

Tips for Effective Lab Instruction for Teaching Assistants

Part II: Student Relationships and Interactions

How should TAs interact with students?

1. Communicating with students

- **Verbal and nonverbal communication**
 - Be aware of how your verbal and nonverbal (e.g., body language, tone of voice) communication affect your interactions with students.
 - Try to use open body language (e.g., uncrossed arms, upright posture) to cultivate an air of authority without seeming angry or stand-offish.
 - Monitor your tone while speaking to students and try to avoid intonations of sarcasm or condescension.
 - Effective TAs can use student body language and facial expressions as cues to determine when students need help or clarification. Students may not want to ask for help or be able to verbalize their problem, but often will be glad to accept assistance or guidance when offered by the TA.
- **Establish clear methods of communication**
 - Email as preferred method of communication. Avoid more personal forms of communication such as social media or personal phone numbers.
 - Set office hours. Be sure students know when and where they are held.
 - Be yourself. If you feel insecure about your authority, be more formal. If you are comfortable in an authority role, feel free to show more vulnerability, using your previous mistakes in similar situations to help students learn.
- **Be mindful of social media**
 - Double check your privacy settings to see what information is publicly available before beginning as a TA.

2) Classroom management

- **Maintaining civility**
 - Clearly defined rules and policies can help avoid minor student incivility (e.g., cell-phone use, computer use for non-class purposes).
 - Encourage an atmosphere of open communication in the classroom. Model civility in your enforcement of classroom policies (avoid sarcastic or defensive behavior)
- **Offended or aggressive students**
 - Try to understand and support the student's point of view while remaining objective in your responses to their concerns.
 - You may not agree with the student, but showing you care about their perspective can help you get to know the student and may help you address the problem in other ways.
 - Interacting with students throughout lab sessions and being approachable can help avoid these types of situations.

- **Student misconduct**
 - Refer to the instructor's syllabus or speak to the instructor for course policies on handling student misconduct.

References

McKeachie, W. & Svinicki, M. (2013). McKeachie's teaching tips. Cengage Learning

Herrington, D.G., & Nakhleh, M.B. (2003). What defines effective chemistry laboratory instruction? Teaching assistant and student perspectives. *Journal of Chemistry Education*, 80, 1197-1205. doi:10.1021/ed08op1197

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at ctl@slu.edu.