enables fellow classmates to participate.” Some students do not act as respectfully towards teaching assistants as they do towards instructors. This disproportionately affects teaching assistants who are women and/or from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. Strive for a friendly and professional hierarchical relationship with your students. It is important to always use your university email address when corresponding with students and to save all email correspondence at least until the end of the term. Additionally, office hours should be conducted with the door open so that you are never alone in a room with a student. Communicate with your instructor if any student interaction makes you feel uncomfortable or is problematic.

## Conclusion

While much of graduate school is devoted to producing peer-reviewed scholarship, serious investment in pedagogical training and experience is crucial for those considering academic careers. Engaging in regular metacognition (Lin et al. 2005) and reflection will help you to improve your teaching throughout your teaching assistantships and be able to articulate a teaching philosophy when you draft materials for academic job applications. Keep a list of classroom successes and activities or materials that were especially beneficial for students so that you can incorporate them into future syllabi and discuss them during job interviews.

It can be tempting to put all your effort into being the perfect teaching assistant, but remember that your teaching should complement, not dominate, your research activity. Treat yourself like you would advise a student completing a major assignment – establish a growth mindset (Dweck 2006), establish S.M.A.R.T. goals<sup>3</sup> (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound) for yourself, and celebrate progress forward. A good rule of thumb is to try no more than one new pedagogical technique per class, and some techniques may require multiple classes to achieve proficiency. Remember that what works for other instructors and at other campuses may not work for you. This is not a reflection on your skill as a

teaching assistant. If you are resourceful, enthusiastic, and persistent, you can learn to teach – and may even come to enjoy it, including both the humbling moments and the breakthroughs.

## Endnotes

- 1 For more information on the mechanics of grading, see <https://gsi.berkeley.edu/gsi-guide-contents/grading-intro/grading-efficiently>.
- 2 “Tips & Tools” from the Learning Center at UNC Chapel Hill resources available at <https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/>.
- 3 For more information, see [https://www.ucop.edu/local-human-resources/\\_files/performance-appraisal/How%20to%20write%20SMART%20Goals%20v2.pdf](https://www.ucop.edu/local-human-resources/_files/performance-appraisal/How%20to%20write%20SMART%20Goals%20v2.pdf).

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