**Top Tips for Archaeology TAs**

**Faculty interaction**

Your faculty course leader will probably want to meet with you and the other TAs before the course starts. This is a great opportunity to ensure you understand their expectations for the course and for your role as a TA. Things to clarify might include the following:

* Make sure you know what the course deadlines are, especially for submitting grades (and arrange your schedule accordingly)
* What resources do you need to be familiar with – course management software, instructional software, readings, websites etc?
* Ask about time management – when are the busy periods of the course, are there times that are quieter? Is there a way to spread the load? How much time should you give to section preparation and student feedback etc?
* What are the course’s learning objectives, and what are the expectations for assessment? Is there a grading rubric?
* Is there a specific space where office hours should be held? How frequently should you hold them? Does the professor have other expectations for how often your students should come to see you?
* What are the faculty member’s expectations for communication during the semester (including modality – phone/email/in person, and frequency of contact)?

“If you are working with a faculty member for the class, make sure you are on the same page with responsibilities, teaching style, teaching content, etc. A lot of faculty have specific standards of how they want the course run, but not all of them will tell you clearly or up front!”

[**Elena**](https://gradschool.cornell.edu/career-and-professional-development/pathways-to-success/build-your-skills/tips-for-tas/) **(Cornell)**

**Before the first class**

If you can, take the opportunity to check out the room where you’ll be teaching ahead of time. Familiarize yourself with any equipment etc. This can include making sure you can log on to the computer or can connect to the projector, seeing if you need to bring chalk/white board markers. If you don’t like the room (e.g., no windows, lecture-style set up for a seminar section) consider asking if it’s possible to be reassigned. This can sometimes be possible after the first week of classes, and students will often appreciate your effort to find them a pleasant space. Familiarizing yourself with the room will help you feel less nervous on the first day of teaching.

If possible, connect with other students who have previously taught the course or who have worked with the faculty course leader and ask them to share any recommendations or best practices.

* Do they have suggestions for teaching strategies, readings, resources etc?
* What were the most challenging topics, and where did they find students needed most help?
* What was the workload like and when were the busiest times of semester?

**Classroom orientation and expectations**

It’s a great idea to spend the first section doing introductions, but also establishing expectations for respectful discussion. A productive way to do this is to ask students what their expectations are for the section and for discussion. Discuss these with the class and together come up with a set of written guidelines. You should be prepared with what expectations you feel are important so that you can make sure these are represented in the landing points of a group discussion. Not all students will arrive with the same understanding of respectful discussion or “sharing air time,” etc, so being ready to raise some of these issues yourself at the beginning will help with addressing any future problems AND making students who might be more vulnerable feel like this is a safe space where they know you will be aware of any concerns.

Make sure students have a good understanding of research and writing ethics (with careful citation and/or quoting of sources and clear separation of their opinions from those of others), and that they understand what plagiarism is.

* Write these expectations on the board or somewhere visible to all
* Take a photo/screenshot, and/or write up these guidelines to circulate to the section group before the next meeting
* You may want to add a short commentary to the guidelines when you send them

Some TAs like to create a short syllabus for their section. This can give students an idea of the program for the semester, your expectations, due dates for assignments and your contact details and office hours. It’s a good idea to run this by the faculty member in charge of the course to see if they have any suggestions or tweaks to make – you may also want to develop a joint section syllabus with other TAs for the course.

“Just be honest if you don’t know the answers – students prefer it much more than you’re just making something up.”

[**Rachel**](https://gradschool.cornell.edu/career-and-professional-development/pathways-to-success/build-your-skills/tips-for-tas/) **(Cornell)**

“Encourage discussion about questions, rather than lecture or try to get ‘correct’ answers…If possible, sit down in a group with students, rather than stand behind a lectern. Get advice from professor or other TAs about grading and what is the appropriate level of writing skills for your students.”

[**Anonymous**](https://gradschool.cornell.edu/career-and-professional-development/pathways-to-success/build-your-skills/tips-for-tas/) **(Cornell)**

**Office hours**

Office hours are usually an important part of your work as a TA. To allow students to make best use of your office hours it’s a good idea to ask them in the first week if there are times when they are unavailable and schedule your hours accordingly. Recommend that they all come and see you at least once before midterm.

Using a scheduling app like Calendly (<https://calendly.com/>) can be very helpful for arranging appointments and saving you time by dealing with cancelations, double bookings etc. Consider allowing students to meet with you in person or via Zoom to maximize their opportunities to get to your office hours.

**Lateness and incomplete assignments**

Many students will hand things in late or incomplete. It’s best to decide and communicate ahead of time what your policy will be in this case, as otherwise students will assume that you’ll grade late assignments without penalty.

* Make sure to give students a written deadline for when assignments are due
* Make clear the latest date after which you’ll grade a piece and/or penalties for late assignments.
* Always verify that all assignments have been received on the due date. Occasionally a student will send a blank document or claim to have submitted an assignment, and if this is not caught immediately it can lead to doubt as to whether or not this was a genuine mistake.
* Check with your course leader about how situations like medical/family emergencies are handled, as well as expected advance communication about anticipatable conflicts such as religious holidays, team travel (and what counts as an acceptable excuse), etc.

**Assignment expectations**

Make sure to be clear with students about what is expected for assignments. For example, what does a “2 page assignment” look like? It’s helpful to give students clear formatting guidelines:

* What font size and margins are acceptable? Do you have recommendations/expectations around which fonts to use?
* Give them a number range for # of citations in their bibliography

Discuss the different kinds of sources they may use or come across and be clear about your expectations for:

* Academic texts (journals, books) vs web articles, popular texts
* Primary sources vs secondary sources
* Background reading vs cited texts (texts consulted, vs texts referenced)

Be clear on what kind of referencing system you expect. Undergraduate students generally find it easier if this is defined for them rather than having to choose one of their own.

* Make sure to give them examples
* E.g., you could ask them to use one of two Chicago styles (author-date or notes & bibliography): <https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html>

Be clear on how as well as when you want papers to be submitted

* Do you want papers turned in electronically or hard copies?
* Where and when should they be handed in?

**Grading expectations**

It is helpful for students to know what is expected for a grade. What does an A range essay look like? What makes a B range assignment? What is the difference between a B+ and an A-?

If you are teaching in a course that has multiple TAs, it can be useful to do some grading together when you start grading an assignment, so that you are calibrated (and can learn from each other). A good way to do this is to pick a couple of papers/assignments and have all of the TAs grade them separately in a meeting, and then compare and discuss the grades they gave them.

If your professor does not offer grading guidelines you can work out a rubric for yourself that you can communicate to the students. These will change for different courses and institutions, but here is one example:

For **A range** essays originality and argument is key, together with solid referencing and careful and accurate writing. **A range** essays will show evidence of independent research that goes beyond the listed reading. An original and critically argued essay with good use of examples, would get an **A-** if it was presented with poor referencing and typos or poorly formatted. A well referenced and clearly written paper with good formatting that did not show much evidence of originality would lean toward a **B+**

**B range** essays show a strong grasp of the topic, assessing and outlining arguments carefully and with relevant examples given. The papers are clearly written, referencing is usually adequate, and there may be some typos/formatting issues. **B range** essays will tend to rely on the assigned readings without much outside reading. A **B+** paper is distinguished by its clear presentation and critical evaluation of an argument, supported by evidence drawn from the assigned readings. At the lower end of the spectrum essays will repeat what has been presented in class without citation of original sources. In **B-** papers referencing may be poor and there may be an over-reliance on the internet for examples and sources, but the argument is still clearly presented.

**C range** essays show a poor grasp of the topic, and are often present a partial or incomplete view on the readings (without evidence that a student has considered other perspectives). They often fail to answer the question and there is usually little use of the assigned reading, and not much attention to evidence, with few examples provided. Those examples that are given tend to come from lecture or from internet sources. Referencing and grammar may be poor, with an over-reliance on web sources such as Wikipedia etc.

**NB** If a student has difficulties with spelling and/or grammar, it is a good idea to have an informal chat with them and direct them to the appropriate resources on campus. Students come to class from a wide range of backgrounds and not everyone will have had the same grounding in basic spelling and grammar as others. Also be aware that this might also indicate dyslexia or some other learning difference that can be helped with appropriate interventions.

**Managing the workload**

Teaching can be very enjoyable and rewarding; it can also be like a sponge, soaking up all your available time. It’s important to put boundaries on the hours you spend preparing for class and giving feedback etc. Otherwise it’s very easy to let the weekly deadlines and immediate gratifications of teaching take priority over your own needs. This is the same whether you’re a TA, beginning, or established professor. Remember to block out time not just for teaching but also for your own research, reading etc. Establishing a writing or reading group with your peers can be a good way to make sure you keep on track while also teaching.

“A lot of new TAs find that grading duties sneak up on them. Treat grading time as if it were another non-negotiable event on your schedule; choose consistent blocks of time to do grading, put them on your calendar, and don’t convince yourself that you can do it later. You will be much less stressed when there’s an hour before the grades are due and everything is already finished.”

[**Andrew**](https://gradschool.cornell.edu/career-and-professional-development/pathways-to-success/build-your-skills/tips-for-tas/) **(Cornell)**

“Be honest with your TA supervisor. If you’re struggling with your workload plus your TA responsibilities, let them know. There may not be anything they can do, but they may also give you some slack.”

[**Rachel**](https://gradschool.cornell.edu/career-and-professional-development/pathways-to-success/build-your-skills/tips-for-tas/) **(Cornell)**

**Other resources**

Your own institution will probably have a dedicated pedagogical resource center. At Columbia we recommend [Columbia University’s Center for Teaching and Learning](https://ctl.columbia.edu/). They have [dedicated resources for graduate students](https://ctl.columbia.edu/graduate-instructors/) including one-on-one support from CTL staff. They also run a wonderful podcast series [*Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning*](https://ctl.columbia.edu/resources-and-technology/resources/podcast/). Take some time to look through the materials on offer, but for specific topics also check out the Centers at other universities. Below we’ve listed a few that have great collections of resources.

The Bok Center at Harvard has an excellent range of teaching and learning materials. Their guidance on providing feedback on written work is very helpful and efficient: [https://bokcenter.harvard.edu](https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/)

The [University of Chicago’s Teaching and Learning Center](https://teaching.uchicago.edu/) has good advice on [leading discussions](https://teaching.uchicago.edu/resources/teaching-strategies/leading-effective-discussions/).

[Collected Wisdom. Strategies and Resources from TAs for TAs](https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/CollectedWisdom/collectwisdom-teachingstrategies.pdf) (pdf from Carnegie Mellon University)

This document draws on interviews with students carried out by Cornell as part of their [Career and Professional development website](https://gradschool.cornell.edu/career-and-professional-development/pathways-to-success/build-your-skills/tips-for-tas/). It contains plenty of other helpful information.

**Do email us at** **archaeology@columbia.edu** **with other suggestions for this document and for resources you’ve found helpful. Please note in your email that this is for the archaeological pedagogy online repository.**