

Student Best Practices Guide for UW Teaching Assistants

ASUW Working Group on TA Support

The following is a set of best practices, from a student perspective, that was put together by the ASUW Working Group on TA Support. We are a group of nine students from multiple backgrounds that came together to discuss ways that the University could provide Teaching Assistants with more resources to succeed in the classroom. We recognize the difficulty of teaching, and hope that this tool will be useful in understanding the teaching methods that undergraduates most appreciate.

As successful teaching methods differ between fields of study, we crafted a list of generally helpful techniques, as well as a picture of our ideal Teaching Assistant from each field of study that we had represented in our Working Group. Of course, a teacher's best bet is to respond to the needs of each individual classroom and seek input on teaching style early and often, but we believe that this guide will serve useful for all Teaching Assistants at the UW.

MOST HELPFUL TECHNIQUES IN GENERAL →

- Actively engage in each student's learning process, and try to learn names. It helps to know you care!
- Stay open to student ideas and input. This is especially useful for discussion based courses to create an environment conducive to learning.
- Articulate and speak clearly with good volume. This is a basic way to ensure that course ideas are effectively communicated to students.
- Coordinate section with lecture and maintain course consistency. This comes down to organization and communication with the professor leading the course, if applicable.
- Be available and respond promptly to emails when possible.
- Be familiar with the material and be prepared for the section's curriculum. This seem basic but it is the foundation for a successful course.
- Maintain grading/attendance policies throughout the course and for all students. Parity in grading is often questioned, reasonably or unreasonably, but standardization and transparency is an easy way to keep away some of these concerns.

- Encourage student discussion and participation and try to call on a variety of students in discussions. Calling on students that have not actively engaged can work for some sections, but we recommend gauging the classroom dynamic first.
- Familiarize yourself with the classroom technology beforehand. This includes not only in-class resources but online tools such as Catalyst and WebAssign.
- Be on time to both class and office hours. This will encourage students to be punctual as well.
- Provide opportunities for students to engage in the material hands on if possible. Some students require a more tactile learning style.
- Give detailed and specific feedback to students, especially about missed points.
- Modify pace to fit students' needs when possible. Actively seek input from students on their comfort with the speed of the class.
- Send out materials beforehand, if applicable.
- Solicit mid-quarter course feedback to help adjust to student needs, through tools such as Catalyst or more formal methods.

THINGS TO AVOID →

- Being vague in instruction or feedback. It is extremely important that students know where they stand in their understanding of the material.
- Doubting yourself or your knowledge of the material. Students learn best when they feel confident in their instructor.
- Choosing favorites in class. This is often unintentional, but students greatly appreciate it when teachers make an honest effort towards neutrality.
- Digressing from the material too much. There is a fine line between adding some personality to teaching and spending too much class time on stories and tangential material.
- Taking negative feedback personally. When students feel comfortable approaching TAs privately with concerns, this provides a healthy opportunity for the development of the learning environment.
- Focusing too heavily on only discussion, lecture, or group work in one section. This will depend on the class, but in most cases it is ideal to have a mix between these methods.

- Giving practice problems with no available solutions. Practice work is crucial, but it's difficult to make progress in learning without feedback on that work.
- Being close minded to student ideas. This is especially relevant to discussion sections, where students need to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts freely.

A Picture of our Ideal Teaching Assistant

Hard Sciences

Our ideal TA is knowledgeable and prepared for each lecture with strong and relevant examples to illustrate concepts. They actively engage in each student's learning, making sure that everyone understands the material. The TA is aware of common mistakes that students may make, and gives examples of how to correctly work through each problem, providing specific feedback on assessments and worksheets. An ideal TA is personable towards students, getting to know them and sharing interesting applications for the material or their own research.

Social Sciences/Business

In classes with concrete real world connections, they emphasize their personal experiences and illustrate how concepts relate to applications. When using examples in assessments or lessons, an ideal TA takes the opportunity to make them fresh and interesting. It is especially important to be personable and engaging. Social sciences and business require a particularly strong balance between lecture and discussion in order to promote student understanding.

Humanities

The perfect humanities TA understands all the class materials, and is able to connect readings to lecture. They're open to new ideas from students, helping them to connect course subjects with current events or outside material. It is especially important in these classes to allow students to express ideas and philosophies that don't necessarily coordinate with those of the instructor. Given the subjectivity, an ideal TA maintains students' respect through transparent and consistent grading policies. They make certain that students are prepared for exams, giving them not only information but strategies on how to approach the questions.

STUDENT STORIES

These are pictures of exemplary and poor teaching for each type of TA we identified.

"In this current quarter, I have a TA in MATH 125 who is almost like another professor. He sets up midterm and final reviews and sends them to his quiz sections. He also thoroughly explains how to do each problem instead of just stating the surface steps. I really enjoy being in his class, and I actually learn more in his quiz section than in my actual professors' lecture. I feel very confident in his knowledge of math."

- Anna, Freshman, Civil Engineering

"I had a Math TA who had a very thick accent, barely spoke above a whisper, and wrote incredibly small on the board. No one in class was able to hear or understand what he was saying, or see what was being written on the board. When asked to write bigger or talk louder, he would for a couple minutes, then go back to his original volume/size of writing. Incredibly smart TA who knew the material, but was unable to teach well so the quiz sections were a waste of time."

- Sahnzie, Senior, Business

"I am currently taking ECON 200 with a TA from Venezuela. Although it is her first time being a TA, she is a lot better than some of the TAs I had/heard before. She is passionate, knowledgeable and responsible- she makes notes for us and makes sure we understand the key concepts. She is really approachable and patient- she is willing to spend extra time to go through some problems students have. I really appreciate that she writes out her lesson plan at the beginning of quiz section and has time for Q&A which I think is really helpful. She encourages us to visit her office hours. I did that several times this quarter and every time I went, I had my questions answered."

- Tina, Freshman, Undeclared

"I had a statistics TA that was extremely ineffective in teaching the subject. Everyday in section he would show up with exactly what he was going to say written down and did not know anything that wasn't written in front of him. He was not able to answer students' questions or answered them incorrectly. There was a slight language barrier when students' asked questions and he would answer completely different questions."

- Bethany, Senior, Political Science/Communications

"I had a TA who was very intelligent; he ran the class very smoothly. Discussions almost always were very detailed. He would elaborate on pieces that the book gave minimal information on. He was a very hard grader, a 3.2 was a 4.0 to him, but he pushed all of his students to work to their best and I couldn't have enjoyed it more. Students who were just there coasting to get credits were actually forced to do the work and if they did not then they were failed (which happens very little in the history department). I came out of the quiz section with just as much if not more information than I did from the professor's lessons themselves and the professor knew what he was doing. I cannot say enough good things about the excitement and enjoyment I got in my Chinese history class because of how demanding our TA was."

- Chris, 2012 Alumni, History/Classical Studies

"The communication between the TA and Professor was poor. To start off that was because the professor was not very structured, but also gave barely any instruction to his TAs/the TAs were failing to lead the class when the Professor was on a trip to Europe. The TA would answer a question one way, and then the Professor would answer a different way, I would return to the TA with my information, and he would state he gave that information in the first place, which is false as I had the emails. I have noticed that to be issues in many classes, accountability by TAs. This affected the entire class as it was a very participation heavy, rule heavy class because it is a Congress Simulation. That also brought heavy ensnarement to myself and peers. It was a poor experience, and the TA's interest in the class was very limited."

- Amanda, Junior, Political Science/History

CONCLUSION

Thank you for reading this guide. Our main goal is to not only increase the resources available to TAs on campus, but increase the collaboration between undergraduates and graduates on what makes for a great teaching experience at the University of Washington.

We appreciate you choosing to include us in your passion through teaching, and wish you the best for your future endeavors.