

Guide to Teaching for International TAs

Understand your students. North American students are rather informal. They may call you by your first name. If you wish to be called differently, make sure to let them know the name you wish them to call you by on the first day of class. You may also want to help them to pronounce your name. They are less likely to approach you if they cannot say your name.

Get familiar with the US academic culture. If you have never taught in a North American university, become familiar with the classroom culture. You can achieve this by attending a class to observe the teaching methods, the students, and their interaction with the instructor or by talking with more experienced international TAs about their insights and strategies. College students in the US usually are at different levels in terms of their academic background. This is because the US does not have a standardized curriculum in the K-12 education. Do not make assumptions that students have similar knowledge when they enter the course.

Build rapport. Try to be in the classroom a few minutes earlier and chat with students to build rapport. Campus events, weather, and sports are good topics to open up the conversation. Of course, football is a topic you can always talk about here at Penn State.

Acknowledge language barriers but do not apologize. Do not apologize for the fact that your English is not native-like. You can talk to your students about where you come from, share cultural facts with them, and your experiences as a student in your country. If you think language might be an issue for communicating with your students, let them know that you will do your best to make sure you understand them and vice versa. Also let them know that they cannot use your accent as an excuse for not learning or doing poorly. They will be more responsible for understanding your lectures and materials. This may relieve the anxiety from them and from you.

Promote open communication in your classroom. Give students the opportunity to politely let you know if they do not understand you, and tell them you also might ask them to repeat a word or phrase. Do not ignore students' questions. Confirm your understanding of a student's comment or question by repeating what they have said. Then phrase it in another way and ask if that is a correct representation of the student's comments. If you don't know the answer, let them know that you will find it for them. If necessary, write your main points and any course related vocabulary on the board at the beginning of class and as the words come up during discussion. Also watch for nonverbal communication behaviors involving speed of speech, volume and tone of voice, eye contact, facial expressions, and head and hand movements.

Be flexible. Let your students know that you are listening to them and are willing to change/adapt the course to their needs. Have your students complete an informal midterm evaluation of the course to identify students' concerns, find out about student perspectives on the course and make appropriate changes, address misunderstandings, or clarify expectations or grading policy before the second half of the semester.

Minimize your stress level. The day before you teach, go and find the classroom in which you will be teaching. Prepare for your classes; rehearse the night before to take some of the anxiety away. If at all possible, find another TA and do a dry-run of your first class together.

Design your class to allow for interaction. Students tend to appreciate classroom environments that are entertaining and interactive. So you might want to work on developing activities that involve team work, class discussions and role-plays. You do not have to reinvent the wheel for developing new materials; talk to other TAs or professors in your department who have already taught your course or the specific topic you would like to introduce. They might have some good ideas/activities you could use, adapted to the needs of your course or students. After the teaching, you might also want to save your lesson plans and activities. Keep notes of things that have worked or not, and write up possible suggestions for future improvements.

Provide positive feedback. Try to avoid giving direct negative feedback as students are not used to it. In a North American education system, students are used to receive encouragements and positive comments, including constructive criticism.

Organize your time well. Set a schedule for teaching-related duties. Preparing for classes, grading exams, and meeting with students can take a lot of your time if you do not carefully organize your schedule. Remember that you also are a student and as such you have to do your own work as well.

Save for the future. Save SRTEs. Start collecting your SRTEs right from the start because, sooner rather than later, when you will be on the job market, you will be asked to provide a summary of your SRTEs. This will save you a lot of time!