

Large Class FAQ: Resources

1. How do I work best with my TAs?

- Make your expectations clear at the beginning of the semester. Faculty agree that getting off to a good start is critical. In your first meeting, it's a good idea to provide answers to the following kinds of questions: How does your relationship with TAs fit into the broader context of graduate education in your department? What opportunities for development does this working relationship provide both you and them? What are the course objectives, and how do you intend to work with TAs to fulfill these objectives? More specific issues to address might include: What kinds of student questions and situations do you want to handle yourself, and what kinds would you like the TA to handle (or at least have a first try at)? Do you expect TAs to regularly attend lectures in the classes they assist?
- Maintain close contact with TAs throughout the semester. If your TA is sharing many basic instructional responsibilities (attending class and taking notes, giving occasional guest lectures, preparing quizzes, grading, holding office hours, etc.), you are probably communicating regularly and often. However, if TAs are working with your students in separate recitation/lab/discussion sections, consider meeting formally with them at regular intervals--participants suggest meetings before giving major exams, collecting big assignments, or introducing difficult concepts. Here are some questions that you may need to discuss with TAs as the semester progresses: How do you run an exam review session? What are the ground rules for responding to student work? What criteria will be used for evaluating specific assignments? What are the general procedures for addressing issues such as requests for make-up exams and grade disputes?
- Facilitate the flow of feedback. Several faculty noted the importance of providing a forum that encourages TAs to keep you informed of what students already know and what they are having difficulty understanding. Similarly, they recommend providing TAs with regular feedback on the work they are doing. If TAs are leading smaller sections, for example, consider visiting these sections throughout the semester; this is also a good way to meet and interact more directly with students..
- Create opportunities (e.g., brown bag lunches) for TAs to share ideas with one another.
- Help TAs balance their work for you with their research responsibilities. For example, Bob Hale (Education & School Psychology/Special Ed.) asks his TAs to keep track of their hours and to let him know when the workload exceeds expectations. You may need to make slight adjustments in what you're asking of TAs, or the problem may be how the work is shared by the TAs themselves. For example, if students like working with a particular TA (and word does get around), they may inundate that TA with requests for help. The solution may simply be learning how to say, "No."

- Sit in on at least one of each TA's recitation sections, discussion groups, or labs during the course of the semester. (You will get feedback on students' learning as well as provide guidance to your TAs on their instruction.)
- Share your experience: give TAs tips on how to get students actively involved in a discussion or problem-solving session.
- Model a positive attitude towards students and TAs in your interactions with them.
- Have TAs attend each class lecture and write one to three possible exam questions based on their reaction to the class lecture.
- If students complain about an International TA's English, attend the ITA's session yourself before making any specific recommendation. In some cases, you may want to recommend courses such as Speech Comm. 117 and 118, which have been designed to help ITAs improve their spoken English. Additional University resources for ITAs are listed in the Directory of Resources for International Faculty and Teaching Assistants.
- Finally, if you cannot provide the help that TAs need to do their job well, direct them to someone who can. Inform them of departmental resources for teaching and learning. University-wide resources are listed in our Directory of Resources at Penn State

2. How do I manage without TAs?

- Many instructors have had success using undergraduate assistants who may or may not be taking the course and who receive either pay or credit for the job they do. Most luncheon participants agreed that undergraduate assistants cannot be asked to do all the things commonly asked of graduate TAs. However, their knowledge of the course, familiarity with the institution, and proximity to their peers can allow undergraduate assistants to play an important and unique role both in and out of the classroom. They also benefit directly by learning more about the course subject. Undergraduate assistants can do many things to increase contact hours with students and facilitate communication and learning. They can provide additional feedback opportunities to students by extending the instructor's office hours (although they must have an appropriate space to do this). They may also help evaluate student work such as homework and other short assignments. Finally, undergraduate assistants can help the instructor monitor electronic mail and Web-site discussion programs.
- Without TAs it is difficult if not impossible to have one-on-one contact with every student during office hours. However, some faculty report that listservs and course Web pages are providing students increased contact with instructors and peers. Some post answers to frequently asked questions to the entire class or create and monitor a forum in which students are encouraged to answer each other's questions. Another possible solution is to enlist the help of an undergraduate TA. In exchange for pay or credit, an undergraduate who has done well in your course in a previous semester can serve as an excellent resource for other students. For an example, see Rebecca Corwin's account in the Teaching Large Class Sections chapter of *The Penn State Teacher II*.

- Without TAs to lead small break-out sessions or lab/recitation/discussion sections, instructors are concerned that students in large sections do not get enough opportunities to apply what they are learning. One partial solution is to ask students to spend several minutes working in pairs or small groups to solve a problem or discuss and report the key points of an issue. Carol Hammer (Communication Disorders) uses video clips to present students with cases that they respond to in class applying what they have learned thus far.

3. What do I do if there's a problem with my classroom?

- If students are having difficulty seeing and/or hearing, have TAs sit at back of room and monitor instructor's voice and writing.
- If desks are immovable and too close together for administering exams, give color-coded exams with questions in different order.
- Notify the University Committee on Instructional Facilities (UCIF). You can email them at L-UCIC@psuvm.psu.edu. CELT also regularly sponsors events that bring together teachers of large class sections and members of this committee. Summaries of previous large-class luncheons with representatives from UCIF are available on-line.
- You can prevent many problems ahead of time by indicating your preference from a variety of seating options (a list is available at <http://www.psu.edu/registrar/gpc.html>). Additionally, you can actually request a number of other features that will support your particular course, such as 40 feet of blackboard or two projection screens. These requests should be made when your department submits its schedule of classes for the next semester. This is also the time to request a technology classroom. The technology classroom request form, which must be filled out each semester, is available on-line at <http://www.psu.edu/registrar/ourforms/schedindex.html>.