Teaching Assistants

Who Are They and What Are They Doing in Your Classroom?

Teaching assistants (TAs) are usually graduate students who receive financial support in return for performing instructional duties. They are studying for a masters or doctoral degree. They are students, researchers and instructors all rolled into one. TAs come from all over the USA as well as from other countries. The role of a TA varies depending on the type of course being taught. Some lecture, many are discussion section leaders or laboratory assistants, and some are graders.

Are There Advantages to Having a TA?

Sure! They have some things in common with you, and that can help with classroom communication. They’re students too. They can relate to many of the challenges that face you each semester. They have to stay up late studying for tests or writing papers just as you do. In many cases they are close in age and even if they are not close in age, they remember the academic, social, and financial pressures of undergraduate life. They can remember learning the same material and try to present it in a way that will assume the appropriate amount of background knowledge. Also, they are on the cutting edge of research in the subjects they teach. They get their up-to-date information even before it hits the journals and newspapers.

If the TA is international, you have the opportunity to develop skills in intercultural communication that will serve you well out in the real world. Skill in interacting with people from different language and cultural backgrounds cannot be learned from a book; it takes real-life experience with people who have different accents, eye contact patterns, conversation timing, nonverbal communication styles. In some courses you also have the benefit of an additional view of your subject matter based on another culture’s world view.

How Can You Facilitate Classroom Communication With Your TA?

Your TA is conscious of your nonverbal behavior throughout the class period. If you are working on other assignments or thinking about something else, your TA knows. How? By your listening behavior. If you’re looking at your TA and showing your understanding by nodding, your TA notices. If you have a puzzled look on your face, you TA notices. If you start this kind of nonverbal listening behavior at the beginning of the semester, you have a better chance of getting your TA’s attention for the rest of the semester. It’s human nature to look in the direction where one expects to find some action. Taking part in classroom interaction is very important for retention of material because of the alertness required to participate. And remember, you are not here to look smart; you’re here to learn. Ask your questions. Use active listening behavior to encourage your TA to pay attention to you.

How Can You Facilitate Communication with an International TA?

There are several ways that you can help to improve the flow of communication between you and your international TA (ITA). Visiting your ITA during office hours will provide you with micro level information (below your level of awareness) about your ITA’s conversation style – information that you will put to use without even realizing it when you are back in the classroom. The earlier in the semester that you visit your ITA, the better it will be for you. At the beginning of the semester you will be adjusting to your ITA’s way of speaking. This is the same process that international students go through with American professors and TAs. They sometimes can tape record the instructor (with the instructor’s permission) so they can listen several times and speed up the adjustment process. Visiting your ITA during office hours will help in the same way.
Research shows that there is a higher amount of information transfer between people when background information is shared. One way to capitalize on this is to talk to your ITA about where they are from during your initial office visit. Tell your ITA something about your background for the subject of the course. You don’t need any other reason for your office visit besides this handout!

Another way that you can help is by suspending one of our culture’s strongest prohibitions: calling attention to language differences during conversations. You may not realize it, but this prohibition is operating in your conversation system most of the time. The system works well when you are interacting with people from your hometown, but it can spell disaster in an intercultural classroom. This prohibition is not as common in areas of the world where several languages are spoken. In fact, it is likely that your ITA would welcome your calling attention to the fact that you’ve missed something because of a language difference or the fact that the ITA has misunderstood a question.

What Do You Have the Right to Expect From Your TA?

Your TA should:

⇒ Have knowledge of the subject,
⇒ Come to class regularly,
⇒ Be prepared for class,
⇒ Be accessible during office hours and by appointment,
⇒ Be responsive to your questions,
⇒ Treat all students equally
⇒ Grade fairly and promptly.

If Things Aren’t Going the Way You’d Hoped....

A variety of issues can come up in the classroom: questions about tests, grades, ethical treatment of students, and others. Start where the issue is: between you and your TA! If you want to pursue the issue further, go to the course coordinator or professor. Still further? Go to the department office and find out who is the next in the chain of command. By the way, let course coordinators and professors know about TAs that you appreciate so others will benefit the way you did.

Adapted from “Teaching Assistants at Mizzou” produced by the office of T.A. Training and Development at the University of Missouri-Colombia, Columbia, Missouri.