

I. COMMON MISTAKES AND TIME MANAGEMENT

The following sections of Rishel's book should also be read at this point:

- How to Get Fired
- The Semester in Five Minutes

Having gone quickly through the most urgent points in the Introduction, we shall now begin to discuss things in more detail. This unit deals with two topics that seem particularly appropriate to start with; namely, pointing out simple mistakes that make things difficult for everyone but are easy to avoid, and managing time effectively so that you can finish everything without neglecting anything important.

You should also read the sections in the UCR TA handbook (*The Next Step*) on duties and responsibilities of a TA (pp. 6–11), professionalism and TA attributes (pp. 24–26), and time management (pp. 120–130) for additional suggestions and a slightly different perspective. International teaching assistants should also read the section on international TAs, including standard questions and answers, on pages 14–26. Some of the comments about extra work in the handbook may need to be updated in accordance with the current union contract.

Easily avoidable common mistakes

We begin by elaborating on some of the do's and don't's mentioned before. Frequently it is easier – and in fact more important – to say what should not be done in class rather than what should be done.

Perhaps the underlying philosophy should be that *the first step in teaching well is not to teach badly*. Anyhow, here are some common mistakes that are usually fairly easy to avoid. Roughly speaking, they fall into three categories: Planning, course level, and image.

Course level problems

1. Overestimating or (*relatively rare*) underestimating the level of the assigned course. — This reflects a sharp contrast between being a graduate student and being a teaching assistant. As a student it is often advantageous to be as quick witted as possible and to put things into a very succinct form, but as a teaching assistant it is crucial to do things in a slow, deliberate, step by step fashion.

Planning problems

2. Inadequate preparation for class. **This is so fundamental that it is difficult to stress too much.**
3. Falling behind or (*relatively rare*) going substantially faster than the class schedule. — This can also be viewed as a problem with the level of the class..

4. Inadequately monitoring class time. — This is clearly related to the previous item.
5. Not anticipating the next lesson.
6. Taking everything straight from the book. — This applies particularly to sample problems, and student comments in evaluations often complain about such patterns. It is possible to go too far in the opposite direction and do things that are relatively far removed from the book, but this does not seem to happen very often.
7. Not handling discipline problems effectively. — There will be a brief discussion of this issue later in the quarter and a more extensive treatment of the problem, complete with case studies, during the second quarter. If problems arise before this, you should talk to your peers and contact an appropriate faculty member — **PROMPTLY**. One can view discipline problems partly as planning problems and partly as image problems, but they are listed as planning problems here because the most important thing is to prevent them getting out of control.
8. Not supervising examinations carefully. — Student attitudes in elementary courses are not always positive, and this can lead to dishonesty in many different forms. As in the previous item, this involves both planning and image, but it is listed under planning because it is better to prevent the problem from arising than to deal with the damages afterwards.
9. Missing office hours or classes and not following standard procedures for cancellation. This is also partly a planning problem and partly an image problem, but it is listed as a planning problem because it is usually preventable.
10. Not meeting official deadlines. This can also be viewed as an image problem.

Image problems

11. Giving an impression of fundamental dissatisfaction with your assignment. — It is unrealistic to expect that all workers in any sort of position will be 100 per cent satisfied with their jobs all the time, and at times it is appropriate to let others know that you are simply carrying out orders from others or relaying their position on various issues. Also, although a teaching assistantship is in many respects a means towards an end, it is inappropriate to act as if the job is not all that important.
12. Discouraging student involvement during class. — The whole issue of involving students during class is relatively complex and will be covered more extensively during the second quarter. However, at this point we are not talking about encouraging students to participate but rather about not discouraging them from participating, either by refusal to answer legitimate questions or by answers that make a student needlessly sorry that he or she said anything at all.
13. Not relating to the students as an authority figure. — There will be a lengthy discussion of relating to students later this quarter. Two areas of obvious concern are misguided attempts at humor that offend a student's sensitivities and socialization with undergraduates that compromises your role in the classroom.
14. Irresponsible behavior towards those with whom you must work, including other

teaching assistants or lecturers as well as faculty and staff.

This is also a good time to think back about your own college classes and ask yourself, *What sorts of mistakes by your instructors or TAs were particularly bothersome to you or your fellow students, and what could have been done better in your college classes?* It is a good idea to consider how you would like to be treated if you were a student in your own class and to act accordingly.

Managing time as a student and a teaching assistant

Since being both a graduate student and a teaching assistant is a demanding way of life and you probably do not want your personal life to fall apart, this is extremely important. As noted previously, you should expect to spend about 20 hours per week if you have a regular half time appointment (4 hours of discussion sections or some equivalent combination). Here are some suggestions.

1. *Plan ahead.* Make up a calendar listing your responsibilities such as examinations in the classes you are taking and teaching, office hours, preparation and planning, *etc.* **Be realistic** about what tasks take precedence over others, and be careful not to confuse priorities with desires. Try to estimate realistically how long it will take to do various pieces of work like preparing for a class and grading without having to rush or cut corners, and anticipate times when both your studies and teaching will place heavy demands upon your time and energy (for example, near the middle and end of the quarter). Break down your responsibilities into manageable time periods; for example, the periods should probably be at least 15 minutes long and certainly no longer than two hours (one hour may even be better). — *Don't feel that you have to fill every moment of the day with work.* If you have regular leisure activities in your life such as athletic activities or extracurricular organizations, put these into the schedule too. Include some time to take care of personal matters. Otherwise the value of the schedule is compromised, and it is likely that your efficiency and ability to manage your time will deteriorate. There is a blank chart on pages 124 and 125 of *The Next Step* that may be useful.
2. *Keep an accurate record of the time spent on specific tasks.* Items to list include class preparation, office hours, grading, studying for the courses you take, *etc.* This will be particularly useful when you are facing a broad range of different tasks, and it can also be used to justify modifications for your calendar. Note interruptions if they occur.
3. *Stick with your plans as much as possible, but prepare for schedule breakdowns.* When you compare your plans with your records of time spent, there will probably be some minor differences. However, if you find it necessary to modify your plans frequently, something is wrong. In such cases you should reexamine your priorities and the time it takes to do various things as listed in your records. If it is necessary to modify your plans, take priorities into account. Lower priority tasks may yield to unanticipated demands, but the most important tasks should be given the necessary time and effort. There are times when so much is happening that you cannot expect to plan for everything that comes your way, and the end of the quarter is a classic example; planning ahead can reduce the impact of unexpected work.

4. *Distinguish between times that you are on and off duty as a teaching assistant.* If you have office hours, it is your duty to give students your full attention during these times, and in some cases you might agree to arrange further appointments for students who cannot come during your regular hours or to conduct help sessions or extra hours before an examination. However, you have no obligation to maintain an open door policy that allows students to seek help whenever you are in your office, and in fact this is strongly discouraged. Similarly, you should not agree to special hours each week for a student who needs more help than the others (in such cases it is appropriate to recommend that the student find a tutor). This is not just a matter of doing something for selfish interests; it is distracting and unfair for the other students in an office to have a roommate explaining the same problems to students for several hours a day. Finally, when deciding on time for your studies you should keep in mind the official University Senate guideline for the workload of a course; namely, each credit hour is intended to represent up to three hours of work per week (accordingly, for a four hour graduate class that meets three hours a week, the expectation is for up to nine hours of work per week outside class).
5. *Talk to the faculty and to other students.* Clearly students who have experience as teaching assistants may provide extremely valuable insights into budgeting time. Also, in many cases other teaching assistants can tell you whether there are certain concepts, ideas or techniques that many students are having trouble with and may need elaboration during class time. This can save you considerable time and energy that might be spent answering the same question for a dozen or so students after class or during office hours. The course instructor should know if you need additional help in carrying out your work so that things do not become overwhelming. In some cases he or she might be able to suggest ways in which you can do your work acceptably in less time or with less effort.
6. *Take care of yourself.* Recognize if or when your list of things to do is growing too rapidly, and in such cases step back for few moments and look everything over from a broader perspective. Summarize what needs to be done and take steps needed so you can do the work in a calm, systematic and constructive manner. Ask others for advice if you think this might help. As usual, get in touch with someone in authority if things seem to be getting out of control.