**University of Louisville**

**Handbook for**

**2014-2015**

**Graduate Teaching Assistants**

*Originally produced by the Office of Research & Graduate Programs and the Center for Faculty and Staff Development in 1987. Latest revision by the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies, July, 2014.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this handbook is to give graduate teaching assistants - particularly those that are new - information and suggestions that will help them better understand the situation in which they are working and provide practical information that will make their teaching responsibilities easier and more rewarding.

Many of the ideas in this handbook come from experienced graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). Although different GTAs will have different experiences, there are a number of things on which they all agree. The points of agreement, as well as the reasons for the different experiences, are described in this handbook.

There are many practical ideas and suggestions in the following pages. You should not expect to learn them all or to put all of them to use immediately. You should not try to completely change your personal style nor strive to adopt all of the suggestions which follow. You must make your own judgments about what works best for you and for your students.

Although this handbook is directed toward your function as a teacher, it is important that you keep in mind your principal purpose - the attainment of a graduate degree. You will be faced with course work, examinations, deadlines, and requirements of your own. You will need to continue to excel in your own studies, even as you will want your students to excel. You will need to organize and discipline yourself more than ever while remembering the needs of your students.

It is an honor to be a graduate student and it is a high calling to be a teacher. Dedication and hard work can make both roles highly rewarding. I encourage you to develop a synergistic relationship between the two so that both you and your students will benefit throughout your lives.

I wish you success in all your efforts.

Beth A. Boehm, Ph.D.

Professor of English

Dean of the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies

**CHECKLIST**

**Before beginning your GTA assignment, the following items should be completed:**

* Confirm type of assistantship (research, service or teaching) and number of months (ten or twelve)
* Confirm GPA requirement for your program (the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies requires a minimum 3.0, but some programs require you maintain a higher GPA)
* Obtain Cardinal Card (UofL ID card)
* Purchase parking permit (if necessary)
* Attend Human Resources Orientation
* Attend Graduate Teaching Assistant Orientation, hosted by the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies
* Read Graduate Teaching Assistant Handbook
* Complete the modules in the Graduate Teaching Assistant Orientation Blackboard site online

**CHAPTER I: GENERAL INFORMATION**

**Types of Assistantships**

The University of Louisville offers three types of graduate assistantships: research, service, and teaching.

1. A graduate research assistant (GRA) is assigned to a particular professor or project. Responsibilities will vary among the assistantships awarded and therefore need to be explained and clarified on an individual basis.
2. A graduate service assistant (GSA), like the research assistant, is assigned to a particular professor or project and can assume a variety of responsibilities according to the needs of the professor. These assistantships may, for example, require classroom-related tasks such as grading or organizing study sessions, or they may revolve around laboratory procedures.

Only GSAs may be assigned outside their academic departments; therefore, if you have an extra-departmental assignment, no matter what your job description, you are classified as a GSA.

1. A graduate teaching assistant (GTA) assumes primary and frequently sole responsibility for a particular course. Regulations require a student holding this position to have completed a minimum of 18 hours of graduate work in the field; consequently, these assistantships are generally awarded only to those in the advanced stages of a master's program or those with a master's degree in their doctoral field.

It is your responsibility to know what type of assistantship you have been awarded.

**International Students as Graduate Assistants**

The University of Louisville requires all international GTAs, with the exception of those teaching a foreign language, to demonstrate their level of proficiency in the English language before they may begin their teaching assignments as GTAs. You will be notified by your department that you will need to demonstrate your English proficiency before you assume your teaching duties. Please contact your department to determine whether or not you must do the teaching demonstration. If you are notified that you must do the teaching demonstration, you must contact the Intensive English as a Second Language Program (IESL) office at 502-852-5901 to make an appointment. Be sure that you provide your department and the IESL Program with your e-mail address so that you can be contacted, if necessary. More information can be found at the IESL web site, http://louisville.edu/english/iesl/.

Passing this test does not guarantee that your speech will be easily understood by your students. You will have to make a considerable effort to speak slowly, distinctly, and with the inflection and emphasis patterns of native speakers of English. You can help your students by stopping frequently to ask if you have been understood, using the blackboard to illustrate points you are making, and providing hand-outs when the material is particularly complex.

The second problem revolves around cultural differences. Before you decide that students are being rude or conducting themselves inappropriately in the classroom, talk to one of your American counterparts or to the students themselves. It may be a difference in expectations and customs rather than deliberate hostility or misbehavior.

Studies show that international GTAs who approach teaching tasks with good humor and a genuine desire to help students to learn are rated very highly by their students. These are the qualities valued in any graduate assistant, regardless of nationality. Moreover, the international graduate assistant can teach something his or her American counterpart cannot: that certain types of learning and knowledge have no cultural boundaries and others flourish when culturally diverse perspectives encourage a re-evaluation of methods of inquiry and their accompanying belief systems.

**Cardinal Card**

To take advantage of campus resources, you must first obtain your Cardinal Card, your official university ID card. There are two locations to have your card made: Belknap Campus – Houchens Building, 08K and Health Sciences Campus – Abell Building, First Floor Security Station.

Your Cardinal Card serves as your:

* Identification card
* Library card
* Facilities access
* Meal plan card (if applicable)
* Cardinal Cash purchases for vending machines, copies, residence hall laundry, campus food service locations

**Parking**

As a Graduate Assistant, you have the option of purchasing a purple or green student parking permit or a faculty/staff blue permit; visit http://louisville.edu/parking for details on the various permits offered and parking regulations. In order to purchase a parking permit, you can visit either the Belknap or HSC Parking Offices or purchase your permit online. Be sure to take your Cardinal Card and proof that you are a GTA (e.g. a letter from your department stating you are a GTA) if you wish to purchase a blue permit.

Although blue parking tends to be closer to campus than green or purple, blue parking lots fill up quickly (usually by 8:30 a.m.). Parking is available at all times in the Papa John’s Cardinal Stadium lot and shuttles run regularly to the Belknap campus from 7:00 a.m. until 9:30 p.m.

**Graduate Student Organizations**

The major organization for graduate students is the Graduate Student Council (GSC), comprised of delegates from departments with graduate programs. The GSC provides honoraria for outside speakers, departmental-sponsored programs and for graduate student travel to conferences and seminars via funds provided through the Student Government Association (SGA). If you are interested in becoming a member of GSC, contact information is available at their website, <http://louisville.edu/graduate/gsc/>. There are also groups/organizations concerned with specific aspects of graduate student life in various academic departments. A complete listing can be found at <http://uoflstudentinvolvement.orgsync.com/Search_Organizations> Check with your department for additional information.

**University Support Services**

The International Center sponsors a wide variety of programs and activities for international students. American students are welcomed at many of the social functions. If you are interested in becoming involved with these programs, call the International Center at 502-852-6602 or visit their website at <http://louisville.edu/internationalcenter>.

For some of you, the time may come when the pressures of your responsibilities threaten to become overwhelming. You may discover that you need help managing your time and stress or in developing effective study skills. If this happens, please contact the University Counseling Center at 502-852-6585 or at <http://louisville.edu/counseling>. Do not hesitate to seek help. Group and individual sessions are available at no charge to all enrolled University of Louisville students. For specialized help, you may be referred to a psychiatric or psychological service.

The Department of Public Safety provides support services for all students. An escort service to assure you arrive safely at your destination is available at no charge to all students. This operates from dusk until dawn, seven days a week by calling 502-852-6111. Public Safety also sponsors MAP (Motorist Assistance Program) to assist U of L students who experience minor difficulties (e.g. lock-out, dead battery) with their vehicles. MAP can be reached at 502-852-7275.

**Human Resources**

The School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies has partnered with the Human Resources Department (HR) to create a centralized payroll orientation program for incoming graduate students who will receive a stipend through a graduate assistantship or fellowship.  HR has created a web site to provide information about the new orientation process. The web site instructs students to complete an electronic I-9 and new graduate student hire packet prior to attending an orientation session. The site also provides a link for students to register for one of the orientation sessions that HR will hold. The link to register can be found at: <http://louisville.edu/hr/employment/newemployees/gradhrorientation.html>

**CHAPTER II: YOUR ROLE AS A STUDENT**

**Grades**

Graduate students are required to maintain a minimum 3.0 GPA (see definitions in the Graduate Catalog); however, there are programs that require graduate students to maintain a higher GPA. Be sure to check with your department to determine their GPA requirement. Graduate programs offer professors the option of awarding plus and minus grades.

**Academic Grievances**

If you believe you have been treated unfairly or have received an unfair grade, there is an established process you can follow. The first step is to speak directly with the professor who you have the issue with. If the outcome of that conference is unsatisfactory, your department has a sequence of steps to take. Your academic advisor can advise you on the proper procedure.

**Relating to the Faculty**

Your relationship to the faculty can become a bit complicated with your new role, especially if you are a GTA. On the one hand, you are still a student. On the other hand, you are performing many of the functions of a faculty member. There are no hard and fast rules to govern this duality of roles. The best advice we can give is to remember that no matter how your students see you and no matter what your professional responsibilities, the faculty view you as a student. Certainly, there are expectations, and there are those professors who will be more willing to enter into a collegial relationship with their graduate students. Many (but not all) departments routinely include graduate students in many social functions. Nevertheless, to assume an element of familiarity or equality without being invited to do so can only lead to difficulties.

Address faculty members by their appropriate titles, unless invited to do otherwise. You may notice that other senior GTAs are on a first-name basis with some faculty members, but you can usually safely avoid calling them anything until you are certain what is suitable. However, in the classroom, always address any faculty member by his or her title.

Remember that a faculty member who cares enough to watch out for you, give advice, help you figure out where and how to get a paper published and offer moral support when you need it, may also be a future reference.

**Funding**

Participation in professional activities is vital to your career. When you need money for a special project or participation in a professional conference or seminar, begin well in advance to check out your options. Start with your advisor or your representative to the Graduate Student Council. Funds are limited, and you may not get all you want or need from a single source, but if you meet the criteria, you have a chance of getting some help.

**Pitfalls**

The university and your faculty advisors will tell you that being a student is your primary role, that your studies take precedence over everything else. The GTA is particularly susceptible to two conflicting tendencies that often afflict new faculty.

First - graduate students are especially prone to the temptation to stop seeing yourself as a student, to decide that you already know more than those from whom you are learning, to become sick of people putting grades on your thinking and your work, to decide at some point that you no longer need to be bothered with accomplishing the assigned work. When you see yourself in this situation, consider that if the faculty members are doing their job, you should reach a point where you know more than they in one particular area. When you can move beyond what is in the books, the faculty have succeeded not only in teaching you the material, but also in teaching you to learn and create. It is important to remember their experience in surviving effectively in this field far outweighs yours.

Another mistake is to see oneself as indispensable. For the GTA, for example, the sight of those eager (and not-so-eager) faces waiting for you to say something profound, believing that you can say something profound, leads almost inevitably to the notion that somehow their fate lies in your hands. You cannot take every student failure as your own any more than you can take every student success as your own. Students have a way of failing and succeeding in spite of, as well as because of, anything you did or could have done.

Included in this particular mode of behavior is the urge to volunteer to do all sorts of extra projects. Volunteering is a noble activity, and therefore particularly insidious if you don't learn to control it. When your desire to accomplish exceeds your available time, you find yourself with a calendar that cannot accommodate the number of tasks you have taken on unless you give up sleeping and eating altogether. The end of the semester is especially dangerous because that is when you have to do all the things you put off doing during the semester so that you could accomplish the extras. You are not indispensable, and things will get done without you.

Another possible tendency is essentially the opposite of the above phenomena. Some students seem particularly susceptible to the "imposter syndrome," the secret belief that you are not as capable as everyone thinks and will be discovered at any moment as the dunce you really are. As a consequence, you find yourself nodding in agreement to ideas that make absolutely no sense to you because everyone else obviously understands perfectly well. Thus, your original premise is reinforced: you must not belong in graduate school. Before you turn in your pencils and give up, consider this wisdom from a former doctoral student who contributed to this handbook: “We arrive expecting to learn everything, we move on to recognizing that we'll have to be satisfied with learning everything we want to know, and we end up settling for learning most of what we need to know. The real imposters are those who graduate thinking they know it all.”

 **CHAPTER III:** **YOUR ROLE AS A PROFESSIONAL**

**Research and Service Assistants**

GRA and GSA positions are designed on an individual basis according to the needs of the department, professor, or project. Some departments reserve these positions for doctoral students; others use graduate students at both the master's and doctoral levels. The number of years or semesters for which these appointments are renewable depends on the department in which you are working.

Many departments provide their own orientation sessions for graduate assistants, and you will receive printed materials on policies and procedures. If these are not supplied as a matter of routine, ask for them. You should also seek out an experienced graduate assistant to find out what you can expect in your new position.

If you will be working with students, one of your early tasks should be to familiarize yourself with the University policies that pertain to students. These policies include:

* Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities:
	+ <http://louisville.edu/dos/policiesprocedures/student-rights-and-responsibilities-1-1.html>
* Code of Student Conduct:
	+ <http://louisville.edu/dos/students/code-of-student-conduct.html>
* University’s Student Grievance Procedures (both academic and non-academic):
	+ <http://louisville.edu/dos/students/studentpoliciesandprocedures/student-grievance>
* FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act):
	+ <http://louisville.edu/library/archives/stupriv>
* Sexual Harassment Policy:
	+ <http://louisville.edu/hr/policies/PER102.html>
* Faculty and Staff Guide to Helping Students in Distress:
	+ <http://louisville.edu/studentaffairs/publications/OLDERstudentsindistress.pdf>

Check with your unit to determine if any other unit-specific policies exist pertaining to students.

In most cases, you will have an immediate faculty supervisor, and your first task will be to clarify your duties and responsibilities. In some areas, these can be made explicit and routine, but in others you may have to learn to tolerate a schedule and job description that varies with the needs of the task. You will also need to know your department's policy for keeping office hours.

**Laboratory Work**

If your responsibilities involve work in a laboratory, be certain that before you begin you know exactly what safety precautions must be taken and the precise routine to follow in the event of an emergency. If these procedures are not given to you in writing, ask for them. Remember that you are responsible for the safety of everyone present while you are working.

If you are expected to do demonstration work for students, or if the students will be performing their own experiments, determine exactly what you want to demonstrate and what you want the students to learn. What preparation will the students need to do in order to make the best use of their lab time? Will you need hand-outs or material written on the blackboard ahead of time? Try the experiment beforehand to ensure it works and that you have all necessary equipment and materials on hand. This also allows you to make note of any potential problems or safety hazards.

When students will be working on their own for all or part of the time, you will want to circulate and act as a consultant. Can you encourage them to learn collaboratively rather than always to rely on you for answers? If you require the submission of a report on the lab activities, be certain you make clear to your students when they may work together and when the work must be completely their own.

Finally, be sure you have established and posted office hours during which students can come to you with questions or ideas.

**Study Sessions**

If you conduct a study session, be sure you know what questions should be asked and answered and leave ample time for student questions that might not have occurred to you. You should decide ahead of time how best to run the session. Should you ask the questions? Should the students work in small groups, coming to you only when they cannot collectively solve the problem? You may need a few sessions with the group before you can assess the best way to work with this particular group of students.

**Ethical Responsibilities**

When you, as a teaching assistant, take on the role of teacher, you accept the ethical responsibilities that accompany that title. There are two major premises that undergird the academic community's ethical stance: first, no matter what you privately feel, every student's work must be evaluated solely on the basis of his or her classroom performance and scores; second, under no circumstances is cheating or deliberate plagiarism tolerated.

You are going to like some students better than others. Because the university has a widely divergent student population, you may encounter undergraduates with whom you would like to become friends. This is not an excuse for giving those students whom you find personally congenial more of your time and effort. Just as it is illegal to grade a student according to race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation, so it is unethical to play favorites in the classroom. Wait until the class is over and final grades have been submitted before you establish any connection outside the classroom. Otherwise, you leave yourself wide open for the filing of grievances by other students, a situation in which you do not want to find yourself.

There are many ways to discourage cheating on quizzes and exams. This is a pedagogical problem you want to anticipate and prevent rather than deal with after it happens. Your advisor can help you discover preventive strategies. Plagiarism is more complex. First, you must know exactly what it is and how to explain it to your students. Unhappily, many of them honestly do not realize the constraints on using someone else's words, do not know what constitutes "common knowledge," and are not sure it is important anyway. In addition to what you say, you can provide a model for them by never giving them an undocumented hand-out, even if it is a study sheet you have borrowed from a friend. You should also know the copyright laws that pertain to the reproduction of teaching materials and obey those restrictions. Someone in your department office can clarify these rules for you if you are uncertain of their content or interpretation.

In addition to these general principles, you are partially responsible for introducing your students to the ethical considerations that guide the work in your discipline. Discovering and dealing with ethical problems of subject matter, lines of inquiry, and procedures are part of membership in the community. Your students need to know the nature of these considerations as they work toward an understanding of what it means to work in and belong to this community.

**Preparation for Class**

It should go without saying that you owe it to your students to be prepared for every class. This is a considerable task your first time through, especially for those of you who have sole responsibility for all facets of the course, but it will get easier as you become more experienced. Begin by working out your goals for the entire course: what is it you want them to know or be able to do by the end of the semester? Now confer with your advisor and experienced GTAs to determine whether these expectations are reasonable and consistent with the department's understanding of the content of this course. Once you have this established, you can work out how you're going to fit all of this into the class periods, how these goals can best be accomplished, and how you will test and evaluate the learning that you hope has taken place. Do not hesitate to ask your faculty advisor or an experienced peer for advice on matters that are not standardized by departmental policy or procedure.

**Front Matter and Syllabi**

Front matter is a fancy name for the class policies you put in writing and hand out to your students on the first day. If your department does not have a standard form to follow, ask an experienced peer for a sample. You may also visit the Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning at <http://louisville.edu/delphi/resources/syllabus> for guidelines concerning the creation, distribution, and modification of syllabi at the University of Louisville. In essence, your front matter ought to include the following information:

1. The course name, number, section, time, and meeting place.
2. Your name, office location, office hours, e-mail address and the phone number where you can be reached in person or with a message. New GTAs often wonder whether or not their home phone number should be given to students. This is an individual decision, but you ought to consider how easily and frequently you can be reached on campus, whether or not you expect students to notify you in advance of an absence, and whether homework assignments are specified on your course syllabus. If you do decide to give out your home number, make clear to your students from the beginning the hours at which you will accept calls and what kinds of problems you are willing to deal with at home.
3. Textbooks and materials required for your course.
4. Attendance policy.
5. Grading policy and criteria. Note that you are stuck with whatever you specify here. You must inform them of these policies and expectations, and you cannot change your mind and criteria midstream, so think carefully before you commit this to writing.
6. Policies regarding accommodations for students with disabilities. Contact the Disability Resource Center at 502-852-6938 if you are unsure about what to include here.

The University requires a complete syllabus to be on file for every course by a certain date each semester. These can be relatively simple or highly detailed. Some instructors combine the syllabus with the front matter, others separate the two. The syllabus is a course outline, including the materials to be presented or covered, reading assignments, work requirements, and test dates. If you plan a detailed syllabus, including homework assignments, this does double duty as a course plan, and it can save you class and office time by giving students the information they need to be prepared for class in advance. It also helps them organize their own schedules. You can give an edited version to your students if it contains more than they need to know. Do remember that the Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities requires that any deviation from the original front matter or syllabus that concerns course procedures or policies be presented in writing to the entire class. If your department does not have a standard syllabus, ask your advisor or a colleague for a sample.

**Technology**

It is your responsibility as a GTA to be familiar with the different technologies that will impact your teaching assignment. If you are the instructor of record, you will be required to use ULink, the online student records portal, located at <http://ulink.louisville.edu>, to print a class roster and to submit individual student grades. GTAs should also be familiar with Blackboard, located at <https://blackboard.louisville.edu/>. Blackboard is a web-based course-management system designed to allow students and faculty to participate in classes delivered online or use online materials and activities to complement face-to-face teaching. Additionally, it is important to note that U of L students are expected to use their university e-mail accounts on a regular basis.

**Lecturing**

Although lecturing is neither always the best nor the only way to present materials in the classroom, there are situations and courses in which it is a necessary format. Lecturing is both an art and a craft; hence it requires perfecting over time. Nevertheless, there are certain guidelines the beginner can follow to reduce the chances that students will become bored.

1. The best training for a lecturer comes through work in public speaking and drama. At the very least, this sort of training teaches you to relax in front of an audience; at best, it will teach you to deliver your material in such a way that your listeners forget they are listening to a lecture. Grab every chance you can to take courses or gain experience in these areas.
2. Make an outline of your material. Very few people can lecture off-the-cuff and remain coherent to their listeners. If your classroom is equipped for it, PowerPoint presentations can be very helpful in organizing your lectures. The complexity of the presentation will determine the complexity of the outline. If you know this material so well you can recite it in your sleep, you will need only general headings to remind yourself to include everything.

If the material is relatively new to you, contains a lot of facts and figures, or if your thought processes tend to wander whenever the opportunity arises, you will want a more detailed outline. If you have thought of a particularly brilliant opening or metaphor or phrase, include it. But do not write the whole thing out and read it. If you've ever sat through a conference where the presenters read prepared speeches or heard poets reading their own work, you know why. If it has to be written out to be clear and coherent, use it as a hand-out rather than a lecture. Practice delivering the lecture beforehand to a colleague.

1. Know exactly what you want to accomplish and how much your students already know about the subject. Nothing causes student disinterest as quickly as a lecture that contains nothing new.
2. Prepare your students. Assign pertinent readings and any technical vocabulary ahead of time. If you want them to spend time listening rather than scribbling hurried notes, give them an outline.
3. In the opening section, explain the pertinence and relationship of this material to what has come before.
4. During the presentation, maintain eye contact with your listeners, not your notes. This not only allows you to scare them into staying awake, it also allows you to detect puzzlement and restiveness while you can still do something about it.
5. Move around a little. There is no rule that says you must remain glued to the podium. Do, however, remember that to be heard, you must face the students, and your movements should be natural and unobtrusive. If the audience begins to take bets on where you are going next, you have lost them.
6. Beware of distracting mannerisms such as punctuating phrases with "uhms" and "ahs" or shaking your foot. You won't be aware of these unless someone tells you about them or you see or hear them on videotape. So early on, arrange either to have a couple of your classes taped for your own viewing or offer to swap visits with a colleague.
7. Remember that it is a rare being whose attention span matches the 50-minute class hour. Break the presentation frequently with a change of pace - write on the blackboard, ask for questions, summarize the material thus far, or insert a pertinent anecdote. Relevant humor works wonders provided you do not end up appearing to be a stand-up comic rather than an academician.
8. Leave ample time for questions, clarifications, and discussion at the end. Do not be surprised if you have to struggle in the beginning to get students to ask questions; they fear being told the question is stupid, so you will have to ease those fears. If they seem hopelessly dumbstruck, consider a different question-answer format such as small discussion groups or written summaries.
9. Have one of the students summarize the last lecture at the beginning of the next class. This is a good learning device and also allows you to discover where clarification is needed.

**Testing**

Some departments, especially those with large numbers of introductory sections, use standardized tests, thus absolving you of the responsibility of creating such devices. The practice is not without its problems, however, since it brings up the whole question of teaching to tests. Obviously you owe it to your students to see that they are given the material they need to complete these tests successfully, but that does not mean you can only teach them the answers. You must also teach them ways to discover and learn the answers.

If you do create and schedule your own tests, your major concerns will be how to test what you want them to learn, how often exams and quizzes can be administered without interfering with the reading and presentation of new materials, and how to grade the performance. For example, if you want them to learn to see the relationships among trends or ideas, a multiple-choice format may not be appropriate. If you give daily in-class reading quizzes, will you be sacrificing class time needed for other purposes? Should you use a curve? Do you have time to grade all this anyway? Once more, it is recommended that you discuss this with your supervisor or an experienced peer. In addition, ask a colleague to take the test so you can discover beforehand where the questions aren't clear and how much time you should allow. Do not expect your students to answer as quickly as you or a colleague can-they will need two or three times as long.

**Grading**

Your grading criteria should always be clearly established beforehand and your grading system should be as simple as possible. In addition to the obvious responsibility of grading individual students fairly and objectively, you also are required to provide the student with a grade-to-date before the final day to drop. You must also keep your grade records beyond the end of the semester in case a grievance is filed. Never throw any of these records away without being certain of your department's policy for retaining grade records. Finally, a student's grade is never available to anyone other than the student unless you have written permission from the student or unless the person is a duly authorized representative of the university acting in that capacity. This means you do not discuss a student's grade with parents or other students, and you do not post student grades in a form allowing identities to be deduced. Do not leave exams lying about where anyone can read them.

**The First Day of Class**

There are several things you can do to prepare yourself for the first day of class. One is to find your classroom ahead of time - it is exceedingly embarrassing to get lost and consequently be late. Unless you can carry off a grand entrance to an empty room, this is a situation to be avoided. Secondly, plan what you are going to say and how you are going to present yourself.

Whatever you decide, you need on that first day to introduce yourself and to establish your policies and expectations. This means that you must be able to explain clearly what students will be expected to buy, read, write, and perform, and how these tasks will be evaluated. Most of these expectations are established in writing on your front matter and/or syllabus. You will also want to go over the expectations orally or in writing an overview of the materials and subjects to be covered in the course.

Below is a sample schedule of events for the first class:

1. Write the course name and number on the board. Some students will be in the wrong place; now is a good time to let them slip out. If you discover you have too many students to fit in the classroom assigned, or two classes are meeting in the same room, muddle through as best you can or find an empty classroom. After class, report the problem to the department secretary who can contact the appropriate person to correct the error, and leave written notice of the change in the old classroom before the second meeting.
2. Introduce yourself.
3. Determine who is present. You may or may not have a printout of your class roster. You may want additional information anyway, so many instructors ask students to fill out 3x5 cards with their names, addresses, phone numbers, student ID numbers, and any other pertinent information. When you call the roll, ask what the students prefer to be called.
4. Have students exchange names and phone numbers with at least one other student so they can call that student rather than you for missed assignments, etc.
5. Distribute your front matter and syllabus. Go over this point by point and introduce the course as you go. You cannot assume they will read this on their own.
6. Give any assignments you want them to prepare before the next class.
7. You could launch into your subject; you could have them do some sort of sample writing such as an informal writing on what they expect of the course; or you could let them go. Be guided by how much time you have left and your anxiety level. You also need to be aware that the timeframe to add classes usually extends through the first week, and some students will not decide to begin classes until the last possible moment, so you will have to make arrangements to catch up these latecomers.
8. Congratulate yourself on having made it through the worst time. It is all downhill from here, but if you are still shaky, read the article "101 Things You Can Do the First Three Weeks of Class" from the August, 1986 issue of Teaching at UNL, included in the appendix of this handbook.

**Students with Disabilities**

There are no general rules for assisting students with disabilities in the classroom; you simply have to be creative and sensitive to their needs and do your best to see that these students have an equal opportunity to learn the material. Do ask the student with a disability how you can help; do not assume that you should expect less of this student. Remember that not all disabilities are visible. Student with learning disabilities may also require supplemental accommodations. The University’s Disability Resource Center can provide you with help or advice in this area.

**Student Athletes**

Student athletes are unique cases because of their schedules. You will need to decide on a system whereby the athlete who has been absent from class because of his or her game schedule can make up the work missed. During the semester, you will receive sheets asking for grades-to-date and comments about the class performance of any scholarship athletes enrolled in your class. By filling them out and returning them quickly, you can help the Academic Services for Athletics Office spot potential trouble and get extra help to these students. Questions or problems should be referred to that office at 502-852-7100.

**Potential Student Problems**

No one can prepare you for every situation you may encounter as you teach. However, there are certain problems that arise relatively frequently and hence deserve advance consideration.

1. When you have a student who is consistently late or absent, you should try to discuss the problem with the student privately. If he or she is late because the class immediately preceding is on the other side of campus, perhaps you can arrange for the student to sit near the door. If there is no legitimate reason for tardiness, sometimes simply explaining the difficulties a late arrival causes you, the class, and the student will be enough.

Many U of L students work full time and feel that this is a legitimate reason for absence. In this case, you may need to explain that the student has to make a choice between career and education because learning cannot take place on a part-time basis. Any course work that has not been completed as a result of the student's absence is, of course, a legitimate component of the final grade. Policies regarding class attendance are established by academic units – please check with your department to determine the appropriate attendance policy for your courses.

1. When students appear to be bored, you have to look for the reason by asking why this is happening. It may be that the student cannot engage in the task because he or she is unprepared; it may be that you are covering material already known and hence not challenging the student; it may be that his or her social life is replacing sleep, and as a consequence, your classroom has become a substitute bedroom. Again, your questions should be asked privately.
2. Occasionally, a student will develop a real dependency on you for either academic or personal advice. In the latter case, listen more than you talk. If the problem seems serious, suggest that the Counseling Center is better prepared to give advice on these matters than you are and give them the number to the office (502-852-6585). A student who seems unable to cope with the coursework may need encouragement to leave the safety of your tutelage. Can he or she make use of collaborative peer tutoring? If the problems are more complex, the student may need outside tutoring, and you cannot be expected to provide a great deal of individualized instruction, nor are you allowed to tutor for pay your own students. The REACH (Resources for Academic Achievement) program offers tutoring, supplemental instruction, math support, a learning center, and student strategy workshops for undergraduate students. Located in Room 126 of Strickler Hall, REACH may be contacted at 502-852-6706. In addition, some departments keep files on experienced and competent tutors who can be hired by the individual student.
3. The bane of all teachers is the unprepared student. When your entire class is unprepared you will have to decide on the spot how best to handle the situation. If this is a first occurrence, you might consider simply going over the material with them as a class or having them work on it in small groups. You can dismiss them with a reminder that through their own negligence they have wasted the money they paid to have a class that day and the opportunity to discuss that material. This usually works only once, but it can be effective. If the problem persists, however, some stronger measure is called for. Unannounced quizzes that count toward the final grade may help. Probably the best plan is to try to discover why this is happening before you decide on a solution. Are your assignments simply too heavy? Are your students having trouble understanding what you expect of them? Have they failed to see the relevance of the outside work? Do they assume that it does not matter whether they complete the work or not?
4. If a student threatens you with physical harm, if you receive threatening or obscene phone calls, or if a student's behavior is in some way outside the bounds of acceptability, report the incident to the Dean of Students Office (502-852-5787) and your supervisor immediately. Such a problem is exceedingly rare, and it may be that the student is simply testing your reaction; nevertheless, someone in authority needs to be aware of the situation. Do not try to deal with it entirely on your own.

**Advice from Students**

Perhaps the most useful advice on shaping your professional self comes from the students. Advice from past U of L students includes:

1. If you do not enjoy teaching, do not teach. All instructors have bad days when they would rather be at home sleeping, or off studying, or anywhere other than in the classroom. If these days begin to be the norm, you ought to ask yourself why you are here. Students are not easily fooled, if you do not want to teach, they will not want to learn.
2. Keep who you are in perspective. Most students are willing to accept that you know more than they do.
3. Don't ignore questions for which you don't have the answers. Admit you don't know and promise to find out. Honesty and follow-up will more than make up for any gaps in knowledge.
4. Actively encourage questions. Many of your students will be afraid to ask questions lest they appear stupid, inattentive, or un-cool. You will have to train them to believe the only dumb question is the one not asked.
5. Listen to your students; find out what they know and do not know, and plan your teaching accordingly. If you spend all your time giving them material they have already read or know, you will bore them into stupefaction - and they hate being read to from the text.
6. Beware of showing favoritism. It is a natural tendency to focus on those students who seem to understand and appreciate you or who show a burning desire to learn. However, not only will your other less demonstrative students resent this, you may also overlook the potential contributions of those who are simply shy.
7. Finally, do not be too quick to take absences, failures, etc. personally. If your whole class is failing or absent for days at a time, you have to question your effectiveness, but if most are present and succeeding, the problem is probably not with you. There are few teaching assistants who do not take their students' failures personally, wondering what else they might have done to motivate or get the concepts into the heads of those failing. But students have to take the responsibility for their own learning. No matter how good you are, you will not reach every student.

**The Good Teacher**

If you are still searching for the keys to being a good teacher, read the article "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" by Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson. The authors have distilled the research into successful educational practices into seven basic practices:

1. Promote opportunities for interaction between students and faculty.
2. Encourage students to learn collaboratively.
3. Allow students to engage actively in their learning processes.
4. Provide immediate and constructive feedback on student performance.
5. Help students learn to use their time effectively.
6. Expect students to succeed.
7. Welcome and encourage different talents and styles of learning.

Watch the ways in which your own teachers put these principles into practice. One of the great advantages of being a GTA is the opportunity to alternate roles, to be player and audience, listener and lecturer, student and teacher all in the same day. Observe, and through this observation, create yourself as a teacher.

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The following entries, gathered from a variety of sources, will provide you with both specialized materials to solve particular problems and more general and philosophical views of the process of higher education. Additionally, many departments have their own discipline-specific teaching handbooks for their GTAs, so check with your department to determine if they can provide you with additional resource material.

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**Campus Resources for Effective Teaching**

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GTA Academy (sponsored by the School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies and the Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning), <http://louisville.edu/graduate/gta>

Disability Resource Center, <http://louisville.edu/disability>

PLAN (Graduate Student Professional Development Series), <http://louisville.edu/graduate/plan>

REACH (Resources for Academic Achievement), <http://louisville.edu/reach>

Dean of Students Office, <http://louisville.edu/dos>

Created July, 2000

Revised July, 2014

## APPENDIX

**101 Things You Can Do the First Three Weeks of Class**

\* Taken from J. Povlacs, University of Nebraska Lincoln Teaching and Learning Center, August 1986

Beginnings are important. Whether it is a large introductory course for freshmen or an advanced course in the major field, it makes good sense to start the semester off well. Students will de­cide very early--some say the first day of class-‑whether they will like the course, its contents, the teacher, and their fellow students.

The following list of 101 Things You Can Do..." is offered in the spirit of starting off right. It is a catalog of sug­gestions for college teachers who are looking for fresh ways of creating the best possible environment for learning. Not just the first day, but the first three weeks of a course are especially important, studies say, in retaining ca­pable students. Even if the syllabus is printed and lecture notes are ready to go in August, most college teachers can usually make adjustments in teaching methods as the course unfolds and the characteristics of their students become known.

These suggestions have been gathered from UNL professors and from college teachers elsewhere. The rationale for these methods is based on the following needs: 1) to help students make the transition from high school and summer activities to learning in college; 2) to direct students attention to the immediate situation for learn­ing – the hour in the classroom; 3) to spark intellectual curiosity – to chal­lenge students; 4) to support beginners and neophytes in the process of learn­ing in the discipline; 5) to encourage the students' active involvement in learning; and 6) to build a sense of community in the classroom.

Here are some ideas for col­lege teachers for use in their courses in the new academic year:

**Helping Students Make Transitions**

1. Hit the ground running on the first day of class with substantial con­tent.
2. Take attendance: roll call, clip­board, sign in, seating chart.
3. Introduce teaching assistants by slide, short presentation, or self-intro­duction.
4. Hand out an informative, artis­tic, and user-friendly syllabus.
5. Give an assignment on the first day to be collected at the next meeting.
6. Start laboratory experiments and other exercises the first time lab meets.
7. Call attention (written and oral) to what makes lab practice: completing work to be done, procedures, equipment, clean up, maintenance, safety, conservation of supplies, full use of lab time.
8. Give a learning style inventory to help students find out about them­selves.
9. Direct students to the Aca­demic Success Center for help on basic skills.
10. Tell students how much time they will need to study for this course.
11. Hand out supplemental study aids: library use, study tips, supplemental readings and exercises.
12. Explain how to study for the kind of tests you give.
13. Put in writing a limited number of ground rules regarding absence, late work, testing procedures, grading, and general decorum, and maintain these.
14. Announce office hours frequently and hold them without fail.
15. Show students how to handle learning in large classes and impersonal situations.
16. Give sample test questions.
17. Give sample test question answers.
18. Explain the difference between legitimate collaboration and academic dishonesty: be clear when collabora­tion is wanted and when it is forbidden.
19. Seek out a different student each day and get to know something about him or her.
20. Ask students to write about what important things are currently going on in their lives.
21. Find out about students jobs: if they are working, how many hours a week, and what kinds of jobs they hold.

**Directing Students' Attention**

1. Greet students at the door when they enter the classroom.
2. Start the class on time.
3. Make a grand stage entrance to hush a large class and gain attention.
4. Give a pretest on the day's topic.
5. Start the lecture with a puzzle, question, paradox, picture, or cartoon on slide or transparency to focus on the day's topic.
6. Elicit student questions and concerns at the beginning of the class and list these on the chalkboard to be answered during the hour.
7. Have students write down what they think the important issues or key points of the day lecture will be.
8. Ask the person who is reading the student newspaper what is in the news today.

**Challenging Students**

1. Have students write out their expectations for the course and their own goals for learning.
2. Use variety in methods of pre­sentation every class meeting.
3. Stage a figurative "coffee break" about twenty minutes into the hour, tell an anecdote, invite students to put down pens and pencils, refer to a current event, shift media.
4. Incorporate community resources, plays, concerts, the State Fair, government agencies, businesses, the outdoors.
5. Show a film in a novel way: stop it for discussion, show a few frames, anticipating ending, hand out a viewing or critique sheet, play and re­play parts.
6. Share your philosophy of teaching with your students.
7. Form a student panel to present alternative views of the same concept.
8. Stage a change-your-mind de­bate, with students moving to different parts of the classroom to signal change in opinion during the discussion.
9. Conduct a "living" demo­graphic survey by having students move to different parts of the class­room: site of high school, rural vs. ur­ban, consumer preferences.
10. Tell about your current re­search interests and how you got there from your own beginnings in the discipline.
11. Conduct a role play to make a point or to lay out issues.
12. Let your students assume the role of a professional in the discipline: philosopher, literary critic, biologist, agronomist, political scientist, engi­neer.
13. Conduct idea-generating or brainstorming sessions to expand ho­rizons.
14. Give student two passages of material containing alternative views to compare and contrast.
15. Distribute a list of the unsolved problems, dilemmas, or great ques­tions in your discipline and invite students to claim one as their own to investigate.
16. Ask students what books did they read over the summer.
17. Ask students what is going on in the state legislature on this subject which may affect their future.
18. Let your students see the enthusiasm you have for your subject and your love of learning.
19. Take students with you to hear guest speakers or special programs on campus.
20. Plan a "scholar-gypsy" lesson or unit which shows students the ex­citement of discovery in your discipline.

**Providing Support**

1. Collect students' current tele­phone numbers and addresses and let them know that you may need to reach them.
2. Check out absentees. Call or write a personal note.
3. Diagnose the students' pre-req­uisite learning by a questionnaire or pretest and give them the feedback as soon as possible
4. Hand out study questions or study guides.
5. Be redundant. Students should hear, read, or see key material at least three times.
6. Allow students to demonstrate progress in learning: summary quiz over the day's work, a written reaction to the day's material.
7. Use non-graded feedback to let students know how they are doing: post answers to ungraded quizzes and prob­lem sets, exercises in class, oral feed­back.
8. Reward behavior you want: praise, stars, honor roll, personal note.
9. Use a light touch: smile, tell a good joke, break test anxiety with a sympathetic comment.
10. Organize. Give visible structure by posting the day's "menu" on chalk­board or overhead.
11. Use multiple media: overhead, slides, film, videotape, audiotape, model, sample material.
12. Use multiple examples, in mul­tiple media, to illustrate key points and important concepts.
13. Make appointments with all students (individually or in small groups).
14. Hand out wallet-sized tele­phone cards with all important tele­phone numbers listed: office, department, resource centers, teaching assistant, lab.
15. Print all important course dates on a card that can be handed out and taped to a mirror.
16. Eavesdrop on students before or after class and join their conversation about course topics.
17. Maintain an open lab grade book, with grades kept current during lab time so that students can check their progress.
18. Check to see if any students are having problems with any academic or campus matters and direct those who are to appropriate offices or resources.
19. Tell students what they need to do to receive an "A" in your course.
20. Stop the world to find out what your students are thinking, feeling, and doing in their everyday lives.

**Encouraging Active Learning**

1. Have students write something.
2. Have students keep three-week three-times-a-week journals in which they comment, ask questions, and an­swer questions about course topics.
3. Invite students to critique each other's essays or short answers on tests for readability or content.
4. Invite students to ask questions and wait for the response.
5. Probe student responses to questions and their comments.
6. Put students into pairs or "learning cells" to quiz each other over material for the day.
7. Give students an opportunity to voice opinions about the subject matter.
8. Have students apply subject matter to solve real problems.
9. Give students red, yellow, and green cards (made of posterboard) and periodically call for a vote on an issue by asking for a simultaneous show of cards.
10. Roam the aisles of a large class­room and carry on running conversa­tions with students as they work on course problems (a portable micro­phone helps).
11. Ask a question directed to one student and wait for an answer.
12. Place a suggestion box in the rear of the room and encourage stu­dents to make written comments every time the class meets.
13. Do oral, show-of-hands, multiple choice tests for summary, review, and instant feedback.
14. Use task groups to accomplish specific objectives.
15. Grade quizzes and exercises *in class* as a learning tool.
16. Give students plenty of oppor­tunity to practice before a major test.
17. Give a test early in the semester and return it graded in the next class meeting.
18. Have students write questions on index cards to be collected and an­swered the next class period.
19. Make collaborative assign­ments for several students to work on together.
20. Assign written paraphrases and summaries of difficult reading.
21. Give students a take-home problem relating to the day's lecture.
22. Encourage students to bring current news items to class which relate to the subject matter and post these on a bulletin board nearby.

**Building Community**

1. Learn names. Everyone makes an effort to learn at least a few names.
2. Set up a buddy system so stu­dents can contact each other about as­signments and coursework.
3. Find out about your students via questions on an index card.
4. Take pictures of students (snapshots in small groups, mug shots) and post in classroom, office, or lab.
5. Arrange helping trios of stu­dents to assist each other in learning and growing.
6. Form small groups for getting acquainted; mix and form new groups several times.
7. Assign a team project early in the semester and provide time to as­semble the team.
8. Help students form study groups to operate outside the class­room.

100. Solicit suggestions from stu­dents for outside resources and guest speakers on course topics.

**Feedback on Teaching**

 101. Gather student feedback in the first three weeks of the semester to im­prove teaching and learning.