

Tips for First-Time Teaching Assistants (TAs) and Instructional Aides (IAs)

Before the Semester Begins

Communicate with the course instructor or course supervisor to learn your roles 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 a TA.

Ask faculty members and experienced TAs to share with you their impressions of Washington University students. The faculty members you work with are excellent sources of information and ideas on teaching in your field, and experienced TAs can help you learn what to expect when teaching specific courses.

Learn (or establish) the course policies and procedures related to grading. As a TA or IA, 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 such 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 a TA 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 Web site (teachingcenter.wustl.edu/classrooms/directory). However, it is always best to visit the classroom yourself, so that you can familiarize yourself with the layout and any available multimedia. If you are teaching in a University-managed classroom and would like to schedule a multimedia training session, 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 will indicate the evacuation route for the building, as well as procedures you should follow if an emergency occurs when you are in the building.

Take time to get ready for the first day. If you are assisting in a lecture class, ask the faculty member who is teaching 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 *Tips for Teaching on the First Day of Class*, included in the TA Orientation folders and at teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources). Practice your first class session, preferably in the classroom where you will teach. Rehearse how you will use the chalkboard or technology; for example, how you will manage the time, and when you will pause to ask questions.

Before Each Class, Office Hour, or Help Session

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 Web site, 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. Plan a structure for each class session, with clear goals for each 10-15 minute section of the class. Each class should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. The end

of the class is especially important, so it helps to 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 five, 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 topic).

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. In addition, 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 TAs, 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 at the classroom 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; instead, 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 any case, giving students focused activities when they are struggling with the material or when their energy is lagging can help them learn.

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.

Be friendly to students, 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 the 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 it, 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 to learn 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* at teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources).

After Each Class Session

Reflect on how it 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 that which you had anticipated? Do you need to make changes in 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 you are teaching. 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 TA Handbook* for specific information on University policies and procedures, as well as the additional information included in your TA 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.