

TA Orientation Frequently Asked Questions

A panel of second year TAs answer FAQs

Q: How do you manage you time between grading papers and your own homework?

A: Be prepared for what you teach – the students are paying for their education. For many TAs, this becomes the first priority. On the other hand, you can't get behind in your own education. That means planning ahead. When you know you have a paper due in 2 weeks, start it as soon as it is assigned – don't wait until the last minute because you never know what is going to require your time just before your assignment is due. Also, consult one of the several books on time management. A couple of TA favorites are The Now Habit and Never Check Email in the Morning. You can check the Albertson's Library for these and other books on this topic. The CTL also has several books with sections on time management. Go to the CTL resources page and follow directions to get onto LibraryThing – the online database for the CTL Library.

Q: How much personal information should you share with your students?

A: The students don't need to know what you're doing on your personal time and how hard it is for you to manage everything. Some TAs prefer to share a little more about what is going on in their life to help the students better understand that they, too, are students and understand the life of a student, but we encourage you to land on the side of less information is better.

Q: What do you like best about being a TA?

A: This varies between departments and for each individual; however, one of the things often reported is that you get to use your background as a student to be a teacher. You get to share an area that you are passionate about and inspire them to perhaps enjoy your subject more at the end of the class than they did at the beginning.

Q: How long does it take to prepare to teach a class?

A: The general rule of thumb is that you'll spend 2 hours outside of class for each hour you teach. This time will be in preparation, grading, sharing, etc. Be prepared, but not over-prepared – moreover, be flexible. As you prepare, make sure that you remain open to questions that the students have and when the teachable moment occurs, seize the opportunity to help students lurch forward in understanding. However, don't think you have all the answers. When you don't know – be honest. Be honest with your expectations and what you can do and will do. Be truthful – when a student isn't cutting the mustard, let them know. This aspect of being a TA is a balancing act. Take free time for yourself and enjoy it, but fulfill all responsibilities as a student and a teacher.

Q: What if I don't know what I'm supposed to do as a TA?

A: Your department coordinator will help you with your specific assignment. If you're unsure who that is, contact the departmental Administrative Assistant.

Q: Regarding grading, do you try to grade everything in one sitting, or do you try to grade a little bit each day?

A: This will vary depending on a number of factors. An overarching theme is that papers should be returned in a timely manner. Typically if there are several assignments (papers, labs, etc.) that all have the same format and/or build off of each other, the papers should be returned well in advance of the next assignment. Also, make sure you take a break when you start to fatigue. The quality of grading begins to suffer when your mind begins to wander. Also, be realistic. Grading takes longer than you anticipate it should. For the first assignment you grade, give yourself twice as much time as you expect it to take. For many, that means blocking out that time in your schedule so you'll have time specifically devoted to grading the papers.

Q: How are we evaluated?

A: This, too, will vary by department. Some departments use a mid-semester evaluation process while others rely on the end of the semester evaluation by the students in your class. A few departments only evaluate 2nd year TAs. Some departments will have the TA Coordinator observe you teach, while others do not do this. The evaluations, generally, are a way for you to see where students view your strengths and weaknesses and offer you a mirror to see where you might want to attempt improvement. Some of our experienced TAs encourage TAs to avoid sites like PickaProf or RateMyProfessor since these sites often attract the two ends of the continuum in your course – both those that really enjoyed your class and those that really didn't.

Q: In light of problems on other campuses, what do we do to protect ourselves and our students?

A: The campus has two initiatives to cover this topic. One is the "OptIn" service where faculty, staff and students identify how they want the University to notify them when there is an emergency on campus. From your BroncoWeb account, you can set your email, cell, text, etc. information for notification when there is a need for such communication. Additionally, the University is exploring the SOS program where faculty, including TAs, can receive help when they believe that a student is facing a challenge that may need to be addressed.

Q: What resources do we have to check for plagiarism or cheating?

A: Boise State uses BlackBoard™ for electronic course management. One function on BlackBoard™ at Boise State is called Safe Assignment. Safe Assignment will compare a student's paper against information on the web and other papers turned in through that service for a similarity score. While this doesn't in any way indicate plagiarism (since information correctly cited will be highlighted as copied information), it does enable the instructor to see how much of a paper may be coming from alternate sources.

Do you have a question you'd like answered? Email that question to CTL@Boisestate.edu