

## Attending to Attendance: Body, Mind, and Spirit

Regardless of one's position on class attendance, it is a simple fact of university life that attending class ought to be essential to a student's learning experience. Courses ought to be structured so that regular class attendance contributes to the students' grasp of the material. The fact that courses are taught implies that the substance of the course is much more than mere references to text. This, however, says little of whether an instructor ought to have an attendance policy as part of his or her course. While attendance policies and the general strictness of those is subject to the instructor's discretion, below are some pointers which can help you make an informed decision as to whether you need an explicit attendance policy as part of your course.

**1) Attendance policies should be backed with good reason.** Attendance policies are beneficial only inasmuch as they support the learning process. Ask yourself, 'Why is it important that the students regularly attend class, and why should it adversely affect the students who choose not to do so?' Once you have answered these questions, you will have a general idea as to how you should proceed.

**2) Enforceability.** If you have a large class, attendance policies could be difficult to enforce, and taking attendance should not substantially interfere with instruction. Calling roll for a class of three hundred students may not only be extremely difficult to do, but would take up a great deal of time that should be spent on the course material.

**3) Explicit or implicit attendance policy.** Explicit attendance policies include actively taking roll, having a sign-in sheet, or some procedure that actually checks for a physical student presence, but remember, a student who sleeps through class may be physically in attendance but absent intellectually. Implicit attendance policies are built into the course requirements. In class quizzes that cannot be made up, papers with an in class due date, discussion sections, and class participation grades are a few examples of course requirements that have attendance built into the semester's

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## TA Forum: TAs Question, TAPTALK Answers

**Q:** What is the appropriate way to accommodate students with physical or learning disabilities?

**A:** Not all disabilities are apparent. First, at the beginning of the course, make a general announcement indicating that you need to be aware of any students who by virtue of their disability need special attention or arrangements. Students should have a letter from their disability coordinator stating precisely what measures need to be taken, such as longer test time, seating up front, tape recording lectures, and so on. If students do not have a letter, direct them to their college coordinator so that they may secure the proper documentation. If you have any questions as an instructor, call the Office of Student Rights Compliance.

**Q:** I am afraid that by allowing make-up exams, students may have an unfair advantage as some may get information from students who have already taken the exam. What can I do?

**A:** Typically, the unfair advantage may result when the same

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requirements. With implicit attendance policies, the structure of the class itself eliminates the need to physically check attendance, but also lets the students know that they must be in class to meet the requirements of the course.

### 4) Good excuses and bad

**excuses.** Inevitably, students will miss class, and often they do so for valid reasons. Many absences are quickly recognizable as valid or invalid. There are, however, questionable absences on which the TA may need outside verification before making a final decision. This can be done by requesting that the student with the questionable absence go to their college dean regarding the excuse. The dean then will make a decision on the validity of said absence and notify you via letter of that decision. Then you can make a decision based on the dean's recommendation, while still retaining your prerogative in deciding whether or not to recognize the absence as valid.

### 5) Put attendance policies in writing.

Regardless of your final decision about your policy, all policies should be distributed in writing to the students on the first day of class. The easiest way to accomplish this is to put your policy (either explicit or implicit in the form of grade requirements and due dates) on the class syllabus and then review the syllabus with your students, allowing them to ask questions. This way there can be no misconception about what is expected regarding regular attendance. Often, attendance policies are seen as paternalistic holdovers from high school. However, if the policy is based in sound, educational reasoning and is also clearly articulated to the students, it allows the students then to make their own informed decisions and makes it known that you care about their attendance.

Attendance policies (explicit and implicit) constructed with a great deal of thought and care can ensure that students are aware that regular attendance is necessary for students to fully benefit from your course.

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test is given as a make-up exam. If you want to eliminate the possibility of unfairness, develop another version for students who cannot take the exam at the scheduled time. Also, try to schedule the make-up exam as soon as possible after the scheduled

exam so that there is little discrepancy in the amount of time students can prepare. You must, however, make sure that the exams are similar in difficulty, as there is no reason to penalize students who cannot take the scheduled exam due to a University approved absence. This is in line with a general policy to not repeat tests, since doing so only creates an atmosphere where students may seek an unfair advantage. This eliminates the effectiveness of student test banks, which contain past exams from an assortment of classes. If you change your exams each semester, you ensure that your tests will not be included in files for future students.

Do you have a question for the TA Forum?

Contact the TA Project Helpline at 932-1182 or go online

at <http://tapproject.rutgers.edu/asktap.html>

## Get Online!

TapOffice:

[http://tapproject.rutgers.edu/Graduate School - New Brunswick](http://tapproject.rutgers.edu/Graduate%20School%20-%20New%20Brunswick)

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TapTalk is produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick.  
Editor: Christy Mag Uidhir  
Letters, submissions, calendar items, and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.

TapTalk  
25 Bishop Place  
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901  
(732) 932-7747  
[tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu)

# Office Hours and TA Availability

Part of teaching a course is being available to your students outside the confines of the classroom. Often, the period of an instructor's office hours is the time when students can get clarification on the material, ask questions about assignments, or get feedback from the instructor. Above all, office hours should not be viewed by the TA as an unwelcomed part of course instruction.

TAs should make themselves available at least two hours a week, but should also allow for appointments from students who cannot come to the regularly scheduled office hours. Electronic mail can alleviate some of the scheduling conflicts, and TAs should not be frightened about giving out their email addresses. Email allows the TA ample time to consider a student's question or request. Both students and TAs should use Email responsibly, allowing ample time for the party at the other end to respond.

When the due date for mid-term or final exams and papers approaches, office hours can easily become overbooked. Make sure that all of your students receive equal opportunity for assistance, and for your own sake, limit the amount of time any one student can occupy. Before major exams, consider having group office hours. This takes up less

of your time, and provides a session where students can get their questions answered either directly from you, or indirectly from other students providing answers or asking questions. Also, make sure that your students understand that a major crisis need not be the sole reason to come to your office hours. Encourage your students to visit your office hours if they have questions about the course, need help on an assignment, or want to make sure that they understand the material.

Many students, especially first year students, may find visiting your office hours intimidating, and if you merely state your office hours on the syllabus and leave it at that, nothing is done to alleviate the students' fears. By making yourself available and letting your students know that you are interested in their concerns and progress, you are creating a comfortable atmosphere of approachability. However, some students may still feel reluctant. These students can be encouraged to visit your office hours by placing a note at the bottom of an assignment requesting that they come see you, or by speaking with them briefly after class and encouraging them to visit.

Although ultimately it is a

student's responsibility to ask questions or ask for help, some just need a little encouragement. If it is understood from the beginning of the semester that you are available and willing to help, students will feel more comfortable coming to your office hours.

## The Pedagogical Insight Corner for the Curiously Minded TA

*Have more than thou showest;  
Speak less than thou knowest.*  
William Shakespeare 'King Lear,'  
Act I, Scene iv

*My words fly up, my thoughts  
remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to  
heaven go.* William Shakespeare  
'Hamlet', Act 3 scene 3

*Outside of a dog, a book is  
man's best friend. Inside of a  
dog it's too dark to read.*  
Groucho Marx

## Get In Touch!

Tap Office:  
[http://  
taproject.rutgers.edu](http://taproject.rutgers.edu)  
Graduate School - NB:  
<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>  
TA Helpline: 932-11TA

TA  
Helpline  
Call  
932-11TA  
Monday-Friday  
between  
the hours  
of  
8:30-4:30

**Want to be a Movie  
Star?**  
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Call 932-11TA for details  
<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

# TAP Calendar

12/5 *Dissertation and Thesis Workshop* 10:00 a.m.<sup>1</sup>  
Spring 2002 *Introduction to College Teaching*<sup>2</sup>

1. Please call (732) 932-7034, or email Barbara Sirman at [sirman@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:sirman@rci.rutgers.edu), if you plan to attend a workshop.

2. Wednesdays, 4:30-6:30 p.m. Course Number: 16:186:855:01 (71222). Please contact Amber Carpenter for details and special permission numbers. ([acarpent@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:acarpent@rci.rutgers.edu)) or 932-7449.

**Interested in Peer Observa-  
tion of your classes?  
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pop/pop.html](http://tapproject.rutgers.edu/pop/pop.html)**

## Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean  
Graduate School-New Brunswick  
25 Bishop Place  
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901-1181  
(732) 932-7747