



**The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning
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TWENTY TIPS - SOME HINTS ON HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE TA

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1. Definition of your duties: degree of ***interaction with profs*** varies widely! Check with your professor at the beginning of the semester as to his/her expectations about attendance at lectures, duties for keeping track of grades, help in xeroxing and handing out class materials etc, but as a general rule ‘check in’ frequently with the professor throughout the semester. It will also be extremely useful to consult the TA from last year. If you suspect any student of cheating do not try to deal with it yourself, but talk to the professor.
2. It is a good idea to ***attend many of the prof’s lectures***, at least toward the beginning of the semester, to become familiar with what level the professor expects, to observe where students have hang-ups, etc. Your perspective (listening to the professor lecture) as a fellow teacher will be very different from the one you had as a student taking a similar course.
3. Think about your ***goals in teaching***: the emphasis should not be on memorization of formulas or facts, but on ***helping students learn how to think critically***, how to solve problems, how to find answers for themselves. Think about this in labs, and try to avoid spoon-feeding answers to students, but rather develop the ability to guide them in discovering answers or coming to conclusions for themselves.
4. ***Value of TAing***: even if you are absolutely certain you will never teach, it is extremely valuable experience in ***thinking and speaking on your feet***. It helps you learn to transform passive into active knowledge. It is good practise for presenting/defending your ideas in a job situation, or on prelim exams. Also, teaching is something of a social responsibility, a payment for the privilege of satisfying our curiosity in doing basic research.
5. Do not be overly concerned about whether your students ‘like’ you; be more concerned that they respect you, although of course it is important to show that you have a sense of humor, and ***it is important to show your enthusiasm for the subject and for the class***. Let them know that you enjoy being there, that you regard the labs as a valuable way for them to learn the material and to get to know one another. Aim to be a professional.
6. ***Avoid the temptation to give lectures in lab***; your goal should be to get students involved in hands-on work as quickly as possible, especially if they have received a lab handout in advance. Often it is better to just let students ask questions as they encounter difficulties; this approach lets students work at their own level and pace. (However, be prepared that some students will *want* more lecturing and spoon-feeding; you need to remind them that this is not the most effective way for them to truly learn the material.)
7. When you do lecture, ***get the students actively engaged***: move around the room, make eye contact, write important terms on the board (also maybe an outline of the major

points to be covered), and ask some concept questions instead of just fact regurgitation. Do not use Powerpoint, unless it is imperative for you to show photos.

8. It is great to show that you have a sense of humor, but do ***be sensitive***, and avoid sexist, cultural or racial jokes; perhaps it is best to tell jokes on yourself.

9. Do ***set forth clear grading guidelines***, including policy for late work, in writing, at the very beginning of the year, and be reasonably strict about them (to protect the students from themselves!) - ***but*** be open to exceptions that are warranted in cases of medical or family emergencies. It is also fine to expect and enforce reasonable standards of neatness.

10. Generally it is a good idea to ***encourage students to work with one another*** in labs, helping each other to learn; make sure to let them know this explicitly. Just make it clear that when it is time to hand in material, each person puts it in his/her own words.

11. Make a serious effort to ***learn your students' names***; it makes a huge difference to them. It might be easier to initially focus on just their first names, and to ask something about them such as where they come from, or why they chose to take this course.

12. Be ***constructive when grading***; never write a derogatory comment - you can never be sure why it is that a student has messed up. They might have tried very hard but be suffering from a lot of personal problems.

13. Be ***open-minded when grading***: In an effort to be fair, beginning teachers (and TAs) usually tend to grade too rigidly. Try to look at the whole answer, stand back from it, realize that students can have an original idea and/or use correct reasoning even if they omit the point you had in mind, or miss the 'correct' answer. Think about your own goals - e.g. correct reasoning vs. factually or numerically correct answers - before grading. Also realize how annoyed students can get by picayune grading (eg red marks of minus 1, minus 2 etc all over their pages), and how it can affect the overall mood of the class. Grading is one of the main criticisms students (especially women) have about math and science courses - harsh grading can make the course seem like a weed-out exercise, and make them feel like a worth-less person.

14. In some ways it is harder to be a TA in ***courses for non-science students***. Try not to talk down to them; they are just as intelligent as the science students, but have different interests and motivations. Find ways to 'connect' the subject matter with their own interests and experiences; avoid excessive use of jargon terms; learn how to cut to the essence of a process or phenomenon without oversimplifying. Use pictures, diagrams, maps, models.

15. Don't schedule your ***office hours*** for the morning; students aren't up yet. As a general rule, schedule at least two different hour-long periods for office hours each week, and make sure you are there.

16. You also have an important ***role as a mentor and advisor***. One-on-one discussions in labs and on course field trips are an excellent way for you to offer advice and encouragement to students thinking about other courses in our department, or a

concentration and/or research project, or career. (Always feel free to suggest they contact Jan.)

17. Remember the *responsibility involved*: teaching is the fundamental mission of the university. So be on time, learn how to operate the slide projector; get materials out for the lab and put them away, and erase the board at the end of the lab. At the end of the semester make sure that everything is cleaned up and put away. If equipment is missing or malfunctioning, notify Bill Collins immediately.

18. Keep track of your *hours each week* - as a way to make sure you are not spending too little (or too much) time on your TA duties, and as important feedback to the professor about the TA needs for that course.

19. Do *keep a record* about what aspects of the various labs, homework exercises etc 'worked' and what didn't work, to put in the records to be passed on to next year's TA, as well as for your own use (perhaps in a portfolio) in striving to improve your effectiveness.

20. Finally, *have fun!!* It is a much healthier learning environment for everyone if you make it clear that you expect the semester's learning experience to be fun, for you and them - at the same time that you set high standards and expectations.

And of course - Make use of other grad students in the dept who have TAed, and absolutely make use of the Sheridan Center!