

TA Do's and Don'ts

Or, Simple tips to help you get the most out of your TA experience

Do

- **Check out the location of your room in advance**
 - There's nothing worse than arriving flustered and out of breath for your first class.
- **Turn up on time for every lecture and/or tutorial**
 - Being late cuts into your teaching time and sets a bad example for students.
- **Learn your students' names**
 - This is easy for some, hard for others, but it's worth doing. You can also ask your TA supervisor to download pictures of your students from Extranet for you.
- **Arrive prepared**
 - While you can't anticipate everything, you'll feel more comfortable if you're on top of the material.
- **Have some activities to fall back on**
 - Sometimes we're lucky and our tutorials are full of interested, enthusiastic, talkative students; other times, it can feel like pulling teeth. Come up with a few activities you can do to get discussion started—even setting a simple "show and tell" assignment for the next week's tutorial can work.
- **Keep your office hours**
 - Once you post your office hours, make sure to keep them. If you have to cancel due to sickness or other emergency situation, use Brightspace to let students know.
- **Try to be consistent in your grading**
 - Especially if you've never graded before, you may find it useful to compare the last essays or tests you marked with the first few. It's surprising how often we start grading either harder or more easily as we work our way through the stack of papers.
- **Be respectful**
 - To your course instructor: they are an expert in the area;
 - to your fellow TAs: they're also going through a steep learning curve;
 - to your students: you don't know what's going on in their lives nor what expertise they may have.
- **Be enthusiastic**
 - Teaching is like thermodynamics: energy in = energy out. If you approach teaching with enthusiasm, your students will respond in kind. If you come across as bored or indifferent, your students will mirror that back to you.
- **Be cautious with confidential information**
 - Your instructor might reveal some confidential information about students, for example, needing some special accommodation. Be respectful with this information;
 - If unsure if information disclosed is confidential, please ask;
 - Students might share some personal information with you. If unsure what to do with this information, ask them if it is fine to share with the course instructor.
- **Know where to call for help**
 - Call 911 for an emergency or 519-661-3300 for campus police (non-emergency);
 - for help with AV technical problems, consult with the Operations and Communications Manager;
 - for help with Brightspace, please contact the WTS Helpdesk;
 - the main office is open 8:30 am – 4 pm.
- **Other**
 - All classrooms are supposed to be regularly supplied with either chalk or whiteboard markers, as appropriate. If something seems to be missing, please contact the Operations and Communications Manager.

Don't

- **Be inconsistent**
 - Students will be confused if you're inconsistent in your approach.
- **Pretend an expertise you don't have**
 - Students can almost always tell when you're faking it. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. You can either turn this into a classroom exercise by having them look it up or you can tell them you'll find out and give them the answer in the next class.
- **Try to make yourself look smart at a student's expense**
 - This one's easy. Think about how you would feel in the student's place.
- **Allow too much time wasting**
 - Occasionally you will get a student who thinks it's clever to be able to divert the class from its topic. Unless it is actually relevant, try to get them back on track quickly.
- **Procrastinate**
 - It's all too easy to put off doing tasks we dislike or are unsure about. But, especially when you're new to grading, it's a mistake to put it off to the last minute and leave yourself too rushed to do a good job.
- **Be unprofessional**
 - Your TA position is an apprenticeship in teaching with serious responsibilities. Your work can have a serious effect on your students, for better or worse. We assume you want it to be for better, not for worse.
- **Be inefficient**
 - Your TA hours are predicated on the belief that you will be professional (see above). Your course instructor will expect you to learn to grade expediently and not to waste time.
- **Set a bad example**
 - Undergraduate students look to you for an example of how to behave in the classroom. If you are talking over the lecture, playing games on your laptop, or chatting on your phone, students will see that as validating their choice to do likewise. What you want in the classroom is an active learning community – and that has to be positively reinforced all the time by you setting an example at all times.
- **Fail to pay attention**
 - What you want in the classroom is an active learning community – and that has to be positively reinforced all the time by you setting an example at all times.
- **Play favourites**
 - Favouritism is nasty and creates classroom dissension. A good learning environment depends on a fair and even-handed attitude on the parts of both TAs and teachers.
- **Allow students to give you medical information**
 - Western has a policy of only allowing the counselling offices in each faculty to approve medical or other accommodations.
- **Change the assignments**
 - Assignments are set by the course instructor, who has pedagogical reasons for wanting them done in particular ways. Additionally, Senate regulations forbid changing the assignments once the course has started.
- **Work overtime without the proper permissions**
 - Any hours worked beyond those described in the Duties Specification Agreement shall not be worked without an Employee sending a completed Overtime Request Form to their Course Supervisor and Director of Administration for the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.
- **Be too hard on yourself**
 - We all had to start as TAs. There is a significant learning curve. Your course instructor will help you learn how to conduct tutorials, how to grade, how to write effective comments, etc., and be your first port of call for any related problems you may have.
- **Fail to ask for help**
 - Asking for help isn't a sign of weakness, but rather that you're smart enough to recognize your limitations; asking for help when you need it can save you from further aggravation.