

What Makes A Great Teaching Assistant?

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When certain college courses take on dozens of students per class, it can be overwhelming to the most prepared of professors.

This is where a TA comes in. She helps grade papers, answer student questions, and can even supplement course materials and lectures from time to time. However if you're just starting out in a teaching assistant position, the task can be daunting.

What Makes a Good TA?

Just as with any teacher, the students are the best way to measure a TA's success. The happier and more educated the students, the better job the TA is doing. Often times TA's are students as well, and have a good, working understanding of how best to reach and engage students. However, there is a difference between a good TA and a great TA, a few examples of which we have below.

On Presentations

A good TA will: be prepared for each lecture with tons of notes and knowledge.

A great TA will: be prepared to ask students questions, engage the classroom as a whole, and maintain a healthy learning environment.

On Questions

A good TA will: answer a student's questions in person or via email in a timely manner.

A great TA will: answer a student's specific questions, rather than giving a blanket answer.

On Communication

A good TA will: be easy to understand and have command of the language. (A TA who writes for "Science Blogs" listed this as the major complaint of students).

A great TA will: be easy to understand and uses phrases that fit the classroom — i.e. if you're a graduate student/TA teaching an undergrad class, use undergrad terminology.

On Teaching

A good TA will: explain theory/idea, and then work a problem or real life example.

A great TA will: explain theory/idea, and then work a SERIES of problems AND real life examples on the board and with the students themselves.

On Relationships

A good TA will: learn the student's names.

A great TA will: learn the student's names and educational goals, as well as strengths and weaknesses.

What Shouldn't a TA Do?

Now that you've got some to-do's, be sure and avoid these pitfalls of being a teaching assistant:

1. Do not undermine the teacher/professor

No matter how much you may disagree with teaching methods, go with them. Turmoil in the classroom reflects poorly on you. Only when the teacher is truly out of line should you say something, but in the appropriate setting.

2. No first time fears

Every TA starts somewhere, but it's important that the students don't know if it's your first, second, or hundredth time. Don't let on to students that this is your first TA position.

3. No recounting previous TA jobs

You may have had a really difficult situation in your last teaching job, but your students do not need to know that. Only past relevant *and* positive experiences should be shared.

4. No getting personal

Sure your students may be the around your same age and share some of the same interests, but remember to maintain the student/teacher relationship at all times.

5. You run the class

Unfortunately there are students who hear "TA" and think that you will be a push-over. Set the precedent early and clearly that this is your class, not the students'.

More Tips for TA's

Still unsure on how to proceed? Check out these great tips:

- **Read about TA's by TA's:** There are tons of teaching and teaching assistant blogs on the web that are full of useful information.
- **Use the teacher:** That's what teachers there for and should have plenty to say on how you can succeed.
- **Go to a TA directly:** If you're becoming a TA, chances are you've had a few before. Go to your favorites and ask if they'll take a short meeting with you to pass on their wisdom.
- **The handbook:** Every college, university, and school has a handbook for faculty on what is expected. Be sure you read and understand it.