

Getting Ready for your Role as an Assistant in Instruction

Before the Semester Begins

- Communicate with the course instructor to learn about your role and responsibilities. Find time before the class begins to touch base and make sure that you understand your specific teaching responsibilities and the instructor's expectations for you as an Assistant in Instruction (AI).
- Ask faculty members and experienced AIs to share their impressions of Washington University students with you. The faculty members you work with are excellent sources of information about teaching in your field, and experienced AIs can help you learn what to expect when teaching specific courses.
- As an AI, you will be on the "front-line" for student questions. In many cases, in fact, students will be more likely to approach you to ask questions than they will be to ask a faculty member. Therefore, it is essential that you understand all course policies, including those pertaining to grading and attendance before the semester begins. If your responsibilities include grading, ask the faculty member or course supervisor to explain grading guidelines, criteria, and policies, including the procedure for responding to students' concerns about grades.
- If you are an AI who is in charge of a course or section of the course, take time before the semester starts to establish course policies and to come up with a plan ahead of time regarding how you will respond to students who request exceptions to course policies or who express concerns about grades.
- Check out your classroom. You can see details (including photos) of your classroom by using the **Classroom Directory** on the Teaching Center website. However, it is always best to visit the classroom yourself, so that you become familiar with the layout and available equipment. If you are teaching in a University-managed classroom and would like to learn about how to use classroom technology (e.g. SMART board, projector, classroom computer), call The Teaching Center at (314) 935-6810.
- When you check out your classroom, look for a yellow sign in the hallway, near the building exits. This sign indicates the evacuation route for the building, as well as procedures you should follow if an emergency occurs when you are in the building. View more tips on emergency management at the **University Emergency website**.
- Take time to get ready for the first day. If you are assisting in a lecture class, ask the faculty member to introduce you to students at the first lecture. Make it a point to talk informally with students before and after each class so that you can get to know them and they can see that you are approachable.
- Prepare to teach, rather than just to introduce yourself and the course, the first time you meet with students (see **The Teaching Center's Using Class Time Effectively on Day One**). Practice for your first class session, preferably in the classroom where you will teach. Rehearse how you will use the chalkboard or technology, how you will manage the time, and when you will pause to ask questions.

Before Each Class

- Preparation is the best cure for nervousness and uncertainty. Ensure that you have a grasp on the course content, as well as access to all necessary materials, including textbooks, lab equipment, course website, and other resources. As you prepare for each class, help session, or office hour, do not merely go over the same content that the students are learning. Take a broader view. Consider the ideas and assumptions behind the content; anticipate questions that students who are learning this material for the first time will ask you.
- Enhance your students' learning by being organized. Structure each class session around clear goals. Each class should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. The end of the class is especially important to provide students with closure on the material covered. Devise a plan for spending the last 5 minutes (or more) of class summarizing and solidifying key concepts and information.

- Have a “Plan B” ready to go if your “Plan A” does not go as anticipated. Doing so will help you maintain confidence and control. For example, sometimes a discussion or activity that you expected to last 15 minutes is over in 5, but still achieves the goals you had in mind. Rather than letting the class go early, you can devote the remaining time to another activity that will help the students learn the material (e.g., summarizing key ideas of the day, or presenting a problem or mystery that introduces the next class).
- Plan to use a variety of teaching methods, including those that involve active learning. Students can learn more and be more engaged if you routinely integrate active learning activities such as questions, problem-solving, discussions, and demonstrations. You can be most effective if you combine teaching methods to reach as many students as possible, and to help students learn in different ways. For example, combine verbal and visual explanations; explain concepts using both a big picture and a detail-oriented approach.
- Include time to summarize important points and to make connections to material that you covered during previous classes. Because your students are not experts in the field, they may have a difficult time identifying the most important points and seeing how these points are connected to the broader themes of the course. If you do not summarize and make connections, you may be able to cover more content but de-emphasizing the organizational context may actually reduce students’ ability to learn and retain all of the material.
- Get emotionally ready for class. Set aside time right before you teach to focus your mind on your goals for that day and to look forward to teaching—to interacting with students, helping them learn the day’s material, and responding to the questions and ideas that they bring to class.
- Present a professional appearance. Wear something in which you feel confident and comfortable. While there is no “dress code” for faculty and assistants in instruction, some instructors prefer to dress more formally than their students do in order to feel more confident in a role of authority.

During Each Class Session

- Arrive early, start on time, and end on time. Showing your respect for everyone’s time will encourage your students to do the same. Arriving early will allow you not only to set up for class but also to talk with students informally. This informal interaction will help you establish a rapport with your students, which will, in turn, help them feel confident about participating in class and asking for help when they need to.
- Show passion for the subject and for your students’ learning. You can inspire your students to learn by showing that you are excited about the course and their learning. If students appear bored, don’t be discouraged—just get students actively involved. For example, ask students to compose and answer questions, provide examples, or solve problems. Don’t assume that students look bored because they know the material and then decide to speed up your pace; it may be instead that they are having trouble understanding what you are presenting to them. It may also be that they are sleep-deprived, as college students often are. In either case, giving students focused activities can provide a huge boost for learning.
- Be flexible. Be prepared to have good days and bad days in the classroom. If you are not getting good results teaching in a particular way, try something new. For example, if the students in your discussion or recitation subsection are extremely quiet, try a small-group activity in which they solve a problem or answer a set of questions.
- Get to know your students and learn their preferred names. Be friendly, but maintain an environment that is fair (and appears to be fair) to all students. You should demonstrate that you care about your students and their learning. However, you should not try to be a friend (or more) with your students, which can create the appearance of partiality or favoritism.

- Do not be afraid to say you do not know the answer to a question. Tell your students that you will find out an answer, and then get back to them. Present the answer to the entire group during the next class; do not let the matter drop. You do not need to be all-knowing to maintain your credibility. One way to lose credibility, in fact, is to “bluff” by giving an answer of which you are unsure (and which later turns out to be inaccurate). By being confident in not knowing and coming back with an answer later, you are modelling honesty and intellectual curiosity. Your enthusiasm for learning something new will inspire your students to follow your example. At the same time, if you find that you frequently do not know the answers to your students’ questions, you may need to spend more time preparing for each class session.
- When asking questions, be willing to tolerate some silence. Often, silence means that students are thinking—an activity you want to encourage in the classroom. Do not give in to the temptation to answer your own questions, which will only convince students that if they wait long enough, you will supply the answers for them. Wait 5-10 seconds for an answer. If, at that point, you are getting blank stares and quizzical expressions, rephrase your question. For additional questioning strategies, see **Asking Questions to Improve Learning**.
- Make an effort to get all students involved. Encourage students to think out loud when they are answering questions and working through problems. When soliciting an answer from the class, call on a variety of students. You may need to wait a few moments for students who are shy or still thinking about the answer to volunteer, and you may have to ask some students to give others a chance to speak. For additional questioning strategies, see **Increasing Student Participation**.

After Each Class Session

- Reflect on how the class went. Take five minutes to note what worked and what did not, points that seemed challenging or confusing for students, and any new ideas that occurred to you while teaching. Keep these notes with your lecture notes or lesson plans so that they are accessible as you prepare for the next session and for the next time you teach the same course. If you wait until the end of the semester to reflect on how the entire course went, you will probably have forgotten the specific details that will be helpful to you later.
- Make any necessary adjustments to your plan for the next class session. For example, will you need to clarify or review any material from the session that just ended? Will you need to start at a different point than what you had anticipated? Do you need to make changes to the way that you present material? Is there anything you can do to improve student participation and comprehension?

Throughout the Semester

- Seek out assistance when you need it. If you have questions and concerns, speak with the faculty member who is in charge of the course. If you have concerns about a student’s health or academic progress, or if you suspect the student has committed a violation of academic integrity, speak as soon as possible with the course instructor or course supervisor. Consult the Graduate School’s **Reference Guide to Support Teaching Experiences** for specific information on University policies and procedures, as well as the additional information included in your Graduate Student Teaching Orientation materials, such as the list of resources on the handout titled Assistance for Students.
- Participate in opportunities to learn about and discuss teaching. Consider attending teaching workshops sponsored by The Teaching Center and your department. If you would like to discuss your teaching or learn about opportunities for professional development in teaching, make an appointment for a Teaching Center consultation. Engage faculty mentors and peers in conversations about teaching. Consider joining with fellow graduate students to start an informal teaching group in which you discuss your own teaching and respond to scholarship on teaching or join The Teaching Center’s EPIC Learning Community. EPIC is a multidisciplinary program that is designed for graduate students early

in their teaching at Washington University to learn more about pedagogy, meet colleagues from across the university, and engage in thoughtful discourse.

Recommended Reading

Asking Questions to Improve Learning: <https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/teaching-methods/participation/asking-questions-to-improve-learning/>

Classroom Directory: <https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/classrooms/directory/>

Davis, Barbara Gross. Tools for Teaching. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

Increasing Student Participation: <https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/teaching-methods/participation/tips-for-increasing-student-participation/>

McKeachie, Wilbert, et al. McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers. 12th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

University Emergency Management: emergency.wustl.edu

Using Class Time Effectively on Day One: <https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/course-design/using-class-time-effectively-on-day-one/>