

# Preparing Your TA for the Job

 [facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-careers/preparing-your-ta-for-the-job](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-careers/preparing-your-ta-for-the-job)

By Katherine Senko

February 24, 2019



The Teaching Assistant (TA) job is typically filled by an upper-level university student or graduate student. It's a job that requires one to play several different roles. First and foremost, the TA is a student and must complete all responsibilities to maintain this status. Second, the TA has a responsibility to the hiring professor. To the professor, the TA is the assistant and must abide by the requirements set out by the professor. Third, the TA has a responsibility to the students in the class. The role here is that of teacher, tutor, and occasionally advisor.

How does your school prepare TA's for each of these individual and important roles? Many schools simply run their TA's through the hiring process and those whose grades in the subject area are high enough qualify for the position. Ideally, the hiring body also prepares the TA's for each role they will serve, as the student, as the assistant, and as the teacher. But in most cases, the professor is solely responsible for preparing the student to also become a competent TA.

## **Advice for faculty**

It is important for both the TA and the professor to clearly understand all three roles. It helps if the professor sets ground rules early in the semester. As a professor, be sure to plainly communicate your expectations and be open to

hearing any concerns of the TA. Remember, the TA is first a student, second an assistant, and third a teacher.

Your TA is most familiar with being a student, and this is the role they should take most seriously. It is the reason they are at the school after all. They should have strong study techniques and know the subject matter well. Combining the student role with TA responsibilities adds a new importance in time management. The student's time is now occupied not only by his or her own studies, but additional requirements set out by the professor. Therefore, time management is paramount.

Setting priorities are the hallmark of time management. The priorities of one's own courses and those that one is teaching must be balanced. If the balance becomes disrupted, then the TA must communicate this to the professor. Emphasize to the TA the importance of advanced communication. If the TA is falling behind in his or her own student work, the professor must know this. Arrangements can be made to relieve the TA of certain duties if the professor knows about the difficulty ahead of time.

The role of assistant deals largely with class preparation. Remember the TA probably has no formal teaching experience, so class preparation is new to them. As the professor's assistant, the TA may be expected to deliver lecture material, formulate discussion questions, grade papers or other learning material, and maintain office hours. Each of these activities takes considerable planning. Sometimes a new TA underestimates the amount of time each activity requires. It is good practice to collaborate with the TA in the beginning until you are both comfortable. Here, communication is again key. Clearly state your requirements and direct the TA on how to accomplish each task.

Preparing content for teaching is more than forming an outline. The professor should work with the TA to emphasize important points, fully prepare examples of difficult concepts, work through tough problems, and even draw out schematics or concept maps. Discussion questions should be open-ended and initially developed with the professor's guidance. Working directly with the TA on these matters ensures the focus of the lesson is appropriate. Standards for grading and feedback need to be clear and as objective as possible. The TA should be prompt and attentive to all office hours.

Presenting to the class may be the most unfamiliar and daunting of the roles the TA will face. To prepare the TA the professor may have the TA practice before giving to students or observe a professor's lecture. The style of the TA may be different, but the content should be the same. Presentation techniques include lecture, discussion questions, debates, interactive problem-solving, or case study analysis. The more opportunities students have

to interact with the content, the more they'll learn and retain. Similarly, the more a professor interacts with the TA, the better the TA will know the emphasis of content material.

Managing the class is also important. Taking attendance, controlling distracted students, entering grades—these are all jobs that become the responsibility of the TA. Walk the TA through various scenarios and techniques for dealing with classroom disturbances and processes. For example, what procedure do you prefer the TA uses for attendance? Should the TA call out the roll or use a sign-in sheet? Is the classroom set up for active learning and small group work or is set up for lectures? Can the TA easily reach out to students who may be distracted? Direct the TA in how the papers should be graded. Do you want to focus on content yet still comment on technique and grammar? How much feedback are the TAs capable of giving? Are you comfortable with the TA giving advice to students? These questions should be answered early before the start of the job.

Hiring a TA can mean a welcome relief of the administrative duties of the classroom, but it does require careful preparation and ongoing communication. Clearly establish your requirements early. Guide the TA on how to prepare a lesson. Show the TA what you are looking for in your grading techniques. Emphasize the key points throughout the semester. Communicate openly and frequently. Make TA training part of your own preparation and the process should flow smoothly.

*Katherine Senko is an instructional designer with more than 15 years of experience designing courses for various industries. She holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership. She is currently working at Carnegie Mellon University.*