

## TA Forum: You Have Questions, We Have Answers

This month, TAP*Talk* is introducing a new, interactive feature, the TA Forum. TAP*Talk* invites TAs to submit questions or concerns regarding the teaching experience. Those questions along with answers and advice will appear in subsequent issues. In this, the first installment, TAP*Talk* will tackle a few of the questions frequently asked by TAs. To submit a question, email the TA Project at [tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu) or call the TA Help Line at 932-1182.

### ***What do I do if I suspect a student of cheating?***

According to recent national studies, many students have or will engage in some form of academic dishonesty. If you suspect a student of cheating, you are required to report this to the faculty advisor for the class or your department chair.

### ***What if my students have a problem with my accent?***

As long as you enunciate clearly and speak slowly, students should not have difficulty understanding your speech. However, should problems persist you can contact the Program in English as a Second Language (ESL) for assistance (<http://web.rutgers.edu/eslpals/>) or 732-445-7422. Remember, many instructors, regardless of their language background, will often find themselves repeating things. However, if you are doing this so often that it begins to interfere with the lesson, contact ESL.

### ***My students complain that I assign too much work. What should I do?***

This is a common complaint that arises in most classrooms. If you made the course requirements clear to the students at the beginning of the semester and have stuck to those requirements, then while the students may feel overburdened, they understand the course requirements from the outset. If you are still unsure, talk to a faculty member for the class or your department chair.

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## When Good Technology Goes Bad: Cell Phones and Pagers

Classroom disruption by students can take many forms: chatting with a neighbor, reading the newspaper, sleeping during the lecture. New developments in technology, however, have created new forms of classroom disruption, namely the cell phone and the pager. As more and more students view these devices as an integral part of their daily lives, the appearances of cell phones and pagers in the classroom has increased. Once foreign sounds, the shrill ring of a cell phone and the beep or none too quiet vibration of a pager are commonplace. These sounds, as much as any unnecessary noise, ought to be regarded as unwelcome and disruptive. An instructor should make clear to his or her class that these devices should be turned off once class begins, and that instances of their activation will warrant disciplinary action, just as if the student were to suddenly scream in the middle of class. Certainly, there may be situations where the student desperately needs to be contacted, but those scenarios are few and far between and can be remedied by the student

*(cont. on page 3)*

## TA Forum...

(continued from pg. 1)

### ***A student wants to take the test later/earlier than the assigned date. Is this okay?***

Taking an exam on the established date and time is very important, and if the student does not have an undergraduate college-approved absence, you are not obliged to change the test date for that student. Also, you are not required to give the students the same test as those who took the test on the assigned day. You need to be firm about test dates, but if you think the student's request has merit, consult the faculty member in charge of the course, or if you are teaching independently, your department chair.

### ***I am interested in incorporating computers into my instruction, how do I go about doing so? I am having problems using certain computer software; where can I get help?***

If you want to use computers as an instructional tool or you want to learn more about certain software, the Teaching Excellence Center (<http://teachx.rutgers.edu>) offers

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various workshops on computers and their applications, including: Word, Access, Excel, Powerpoint, and MS Publisher. Consult their webpage throughout the semester for times and locations.

### ***My students are asking for extra-credit. Is there such a thing and should I allow it?***

By no means are instructors required to give extra-credit. Should you choose to do so, make sure that all students in your course have the option available to them. Extra-credit options should be made clear on the syllabus at the beginning of the course. If the extra-credit is not part of your original course design, there must be extenuating circumstances (not just poor performance) to justify it. In all cases, consult the faculty member in charge of the course, or if you are teaching independently, your department chair.

### ***I have a problem with late and/or absent students, what should I do?***

On your syllabus make perfectly clear what your attendance policy will be as well as the consequences of violating it. Late students can be just as problematic as absent students, so make sure to include late arrivals as part of your attendance policy. An example would be that if the

student were more than 15 minutes late to class, that counts as an absence. If students are made aware of your attendance policy at the beginning, then there will be no surprises or arguments during the semester. If you are concerned with making a distinction between legitimate absences and frivolous ones, request that all students go to the dean of their college and explain the absence to him or her. If the dean deems the absence valid, he or she will write a letter to the instructor (TA) in charge of the course suggesting that the student's absence is legitimate.

If you have any questions or concerns that you need addressed or you think other TAs would benefit from certain questions being answered, do not hesitate to submit a question to the TA Forum.

**TA Forum**

**Web:** <http://tapproject.rutgers.edu/asktap.html>

**Email:** [tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu)

**Phone:** 932-1182

## Get Online!

Tap Office:

<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>  
 Graduate School - New Brunswick

<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

# Arguing Points Pointers: Tips for Handling Grade Challenges

Inevitably, some students will not be satisfied with an assigned grade, and some of those students may wish to contest their grades with the instructor. When this occurs it can often be trying for both the instructor and the student. If certain precautions are taken, however, most of these conflicts can be resolved in a clear and fair manner.

To begin, when designing a test, make sure that there is a clear point or letter grade system that you will be using and make this available to the students, so that both parties have clear expectations of how the grading will proceed. This makes justification of an assigned grade easier. Also, allot enough time to grade the exams, since the easiest way to make mistakes is to hurry through a test.

When a student approaches you about a grade he or she received, be open to the student's concerns. If you simply dismiss the student's questions and state that all grades are final, the student will feel neglected and resentful. In addition, one must not be too quick to award points where merit is absent simply to avoid conflict. A good rule of thumb is to listen to the student's complaint and tell him or her that you will consider it. This allows you ample time to review the student's

grade and decide, on your own, whether the grade needs to be changed. To review the test in front of the student only puts undue pressure on you and can create an uncomfortable situation. Upon review, if you find that the student's claim may indeed have merit, consult an objective outside party such as a faculty member and ask his or her opinion. Most important is that when a decision is reached, you must stick to it. If possible, ask the student to come to your office hours so that you can explain your decision. If the student reacts emotionally, remain calm. Do not engage students when they are angry or upset. Try to calm them down, possibly suggesting a future meeting time with another faculty member present. If they become abusive, ask them to leave at once.

Do not make the student any promises. When conflict arises, TAs may find it easier to simply throw out empty promises in order to avoid confrontation. This is a recipe for disaster as you have not only compromised your position but you have created an atmosphere for a future, and possibly a more heated, conflict.

TAs make mistakes, and some student's complaints

about their grades are valid. Do not, however, be too quick to change grades. As long as you give them a fair hearing and due consideration, they will feel respected and you will have a stronger position.

## ...Goes Bad (cont. from page 1)

requesting permission from the instructor to leave his or her cell phone or pager in active mode. In any case, to avoid problems in the classroom, the instructor should have a policy of no cell phones or pagers, and articulate this at the beginning of the semester. Any infractions should be dealt with and not ignored lest a technological Pandora's box be opened, turning the classroom into a cacophonous symphony of rings and beeps.

### The Pedagogical Insight Corner for the Curiously Minded TA

*The advantage of a classical education is that it enables you to despise the wealth which it prevents you from achieving.*

-Russell Green

### Get In Touch!

Tap Office:

<http://tapproject.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?**  
*Then get your class  
videotaped!*

Call 932-11TA for details  
<http://taproject.rutgers.edu>

# TAP Calendar

11/6	<i>Dissertation and Thesis Workshop</i>	10:00a.m. <sup>1</sup>
11/13	<i>CV/Resume Writing</i>	12:00 noon <sup>2</sup>
11/15	<i>Careers in Academe</i>	12:00 noon <sup>3</sup>
11/19	<i>Dissertation and Thesis Workshop</i>	10:00a.m. <sup>1</sup>
11/27	<i>Interviewing and Salary Negotiations for Graduate Students</i>	4:30p.m. <sup>4</sup>
11/28	<i>Teaching Your Own Course</i>	12:00 noon <sup>3</sup>
12/5	<i>Dissertation and Thesis Workshop</i>	10:00a.m. <sup>1</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. Douglass Campus. To register, call 932-9742

3. College Avenue Campus. To register, call 932-7747.

4. Employment Center, Conference Room, Busch Campus. To register, call 445-6127 ext. 0.

**Interested in Peer Observation of your  
classes?**

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

## Teaching Assistant Project

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