

## The American Classroom **Tips for New International TAs**

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### In the beginning

- Meet with the course instructor / supervisor to make sure you know what your responsibilities are and what is expected of you as a TA.
- Meet previous TAs of the course to learn more about the course nature including grading routines.
- Make sure you, the instructor, and other TAs (if there are any) are on the same page on all aspects of the course, including grading.
- If your TA responsibilities include off-campus duties, make sure you know the commands of the other environment and follow them closely.
- Understand the syllabus and the course material before the course begins, and do not hesitate to ask questions if anything is unclear; always be prepared for class—do not "wing it"!
- Establish a schedule to ensure you have a workable balance between your studies, your TA responsibilities, and other responsibilities you might have.

### In the middle of the semester

- If you face any difficulty handling students, make sure you talk to the faculty in charge and find a timely solution.
- Some professors may ask you to lead a lecture during the semester in order to help with your professional development. Start building your professional portfolio now!
- Continuously evaluate yourself by discussing with the instructor, fellow TAs, and class students; don't wait until the semester ends.
- Learn to take feedback from students and use it to improve yourself. Do mid-semester evaluations; they can be informal but they will help you a lot with your teaching.
- Have office hours and don't miss them, even if you do not expect anyone to show up! Use them to talk to students one-on-one. This can be useful for students struggling or causing you any trouble.
- Don't be afraid to admit it when you don't know the answer to a question. But offer to find out, and follow through with that promise the next class.
- Maintain a safe and respectful environment in your classroom. It is okay for students to challenge and question you and each other, but it is not okay for students to be disrespectful to you or their classmates.

### Bonus tips

- It is okay to be nervous. But keep in mind that you are the one in charge. Be confident in the knowledge that you have and in your abilities as a TA. Teaching is learning—you'll get better too!
- Teach with your personality, borrowing from others whose teaching styles you admire, but always be you! *You* can bring something to the table with your own tastes, opinions and methods.
- Language concerns are common with international students. Do your best to communicate clearly. The students also have a responsibility to try their best to understand you, just as much as you try to understand them. If needed, check with the Slutzker Center for International Students for additional language support they might have.
- Students must be respectful of you and of each other at all times. Extend the same respect to your students and fellow TAs that you would like them to extend to you.
- Be friendly but maintain boundaries. Your students are your students and not your friends! Never date as student! Remember that you have the power to give grades, and that changes everything.

**Suggestions for Verbal Feedback** (Source: [http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/resources/resources\\_graduate\\_students/ta\\_handbook/giving\\_effective\\_feedback/suggestions\\_verbal\\_feedback.html](http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/resources/resources_graduate_students/ta_handbook/giving_effective_feedback/suggestions_verbal_feedback.html))

- **Positive Feedback for a Correct Response, Comment, or Appropriate Question**

**Scenario A:** a TA is lecturing on the musical structure of a piece of classical music and a student asks, "Can some sections be left out?"

**Option 1:** "Thanks for bringing that up. The question was, 'can some sections be left out?' Does anyone think they know the answer?"

- ✓ 'Thanks' validates student participation.
- ✓ Restating the question for the class ensures that everyone can hear what was asked.
- ✓ Passing the question on to the whole class encourages participation.

**Option 2:** "Interesting question. The question was 'can some sections be left out?' In fact, more often than not, extra sections or movements are added. For example, ..."

- ✓ Starting with a positive response validates student participation.
- ✓ Restates the question for the class so everyone can hear.
- ✓ Allows the TA to move into a lecture-style format and present additional information.

**Option 3:** "Good question. The question was 'can some sections be left out?' I believe this type of music requires that all sections we've talked about be included but I am not sure. I will look into it and let you know by email. In the meantime, is there anyone else who knows?"

- ✓ Positive response.
- ✓ Restates the question for the class so everyone can hear.
- ✓ Admits the TA does not know the answer (honest response) and demonstrates accountability.
- ✓ Passes the question on to the class for group participation.

- **Positive Feedback for an Incorrect Response, Comment, or Appropriate Question**

**Scenario B:** in a Biology class the TA asks: "Who can tell me what distinguishes an animal cell from a plant cell?" A student responds, "Well, I don't think a plant cell has a cell wall" (an incorrect response).

**Option 1:** "OK, let's take a step back first. Who remembers the characteristics of a plant cell from last week?"

- ✓ Does not emphasize the student's mistake.
- ✓ Serves as a way to review and consider recent material.

**Option 2:** "No, that is not quite right. One of these cells has a wall while the other does not. Can you remember what distinguishes the two?"

- ✓ Encouraging feedback that does not alienate the student.
- ✓ Restates the student's response and clarifies what is incorrect.
- ✓ Uses the incorrect response as a chance to compare two concepts and to review other material.

**Scenario C:** in a Statistics class a TA is discussing the Chi-square test. A student asks, "Can't we just use a T-test instead?"

**Option 1:** "Good question, let's take a moment to discuss the reasons why we would choose a Chi-square test over a T-test."

- ✓ Serves as a way to review and compare recent material (a good study technique).

**Option 2:** "Does anyone else find the distinction between these two tests confusing? After class I will post a chart on OWL that compares these two tests for you to use. For now, let's focus on the Chi-square test."

- ✓ Underlies the need to move on, but demonstrates compassion for the student and an interest in supporting continued learning.