

Student Notebook: Five Tips for Working with Teaching Assistants in Online Classes

January 06, 2021



The coronavirus pandemic has forced most in-person classes to meet online, creating a new teaching dynamic for instructors and teaching assistants (TAs). Many articles on working with TAs are written by team leaders, course instructors, and professors. In this article, I draw from my 4 years as a TA (assisting with eight online health education classes and 13 in-person courses) to offer advice to instructors on how they might work with TAs more effectively.



Sarah C. Turner (University of Houston)

1. Get to know your teaching assistant

Meet with your TA before classes start. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, conversations normally held over lunch have become video chats. Getting to know your TA can help you to gather information about their strengths, familiarity with the course content, teaching experience, and experience with Blackboard Learn or any other platform you use (Ciston et al., 2016). This can also help you assess which responsibilities they can address on the first day and which tasks they still need to learn. The working relationship between instructor and TA is a dynamic collaboration that has specific roles, tasks, and goals. The first few conversations about these topics can set the tone for the semester.

2. Exchange phone numbers—and be available

Invite your TA to ask for clarification on grading coursework (Hardre, 2005) and other tasks. Texting to answer brief questions in clear language can be more effective than communicating through platforms such as Blackboard, which might not reach your TA before the next class or deadline.

3. Create opportunities for ownership

Being a TA can help students develop into competent and confident assistants who work independently on agreed-upon tasks (Ciston et al., 2016). Create opportunities for your TA to take ownership over parts of the course. For example, TAs are often asked to review and proofread course material before it is posted. After the first few quizzes, you could ask your TA to write multiple-choice questions for an upcoming quiz and to upload them to the learning platform after incorporating your feedback. This lets your TA practice entering quiz questions into the platform, writing logical but incorrect options to multiple-choice questions, and posting the quiz on time to meet the deadlines in your syllabus.

4. Ask your TA for observations and feedback

Ideally, your TA has taken this course in the past or knows the content well enough to be approved by the assistantship committee and assigned by the TA coordinator (Gehringer, 2009). But if they have only a basic understanding of the course content, they may be able to offer fresh insights on your explanations, reading assignments, and questions on quizzes and tests.

5. The golden rule of grading: Treat your TA's time as you would your own

Even with the shift to online, it's important to avoid piling tasks with short-turnaround times on your TA. Instead, invite your TA to collaborate with you in designing innovative course assignments to optimize opportunities to provide specific feedback for students. Ask your TA about their experiences as a student in online classes; this conversation might give you ideas for structuring your own online classes (Hardre, 2005). Other variables to consider are class size and number of assignments, which can significantly impact your TA's ability to keep up with your course, as well as their own classes and any other courses they may be assisting with.

References

Ciston, S., Cerretani, C., & Went, M. S. (2016). Teaching with graduate teaching assistants: Tips for promoting high performance instructional teams. *Proceedings of the 2016 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference & Exposition*, Paper 16699. American Society for Engineering Education.

Gehringer, E. (2009). Working effectively with teaching assistants. *Proceedings of the 2009 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference & Exposition*, AC 2009-1738. American Society for Engineering Education.

Hardre, P. L. (2005). Instructional design as a professional development tool-of-choice for graduate teaching assistants. *Innovative Higher Education*, 30(3), 163–175.

Student Notebook serves as a forum in which APS Student Caucus members communicate their ideas, suggestions, and experiences. [Read other Student Notebook columns here](#), and learn about [the benefits of Student Membership](#).

Interested in submitting a Student Notebook article of your own? Learn more and indicate your interest by [clicking here](#) (logged-in APS members only).