Welcome

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What can I do to not feel nervous?
Feeling nervous is a problem faced by almost all new Undergraduate TAs (UTA). There are a few things you can do to at least reduce how nervous you’ll feel the first time you UTA. Make sure that you know where your classroom is and you should check out your room a couple of days before classes actually start in case there are any problems to be addressed. Be sure that you have read over the syllabus and are prepared to discuss it with the students in case there are any questions. Remember that the students are nervous too. As the students get to know each other they will begin to relax.

2. How important is it to learn every student’s name?
Learning the students’ names is critical to communicate to them that you care about them as individuals. Although it may seem daunting at first, you’ll be pleased at how much your efforts will be noticed and appreciated by the students.

3. What do I do if I have a student who makes trouble?
Also remember that your professor is your first line of defense. Always check with your professor on how to handle these types of problems. You can also consult with the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (2nd Floor). You should never try to handle a problematic situation by yourself.

4. Should I be friendly or formal?
Generally speaking, an informal and friendly attitude is the norm for American classrooms, but the issue of just how friendly you should be is not always clear. You want the students to feel comfortable with you in the classroom but you don’t want to undermine your authority in the class. It is possible to be friendly while maintaining your authority as long as the students do not mistake your friendliness for leniency.

5. What if my students don’t like me?
This is a common concern among new UTAs, but one that rarely actually arises. As long as you are enthusiastic about your teaching and subject matter and show a genuine interest in helping the students learn, the students will likely respond very positively.

6. What if I am the same age as my students?
When you are similar in age and experience to your students, your first priority is to demonstrate your competence as an undergraduate teaching assistant by being prepared and organized for every class. If you are able to grasp their questions and respond to them effectively, students won’t be concerned that you may seem young. If some cases, your knowledge of the course based on taking it yourself may give you greater insights in the nature of the student’s difficulties.

7. What if I don’t know the answer?
Keep in mind that, by pausing to think, you are also showing students that it is okay for them to stop and think before answering. Saying, “I don’t know, but let’s see if we can figure it out together” or “I don’t know, but I’ll find out and get back to you” are also appropriate responses in many situations.

Responsibilities

At the iSchool, undergraduate teaching assistants may:

- Conduct drill or practice sessions
- Tutor students on a one-on-one basis
- Oversee labs
- Attend lectures
- Attend weekly undergraduate TA meetings
- Provide written feedback (individual comments, detailed solution sets)
- Report on common student errors or difficulties
- Prepare quizzes, handouts, assignments, exam questions
- Hold regular office hours
- Conduct review sessions before exams
- Record attendance
- Proctor exams
- Maintain on-line resources for students

The critical thing to remember is to discuss your responsibilities with your professor to make sure that you understand what is expected of you. Also try to establish a regular weekly meeting time with your professor in order to discuss any questions or problems that come up.

Help for Undergraduate TAs
Your primary source of guidance and teaching assistance is your professor. Also, don’t hesitate to ask the experienced UTAs for help and guidance as well.

In addition to the help you can get from your professor, you will also receive information from attending the three day IST337 course which will orient you to becoming a new UTA.

Preparing to be an Undergraduate TA

Becoming an Effective Undergraduate TA

Do we really know what constitutes being an effective UTA? Is effectiveness something that can be defined, evaluated, measured? What does the research tell us?

The studies which have been done on this topic have used various approaches and perspectives to examine the construct of “being an effective UTA,” ranging from classroom observations to measuring student learning outcomes to expert opinion and learning theory. (Chism, N. 2004)1 Although the approaches varied considerably, there is consensus on what makes UTAs successful. Enthusiasm, rapport, interest in students, organization and intellectual challenge are the traits that appear over and over again in descriptions of excellent UTAs. Think about your own experience and these traits will undoubtedly come to mind.

In terms of effective methods, there are many to choose from depending on one’s own context. When deciding what methods to use, it is helpful to keep in mind the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education:2

Good practice:

1. Encourages Student-Faculty Contact:

Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of classes is the most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Faculty concern helps students get through rough times and keep on working. Knowing a few faculty members well enhances students’ intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans.

2. Encourages Cooperation among Students:

Learning is enhanced when it’s more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one’s own ideas and responding to other’s reactions improves thinking and deepens understanding.

3. Encourages Active Learning:

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences and, most importantly, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.

4. Gives Prompt Feedback:

Knowing what you know and what you don’t know focuses learning. Students need appropriate feedback on performance to benefit from courses. When getting started, students need help in assessing existing knowledge and competence. In classes students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive suggestions for improvement. At various points during college and at the end, students need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to learn and how to assess themselves.

5. Emphasizes Time on Task:

Time plus energy equals learning. There is no substitute for time on task. Learning to use one’s time well is critical for students and professionals alike. Students need help in learning effective time management. Allocating realistic amounts of time means effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty. How an institution defines time expectations for students, faculty, administrators and other professional staff can establish the basis for high performance for all.

6. Communicates High Expectations:

Expect more and you will get it. High expectations are important for everyone—for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves and for the bright and well-motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when teachers and institutions hold high expectations for themselves and make extra efforts.

7. Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning:

There are many roads to learning. People bring different talents and styles of learning to college. Brilliant students in the seminar room may be all thumbs in the lab or art studio. Students’ rich hands-on experience may not do so well with theory. Students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them. Then they can be pushed to learn in new ways that do not come so easily.

As far as your role as a UTA goes, students should be actively involved in the learning process and encouraged to ask questions. Furthermore, it is better to say you don’t know an answer and will find it for the next meeting, than to pretend you know or to ignore the question. One of the major roles a UTA has is to answer student questions and nothing frustrates undergraduates more than feeling that a UTA does not understand or is not willing to answer their questions.

Additional Tips to Become a More Effective Undergraduate TA

1. UTAs should attend the professor’s class to identify gaps to be filled and to prevent redundancy.
2. Don’t assume the students know the basics of a discipline. Find out the students’ backgrounds and realize that the basics may need to be taught or reviewed.

3. By the same token, don’t assume students know how to learn. Discuss good study or reading strategies so the weaker students can find out how the better students go about the task of learning.

4. Do all homework assignments yourself BEFORE you try to help students so you can check for any mistakes and anticipate their questions or difficulties.

Following the guidelines above will help you decide what TA methods will work best for the class and help you avoid some of the usual beginner’s mistakes. But remember, no matter what methods you choose, nothing can substitute for your enthusiasm for your discipline and your interest in the students.

One of the most difficult areas to negotiate is setting the right tone for your relationship with the students. Friendliness is highly valued by undergraduates but you are not their “friend.” While you want the students to be comfortable learning with you, they must also respect you as a TA of the course. How can you establish yourself as an authority figure in the class while maintaining a friendly and comfortable learning atmosphere? If you are a new TA it may take some experimentation to get the right balance. You must recognize what kind of TA you are and decide what kind of behaviors are compatible with your personality. There are some general guidelines that will help you negotiate this terrain.

- **Use self-disclosure sparingly.** Do not share too much personal information with your students; rather talk about campus events, course issues or small-talk topics such as sports or weather to build rapport. Of course, when appropriate, you should feel free to talk about things like trips you’ve taken, pets or your hometown, but you should not discuss your personal life or problems with your students.

- **Be aware of your body language.** Nonverbal messages are very powerful. Reduce the distance between you and the students by moving around the classroom rather than standing behind a desk. Be sure you make and maintain eye contact with all students in the classroom. Don’t forget to smile and show your enthusiasm for the subject material.

These guidelines will help you establish rapport with the students regardless of your preferred style of TA. While engaging in friendly discussions outside the classroom and acquainting yourself with the students’ lives can facilitate teaching and learning, you must maintain some distance and objectivity.

In the classroom there are many ways to communicate your interest and concern for the students. Remember that the students are likely to learn better when they feel that their experiences, thoughts and feelings matter and when they know that they will be treated with respect. Here are some suggestions to help accomplish these goals:

- **Call the students by name.**

- **Watch students’ body language for signs of boredom or lack of comprehension (e.g., dozing, chatting with a neighbor, paper rustling).** If you see this behavior, try moving around the room, or have a discussion with your professor after the lecture is over.

- **Be sensitive to students who have different cultural backgrounds and therefore different cultural interpretations of behavior.** For example, an unwillingness to express an opinion may be a culturally-based norm, rather than a sign of lack of preparedness.

If students perceive that you are friendly and interested in their success at the University, you may find that they will approach you for assistance in other areas of their lives. Be sure you are familiar with the counseling and tutoring resources available on campus. Remember your role is not to solve all the students’ problems, but to refer them to the appropriate office.

**Relationships with the Professor**

In terms of the teaching assistant’s relationship with the professor, good communication is again important. Each of us can gain knowledge about being a good UTA by talking with our professor and learning from their years of experience. By working with different professors, different styles can be observed and our own individual approaches to being a UTA can be developed.

It is also important to talk with the professor if the UTA’s role and/or responsibilities need clarification. Questions you may wish to discuss with your professor are suggested below.

1. What do you want the course to accomplish?

2. Is attendance mandatory?

3. How much responsibility will I have?

4. How can I get some help for being a UTA?

5. How often will I meet with the professor?

If there are several UTAs working with the professor in the same course, to what extent am I to coordinate my plans with theirs and what is the mechanism for doing this?

Many of these questions may be answered in initial meetings, but if you have any unanswered questions, be sure to find a time when it is convenient for your professor to answer those questions **BEFORE** the semester begins so that you are comfortable.

Many of the problems faced by international teaching assistants are the same as those faced by American teaching assistants. The International teaching assistant, however, is new not only to Syracuse and to being a teaching assistant, but also to this country. Two unique concerns affect you: language barriers and the different culture and behavior of American students.

The greatest concern of International teaching assistants is language. You fear that you won’t be able to understand the students or that the students won’t be able to understand you. As you gain more experience speaking English, your concerns will lessen.
Give the students a chance to get accustomed to your accented English. Students are exposed to many things that are novel to them, including different accents. There are different accents among Americans as well. Begin slowly. Tell students what country you’re from and why you’re here at Syracuse University. If students understand a little about your culture and background, they’re more likely to give you a chance. They’re also more likely to make the small effort necessary to understand an unfamiliar accent. Keep in mind that American students tend to be very forgiving and flexible.

One important way to gain acceptance by the students is to let them know that you care about them and their success in the course.

Make it clear to the class that they should let you know if they don’t understand something you say. Be patient when this happens and don’t be offended or defensive about these communication breakdowns. If you don’t understand a student’s question ask the student to rephrase it. This won’t compromise your authority. However, pretending to understand when you don’t will undermine your authority and lose the students’ respect for you.

American students are different from the students in many other countries. Their dress and manner may be quite casual. Classroom behavior may be informal, with students sometimes questioning or disagreeing with the instructor. This is accepted behavior and should not be treated as a challenge to authority. It isn’t a sign of disrespect but rather a student’s interest in dialogue. Also be careful not to be overly authoritarian -- it’s resented by American students and will interfere with your effectiveness as a teaching assistant.

Lastly keep in mind that you’ll make some mistakes. Try to laugh at them and make them work to your benefit. Demonstrate that you care about your students and this country and you can minimize any problems you’ll encounter with language and the American culture.

Teaching Freshmen

Adapted with permission from the University of Massachusetts for Teaching Assistants.

There are some special characteristics of freshmen students that set them apart from other students and which TAs of freshmen should keep in mind. Entering freshmen have been socialized for twelve years into a system of primary and secondary education in which:

**High School**

- They perform according to a set schedule of daily assignments that are often collected
- Many students moved together from class to class and from term to term, forming a continuing and strong support network
- Weighted grading systems differentially rewarded performance in courses by level of difficulty
- All of the institution’s resources (including the teacher) were right there every day in the classroom

As a result, the expectations of university academic life, emphasizing self-initiation, independence and responsibility may be quite jarring for first-year students. Some factors to consider are:

**College**

- Most often, college is the first extended experience freshmen have had with independent living. The transition from family, town and school to the newness of independence and the wonders of university life can all too easily overshadow what may be perceived by the student as dull academic responsibilities.
- The very size and complexity of the university can be tremendously confusing and intimidating to students, especially those whose entering class is often larger than the population of the entire high school from which they came. Also, whose classmates and even roommates are strangers to them, and whose schooling up to this point has been mostly passive receivers of educational services which makes them unused to seeking out assistance, especially in an alien environment.
- For the most part, entering freshmen are used to being in the upper halves of their graduating classes, to being widely known and respected by their peers and teachers - in other words to being “big fish in small ponds.” At the University, many of them are anonymous, submerged in large classes and competing with the cream of the crop of a number of high schools - very “small fish” in an awfully “big pond.” This is often a difficult transition.
- Unlike upperclass students, whose prerequisites assure some consistent entry levels into courses, the variety of learning styles and the level of preparation of freshmen students varies as widely as do their study skills. Students are often shocked to discover what is expected of them as freshmen.
- Therefore, try to take these things into consideration when working directly with freshmen students.

In The Classroom

**Tips on Sustaining a Positive Learning Environment**

1. Make the examples you use relevant to the students’ lives. For example, “What if this situation happened in your home town? What is the first thing you would do?”

2. Address students by name. Use a seating chart, name tags, whatever may work for you to learn their names.

3. Remember not all reasons for incomplete assignments are excuses. Yes, we must establish rules, but there are occasions where the rules need to be broken. Be compassionate, not cynical. Grandmothers really do die.

4. Constantly read your audience's response:
   a. If it is clear from the expressions on their faces they have no idea what you are talking about, be willing to take the time to present the concept in different words, with different illustrations. Expecting their confusion to disappear with time is not good enough.
   b. If students are bored or you have just covered an in-depth topic intensively, there is nothing wrong with stopping. Allowing them to talk or stretch for a minute or two and then continuing.
5. Provide nonverbal encouragement:
   a. Maintain eye contact.
   b. Move about the room. Display your willingness to be a person; sit on a sturdy desk or table. Move into their space.
   c. Be animated and expressive, both facially and bodily. Let them see and feel your enthusiasm.

6. Model the thinking processes in your field for the students. Do not just tell them; show them and then let them practice. If you are not talking, it does not mean you are not helping.

7. Use positive reinforcement:
   a. Give students recognition for contributing to discussions or answering questions. Use positive reinforcement when possible, but if the answer is incorrect, try to lead the student through continued questioning to reach an acceptable position.
   b. Use student test answers to review material after a test.
   c. Validate student opinions by referring to points students made previously, not always using "as I said last Thursday...". Say, "to follow up on John's point Tuesday...".

8. Keep constant tabs on how the students are progressing:
   a. Be willing to provide review, catch-up or further explanation sessions.

9. When asking questions, pause. Students need time to process the questions and their answers. Count to 15 before moving on. If you do not, the message you are giving is, "I really don't want to take away from my time to listen to a student." This is not the message you should be sending out if you want your students to learn. Verbalizing information helps students internalize it. We should provide as many occasions as feasible for them to verbalize.

   Invite responses by pausing for a good length of time. If you wait long enough, you will get an answer if you have not worded the question in an alien language or manner.

10. Do not talk down to students:
    a. Avoid judging behaviors, which cause students to feel inadequate.
    b. Avoid stereotyping. Do not think that females have a certain set of interests and males have another. Do not think that all older students like to talk in class. Do not target examples and questions towards certain groups in the class.

   If you make appointments with students, keep them. If you are detained, call someone to post a note for the student.

Teaching in a Lab

Lab classes, like all other types of classes, have goals that relate to the course as a whole and to each lab session as well. With regard to viewing the course and lab as a whole unit, there is usually a general goal that the labs will provide a concrete, hands-on experience that will help the students tie the abstract concepts to a concrete process of discovery.

Each lab session furthermore provides students with an opportunity to master technical skills such as coding, creating databases, creating websites, etc. In mastering these technical skills, students are learning the skills we associate with inquiry: observation, hypothesis, pattern recognition, inference, classification or categorization. And of course, each lab is making some concept presented in the lecture come to life in a way that students can see, feel, touch, smell and count. Labs, like discussion sections, also have a social aspect in that students typically work together in groups as collaborators and learn the value of teamwork.

Weaker students can particularly benefit from this aspect of a lab course by observing how the more successful students go about accomplishing the tasks laid out for them. It is critical that all students be encouraged and shown that information technology is something everyone can DO, not just a body of knowledge that must be memorized.

Like other types of teaching situations, a good lab should be well organized and should have three distinct components: 1.) an introduction which links the lab to previously learned material and explains exactly what is expected, 2.) the active part in which the students are working on their lab problems and 3.) a closing or summary, in which you generalize the results back to the lecture or upcoming lessons and give the students a take-home point to help them retain what they have learned.

Any presentations you make should be short and to the point as the students are there to work, not to hear your version of the lecture. In longer labs you may also want to build in a short 3-5 minute stretching break to help the students stay focused and on task.

Due to the amount of work involved in most labs, thorough advance preparation is critical.

Before you TA each lab you should:

- Read the lab assignment and do the lab so that you can anticipate difficulties that the students may have with either the explanation or implementation.
- Ask other lab TAs who have already been a TA for the course where they saw students having difficulties.
- Check out all the equipment at each station to be sure everything is working on the day of your lab. Be sure you know whom to contact about broken or malfunctioning equipment.
- Make sure you know where to get any materials you need for your lab.
- Explain all grading criteria and lab report requirements such as the weighting of content versus form.
- Decide how you will form student groups: randomly, their choice or by your design, if needed.
While you are in the labs you should:

- Write an outline of the lab on the board.
- Begin on time so students have the full amount of time to work.
- Be active while your students are working in groups, walking around and listening to make sure they are on the right track, offering suggestions or questions to help those who are having some problems and keeping tabs on how they are doing in terms of time.
- If you find yourself answering the same question or addressing the same problem more than 2 or 3 times, take a few minutes and address the issue with the entire class.
- Give students some reminders about where they should be in their labs given the time elapsed.
- Plan to end with time to summarize and conclude.
- Remind students of reading and preparation for the next lab.

Use of Humor in the Classroom

“How can I use humor in my class?” is one of the most common questions asked of good teachers. Teaching Assistants experience faculty members who are clearly comfortable using humor in its many different forms but do not know how to start to build it into their style. There is little mention of humor in teaching texts so here are a few suggestions.

Humor can often help a student remember a point. There becomes an association between the (remembered) humor and your instructional item. Be sensitive to gender issues and do not use possibly offensive items. Be careful not to use humor involving ethnicity, race, sex, disabilities and other sensitive issues. Some humor is high risk. For example, quick quips may come out wrong and offend. Cartoons and other proprietary humor can be used in the classroom but not posted on the web. Copyright is something of which you should always be aware. Self-effacing or self-deprecating humor is very safe. It is often best to laugh at yourself.

Humor can be a lot of fun for you too!

Why would you not use humor? It might offend your students, embarrass you, not be your style, completely fail, take too much time, not be appropriate or break copyright. If you are a sensitive person you will be OK. There are lots of sources of humor around. Exploit it and use its great educational effect.

Using Questions to Teach

Questions are an integral part of the classroom discourse and can originate either from the students to the instructor or instructor to students. In order for questions to succeed and learning to occur, there are certain conditions that must be met:

UTA to Student

1. Questions should be at the appropriate level and there should be a variety of levels of questions in each class.
2. You must allow sufficient wait time (minimum 10 seconds) for students to answer the questions. The more complex the question, the more wait time they will need.
3. Do not answer your own questions. If no one volunteers an answer after a reasonable wait, rephrase your question. Tell students to discuss their answers with a partner or write down their answers and exchange them for discussion before asking for an answer in front of the whole class. Always give students the message that they must attempt to answer the questions and that you will not jump in to do it for them, just to save time.
4. Never ask “Any questions?” because you will most likely not get any responses. Either ask students “What questions do you have?” or ask them a real question about the material you have just covered.

Student to Instructor

1. When students ask questions, make sure you listen to the whole question and then repeat it, paraphrasing if necessary, so that all of the students know what the question is before you begin answering it.
2. Never brush off a student’s question or answer sarcastically. If you don’t know the answer, be honest and tell them you will find out before the next class meeting.
3. Don’t feel you must answer every question—let other students respond to student questions when appropriate.
4. Encourage the students to ask questions—this promotes engagement in the material and lets you know when they are having difficulties.

Question and answer is a form of dialogue between students and TAs. Remember that getting answers to questions is never a waste of time from the students’ perspective, even if it means that less content is covered. There is not much point in covering more material if the students are not following you and staying engaged and the best way to judge that is through the effective questioning techniques outlined above.

Bloom’s Taxonomy

The various types of questions that are used with students can be categorized in many ways, but probably the most often cited taxonomy is Bloom’s. Bloom based his taxonomy on the types of tasks most often called for in academic settings.

1. Knowledge Questions: recall and recognition: major ideas, dates, names, places, etc.

   Key words: Who, what, where, when, define, describe, select, identify, tell, choose, match, which one, omit, etc.
2. Comprehension Questions: understanding, interpreting facts, translating knowledge, comparing and contrasting

   Key words: summarize, contrast, explain, predict, state in your own words, demonstrate, discuss, show, give an example, select the best definition, which statements support, infer, etc.

3. Application Questions: use information, solve problems, apply information to new situations

   Key words: Calculate, illustrate, show, relate, what would result, modify, judge the effects, tell what would happen, complete, discover, examine, etc.

4. Analysis Questions: finding patterns, parts, organization, components

   Key words: Identify, analyze, connect, classify, arrange, order, what does the author believe or assume, find the inconsistencies, separate, compare, what conclusions, separate fact and opinion, etc.

5. Synthesis Questions: creating new ideas from old ones, generalizing from facts, relating elements or knowledge in a new way, predicting, drawing conclusions

   Key words: Combine, develop, choose, state a rule, solve the following, plan, formulate, rearrange, compose, modify, generalize, propose an alternative, etc.

6. Evaluation Questions: discriminating between ideas, making choices and defending them, assessing the value of theories, verifying the value of the evidence, identifying subjectivity

   Key words: Assess, criticize, judge, recommend, convince, appraise, what fallacies/inconsistencies appear, what is more logical/better/appropriate/moral, rank, support, grade, summarize, measure, discriminate, etc.

Undergraduate Teaching Assistant Hybrid/Online Responsibilities

Being an undergraduate teaching assistant for an online course offers a new perspective on the possibilities and challenges of supporting online faculty and students. Effective communication and collaboration are essential. Here are a few recommendations for getting everyone on the same virtual page:

- **Consider a contract or memorandum of agreement.** This can be informal, but captures in writing the expectations you and your instructor have — the specific tasks you will complete, synchronous or in person requirements — and communicate them before the term begins.
- **Coordinate in advance.** Encourage your instructor to share their approach to teaching in general and the course specifically. Walk through the syllabus, class schedule, and assignment instructions, and review learning objectives and grading rubrics. Meetings, in person or virtual, are great, but this kind of coordination can also take place via email to make sure resources are available and questions are answered.
- **Be available for questions and clarification.** See if you can set aside time during the week to connect with or hold virtual office hours with your instructor. And respond to email as quickly as possible. Instructors are often trying to answer questions students have emailed to them, so shortening this cycle of response is helpful to all involved.
- **Provide access to information and resources.** You will have add/edit content privileges in Blackboard and it can be helpful for you to view any information related to student progress, especially if you are responsible for monitoring student activity and intervening when problems occur. It is also beneficial to have copies of textbooks and any other course materials students will be using to complete their assignments. Be sure to let your instructor know if you made any changes to the course content so they are not surprised the next time they enter the course looking for information.
- **Ask for feedback after the course.** Through informal conversation or structured survey, you have an obligation as an undergraduate TA to express ideas for the course and suggestions for instructor-assistant interaction and communication. Your experiences working with the students can inform the revision of materials and use of technology in future academic terms.

You will be helping yourself, your instructor and the students by getting clear guidance and expectations as early on as possible.

Review Expectations

Familiarize Yourself with Blackboard Roles and Permissions and Any Other Necessary Tools

As an Undergraduate Teaching Assistant (UTA), you have permissions equivalent to the Instructor role in Blackboard, including all course-level permissions, such as the ability to add, edit, and delete all content in a course. You are encouraged to become comfortable with navigating all basic Blackboard tools and features.

Figure Out the Logistics

Check-in with your instructor to figure out the course logistics, including your individual and shared responsibilities, such as adding content to the Blackboard site, leading discussion sections, monitoring the discussion board, etc. You should also agree on communication methods between yourselves and with students. Will you copy the instructor on messages to students? How should you plan to communicate with each other if there is more than one TA per class?

Additionally, you and your instructor should agree on the amount of time you should be spending in the course site, including any fixed or recurring deadlines and expected turnaround time for tasks.

As a best practice, be sure to prominently display your contact information and virtual office hours on the syllabus and in the Blackboard course site.
Communicate Through Announcements
When communicating with students through Announcements, consider sharing a friendly welcome, a weekly wrap-up, an accolade, a news article, a Blackboard tip, or a reminder of an upcoming deadline. These can be written, video, or audio announcements. Be sure to include a text equivalent (transcript, captions, etc.) on any recorded announcements.

Participate in Remote Class Sessions
You can help support an instructor in a class session by:
- Muting participant microphones to reduce feedback
- Monitoring the chat feature
- Organizing the breakout rooms and returning the groups to the larger class
- Managing waiting rooms as directed by faculty
- Sharing their screen to display slides, desktop, or whiteboard features

You can also lead your own remote class sessions by presenting content, guiding discussions, facilitating activities and study sessions, and fielding questions.

Keep Discussions Active
If leading weekly discussions, plan to actively engage students by asking questions, supporting dissenting opinions, and encouraging civil discourse. If you are using Zoom, you can use breakout rooms to assist you with this, otherwise it will be a large group discussion. In addition to facilitating discussions, monitor discussion boards regularly to keep an eye on ongoing or weekly discussions. Ideally, you may be required to summarize questions and challenges for the instructor on a regular basis.

Host Office Hours or Discussion Sessions Virtually Through Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate or Microsoft Teams or...?
Schedule virtual meetings through Zoom, or Blackboard Collaborate or Microsoft Teams for office hours.
- Communicate with the students about how you will use the tool.
  - Post an Announcement in the course notifying students of the date and time of the meeting; let them know they can access the meeting through Zoom or whatever tool you decide to use.
  - Test the platform at least 24 hours before the first section you plan to lead remotely.
  - Record the meeting for students who are not able to attend. Recording options are available during the session.

Make Contact Information Clear for Students
It’s important that students are aware of the best way to contact you and understand the way you will communicate with them. Consider including the following on the syllabus and in Blackboard:
- Name – How do you like to be addressed?
- Pronouns
- Email – Include how quickly you will respond to student email and Blackboard messages.
- Phone – You may choose whether or not to include your phone number. What hours are you available to speak on the phone?
  - Can students text you? If so, how quickly will you respond?
- Office Hours – Are you available to speak with students upon request, or will you hold regular drop-in hours each week via videoconference?
- Synchronous Meetings – Will you hold any sync sessions during the quarter?
- Biography – Compose a short professional biography that introduces you to the students in the course in an approachable way. Describe your roles and responsibilities as an undergraduate teaching assistant so that students feel comfortable coming to you with questions and value your feedback. This statement could be delivered as an infographic, audio recording, or video message.

E-Mail
E-mail can be an extremely useful tool in communicating with the students, either individually or as a whole class. Although the majority of the students will be familiar with e-mail and will have university accounts, you should not assume that everyone is using e-mail on a regular basis. If you want students to use e-mail as part of the communication process, you must be explicit about it.

Office Hours and Counseling Students
Office Hours and Counseling Students
The teaching assistant’s office is one of the few places where the protective shield of impersonality at a university can be broken. Usually office hours are scheduled before the term begins and announced during the first week. One alternative is to check with the students about convenient times before scheduling your office hours.
Let students know frequently that they’re welcome. Invite them individually. Have your instructor post a comment on a paper (e.g., “Please see TA about this.”) brings about a 75 percent response. Stress the importance and value of office visits both to you and to them. Most teaching assistants deal with freshmen and sophomores who aren’t used to such personal contact. If those first few who come in have positive experiences, the word will spread. Some teaching assistants find that posting answers to quiz or homework problems inside the door is an effective means of attracting students to office hours.
For Students who Particularly Need Help Early in the Course

Getting Students to Your Office Hours

To facilitate a helpful tutorial or counseling session:

- Try to be as approachable as possible. The best thing to do when students come in to your office hours is to make them feel welcome. It's very easy to make students feel that they're intruding; it takes only a little bit of care to create a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere in which communication is natural and easy.
- Rely on the student to tell you what he or she has come to see you about. You may suspect some hidden problem, but you should not press the student to disclose it. You can help the students if they actively request your help, but your responsibility need not extend further than responding to their requests.
- Listen to your students when they come to your office hours. Give them your undivided attention. The best way to show that you're listening is to ask questions—it also shows students that you find their concerns important. Students often fear that they're wasting your time; by listening attentively and responding thoughtfully, you can help allay their anxiety.
- Finally, realize that you won't always be able to provide the answers or information that is needed. If you're tutoring a student in the material for the course, there's nothing wrong with saying, "I don't know, but I can find out for you."

If a student is asking for more personal counseling, remember that you're not always the best-qualified person for the student to be talking to. If you feel that the student needs more specific advice, you may be able to suggest someone who can provide it.

What is the line between telling students what to do and how to do it?

Office hours often involve meetings with students who are hoping you can get them "unstuck" on the assignments. At first, you might give concise explanations to fill in gaps in understanding from lectures or text. To help you avoid telling students exactly what to do (especially when the question is about a graded assignment), it can be useful to view yourself as a coach more than as a tutor. In this view, your primary purpose is to give students feedback about what they have done so far and offer direction for further work. But in order to know what kind of feedback and direction they need, you usually need to see an example of students' written work or reasoning. Since students often have trouble with getting started, you may need additional strategies to determine what they need from you.

You can encourage them to show you or explain to you what is causing them difficulty in a variety of ways. For example, you can look at their work-in-progress. Instead of trying to answer their questions directly, you might find or create illustrative examples for them to solve or analyze while you help. In this way, you can see and hear their reasoning and ask questions about their strategies and decisions.

How can you make sure you are not being taken advantage of during office hours?

Since many students wait until the last minute to do their work, they like you to be available when they are doing the work. While evening office hours are very helpful and convenient for students, you do not need to hold office hours on the night before an assignment is due if students flood your office looking for shortcuts and quick answers that do not promote learning. Just let them know when you will be and won't be available so that they can plan accordingly.

You should not be afraid of saying that the office hours are over.

If you have a strong commitment to teaching and want to welcome students in your office more than just during office hours, an "open door" policy can build great UTA-student interaction. But it has some costs when a few students want to spend a great deal of time with you just chatting. In the interest of your own efficiency, you may sometimes need to set limits. For students who want extensive support from you, you may need to start your meetings with them by stating that you have until a certain time and then you have another commitment.

Getting Students to Your Office Hours

Early in the Course

- As much as possible, schedule your office hours at times when students are available. Check with students to be sure that they can attend. Show that you are willing to schedule appointments at other times as needed.
- Invite or require students to come to your office, alone or in small groups, for a very short introductory chat at the beginning of the course. This step may be especially helpful for first-year undergraduates who don't know what to expect from a TA.

Throughout the Course

- Make yourself available to students immediately before and after class to answer quick questions and set up appointments. If possible, attend at least some of the lectures for the same purpose.
- In class, mention interesting topics of discussion that have been or can be continued in office hours. Such examples show that office hours are not just for getting help when students are stuck.
- Both before class and in office hours, welcome conversation about topics other than the course material and make small talk with students to put them at ease.
- Remind students regularly about your office hours. Some TAs write them on the board in each class, especially for first-year undergraduates.

For Students who Particularly Need Help

- Invite students to your office via e-mail or in person when something about their performance or behavior causes you concern. If a student is having significant difficulties and may not want to acknowledge the problem, you may want to contact him or her both in writing and in person. Speaking in person allows you to convey your concern for the student more accurately than e-mail.
- Discuss with the professor whether he or she might refer students to your office hours after low grades on quizzes, papers, or exams.
Student Conduct

Bad Manners

Most students will behave appropriately and in a respectful manner, but there may be an exception or two who will alter the tone of the class.

Watch your own behavior: Some research shows that student misbehavior occurs in response to instructor behavior. Things like arriving late, making little or no effort to learn students' names, condescending through instructions or language choice and postponing students' in-class questions all contribute to students believing that the teacher doesn't care for or respect them. As a consequence, students will return that perceived attitude in one form or another. Some professors have included “conduct” comments in their syllabus; do so with great care. Some examples convey a very scolding tone, which is a bad idea when a teacher hasn't even met his or her students.

Expectations, as research has shown repeatedly, play a large role in behavior.

Most instructors still believe that mutual respect is the key to a good teacher-student relationship. If an instructor expects the best of their students and if they offer them their own best, chances are that the classes will run very smoothly.

Dramatic Cases of Misconduct: If a student is behaving in a way that endangers or threatens you or the students call the Department of Public Safety (3-2224) or in a clear emergency, call 911.

All students receive a copy of the Student Conduct Code and TAs should be aware of the students’ responsibility as outlined in it.

Some Forms of Misconduct

1. Giving or receiving assistance without permission. This includes, but is not limited to:
   - Writing another student's paper
   - Sharing ideas and answers during a test or quiz
   - Working together on assignments that are not group assignments

2. Not citing or referencing the ideas, findings or words of others which are used on assignments to be graded.

3. Submitting the same work for a different class without the teacher's consent.

Cheating

Understanding Cheating

There are many reasons why students cheat. Among them are:

- Pressure to perform well (internal, peer and parental)
- Lack of preparation (students didn’t study or don’t have an adequate background to be successful on their own)
- Conditions encourage it (lack of adequate proctoring; students sitting too close together; overly suspicious teacher who almost challenges students to cheat)
- Lack of sufficient negative consequence (Nothing will happen to me if I cheat, other than getting a better grade; everyone’s doing it; nobody ever gets caught)
- Some teachers deny or refuse to see that their students cheat because it seems to be a personal affront, a violation of trust. Some teachers realize that students cheat, indeed even suspect certain students of cheating, but refuse to act upon it. They may worry about causing the student irreparable damage, of ruining the student’s life, or they may just wish to avoid an unpleasant scene or the process involved in going through a university hearing. So, for whatever reason, they remain silent, but to remain silent is to be complicit in the student’s dishonesty.
- Finding a measured response to cheating troubles many teaching assistants. Overreacting may do more harm than good. On the other hand, teachers who refuse to recognize the possibility of cheating may also be leading their classes to do just that.
- For Syracuse University freshmen, cheating may be a way to keep their heads above water. The competition here is much stronger than in high school. For the first time in their lives, they may be getting Cs and their self-image as top-notch students being challenged.

Whatever the reasons for cheating, we have an obligation to the vast majority of honest students to act decisively when cheating occurs.

In the interest of honesty, teaching assistants should admit up front that some students do cheat. Although teachers may try to deny or ignore this fact, ignoring it only complicates the problem. Until academic dishonesty is confronted as a serious problem, little will be done to change the situation.

Much has been written in recent years about the success-at-any-price student of this generation. Competition for jobs or admission to graduate school has made students single-minded in their pursuit of grades. Students are under a lot of pressure. Given this pressure, wherever it originates, some students find it difficult to resist the opportunity to cheat.

Harassment & Biases

UTAs are role models; therefore, it is important that UTAs conduct themselves in a manner free of racial, sexual and other prejudicial behavior. This section will focus on sexism and racism and provide suggestions for dealing with behavior related to biases. Syracuse University Anti-Harassment Policy

I. General Policy Statement
Syracuse University is committed to maintaining an environment that fosters tolerance, sensitivity, understanding and respect while protecting the free speech rights of the members of its community. The University prohibits Harassment related to any protected category including, without limitation, race, color, creed, religion, sex, gender, national origin, citizenship, ethnicity, marital status, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, veteran status, or any other status protected by applicable law. This policy governs non-sexual harassment at the University. For issues relating to sexual harassment, please see the Sexual Harassment, Abuse, and Assault Prevention policy, which is available here: Sexual Harassment, Abuse, and Assault Prevention Policy. The University’s non-discrimination policies are available here: University Governance, Ethics, Integrity, and Legal Compliance.

II. Reason for Policy/Purpose

This policy is intended to ensure that all members of the Syracuse University community learn and work in an environment that is free from Harassment. It is meant to promote free speech, and foster a community of engagement and respect. The University’s protection of these statuses is grounded in state and federal law. These requirements include but are not limited to: Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in employment based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender, and, by extension, sexual violence; Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits institutions that receive federal funds, including the University, from discriminating on the basis of race; Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits discrimination based on sex or gender, and applies to employment and education programs and activities; the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibit discrimination in employment and education programs and activities based on disability; and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, which prohibits employment discrimination against persons 40 years of age or older.

III. Policy

The University does not unlawfully discriminate in offering equal access to its educational programs and activities or with respect to employment terms and conditions on the basis of an individual’s race, color, creed, religion, sex, gender, national origin, citizenship, ethnicity, marital status, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, veteran status, or any other status protected by applicable law (each defined as a “Protected Category”). As part of this commitment, the University prohibits Harassment on such grounds. The University is also committed to protecting academic freedom and the freedom of speech by members of its community. This policy is not intended, and may not be applied, to abridge the free speech or other civil rights of any individual or group on campus. However, harassing speech or conduct that effectively prevents equal access to University programs or otherwise violates federal or state law, or University policy, is prohibited. The following policy defines prohibited Harassment:

a. Prohibited Harassment Members of the Syracuse University community are prohibited from engaging in Harassment. Harassment is defined at the University as unwelcome conduct or speech directed at an individual or group of individuals, based on a Protected Category, which is so severe or pervasive that it unreasonably interferes with an individual’s work performance, terms of employment, educational program participation, or it creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment for study, work, or social living. To qualify as Harassment under this policy, the speech or conduct must be both viewed by the listener(s) as Harassment, and be objectively severe or pervasive enough that a reasonable person would agree that the speech or conduct constitutes Harassment. In determining whether reported speech or conduct qualifies as Harassment under this policy, the University will consider all circumstances surrounding the reported incident(s), including, without limitation, the frequency, location, severity, context, and nature of the speech or conduct, including whether the speech or conduct is physically threatening or humiliating, rather than a mere offensive remark. The University will also consider the intent of the speaker(s).

b. Protection Against Retaliation The University will not tolerate retaliation or discrimination against persons who report or charge Harassment or against those who testify, assist or participate in any investigation, proceeding or hearing involving a complaint of Harassment. In this context, retaliation means action that adversely affects another’s terms or conditions of employment or education and is motivated by an intent to harm the targeted person or group because of his or her participation in the filing or investigation of an allegation of Harassment.

c. Complaints and Sanctions Syracuse University encourages the reporting of all perceived incidents of Harassment. Upon a report of Harassment, the University will conduct a prompt and thorough investigation of the allegations. Upon completing the investigation, the University will take appropriate corrective or disciplinary action consistent with the results of the investigation. Disciplinary action may be taken against community members who violate this policy, up to and including expulsion of students or discharge of employees. The Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities will administer and decide complaints of Harassment against students or registered student organizations pursuant to the Code of Student Conduct and the Student Conduct System Handbook. The Office of Equal Opportunity, Inclusion, and Resolution Services will administer and decide complaints of Harassment against faculty or staff pursuant to the Faculty Manual or this policy, respectively. To report incidents of Harassment, or to discuss the appropriate course of action, please contact the Office of Equal Opportunity, Inclusion & Resolution Services at (315) 443-4018 or equalopp@syr.edu. Employees who believe that they are being discriminated against and/or harassed should promptly report such harassment to any one of the following:

- His or her immediate supervisor, the supervisor’s supervisor, or a dean;
- Office of Human Resources; or
- Equal Opportunity, Inclusion and Resolution Services.

The University reserves the right to investigate circumstances that may involve Harassment in situations where it has a reasonable basis to believe that Harassment has occurred, even where no complaint, formal or informal, has been filed.

IV. To Whom Does This Policy Apply

Students, Faculty, Staff, Visitors/General Public

Each office and person involved in advising complainants on sources of assistance must avoid comments that might dissuade victims from pursuing their rights or constitute threats of reprisal. Such behavior in itself is discriminatory and is a violation of this policy.

Sexual Harassment

Facts and Figures
Sexual harassment does not only affect women. Men can be harassed and there can also be same sex sexual harassment (woman to woman, man to man). In one survey, 33% of those reporting sexual harassment tried to ignore the unwanted attention. In 75% of these, the harassment continued or became worse. Ignoring sexual harassment does not guarantee it will stop. People who openly charge sexual harassment are often not believed, may be ridiculed, may lose their job, be given a bad grade or be mistreated in some other way.

**People have little to gain from False Accusations of Sexual Harassment**

Some people may confuse harassment with flattery or some may fear being criticized or ostracized if they do not go along with demeaning “jokes” or comments. It is important for both women and men to become educated in order to properly label discriminating behaviors so they can be stopped.

Sexual harassment is not harmless or fun; it is a form of harassment that can profoundly affect its victims.

**What is Sexual Harassment?**

Syracuse University defines sexual harassment as unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that relates to the gender or sexual identity of an individual and that has the purpose or effect of creating an intimidating, offensive or hostile environment for study, work, or social living.

- Submission to these actions is made explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individuals employment, performance appraisal or evaluation of academic performance (quid pro quo);
- These actions have the effect of interfering with an individuals performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment.

**Examples**

***This is harassment***:

- Your UTA asks you to stay after class to discuss a paper you wrote. After everyone has left, the UTA suggests you come to the UTA’s apartment for a drink to talk over your paper.
- You are the only woman working with six men in a cafeteria in a small residence hall. Your supervisor continually tells degrading and sexually explicit jokes about women.
- You are a good student with a 3.5 average. Several times your professor has asked you to go out to dinner and you have refused each time. You are sure that the C you received on your midterm has something to do with your refusals.
- A man in your class continues to ask you for dates, even though you have said you are not interested. For several weeks he called every night even though you hung up on him. Last night he showed up at your room and asked to come in.

All of the scenarios listed above can be examples of sexual harassment. The context of events can be important in determining whether particular acts constitute sexual harassment.

**Signs of Harassment**

- Slurs or abuse
- Sexual innuendoes and other suggestive, offensive or derogatory comments
- Humor and jokes about sex (or gender-specific traits)
- Sexist remarks about someone's body, clothing or sexual activity
- Sexual propositions or subtle pressure for sexual activities
- Insults of a sexual nature Requests or demands for sexual favors
- Catcalls
- Leering, ogling, whistling Suggestive or insulting sounds or gestures
- Use of inappropriate body images to advertise events
- Visual displays of degrading sexual images
- Unnecessary and unwanted physical contact (e.g., constant touching, brushing, pinching)
- Impeding or blocking movement Attempted or actual fondling or kissing
- Physical assault or coerced sexual intercourse

**How to Help and What to Do**

Confront the offender directly as soon as the harassment occurs. State clearly what behavior(s) you want stopped. If you can't confront the offender directly, write a letter and give it directly to the offender. Make sure you keep copies of any correspondence you give the offender. The letter should consist of three parts:

- A detailed account of the harassment
- How you felt when this happened
- What you would like to see happen in the future.

Talk with others and see if they have had similar experiences with the offender. The more support you get, the stronger your case when you confront the offender.

Call one of the resources listed to find out your options.

Report the harassment. If the confrontation does not stop the harassment, report it to a supervisor or department that deals with harassment.

**Procedures for Complaints against Students, Faculty, and Staff**

The University has distinct procedures for the investigation and resolution of:
Students with Disabilities

Syracuse University is committed to achieving equal educational opportunity and full participation for persons with disabilities. It is the policy that no qualified person be excluded from participating in any University program or activity, be denied the benefits of any University program or activity or otherwise be subjected to discrimination with regard to any University program or activity. This policy derives from the commitment to non-discrimination for all persons in employment, academic programs, access to facilities, student programs, activities and services.

A person with a disability must be ensured the same access to programs, opportunities and activities at the University as all others. Existing barriers, whether physical, programmatic or attitudinal must be removed. Further, there must be ongoing vigilance to ensure that new barriers are not erected.

The University’s effort to accommodate people with disabilities must be measured against the goal of full participation and integration. Services and programs to promote these benefits for people with disabilities shall complement and support, but not duplicate, the University’s regular services and programs.

Achieving full participation and integration of people with disabilities requires the cooperative efforts of the departments, offices and personnel. To this end, the University will continue to strive to achieve excellence in its services and to assure that its services are delivered equitably and efficiently to all of its members.

Assurance of equal educational opportunity rests upon legal foundations established by federal law, specifically the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 including Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. By federal law, a person with a disability is any person who: 1.) has a physical or mental impairment; 2.) has a record of such impairment; or 3.) is regarded as having such an impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities such as self-care, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing or learning.

Philosophy and Mission Statement

Syracuse University values diversity and seeks to promote equal access to educational opportunities for all students, including SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. The mission of the Office of Disability Services (ODS) is to engage the University Community to empower students, enhance equity and provide a platform for innovation and inclusion.

While complying with the letter of the law, ODS also embraces its spirit by providing services to all students with permanent or temporary disabilities to ensure that all University programs and activities are accessible. The Center can assist students to maximize their potential while helping them develop and maintain independence. Our philosophy is one that promotes self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy in a comprehensively accessible environment.

For further information:

- General Email (NOT for exams or exam related questions): disabilityservices@syr.edu
- Professors ONLY: Exams and materials should be emailed to: examsods@syr.edu
- Students with Exam Related Questions: odstestingsignup@syr.edu
- Alternate Format: odsalternateformat@syr.edu
- Note Taking Assistance Questions or Concerns: sunotes@syr.edu
- 804 University Avenue, Suite 303 | Syracuse, New York | 13244-2330
  Phone: Voice: (315) 443-4498
  TDD: (315) 443-1371
  Fax: (315) 443-1312