

The End-of-Semester Crunch

The end of the semester is a stressful time for undergraduates and TAs alike. Students have papers to write and exams to take. TAs have to grade those papers and exams (possibly after designing them), take their own exams, and complete their own final papers. Instructors who found themselves all alone during office hours for most of the semester may suddenly be overrun by students who want last-minute help with papers or advice on exams. In addition to all of the academic demands competing for attention, the impending holidays may be an additional source of stress for some. *TAPTalk* has prepared the following strategies to help you organize your responsibilities and complete the myriad tasks without resorting to those dreaded “all-nighters.”

Addressing Student Concerns

During class, go over end-of-semester procedures for papers, discuss the format of the final exam, and if possible, allow some time in class for students to ask questions about the exam or the final paper. Consider scheduling a review during class time. Anticipating concerns and answering questions may ease students’ anxieties, minimize later complaints, and cut down on the number of students who come to your office hours asking the same questions. If you are giving an exam, you can facilitate the organization of study groups by giving students a few minutes at the end of class to set up meeting times and places.

If large numbers of students appear at your office hours, limit the amount of time you spend with any one student (let them know at the beginning of your time together so that they can prioritize and get their most important concerns addressed in the session). You may be able to hold group office hours and meet with many students at once, especially if they all have

general questions about a final exam. If you have students who can’t meet with you during your regular office hours because they have a scheduling conflict, do try to make yourself available to them, at least briefly, during another time. It may be inconvenient, but it may make a big difference to their success in the class.

Students may come to you requesting extra credit work to raise their grades. If you are teaching your own course, it is at your discretion whether or not you will give such assignments and what form they will take, but to ensure fairness, decide in advance what your policies on extra credit will be and communicate them clearly to the entire class. It’s not fair to give the opportunity for extra credit to only the few students who approach you. Some instructors like to put a few extra-credit questions on the final exam so that all students have a chance for a few extra points, while not increasing the instructor’s grading load.

Grading Final Exams and Papers

If you are teaching one section of a multi-section course, make sure you are clear about the expectations of the professor in charge of the course. Some professors will give you detailed grading instructions, while others will leave it to your judgement. Ask questions early, in case the professor is planning on leaving town before the grading is finished. Coordinate with other TAs teaching the course, so that you all have the same grading standards.

If you have many papers or exams to grade, don’t wait for a large chunk of free time that may never appear. Grade in small batches, getting through several papers or exams a day over the course of

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several days.

Academic Integrity

Issues of cheating and plagiarism may rear their ugly heads at the end of the semester, as students take final exams and submit final papers. See the "Technology and the TA" column in this issue for tips on preventing and catching plagiarism on paper assignments. Here are a few easy steps you can take to prevent cheating on exams:

- Don't give the same exam every semester.
- Have students sit with empty space around them, if possible.
- Be alert during the exam. Walk around the room occasionally. Let students know you are paying attention.
- Print out various versions of the tests, with the same questions given in different order, so that students can't copy off their neighbors. (Let them know you are doing this.)
- In courses where the instructor provides blue books, write or stamp in them before handing them out, or instruct students to begin writing on the second page, so that students can't hand in blue books that they've prepared before class and brought with them. In courses where students are supposed to bring blank blue books

with them, collect the blue books and redistribute them, or have students exchange blue books before the exam begins.

• Photocopy selected portions of graded exams before returning them to ensure that students will not change answers and then challenge their grades.

Take Care of Your Own Needs

In trying to be a good TA, don't neglect your own work. Your first commitment is to your graduate work. You need to meet your program's requirements to be re-appointed as a TA or to receive other types of funding. If it's at all possible during this hectic period, try to schedule time to relax and to exercise. This may help you to focus and to work more efficiently as you wade through undergraduate exams and write your own papers. Finally, if you need help, be sure to talk with your faculty advisor, your graduate director, or a dean.

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student has taken a chunk of text from a book. Whatever you do, document your searches, writing down or book-marking the relevant URLs (addresses) and printing out pages which contain matching text.

If the paper as a whole doesn't quite conform to your assignment or in some way seems suspicious to you

(too many sources, citations that you don't trust, footnotes which don't seem to go with the text, a complete lack of footnotes), the student may have acquired the entire paper online, either from a free site or from a "paper mill" which sells term papers. David Alan Black of the Department of Communications at Seton Hall University warns that papers purchased from on-line sources are unlikely to show up by searching on phrases using a search engine. Sites which sell papers may not post the papers themselves online—students will be able to download the paper once they have paid for it, or they may have it emailed, faxed, or mailed to them. While you may not be able to track down the paper itself, if you search using the title of the paper, you may find it in a listing in an on-line catalog of papers, if the student hasn't bothered to alter the title. For more tips, visit Professor Black's website, "Tracing Web Plagiarism: A Guide for Teachers" at <http://icarus.shu.edu/dblack/webcheat/onepage.html>.

Another useful resource is offered by Lou Bloomfield, Professor of Physics at the University of Virginia. His web site (<http://www.plagiarism.phys.virginia.edu/>) provides free software to help detect plagiarism along with a list of useful links related to plagiarism. More tips and links are available at: <http://users.drew.edu/~sjamieso/plagiarism.html>.

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Technology and the TA: Catching Internet Plagiarism

With the ease of cutting and pasting and the vast amounts of material available, the web offers endless opportunities for quick, easy plagiarism. But while cheating is easier than ever before thanks to the Internet, the Internet is also highly useful for catching those same cheaters. Many students do not realize that their instructors will use the Internet too, to identify cases of plagiarism. The Internet is a wonderful tool for combating plagiarism; not only can you search for the plagiarized sources, you can also find tips from other instructors on preventing and finding cases of plagiarism.

Of course, the first step in preventing plagiarism is to have a conversation with your students about intellectual property, crediting other people when you use their words and ideas, and what constitutes plagiarism. In other words, students need to be educated about what plagiarism is and what we expect from them in terms of citing the work of others. Students should also be taught about the values of the academy and how those values translate to all aspects of life.

Instructors play an important role in minimizing plagiarism when they design their assignments in such a way that students are less likely to download or purchase an entire paper. Be sure to make your assignments specific and

detailed, and be sure to change the assignments every semester. If students are coming up with their own paper topics, have them discuss their ideas with you in advance and turn in drafts and preliminary bibliographies. You can find more information on student and faculty responsibilities for academic integrity at <http://teachx.rutgers.edu/integrity/>.

As experienced instructors know, lazy students may “borrow” phrases and paragraphs from material they find on-line and insert them into their papers without quotation marks or attribution. They may also hand in papers that were written entirely by someone else. Students can find archives of free papers on the Internet (some sites ask students who use the site’s papers to post papers of their own), sites offering already-written papers for sale, and sites which promise to custom write papers to fulfill a particular assignment. You may find it educational to visit some of these sites yourself. A few popular free sites are: www.antiessays.com, www.cheathouse.com, and www.schoolsucks.com. A few of the pay sites (some of which also have free papers available) are: www.paperdue.com, www.mightystudents.com, www.essaymill.com, www.essaysonfile.com, and www.topessays.com. For an extensive list of Internet paper sites (over 250!) visit www.coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm.

If you suspect that a student has cut and pasted parts of a paper or if some of the language of the paper differs markedly from the rest or from what you would expect of a student, you need to follow through on your suspicions. When particular phrases strike you as unusual, for example, if they sound overly polished or technical or academic, search on those phrases in a search engine. Type in the exact phrase, sentence, or paragraph with quotation marks around it. Some of the best search engines for this type of search are: www.google.com, www.altavista.com, and www.lycos.com. If the search produces any matches, follow the links to the web sites and determine whether the student has copied the material without attribution. The online retailer Amazon.com recently introduced a feature which allows visitors to the site to search for words or phrases within the texts of many of the books it sells. This may help you discover whether a

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suggests that instructors tell their students that they know about and visit the web sites that provide papers. Students will have to worry that you may have already seen any paper they might submit. Leland further recommends that instructors review one of these sites with their students: "Have students look at a weak paper (there are plenty of these on the Web!) and analyze its failures. They will learn something about writing and also see that what's available for downloading may not impress their teacher" ("Plagiarism and the Web" <http://www.wiu.edu/users/mfbhl/wiu/plagiarism.htm>, latest update: 01/29/02, accessed 11/10/03).

If you do find evidence that a student has engaged in plagiarism or any other form of cheating, don't take action on your own, like failing the student or tearing up his or her paper. Following University procedures protects you and ensures fairness for your students. Speak to the chair of your department, and go to <http://teachx.rutgers.edu/integrity/faculty.html> for instructions on how to report violations of academic integrity.

Sign up for the Peer Observation Program!

Having a class observed by a peer can be a great way to gain valuable feedback about your teaching. The Teaching Assistant Project offers the Peer Observation Program to any interested TA. You will be put in contact with a fellow graduate student teacher and provided with helpful materials for giving constructive criticism. For details, or to sign up, visit the website!

<http://taproject.rutgers.edu/pop/pop.html>

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