

Setting the Tone in the Classroom

Teaching assistants are often concerned with how to set the appropriate tone in the classroom. All instructors must work to create a classroom atmosphere that is conducive to learning; TAs and graduate student instructors, however, face additional challenges in attempting to achieve this goal. Undergraduates wonder whether TAs are “one of us” (students) or “one of them” (professors), and the graduate students themselves may not be sure where they fit in or what their proper role is. TAs are also students, they are generally inexperienced as teachers, and they may not be all that much older than the undergraduates. Some TAs want so much for their students to like them and the class that they present themselves as the students’ friend. Other TAs refuse to see themselves as an authority figure in the classroom, either because they don’t feel entitled to do so until they are “real” professors, or because they have legitimate concerns about power relationships between students and professors. In any of these cases, an overly informal atmosphere can degenerate into chaos. Other inexperienced teachers are so concerned with hiding their insecurity in the classroom that they are overly formal or inflexible, and students may feel that their instructor is more concerned that students show signs of respect than that they learn. TAs must figure out ways to assert authority and provide structure in the classroom, while remaining open and accessible enough that students feel comfortable expressing their ideas so that they will be able to learn the subject matter. Experience will help you find a teaching style that works for you; in the meantime, here are some tips to help you set an appropriate tone for teaching.

Communicate Your Expectations

Provide a syllabus that makes it clear to students what they can expect from the course and what you will expect from them. Use the syllabus to tell students what assignments they are responsible for, when they will be due, and how much each will count toward their final

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Brian Levine, MBA, CPA

**Monday, February 7
6:30 p.m.**

**Rutgers Student Center
Graduate Student Lounge
College Avenue Campus**

Reservations are not necessary, and refreshments will be provided. If you have any questions, contact Alex Bachmann at 732-932-7449 or abachman@rci.rutgers.edu.

The workshop will only address tax issues for U.S. CITIZENS AND PERMANENT RESIDENTS.

The Center for International Faculty and Student Services will be offering international students free access to an online non-resident tax-filing program. Information on the program will be posted on the Center's website (www.rci.rutgers.edu/~cifss/) as soon as it is available.

Tone...

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grade. Include concrete policies on attendance, participation, class behavior, and whatever else you think is important, and then stick by those policies. While you may want to be somewhat flexible with reading assignments or course material in response to students' interests or to outside events, it is unfair to students to make significant changes to the amount or kind of work expected from them, or to change when that work will be due. You may want to make exceptions to your policies for students who face bona fide emergencies or exceptional situations, but in general the syllabus should be treated as a contract between the students and the instructor, to which both sides must adhere.

In addition to stating your expectations in the syllabus, take some class time to discuss your policies. Set ground rules for discussions that include mutual respect and civility; let students know that everyone in the class should feel free to challenge each others' ideas—including those of the instructor—but not to make personal attacks on each other.

If you have particular standards of behavior you'd like students to follow, you must tell them. For instance, some instructors find it rude or disruptive for students to eat in class; others don't mind, particularly if the class meets early in the morning or during lunchtime. Be specific about such things as cell phones, text messaging, and reading the *Targum*. If you fear that class behavior is slipping, remind students of your policies.

Show Students That Their Concerns Matter

Make yourself accessible to students outside of class, through email and during office hours. Encourage students to come to your office hours, and if at all possible, try to find times to meet with students who aren't available then.

Get regular feedback from your students about how the class is going for them. You can administer mid-semester evaluations (the TAP website has a sample evaluation at <http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>), or check in with students more informally, by asking them to write down anonymously their concerns about the class and their reactions to a recent assignment or exam.

Have a Positive Attitude Toward the Material
Your attitude toward the class material can have a large impact on the tone of the class. TAs often have

little control over what material they teach, and would do things very differently if they were in charge of the course. Dissatisfaction over this, however, shouldn't be communicated to students. TAs can and should critique reading material, but they shouldn't complain about the readings, assignments, or course structure. This can especially be a problem in cases when the class is required for students and course content is mandated by the department. TAs may be tempted to say things to students like "we have to do this because the department is making us—I don't like this any better than you do." If you grumble, it will encourage your students to do so as well, and it gives them permission to not take the class seriously. You will also discourage students who are interested and engaged with the material. Model appropriate behavior for your students, and let your enthusiasm for the general subject area come through, even if you aren't all that enthusiastic about particular elements of the course.

Foster Feelings of Community in the Classroom

Promote a sense of community by learning the names of all of your students and encouraging them to learn each others' names and use them during class discussions. Impress upon your students that they are in large part responsible for the class and its success. Find ways to give students leadership roles—perhaps by asking them to come up with discussion questions, or by having them teach some of the

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material to their fellow students.

React to Student Comments

One part of creating a positive classroom atmosphere is responding effectively to students when they participate in a discussion or answer a question. This is often a difficult task, particularly when students say things that are irrelevant, not very insightful, or just plain wrong. Instructors need to correct wrong information and critique comments when necessary, but they must do this gently enough that students won't be afraid to open their mouths in the future. Instructors also need to encourage participation and validate students for contributing, but students can get frustrated if an instructor makes it seem like every comment is equally good or useful. When students speak in class, acknowledge what they've said, and then ask a question which challenges them to think further, or ask other students to react to the comment.

Be Professional

Demonstrate your professionalism to your students by arriving for class on time and starting promptly, by always being prepared for class meetings, and by dressing neatly and as professionally as your budget allows.

Overall, you can set a positive tone by showing your students that you respect them and by recognizing that, as an academic in training, you have every right to be at the front of the classroom.

Dealing with Disruptive Students

Setting the proper tone can help prevent troublesome behavior in the classroom, but at some point or another, every instructor will be faced with a student who noisily enters the classroom late, chats with classmates, does work for other classes, reads the newspaper, falls asleep, or shouts out comments.

Stop potentially disruptive behavior early. Students who do homework for another class may think you are not interested in what they are doing in class. If you don't say something, your students will assume that indeed you don't care, and other students will feel encouraged to disregard what you're doing up at the front of the classroom. Ignoring bad behavior can lead to more general disorder in the classroom.

When students act disruptively, remind the class of your expectations. You may be able to catch the eye of a troublemaker and curb the behavior with a stern look, or by standing near him or her. Other times, you will need to say something to the students involved. Firmly but politely request that they modify their behavior. Don't try to humiliate a student. You may get an easy laugh from the rest of the class, but it will make the target of your comments angry and resentful, and it may make other students feel less comfortable in the classroom and inhibit their future participation.

If you have a group of students

who sit together and talk to each other throughout class, in addition to directing a comment at them, you may want to ask them to move their seats in future classes.

Some students will try to dominate the classroom and monopolize the discussion, making other students feel shut out of the conversation. Avoid this problem by waiting a minute or two after posing a question to call on anyone, giving other students a chance to formulate an answer. If a student shouts out answers to questions without waiting to be called on or interrupts other people, immediately let the student know that such behavior is unacceptable—a gentle reminder about courtesy may be all that is necessary.

You may need to speak to unruly students outside of class and explain to them how their behavior is disruptive and unfair to their classmates. If a student continues to act disruptively after this, don't hesitate to ask the professor in charge of the class, your chair, or a dean for help.

Get In Touch!

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Graduate School - NB:

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TA Helpline: 932-11TA

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TAP Calendar

2/7	6:30-8:30 pm	Tax Workshop	CAC#
2/10	12:00-1:30 pm	CV Writing	BCC+
2/15	12:00-1:00 pm	Tips for Future Faculty Jobs in Higher Ed.	CAC*

#Call 732-932-7449 for information.

+Call 732-445-6127 for information or to register.

*Call 732-932-7747 for information or to register.

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http://taproject.rutgers.edu/services_tips/Master_Faculty.php3

Teaching Assistant Project

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