

"The role of teaching assistant (TA) is one of the most creative inventions in the history of higher education."

*John D. Andrews
Strengthening the Teaching Assistant Faculty*

The Department of Anthropology acknowledges its indebtedness to the Department of Chemistry at the University of Maryland, College Park, for material which was taken from their Chemistry Teaching Assistant Handbook, 2nd ed., and which constitutes the bulk of this handbook for Anthropology teaching assistants.

TEACHING ASSISTANT HANDBOOK

INTRODUCTION

This Handbook for Anthropology TAs is intended to ease some of the initial anxieties and to provide some direction and support for filling the role of a TA. We don't presume that any set of guidelines can assure that you will be an 'inspired,' 'creative,' or even a 'good' teacher. Effective teaching as a craft is a creative endeavor and is largely a function of judgment and skill of the individual.

THE 3R'S: ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND REWARDS

Roles and Responsibilities. The Anthropology Department serves hundreds of students in lower division courses, a sizable fraction of 'teaching' occurs only with the help of graduate teaching assistants. Here's a list of some of the major roles and responsibilities assumed by a teaching assistant. The list is by no means all-inclusive, nor are the duties necessarily listed in order of importance:

- reinforcing basic lecture material
- emphasizing relevance of course content
- directing students to additional resources
- answering questions
- stimulating interest, enthusiasm, and encouraging student initiative
- interpreting and enforcing course policies
- counseling students
- evaluating students
- maintaining clear and complete records

As is plainly apparent, teaching assistants wear multiple hats. Easy? No, not really. Nor are the skills required the first or second time through. In fact, as a craft, teaching is never really perfected by anyone -- even by those who make a permanent career of education. But later in this Handbook, we'll tackle each general TA responsibility area and offer you some practical tips and guidelines.

Rewards. For starters, this may be the first time you've had to communicate on your feet about the science as a professional. Until now you've filled the relatively passive role of 'harassed student' conveying your knowledge through structured examinations and reports. Your teaching assistantship represents a chance to solidify your overall understanding of anthropology fundamentals. The saying 'the best way to learn something is to teach it' is based on the testimony of most experienced teachers.

As a TA, you have an excellent opportunity to practice (in a relatively non-threatening arena) skills such as thinking on your feet, answering questions, organizing a presentation, improvising, and establishing a poised presence -- attributes of considerable value in making it through graduate seminars and even comprehensive oral examinations!

In addition, you will encounter long-range benefits from your teaching experience. If you decide to continue in the academic community upon completion of your graduate program, you'll probably be called upon to teach at both the graduate and the undergraduate levels. Your exposure as a TA may provide the sole opportunity to practice the skills that can make you effective in the classroom.

Or, if you prefer to eschew the academic world, the ability to communicate effectively about your research or other professional efforts to an audience of peers of non-technical types may prove as valuable in industry or government as the scientific knowledge and experience you acquired with the degree. Thus, in addition to viewing your teaching assignment as an obligation and a responsibility, don't overlook its role in your personal and professional development. How you view your role(s) as a TA will, in fact, largely determine your eventual effectiveness as a teaching assistant and will help define the amount of personal professional growth you gain from this rather unique experience.

THE LECTURES

Regular attendance at the lectures in your assigned course is essential for your effectiveness as a TA. Your presence is required for multiple reasons:

1. The material the professor presents, the manner in which it is developed and explained, and the relative emphasis placed on subtopics are what you need to process and support in discussion sessions. The detailed material within a given course can vary significantly from one professor to another, even if a course syllabus is defined. You must help your students with what they are encountering now, not with what you may recall being taught four or more years ago. It's exasperating for a student (and embarrassing for the TA) when the TA is asked to clarify newly introduced material from a lecture the TA did not attend.
2. Your continued visibility in the lecture hall demonstrates to your students (and others) that you're an integral part of the teaching team formed to support their learning of anthropology.
3. You have the opportunity to study an experienced professional in action. Although you have probably attended (endured?) hundreds of lectures in your own courses, you did so primarily to acquire knowledge and to earn a grade, not to observe the teaching style of the instructor. A good way to gain tips on how to clarify anthropology concepts (and, at times perhaps, not to) is by carefully observing an experienced lecturer in action.
4. You can provide valuable feedback to the professor regarding how well the material is being communicated to (and being assimilated by) the majority of students. Most professors also welcome tactful comments from alert TAs concerning errors or ambiguities they may generate in a lecture -- especially on points students may be confused by but are reluctant to bring directly to the professor's attention.
5. During the lectures, you can begin to spot students who attend regularly, who are attentive, who ask provocative questions, who seem bored or lost, etc. It's thus often possible to anticipate your students' behavior in subsequent discussion periods.
6. You will facilitate course mechanics and help ensure smoothly-run lecture sessions by passing out papers, being available before and after lectures to answer student questions, assisting with demonstrations, proctoring exams, quizzes, etc.

Taking notes. Often a professor requires that TAs take lecture notes to be duplicated and placed on file for student reference. Whether or not this is a policy within your lecture section, it's still good practice to take short notes on major points covered, announcements, and/or assignments, for your own use. These are helpful when preparing for discussion sessions. Also, should any of your students miss a lecture, they most likely will come to you first to find out 'what happened.'

THE DISCUSSIONS

Anthropology discussion or recitation sections provide a format for student questions and participation in a small group (20-30 students) setting. However, if participation is limited to a few students asking specific questions, and your response is limited to working a few problems on the board, much of the potential benefit of the discussion session format is lost. On the other hand, your mission as the discussion session leader is not to 'lecture' the students for another 50 minutes per week. So what is expected?

The goal of discussion sessions should be to actively involve students in problem-solving and the generation of ideas. How can the 50-minute sessions be organized to reach such an ambitious goal? Guidelines in this section of the Handbook have been tailored to help you answer this question. And later, specific suggestions for your first discussion session will be offered.

It must be emphasized that there are no hard and fast rules for effective TAing, but rather a collection of guidelines, suggestions, and actions accumulated from past TA experience. You should develop a style of teaching suited to your personality. That takes time and experience. Consider re-reading some of this Handbook in a few weeks, after testing the water and becoming a bit more acclimated.

The General Precepts. These up-front generalizations will provide some useful perspective before the nuts-and-bolts of discussion session management are considered.

1. **Be Prepared!** You obviously won't enter a discussion session with a word-by-word script, but you should know what types of problems and/or topics you intend to cover and how to go about these tasks. Nothing undermines class morale more quickly or completely than an unprepared instructor. Think of some anthropology-related anecdote or short comment on material presented in the previous lecture as a possible opening ice-breaker for the session. Such pre-planning is infinitely better than "OK, gang, any questions?" as a means of stimulating interest and participation. Encourage students to come prepared to discuss and take full advantage of the time. Be ready to ask them questions if they don't question you. (More will be said about questions later!) Arm yourself with plenty of back-up problems or exercises supporting current topics to help students who are unable to identify troublesome homework items or points to discuss. Don't excuse them early because there are no questions.
2. **Don't be afraid to show warmth and concern.** Treat students with respect and consideration, try to be sympathetic to difficulties they may encounter. You may find lack of ability and apparent unwillingness to learn in certain students annoying, frustrating, and at times exasperating. Displays of disgust, contempt, or ridicule, however, all aggravate the situation and diminish students' respect for you and your position. Avoid conveying a sense of self-importance and superiority by showing how simple and self-evident anthropology is for you. Such an attitude turns students off fast. (Try to eliminate words like 'trivial' and 'elementary' from your vocabulary, at least when explaining introductory anthropology.) Identify with your students as much as possible by tuning in to reactions you had the first time you encountered such material (not that long ago). This may help you to avoid the trap of expecting excessive student respect simply on the grounds that you know more than they do.
3. **Be yourself.** Realize that concern and compassion are not synonymous with a lack of control. Nor is informality necessarily associated with a lack of preparation or organization. If you're not effective in an informal atmosphere and can pull it off without losing class control or student respect, then by all means do so. If, on the other hand, you're more comfortable and effective in a less casual, more structured environment, don't try to fake the 'good buddy' routine. You're not at your best when you're ill at ease from trying to assume a character that isn't 'you.' A suggestion: Previous generations of TAs have found that starting off with a more formal, no-nonsense approach and later easing up with discretion is easier to accomplish and better received by students than trying to 'tighten up' after a class has seen fit to take advantage of a too-casual and easy-going approach.

Conducting the Class

1. Learn students' names as quickly as possible and use them frequently. Call on students by name and even incorporate student names in the content discussions. Knowledge and use of names are effective devices for getting and maintaining student attention.
2. Encourage students to sit up front, particularly in a large classroom. Those seated far away tend to get 'lost' easily.
3. Face the class! You're talking to students and not the chalkboard. It's easier for students to feel involved when your attention is on them rather than on the light fixture, the window, or a point above their heads. Look them in the eye.
4. Unlike the commercial radio, it's neither necessary nor wise to fill each vacant second with 'talk' during your discussion sessions. If you ask a thought-provoking question or make a particularly important point, allow a bit of silent time for students to think things through. A 'wait-time' of even 4-5 seconds will do wonders for the quality and quantity of student responses. (Try a brief experiment during a discussion session -- check your watch and note how long 4 seconds feels when standing in front of the class!)
5. Move around during the discussion session. Faraday's advice to lecturers also applies to TAs: "...I would by no means have a lecturer glued to the table or screwed to the floor. He must by all means

- appear as a body distinct and separate from the things around him, and must have some motion apart from that which they possess." Don't become tied to the space between the front table and the chalkboard. Feel free to stroll around and (if chair density permits) down aisles among the students. Such movement, if done in a non-mechanical way, sustains student interest and lowers the communication barrier between you and them.
6. Do not excuse students early if they have no questions. Be prepared with problems, exercises, etc. to make best use of the time for which they have paid.

Chalkboard Technique

1. Your students need to see and read what you have written. Write legibly and large enough so what you write can be seen in the back row. (And if you're uncertain what that means, take a stroll to the back of the room and look at your work the way your students see it). Don't write all the way down to the bottom of the board. Keep desks or tables in front of the board clear of opaque solids like briefcases and lecterns.
2. Students need adequate time to copy what you write. Don't erase a filled board before you need it again. If you're right-handed, consider starting on the right-hand board and working your way to left panels. This way you won't obstruct the view of the already-filled boards as you continue. Despite instructions to the contrary, some students will write down everything you put on the board. If you want students to analyze an idea, they won't begin to 'think' until they have finished copying. So when you want to make a major point, stop your board writing. Let students catch up. Then begin discussing your point.
3. Avoid working with an eraser in hand to simplify or to correct board steps. It's easily done at the chalkboard, but less easily accomplished in a notebook, and is guaranteed to irritate students taking notes. Rather than revising by erasing, draw a line through the offending terms and write new entries above or below.
4. Finally be sure you start your discussion session with chalkboards free of cryptic notation from a prior class that occupied the room. Some students will spend time puzzling over a mechanics derivation that may remain enshrined on the board rather than focusing attention on the more mundane items you wish to review.
5. Erase your board when finished. It is a courtesy to the incoming TA.

Questions, Questions, Questions. Someone has observed that, to a first approximation, a teacher can be viewed as a professional question-asker and question-answerer. Certainly if something more than one-way 'lecturing' is the goal, there's little doubt that Q's and A's comprise an important part of a teacher's repertoire. To master the Q/A strategy as an effective discussion technique, here are some factors for you to think about ahead of time.

Creating a Supportive Atmosphere. Even well-prepared students will often refuse to ask questions or to volunteer answers to questions in class for fear of appearing foolish or ignorant in front of other class members. It's seldom you (as teacher) that they are concerned about, but their peers. The problem is a very real one. Some specific strategies can help.

1. Encourage students to speak up by posing a wide variety of questions and involving as many students as possible in a given discussion. In light of considerable discussion and involvement, timid students will feel that their contribution will attract less attention.
2. Don't ridicule inept or wrong answers or student questions that indicate gross misunderstandings. The basic problem with sarcasm and ridicule is that it punishes the act of responding as much as the response itself. Not only is the student less likely to make a response in the future (whether foolish or not!), but the entire class may feel that their safety in asking or responding to questions has been threatened. Thus the entire group may be more reluctant to risk participation, leaving you up front as an isolated monologist. That is a most unhappy state of affairs in view of what should happen here.
3. Reinforce constructive contributions (either questions or answers) with a bit of verbal recognition and/or nonverbal response such as a slight smile, a nod, etc. Encourage speculation, conjecture, and risk-taking during your discussions. Give students the feeling that they're all on equal footing when it comes to your esteem, and that this is not something that they need to 'earn' by extra-cautious behavior during Q/A sessions. If a student contribution is defective in some way, try to identify the source of the misconception and deal with it constructively, acknowledging and crediting the student for any partial merit the response may possess.

4. Listen carefully to your students. Avoid the temptation to interrupt or stop a student in mid-sentence if you sense a confused or wrong-track view of the subject under discussion. Hear the student out, and then deal with issues raised. If you come across like a critic or censor, the voluntary participation of students will quickly decline.

Responding to Student Questions

1. Look around the class often for 'hands,' and even facial expressions that indicate pending student questions or comments. There is little more frustrating for students than waving a hand in total confusion while the TA continues an intimate conversation with the chalkboard.
2. Again, listen closely. What students actually ask may not be what they really want to know. After you've answered what you thought was sought, give the original questioner a chance to indicate whether he or she is satisfied.
3. Avoid too many quick and outright answers; that's too easy for you and for them, and it often short-circuits the chance for students to develop their ability to analyze and work toward answers to their own questions. For example, you might invite other students to attempt a response to a student question. It may be necessary for you to pose questions or to lead their thought processes, but keep the emphasis on student involvement and participation. You may wish to eventually step in to clarify or to amplify, but first get them thinking.
4. If you make a mistake in fielding a student's question, don't be defensive. You aren't perfect. And don't be afraid to tell a student you do not know something that might be a bit orthogonal to the required course material. In short, strive for the impression of personal integrity rather than one of omniscience. A blatant attempt to cover up or to steer the discussion away from a question you can't answer will do far more to undermine your student's regard for your knowledge than a simple "I don't know, but I'll find out for you." But then be sure you do find out, if possible before you see that student again. Jot down the response on a piece of paper and hand it to the student in lecture on the following day. The student will probably be far more impressed by the fact that you took time to work it out than by the fact that you didn't know the answer at first. And if an error you've committed on the chalkboard is in need of repair, remember that you can always solicit help from the class -- try to correct it together.

Question-Asking Skills. Questions come in multiple flavors. The types of questions you pose will help to define what the students will learn in a class.

At the most basic level, simple 'knowledge' questions can be asked -- questions that depend only students' recall (memorization) of factual material. At a slightly higher level of student effort, they can be challenged to translate factual information into their own words.

More challenging questions can encourage students to apply, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate their anthropology knowledge.

The suggestion here is that you should consciously pose a variety of question types. If most of your questions are aimed at the recall level, many students will become quickly bored. On the other hand, if most questions require considerable analysis and synthesis, some students will be unable to participate and will become quite discouraged. Some related question types:

Convergent questions ultimately have a single correct answer. Questions directed at the skills of recalling, comprehending, and applying will generally be convergent.

And, as you might guess, divergent questions have several acceptable or plausible answers. Divergent questions, calling for student judgment and processing of relevant information, often trigger spirited discussions. But such questions can only be fielded by students after they master 'lower level' skills such as knowing or recalling.

Questions that initiate discussion can be planned in advance of the discussion session. Such initiating questions can be sequenced from simple to more complex.

Often you'll ask follow-up questions after you get an answer to your initiating question. Since such probing questions will depend on the nature of the answer you receive, they're not easily planned. Learning to keep the discussion moving through good probing questions is one way you'll gain practical experience in thinking on your feet in your discussion sessions!

Questioning Tips. The effectiveness of a question is often determined by how it is posed. Consider these points:

1. Avoid 'yes/no' questions. Since you'll want to know how students decide yes or no, you might as well start there.
2. Avoid ambiguous questions.

3. Avoid double-barreled questions.
4. In posing questions, as a general rule use the form labeled Case A below rather than that shown in Case B.
Case A: "What are the major differences between clans and phratries?" (pause) Jim?
Case B: "Jim, what are the major differences between clans and phratries?"
Notice that Case A encourages and maintains full class participation right up through the "pause" interval. Case B invited 23 of the 24 students to mentally drop out of the discussion the moment that Jim's name is mentioned.
5. Allow brief (3-5 second) pauses after each question to permit students to think through and compose their answers. During the 'wait time,' keep shifting your attention around the group, suggesting in a nonverbal manner that you expect all students to tackle the question.
6. Do not call on a student the moment one hand is raised in preparation to answer your question. Continue eye contact with the entire class, thus eliciting additional hands and involvement before you call on someone.
7. If a student's answer is badly off target and it's apparent the student feels a bit foolish about the bungle, give the student a chance to redeem herself or himself via a volunteered answer to a later question during the discussion session.
8. In general, do not repeat a question unless it's very clear that it wasn't understood or heard in its original form. If a grossly inattentive student responds with "What's the question?" when called upon, calmly move on to someone else without making a scene about it. Repeating clearly posed questions encourages mind-wandering.

Special Situations. Here are detailed comments and tips concerning common aspects of discussion sessions to wrap up this portion of the Handbook.

Reviewing Before an Exam. A discussion session immediately prior to an hour exam is generally conducted as a review session, this can be quite effective if well organized.

Obviously, you cannot (and should not) recount or explain everything the professor said in three to five weeks of lectures in one 50-minute discussion. A summary of what you believe are significant and/or 'testable' topics written on the board with maybe two or three good illustrative problems or questions from previous homework assignments listed beside each topic is one way to start the session. Suggestions regarding likely types of questions are also appreciated by students.

An optional review session, lasting 1 to 1 1/2 hours, is sometimes arranged for students during an evening or free afternoon. Discuss such plans with the professor and other TAs. If it's viewed as a workable idea, check with the Anthropology Office ahead of time to reserve a room for this purpose. Providing such a service for students is entirely optional and obviously comes out of your own collective time.

Avoid the 'night before' for such reviews. There's little point in highlighting areas of misunderstanding or confusion for students when there is no time remaining for them to do much about it.

Stress to your students that any review session, whether held during the regular discussion period or as an extra session, is of value only if they come prepared with questions, their studying cannot be done for them.

Returning and Going Over Exams. Professors seldom have sufficient time to return or to go over exams in lecture. This is usually left to the discussion sections. Be sure that grades have been recorded before returning a quiz or exam. What a sinking feeling it is to return to your office after you have returned an exam and realize you had forgotten to record the grades. It's advisable before returning graded examinations to summarize overall class performance, the grading scheme and point structure, and anything else you want to be sure everyone will hear.

After individual exams are returned, you can expect to lose most of your 24 students for at least a few minutes in mixed chorus of point counting, sighs of relief, muttered obscenities, and/or muffled sobs.

Direct class discussion to items you have identified as being commonly missed. Be careful not to get lured into lengthy dialogues with individual students on specialized errors that are of little interest to the rest of the class. (Deal with such individual cases after class or arrange a special conference time.)

Since detailed grading and regrading policies and practices vary from professor to professor, it's not possible to amplify these matters here. How much time should you devote to going over the exam in detail? To decide, weigh the merits and/or necessity of reviewing old course content versus the pace-induced pressures to move on to support new material.

Before and After Class. The five-minute intervals immediately before and after discussion sessions can be put to constructive use:

1. Before class, check to see if you have enough chalk. Consider carrying your own stash.

2. Put on the board, in a prominent manner, any announcements or reminders. You can then merely point to them rather than taking class time to write them out.
3. Chat with students who arrive early to overcome their blank 'waiting room' stares while they wait.
4. End class promptly in courtesy to the incoming TA and class and to your students who have to trek across campus in a mere ten minutes for their next class. Ending class on time buys you five minutes to collect stray papers and forgotten books, erase the board, to answer a few individual questions, and to clear out before the next class begins.

Variations on a Theme. While circumstances and course needs will introduce some variety into the format of your discussion sections, consider taking a more aggressive role in varying the activities that are included in your allotted 50 minutes. After all, doing the same sort of thing every week or, for that matter, for an entire 50-minute period gets monotonous both for you and your students.

What works to motivate some students may leave others cold, so try a variety of approaches. A little subtle coercion is often necessary to prod more passive types into action. Be open to suggestions students might make either as feedback to innovations you initiate or as ideas they may propose for more productive discussion formats. Some suggestions:

1. Small Group Discussion - Assigned problem sets can be tackled by dividing the class into groups of 3-5 students each, and making each group responsible for presenting a particularly troublesome problem to the class. While groups are preparing, circulate and act as a consultant.
2. Student Quizzes - Have students come to discussion with written quizzes of their own, ten minutes or so in length. Exchange these and have students evaluate each others' quiz questions and answers. This exercise encourages students to identify key points within the course, to practice analyzing possible examination questions, and to recognize that reviewing is not accomplished by merely rereading the textbook.
3. Practice Quiz Items of Your Design - Distribute a short practice quiz to the students which they then complete, discuss, and grade themselves working as small groups. Again, circulate to serve as consultant.
4. Going Over Homework Problems - Have students put their solutions on the board. This gets them more involved and gives them practice communicating the material.
5. Pre-printed Solutions - It isn't always possible to discuss in detail all of the long, multi-step problems your students would like to see worked out. If you're convinced that students have made 'best efforts' on the problems ahead of time, you may wish to distribute detailed solutions (emphasizing one or more methods of attack) to students for a few key questions. Check with the Anthropology Office about duplicating services.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

During your first few discussion sessions, you need to set the tone for the semester and establish the ground rules under which you intend to operate. We'll take up some of these housekeeping duties here.

In opening a discussion session, you should clearly display on the board the course name and number, as well as your section number. This is to ensure that all present are where they want to be (or at least should be). Also, place your name, office location, phone number, and scheduled office hours (if decided yet) on the board. Continue to post this information for the first few weeks; some students will be late additions to your section while other need the repetition for things to register. (You should always give the Anthropology Office a copy of your office hours as soon as possible once you have established them. In addition, always give the Anthropology your name, phone numbers (work and home), and address and inform that office of any changes in phone numbers, addresses, office hours, etc.)

Introduce yourself and explain who you are and what your function within the course will be. Many students, especially first-semester freshmen, are unclear concerning a graduate assistant's role. They may equate you with the professor, think that you're a volunteer, or that you're in training to teach high school. Students often do not realize you are a graduate student as well as a TA, and that you thus have other interests and duties. Take a few minutes to tell about yourself; a little bit about your academic and research interests, etc., can help dispel misconceptions and take some 'stiffness' out of first encounters.

Students are more impressed than they let on by an instructor who gets to know them quickly. Call role in recitation until you have gotten to know everyone. (Then continue to take role mentally, at least.) As you

take role during initial discussions, note where each student is seated -- most will stay in approximately the same location all semester.

What follows is a checklist of 'administrivia' -- details you should attend to on the first day.

CHECKLIST FOR DISCUSSION

The First Day

1. Put on the chalkboard: class name, section number, your name, office number, extension, office hours.
2. Take roll from computerized class list.
3. Announce and place on board text title, required course materials, and where they can be purchased.
4. Explain (to extent that you're informed) course policies on exams, homework, grading, etc.
5. Before dismissing the class, suggest they start reading the text. Give a brief overview of the content in the first chapter or unit. Make a 'plug' for keeping up with the course.
6. Assist apparently lost or confused students concerning how the information in the Schedule of Classes is read for anthropology courses. Note and point out to students that the only completely up-to-date listing of Anthropology courses for the semester is the one available from the Anthropology Office.

OFFICE HOURS

You are expected to be available for two or more scheduled hours per week for student consultation at a location that you specify. These office hours can involve some of your most influential contact time with students individually or in small groups of two or three.

Schedule your office hours at staggered times (i.e., Monday 2-3, Thursday 10-12, rather than Monday, Wednesday, Friday 2-3) to provide convenient times for as many students as possible. The appendix of this Handbook gives suggestions of times to set for your schedule. Also, stress that you're available by appointment if your office hours are inadequate. Remind students often of your availability. Even if they don't take advantage of it, your reminders will reassure students of your interest in helping them.

There is too little time available in discussion sessions to go over a question or problem of interest to only one or two students. Provide such detailed and individualized coaching during your office hours for those students who seek it out. During office hours, you'll encounter opportunities to work with a student on a one-to-one basis. When a student seeks individual help, first ascertain whether she or he has genuinely attempted the problem(s) or is merely trying to exploit you for 'easy answers.'

After the student has shown you what has been tried, evaluate the specific skills that have already been mastered and point these out to the student. Pose leading questions which can lead the student through the remaining steps. Merely showing students how to do a problem helps little. It is the skills of problem solving that you are there to help them learn. Provide verbal and nonverbal reinforcement and encouragement along the way. This often requires considerable patience and some tongue-biting.

Many students suffer more from lack of confidence in their ability to 'do anthropology' than from real inability. This awe or anxiety frequently prevents students from learning as easily as they might. Be sensitive to your students' feelings; give each some sense of mastery, no matter how small. A student who approaches you honestly seeking help is trusting you to a certain extent by revealing her or his insecurity or unsureness. Respect this trust and do your best to help the student overcome the problem.

Be as equitable as possible in distributing your time among individual students. If your office becomes a little crowded (rare, but it does happen), get students to help each other and work with several students at the same time if they share common difficulties.

Ironically, you'll find that students who most need to seek individual attention don't make the effort. Or if they do, they wait until it's all but too late. The students you'll probably see the most in office hours will be among your better students. These types usually are a pleasure to work with, since they arrive quite organized with specific questions, or are searching for more challenges.

Not all students who come to office hours have questions specifically related to the course. As an authority figure, you may find yourself in the role of academic or social counselor. Effective counseling is a skill

largely acquired through special training and considerable experience. Balance concern with a certain degree of detachment. Don't let yourself be manipulated into pseudo-parenting or psychoanalyzing. Often the best approach is to serve as a thoughtful listener, without feeling the urge to prescribe remedies or other courses of action.

If you find yourself in a situation where a student needs professional counseling or information that extends beyond your scope, be prepared to refer him or her to one of the numerous services available to students at BSU. Locations of services are given in the "Graduate Assistant Handbook" issued by the Dean of Graduate Studies Office. A copy of this Handbook will be included along with the materials you receive from the Education Office. Familiarize yourself with the campus services that are available for student referral, as well as for your own use.

COURSE MECHANICS

The detailed mechanics of running a course are largely defined by the individual lecture professor, who in meetings with you and other TAs in the lecture section will outline in detail the exam schedule, course policies, grading schemes, etc. Most professors meet with their TAs weekly. Here are some rather standard course practices of which you should be aware.

Grading Tests - Quizzes, if any, are usually graded by TAs -- either taking turns grading all quizzes, or each grading his or her own section's quizzes each time. The grading of examinations is divided among the TAs for a given course, usually with the professor pitching in as well. Aiming for consistency in grading, each TA will be assigned the specialized grading of two or three questions (typically) over all exam papers. The professor may define how each less-than-correct response is to be evaluated or, more likely, the allocation of points within each question will be left up to the TA grading it. In deciding how to establish a grading scale for a given item:

1. Read through the answers to the questions you are grading from several (8-10) exams before making your scale for that item.
2. Establish with other graders a 'standard deduction' for math errors, significant figure lapses, and the like.
3. Decide on the major components of the answer and how much each should be worth in terms of points.
4. Attempt to grant the partial credit that is deserved. In general, think of crediting that which is right at least as much as penalizing that which is wrong.
5. Be consistent! Whether you deduct three or four points for a particular error is less important than maintaining consistency over all papers graded.
6. Make some mark or indication on pages and areas left blank by the student to indicate that it has been seen by you. This is vital in case a student fills in the space later and tries to assert that it was 'missed' by the TA grading the question.

Make-Up Tests. Find out what your lecture professor's policy is regarding late or missed exams or assignments. Remind students of this policy frequently and enforce it consistently. If you 'bend the rules' for one, fairness dictates you must do so for all. And that's an untenable and impractical situation -- establish reasonable regulations and stick to them.

Record Keeping. You're responsible for keeping current and accurate records for all your students. Things to remember:

1. Record all scores as soon as a report, exam, or assignment is graded.
2. Enter grades legibly and in ink.
3. Maintain duplicate copies of all grade records to be kept in a separate, secure place -- thus avoiding problems ensuing from a stolen, lost, or tampered-with grade book.

Student Recommendations. Occasionally, you may be asked by a student to write a pre-professional recommendation letter. If you feel that you would like to do so, tell the student that a letter would probably carry additional weight if co-authored or at least signed by the professor. The professor may be willing to write such letters and incorporate your suggestions.

'PEOPLE' CONCERNS: STUDENTS/PROFESSORS

As a graduate student/teaching assistant, you are called upon daily to deal with a large number and variety of people -- students, faculty and staff members, other graduate students, and administrators. Getting along productively with people in order to perform your job smoothly often requires substantial amounts of practical psychology, diplomacy, and an even greater measure of common sense.

United Front. As a TA, you are viewed by your students as an authority figure and a part of the university establishment -- whether you like it or not. By virtue of your position, you have an obligation to support the teaching program and the professor you are assisting. This is not to say that you are not entitled to differ, even seriously, with the philosophy or practices of that professor or the policies of the course. But it does mean that you should not express your disapproval and/or disagreements to any students in or out of class. If certain policies or practices disturb you, discuss these openly with your professor, or take them up with the course coordinator. Sharing with your students such opinions, no matter how justified you may feel them to be, is highly unprofessional and only undermines the confidence students have in you and the course.

In this spirit of a 'united front,' it is very important that you chat openly with your lecture professor about how things are progressing in your section. The professor should be made aware of potentially awkward or difficult situations regarding any students or the course itself before anything reaches a crisis or confrontation stage.

Feedback from the Professor. The professor for whom you teach can be a useful source of feedback on your progress as a TA. His or her comments and suggestions can be especially valuable during your first few semesters on the job. Many professors may provide you with regular pointers and criticisms as things progress. Others are less inclined to intervene and may elect to leave your teaching entirely up to you. You may welcome this latitude and freedom, but you still may want substantive feedback and suggestions. In these situations, a little initiative on your part may be in order. Take time to keep your professor posted on goings-on within your section. Solicit professor advice and constructive criticism; perhaps even suggest that you'd welcome a visit to your discussion session to supply another view of your teaching. You should know that your lecture professor will be glad to fill out an evaluation form about your performance in the class. This form will be placed in your department folder.

Feedback from Your Students. Along with professor feedback, you are probably equally if not more concerned with how you are being perceived by your students. Since you hold some degree of power over their final grade, your students may be reluctant to be completely candid in the absence of an anonymous and non-threatening format. In light of this, both new and seasoned TAs often compose a TA evaluation form of the multiple-choice variety for students to complete as a mid-semester survey. This way, constructive suggestions can be acted upon soon enough to benefit the students who offer the advice or comments. Check with your professor, as she or he may take a mid-semester course evaluation which would include this information.

Students as Individuals. Dealing effectively with the individual characteristics of a professor is one thing; your students represent up to 48 different personalities to contend with each semester. Your teaching effectiveness, in part, depends on how well you perceive and relate to the individuals within your class. You cannot be all things to all students, but awareness of the differences among your students can be helpful in anticipating classroom reactions you are likely to encounter.

When dealing with freshmen, keep in mind that they are in a transitional period. Most have just left high school where the highly structured format provided much more prodding and hand-holding than is possible or appropriate at the university level. They must make the transition from a relatively passive learning environment to a more self-motivated, active, and disciplined one. Patient encouragement coupled with adherence to high standards and discipline can aid such a transition. Coddling or, at the other extreme, insensitivity can retard it.

Certainly you must treat students as individuals, but be sure that you at least strive to treat both sexes equally in regard to attention given. Consider such factors as non-solicited attention given, calling on students by name, eye contact during questioning periods, interrupting students, giving positive feedback on performance, and avoiding sexist humor or remarks.

Sticky Situations. As complex social interaction, teaching is subject to the subtleties (and excesses) of human interplay. One of the most dynamic of these is male-female interaction, which although now itself in a profound state of flux, cannot help but influence how your students relate to you as an authority figure.

As a female TA, you may encounter situations or problems that would not appear were you male. And a comparable statement can be made about male TAs.

To Female TAs - Your students may experience some difficulty accepting you fully in a scientific field which they may, for whatever reasons, associate with male activity. Male students especially (but not exclusively) may try to challenge your authority, to trip you up, or (more subtly) to try to compromise your status by flippancy or suggestive remarks. Friendly but firm and repeated assertion of your competence and authority to direct their study of anthropology (asserted through deed and attitude, as well as through word) will probably take care of the situation. Such 'challenging' behavior should fall off rapidly.

That such assertion should even be necessary is admittedly annoying, but be patient. Besides, it's unfortunately the kind of practice you're going to need at some time in the future; students may not be the only ones who will have difficulty accepting you as a professional.

To Male TAs - You may also experience some degree of 'testing' or challenging of your authority, but on the whole it'll be to a lesser extent than that experienced by your female colleagues. For some reason, male students seem reticent to ask questions (admit ignorance) in front of their peers -- especially with a male TA in charge. You may need to sensitize yourself to the apparent fact that your male students may have a harder time seeking the help they need.

A few female students may attempt to capitalize on the male-female dynamic to their own advantage. Most of these attempts are fairly transparent, unless you are particularly susceptible to flirtatious or provocative behavior. Lest you be too flattered, it's very likely that it is the lure of your position or (even more callously) a grade that they're after, not you. Common sense should tell you this is a potentially damaging situation for you if you don't recognize and avoid the dangers.

Everyone's Human. As a graduate student new to the College Park area, your opportunities to meet people and make friends have been (and may continue to be) limited as demands on your time have increased.

Almost daily exposure to students close to your age provides a not at all unpleasant interaction from which you can derive a great deal of satisfaction.

It's understandable that you may find one or more of your students attractive or unusually interesting, building a hope to pursue the friendship further. But, based on the experiences and resulting folk wisdom of veteran TAs, it's both best and wise, and certainly less sticky, to put off pursuit of personal friendships or liaisons between you and individual students at least until the course is over.

The above issues have been raised not to give them undue importance or to presume to tell anyone how they should best be handled, but simply to sensitize you to them as very real potential problem areas so you are prepared when or if they do arise.

THE JUGGLING ACT

Up to this point, you have probably noticed that little attention has been directed in this Handbook to the main reason you came to the Anthropology Department -- to pursue graduate coursework and research. The effort required to discharge your TA responsibilities comes from the same time-and-energy-pools from which your course, and later, research efforts must be drawn.

Striking and maintaining a balance between these three sets of demands must probably remain the most difficult aspect of a first-year graduate student's life. Each requires different skills and frames of mind. In addition, you must attend to your domestic necessities and locate in all this the time for some semblance of an adequate (if not 'normal' social existence.

This is in many respects a juggling act -- and you cannot afford to neglect or drop anything. You obviously cannot ignore or deprecate the importance of your assistantship. It is the source of your financial support, as well as a commitment to your students. On the other hand, it's entirely possible to become so absorbed in your teaching that it becomes an excuse not to study or progress toward working as a researcher. Both extremes can seriously jeopardize your position in the Department, as well as your personal and psychological well-being.

The crucial factor which will determine how well you succeed in this balancing act is ORGANIZATION. Time is too short not to make optimum use of it. Start by planning your weekly schedule as best you can to your own advantage.

Your teaching assignment and your own class times are factors you can do little about. But you can plan your office hours so they break up your day as little as possible. Most TAs agree that the time just before discussion sessions begin as definitely a bad office hour slot.

As important as when you hold your office hours is how you use the time when no students show up. Keep up a file of relatively short 'idiot work' items on tap -- updating records, grading quizzes, memorization work for your own classes, etc. 'Shooting the breeze' with other grad students or working crossword puzzles when no students show can add up to hours of wasted time. If all else fails, study!

At other times when you really have serious studying to do, sequester yourself where no one can find you. You must not let your coursework or grading responsibilities pile up. Good teaching takes time and thought, but properly organized, it can take no more time (and even less time) than a disorganized or shoddy performance.

The demands of the multiple roles of graduate student, teaching assistant, and novice researcher are many, and the rewards may seem too few and far between. It all reduces to a reasonably simple suggestion: be patient with yourself and realize that you can't master it all perfectly the first time. The passage of time and the accumulation of experience will make it all seem much less awesome! If this Handbook has contributed toward that end, we will be gratified.

APPENDIX A

HOW TO TEACH ANTHROPOLOGY AND DO IT WELL

- I. PLANNING
 - A. The Goals
 - B. The Text(s)
 - C. Supplementary Material
- II. THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS
 - A. Announcements
 - 1. Your name, the course title and number
 - 2. The prerequisites
 - 3. Preferred policy on note taking
 - B. Handouts
 - 1. A syllabus or outline for the course
 - a. Course objectives
 - b. Chapters covered
 - c. Exam schedule
 - 2. An information sheet
 - a. Your name, course title and number
 - b. Office hours and telephone number
 - c. Homework policy
 - d. Grading policy (percentage)
 - e. Name of text
 - f. Name and other information about TA
 - C. Whet their appetites
 - D. Begin to learn names
 - E. Use the full time allowed
- III. THE CLASS SECTIONS
 - A. Preparation
 - B. Continuity
 - C. Questions - back and forth
 - D. Specific Ideas
 - 1. Arrive promptly
 - 2. Eye contact
 - 3. Clear speech
 - 4. Modulate voice
 - 5. Use pauses
 - 6. Solicit questions
 - 7. Make sure everyone hears the questions
 - 8. Encourage participation
 - 9. Listen
 - 10. Encourage guessing
 - 11. Strive for informality
 - 12. Show enthusiasm (and good taste)
 - 13. Inject humor
 - 14. Smile
 - 15. Don't get angry
 - 16. Be courteous
 - 17. Include historical or personal anecdotes
 - 18. Don't be defensive

- 19. Don't go past the time allowed
- 20. Whatever you do, do it well
- IV. LARGE CLASSES AND OTHER PROBLEMS
 - A. Keep in touch with student problems
 - B. Use overhead projector and microphone if necessary
 - C. Teaching older students, part-time students
 - 1. Weekend assignments
 - 2. Office hours
 - D. Teaching classes with great variability
 - E. Special Projects
- V. BLACKBOARD TECHNIQUES
 - A. Write clearly and slowly
 - B. Repeat orally what you are writing
 - C. Use space orderly
 - D. Avoid blocking
 - E. Write the same size throughout
 - F. Write complete sentences. Solutions to problems should be written just as you'd expect students to write
 - G. Don't write incorrect statements on the board even if you tell the class they are incorrect
 - H. Don't rush out after class
- VI. TEXTBOOKS
 - A. Point out errors in text
 - B. But don't run down the text
 - C. When appropriate, show the class how to read the text
- VII. VISUAL AIDS
 - A. The overhead projector
 - B. Slide and cassette programs
 - C. Computers and peripherals
- VIII. ASSIGNMENTS
 - A. Frequent assignments
 - B. Choose carefully
 - C. Collect at the beginning of class
 - D. Count the homework
 - E. Return promptly
 - F. Encourage discussion
 - G. Read the student solutions carefully and make comments
 - H. Insist on prompt, well organized, legible work
- IX. TESTS
 - A. Open or closed book
 - B. Frequent or infrequent
 - C. Plug and grind, applications or theory
 - D. Independent questions
 - E. Work the test yourself
 - F. Grading
 - 1. Be prompt
 - 2. Be objective
 - 3. Give partial credit
 - 4. Provide statistics
 - 5. Go over exams or distribute correct answers
- X. ASSIGNING GRADES
 - A. Keep good records
 - B. Clustering of total points
 - C. Review student questions about grades carefully