

## Giving Your Students What They Want

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We often ask mentors, colleagues, and a host of other people for advice on being a good teaching assistant. However, the individuals we rarely ask for this information are our students (and no, end-of-the-quarter evaluations don't count, at least not for this article). So I informally asked several students, "What makes a good TA? What do good TAs do that not as good TAs don't? What do not as good TAs do that good TAs would never do?" The results were extremely illuminating, and in some cases, rather surprising. Here are some of the most common answers.

### **Be there. On time.**

A major student complaint was about TAs who are always late. Not late once or twice, but chronically late. If you aren't chronically late, skip to the next paragraph. If you are, consider this a wake-up call. Treat TAing like a job in the real world. Being late is unacceptable, and students generally interpreted this as "our TA doesn't care about us." There are few faster ways to lose your students.

### **Be happy (or at least fake it).**

Okay, so this isn't the class you wanted to TA. Maybe you'd rather be doing research, reading, writing, sleeping, or whatever. But you're a TA. And the students surveyed

*hated* when TAs lacked enthusiasm, or worse, indicated that s/he didn't want to be there in the first place. As one student wrote, "when the TA shows us that he or she doesn't want to be there, it makes class way worse."

On the other hand, students *loved* TAs that expressed passion and enthusiasm for the material, even if the TAs were demanding. As professor of psychology Dr. Robin DiMatteo said during a University Teaching Certificate seminar, we're fighting for our students' attention. We must make class more interesting to them than, say, a visit to Facebook or an online shopping site. Being passionate and enthusiastic is a great way to capture your students' attention.

### **Use incentives!**

If you've read *Freakonomics*, you know that the central theme of the book is that people respond to incentives (if you haven't read it, consider picking up a copy from the library). If people respond to incentives, why wouldn't students?

Happily, the students were very specific about potential incentives. Here's what they wanted:

- Extra credit. This isn't always possible, but an extra couple of points for an awesome presentation or supplemental paper might be worth it when it is possible.
- Candy. Seriously. We might be facing an obesity crisis, but students still crave sugary sweet delights. Be careful how you implement candy – several students sternly warned me never to use "discount store candy." Stick to the name brand stuff.



- **Choices.** This was easily the most surprising element for me (except for the repeated complaints about chronically late TAs). The stuff students will work for! For example, a fellow TA told me that for a course in which students must give group presentations, she offers candy to all students. But the group with the best presentation (as decided by the class) got first choice. The students responded extraordinarily well, working hard to perfect their presentations – just to get first choice of candy!

The choices need not be grand. Choices can be something as simple as, “if this section averages at least an 80% on the next quiz, then you may choose your own groups for the group assignment.”

#### **Be available.**

You don’t need to clear your schedule for your students, but do realize that your office hours may not work for all of your students. One recommended method is to survey your students for *their* preferred office hour times, and try to schedule accordingly. This is rather painless to do with online survey sites like Doodle. Alternatively, I often pass out 3×5 cards on the first day of class and have students write some key information, such as their name, major, and year. I always have them include 3-5 time slots that they’d prefer for office hours.

#### **Answer emails.**

Some students would prefer to interact with you via email. Others have pressing questions. In any case, students (generally)

won’t email you unless they feel they need to do so. As such, don’t ignore student emails! Students typically expect a response within 24 hours or so on weekdays, and by Monday on weekends. Will students frustrate you by sending email with questions that are answered on the course syllabus? Absolutely. But it takes 30 seconds to reply with a polite message explaining where the information can be found.

#### **Be prepared.**

One of the most important things I learned in a pedagogy class is that every class session should have clear and specific learning goals. What I learned from asking students is that every class session should have clear and specific learning goals.

Know what you want to achieve with your students, and let them know. You can do this in a variety of manners – some instructors use slides with the learning goals explicitly stated, while others develop handouts or other materials (including the tried-and-true writing on the chalkboard). As Erin Smith wrote in an excellent [blog post](#), providing students with information in physical form can help shape student perception of you as a prepared instructor. And students like prepared instructors. Moreover, having prepared goals can help keep you organized and focused on the core material during class.

#### **Exercise caution with Q&A.**

Doing a bit of Q&A is fine, but exercise caution when using it for an extended period of time (say, during a review session). More than one student told me, “I despise Q&A!” Further, many students expressed concern that Q&A sessions often featured questions that were either ‘too basic’ or ‘too



irrelevant' (often genuinely good questions, but not always on the course material).

**Remember that the material can be difficult.**

When I used to train tutors for one-on-one sessions, I would always stress to my trainees that the one thing they should never do when a student asks a question or struggles with a concept is say, "That's easy." There is simply no better way to simultaneously lose your students while shattering their self-esteem (except perhaps by using a statement like "That's a stupid question." That statement just adds insult to injury.). For you, a concept may be easy. For someone else, it might be the most difficult concept they've ever tackled. Treat it accordingly.

**Summary**

Giving your students what they want is not as fraught with danger as one might imagine. Indeed, students generally want relatively simple things that often go hand-in-hand with best teaching practices. Many of the students' suggestions focused on creating an atmosphere conducive to learning—quite simply, it's much easier to teach a class when your students are tuned in, and these students were happy to tell us how to keep their attention. Finally, keep in mind that I posed questions in an open-ended format. The students could have asked for *anything* but chose to focus on items that would help maximize their learning. They even included pedagogy in their answers!

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