

American Culture and Classroom – ITA | Tips for New International TAs

At beginning of the semester

- Meet with the course instructor to make sure you know what your responsibilities are and what is expected of you as a TA.
- Make sure you, the instructor, and other TAs (if there are) are on the same page on all aspects of the course, including grading.
- Understand the syllabus and the course material before the course begins, and do not hesitate to ask questions if there is anything unclear; always be prepared for class; do not depend on "winging it"!
- If your TA responsibilities include off campus duties, make sure you know the commands of the other environment.
- Establish a schedule to ensure you have a workable balance between your studies, your TA responsibilities, and other responsibilities you might have.
- Meet previous TAs of the course to learn more about the course nature including grading routines.
- Familiarize yourself with the technology of the classroom

In the middle of the semester

- If you face any difficulty handling students, make sure you talk to the faculty in charge and find a timely solution.
- Have office hours and keep them, even if you do not expect anyone to show up!
- Some Professors may ask you to lead a lecture during the semester in order to help with your professional development. Start building your professional portfolio now!
- Do not be afraid to admit it when you do not know the answer to a question. But offer to find out, and follow through with that promise.
- Maintain a safe and respectful environment in your classroom. It is ok for students to challenge and question you and each other, but it is not ok for students to be disrespectful to you or their classmates.
- Continuously evaluate yourself by discussing with the instructor, fellow TAs, and class students; don't wait until the semester ends. Mid-semester evaluations can be helpful too.
- Learn to take feedback from students and use it to improve your practice.

Tips plus

- It is okay to be nervous. But keep in mind that you are the one in charge. Be confident in the knowledge that you have and in your abilities as a TA. Develop your own teaching style; observe others whose teaching styles you admire, experiment with some different teaching styles; don't try to be a carbon copy of another teacher.
- Language concerns are common with international students. Do your best to communicate clearly. At the same time, remember that students also have a responsibility to try their best to understand you, just as much as you try to understand them. If needed, check with the Graduate School Services for Teaching Assistants and the Slutzker Center for additional language supports that they might have.
- Students must be respectful of you and of each other at all times. Extend the same respect to your students and fellow TAs that you would like them to extend to you.
- Be friendly but maintain boundaries. Your students are your students and not your friends! Never date a student!

What is the U.S. classroom like?

- **General Atmosphere:**

University education consists of four years of study in the U.S. Students do not only take classes that are required by their major. They take a variety of courses across different disciplines throughout their studies.

Freshman: First year students

Sophomore: Second year students

Junior: Third year students

Senior: Fourth year students

Teacher- student communication in a U.S. classroom is known as “highly interactive” (Mcdaniel). Students are often eager to ask questions and express their thoughts and opinions during class discussions. They are also encouraged to learn about different opinions that they may not necessarily agree with.

The general atmosphere in a U.S. classroom is also “relatively informal”, for example student may speak or dress informally (Mcdaniel). Use of first name is common. You can definitely address this if you would prefer not to be called by your first name. Students are expected to be careful about pronouncing names correctly; encourage them to learn the correct pronunciation of foreign names. It would be helpful for an international TA to pay extra attention to correct pronunciation of students’ names too.

Work Cited:

Mcdaniel, Rhett. “International Teaching Assistants Guide.” *Vanderbilt University*, Vanderbilt University, 7 May 2018, cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/itas/.

- **About the English language:**

It can be helpful for you as an ITA to share with students that you come from a different culture, and that English is not your native language, and that they should feel comfortable asking for clarifications if they can’t understand a part of your speech. It would also be helpful to let them know that you may also ask them for clarifications too. It may take them some time for students to get used to your accent (Hasipek). They are usually interested in learning about different cultures; therefore it would be an effective icebreaker to share with students some interesting anecdotes about yourself and your life in your home country, if you feel comfortable.

It may take you some time to adjust to this new academic culture; therefore it is important that you give yourself time to observe this new environment. What is seen as disrespectful in one culture may not necessarily be seen that way in this new one. One example is chewing gum; “[t]ry not to take new behaviors personally” (Hasipek). Ask questions to your colleagues or your mentors about the classroom culture if you feel necessary.

Work Cited:

Hasipek, Metis. "Tips for Surviving as an International Teaching Assistant." *Duquesne University*, www.duq.edu/about/centers-and-institutes/center-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-and-learning/surviving-as-an-international-ta.

- **About emailing:**

Students may not necessarily be familiar with the genre of email in a formal context. Therefore you may receive emails that read like texts, without a subject line, a salutation or a signature. It would be helpful to call attention to this in the first weeks of the semester, explain your expectations from an email, and provide students with some resources they can consult.

Here is an article about this subject that you might find useful:

Wood, Mini, and Anne Manning. "Wellesley College Project on Social Computing: How to E-Mail Your Professor." *Wellesley College Alumnae Association*, <http://web.wellesley.edu/SocialComputing/Netiquette/netiquetteprofessor.html>

Students generally expect quick responses to their emails. It would be helpful to explain them that they can expect a reply from you in this or that amount of time (24 hours, 48 hours etc.) at the beginning of the semester so that they know you need that amount of time, even though you may reply them quite quickly.

Suggestions for Verbal Feedback

Positive Feedback for a Correct Response, Comment, or Appropriate Question

Scenario: A TA is lecturing on the musical structure of a piece of classical music and a student asks, "Can some sections be left out?"

Option 1: "Thanks for bringing that up. The question was, 'can some sections be left out?' Does anyone think they know the answer?"

- 'Thanks' validates student participation.
- Restating the question for the class ensures that everyone can heard what was asked.
- Passing the question on to the whole class encourages participation.

Option 2: "Interesting question. The question was 'can some sections be left out?' In fact, more often than not, extra sections or movements are added. For example . . ."

- Starting with a positive response validates student participation.
- Restates the question for the class so everyone can hear.
- Allows the TA to move into a lecture-style format and present additional information.

Option 3: "Good question. The question was 'can some sections be left out?' I believe this type of music requires that all sections we've talked about be included but I am not sure. I will look into it and let you know by email. In the meantime, is there anyone else who knows?"

- Restates the question for the class so everyone can hear.
- Admits the TA does not know the answer (honest response) and demonstrates accountability.
- Passes the question on to the class for group participation.

Positive Feedback for an Incorrect Response, Comment, or Appropriate Question

Scenario: In a Biology class the TA asks: "Who can tell me what distinguishes an animal cell from a plant cell?" A student responds, "Well, I don't think a plant cell has a cell wall" (an incorrect response).

Option 1: "OK, let's back track. Who remembers the characteristics of a plant cell from last week?"

- Does not emphasize the student's mistake.
- Serves as a way to review and consider recent material.

Option 2: "No, that is not quite right. One of these cells has a wall while the other does not. Can you remember what distinguishes the two?"

- Encouraging feedback that does not alienate the student.
- Restates the student's response and clarifies what is incorrect.
- Uses the incorrect response as a chance to compare two concepts and to review other material.

Source: Western University Center for Teaching and Learning, <https://teaching.uwo.ca>