



Guidelines and Best Practices for Undergraduate Teaching Assistants



UMass | Dartmouth
College of Arts & Sciences

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Introduction

Serving as a teaching assistant can be a great source of personal pride and satisfaction. However, acting in this capacity carries a unique responsibility because you are directly assisting your peers in their learning process. Therefore, the quality of your work has the potential to affect many students. The purpose of this guide is to make you aware of some of the challenges of being an undergraduate TA, and to offer suggestions for a successful experience.

Unique Pressures for an Undergraduate TA

Social Concerns

Unlike a graduate teaching assistant, you are a part of the same social structure as the people you are teaching and/or grading. You will probably know a number of them, and may even have personal relationships with some. You are now being placed in a unique situation, in which you are given a degree of “power” over your peers—a very challenging situation for anyone to be in. The job calls for being objective and neutral in all of your teaching and grading efforts, but there are times when human nature may make this almost impossible to achieve.

You must make every effort possible to avoid situations that create a conflict of interest. Do not simply assume there will be no problems; it is far better to be cautious upfront than to be caught in a difficult situation once the semester is underway. Remember, you will continue to socially interact with your friends and peers long after the semester is over.

Before the start of the semester, you should review the list of students for whom you are responsible with the course instructor. Ideally, a student who presents a potential conflict will be moved into another section or the faculty member or another TA can grade that student’s work. If these solutions are not possible, you should probably have a frank talk with the student before the semester starts about the temporary roles you find yourselves in. You must also take great care to double check your objectivity regarding these students.

Time and Schedule Pressures

As an undergraduate, you face a more rigid academic schedule than most graduate students. You are enrolled in many courses, and most of these have fairly strict timetables for homework, presentations and exams. As you well know, these tend to occur at about the same times each semester (around mid-semester, for example). Obviously, your teaching and grading pressures are both likely to peak at these exact same times. Because your teaching and grading work potentially affects so many other people, it must receive top priority and attention, but it may be impossible to pre-schedule your workload to account for this added demand.

Again, you should try to identify potential time problems as early as possible. You need to communicate your advance concerns to both the instructor of the course you are helping to teach, and possibly to your other course instructors as well. It may be possible to make some pre-arrangements when conflicts are identified far in advance. Both groups of instructors will be less able or willing to make last-minute exceptions or changes. In fact, it may be impossible for the teaching course instructor to do anything because so many other students would be affected, and the timetable for the course has already been set into motion.

Conducting a Class: More Than Knowledge

You were probably chosen for a teaching role based on your good grades or excellent performance in the course in which you will assist. Although it is certainly a recognition of your academic talents, it is not enough to automatically make you an excellent teaching assistant. There are many people with world-class knowledge of a subject who are, nevertheless, poor teachers.

You will need to work at building your skills as a teaching assistant, even if you feel it will be an easy job. Recall some activity in which you now excel, such as swimming or playing chess. Undoubtedly you weren't good at first and the activity took much more conscious thought than it now takes you. In addition, early on, you probably reached a point where you thought you were good, but then encountered a situation that showed you still had a lot more to learn. Conducting a class is similar to these activities. The best teachers make it look easy, but this is highly deceptive.

You are undoubtedly a good student, but you will have to work in order to become an effective teaching assistant. This is especially true in the first semester you TA. Skills that eventually become automatic will require conscious preparation at first. All aspects of your presentation must work together to explain an idea. You must be sufficiently prepared that you can write or draw while speaking, so as to convey a very complex topic or chain of ideas to a large audience. You must also understand the material at a deeper level than that at which you teach. The class will ask questions, and you are expected to provide an answer—if not the definitive answer—most of the time. It is your duty to the class to be as effective as possible, in the same way that you expect effective, engaged instruction when you participate as a student.

Beyond effective communication, you must involve the students in your class. This is a difficult task, because your students' abilities will cover a wide range. There are those who were born for the subject, and others who just aren't getting it. It is your job to engage as many as you can, and to make the material understandable to those who are willing to work with you toward that goal. This means that your instruction will frequently deviate from your planned course of action. You may have to slow down, speed up or go over material in much finer detail than you would have thought to be required. You are walking a fine line between engaging the slower students without alienating the quicker ones. This involves a continuous mental balance adjustment in the same way that walking a tightrope requires continuous physical adjustment. Both activities also require your full attention at all times.

The Need for Commitment

Teaching or grading commits you to a fixed schedule. As a student, you have some leeway to be late for a class, skip classes or vary deadlines. You do not have these luxuries when you teach or grade. Students expect you to be prompt and timely in your actions. They also expect feedback, help and an open communication pathway. The course instructor expects you to follow his or her instructions and guidelines, and to communicate effectively. In other words, your actions are integral to the success of the entire course. So a failure on your part affects not only you, but the entire class.

You and the Course Instructor

Before the semester begins, you and the course instructor should discuss your mutual expectations for the semester. Together, you should fill out the *Undergraduate Teaching Assistant Duties Agreement Form* (available on the CAS Dean's website). Once you agree on duties for the semester the faculty member should file a signed copy with the Department.

The Instructor's Expectations of You

We have already touched on a number of these expectations, so let us summarize a few:

- Effective communication at the start of the semester to identify potential personal conflicts with students in the class, and schedule conflicts with major demands in your other courses.
- Familiarity with the class material, at a deeper level than the presentation requires.
- Good preparation for class, to make the presentation effective and maximize the learning experience.
- Timeliness and punctuality in all course-related activities.
- Availability to the students.
- Feedback to the course instructor, to help identify problem areas.
- Adherence to the course instructor's rules and guidelines, and participation in all course formation and evaluation meetings as required.

Your Expectations of the Instructor

In turn, the course instructor also has obligations to you. All of these obligations—yours and the instructor's—are rooted in the need to effectively present course material to the students:

- Especially in your first semester, the course instructor should help you to prepare for the task of facing a class. The instructor should work with you to at least help you plan your first few presentations if you are in charge of a recitation, and possibly attend some of your initial class periods to give you feedback. Additionally, the instructor could refer you to someone who has been a TA for the course previously for advice and help.
- The instructor should not expect you to have the knowledge or experience of graduate student TAs. He or she should work with you more, and at a more fundamental level.
- You should not be required to make up questions or solutions for homeworks, quizzes or exams without oversight. If you do participate in these activities, the instructor should review any materials you create before dissemination.
- The course instructor should be explicit about the material you are to present. You should not be expected to create course material or to decide content of the course. Again, you may choose to do some work at this level to gain experience, but the material you create should be reviewed and modified as necessary by the course instructor prior to presentation.
- The course instructor should be available to you, at least weekly, in a time and manner of your mutual choosing, to review the course materials, progress and other concerns. Your concerns should be acknowledged and discussed, including any personal problems that arise with other students.

- The course instructor should address concerns that affect the entire class, such as continuously disruptive students, problems with the overall course material or timing, class concerns with course material or policy, and other “big issues.” You are not responsible in any way for solutions to these problems, although you may help in their formulation and may be involved in implementation.
- You should always feel comfortable about approaching the course instructor with your course-related problems, needs and concerns. At no time should you be made to feel intimidated, “stupid” or to have your concerns and questions ignored or trivialized. You are not attending the course as a student; you are working as a partner with your instructor to convey knowledge, insight, ideas and feedback to others. Undoubtedly, you will have to work at learning material in order to be an effective teacher, but you should not have to generate your knowledge alone.

When Things Go Wrong

Most undergraduates find teaching and grading to be a rewarding experience. Nevertheless, problems do occasionally arise and you will need a course of action to follow in order to resolve things as quickly as possible and with a minimum of disruption to the class. Most problems can be resolved through the course instructor. Hopefully you will never have to go beyond this level, but if you do, here is a suggested procedure for dispute resolution:

1. Start with the senior TA or course instructor. Arrange a meeting specifically to discuss the problem. Be clear about the problem and the assistance you need. Do not minimize the situation or allow the course instructor to dismiss it as trivial unless he or she has convinced you that this is, in fact, the case.
2. If your department has designated a faculty member to deal with undergraduate TA issues, this person should be your next level of contact. You will need to present your case in more detail, as he or she will not be familiar with the situation. Always be objective in your presentation, and stick to the relevant facts. If your department does not have a designated contact, you may consider talking to your faculty course advisor.
3. If the situation still cannot be resolved, you should schedule an appointment to discuss the situation with the Department Chair. Again, be prepared to discuss the background and facts of the case in as succinct a manner as possible. It is also helpful for you to have thought through some potential ideas for resolving the problem.
4. After all of these steps, if you still feel your concerns have not been dealt with, you may consider speaking to the Assistant Dean of the College. The Dean’s office has considerable experience in dealing with student concerns, and we may be able to help resolve the issue. Before taking the concern to this level, you should ensure that you have truly given the department every chance to resolve the situation, and you must be firmly convinced that the resolutions they have offered are seriously lacking in some important aspect.

Enjoy Your Experience

We hope the information and advice in this brochure proves useful to you as you begin your new role as a teaching assistant. You will find that teaching can be very fulfilling, and we hope you enjoy the experience.

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