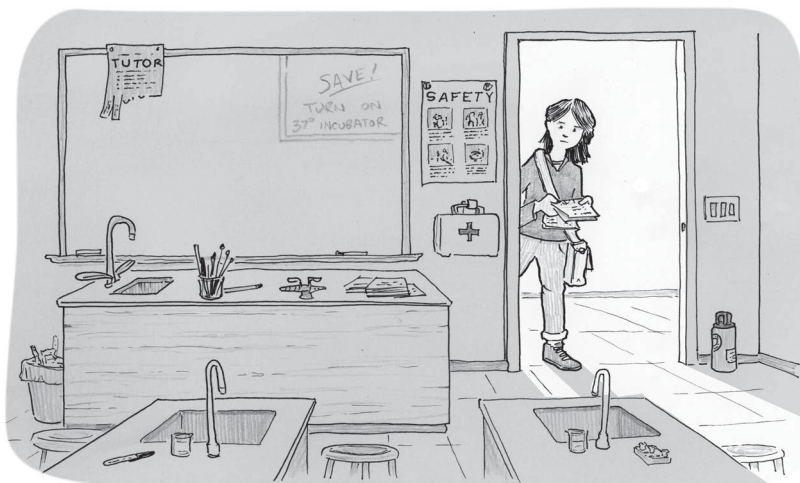


Introduction



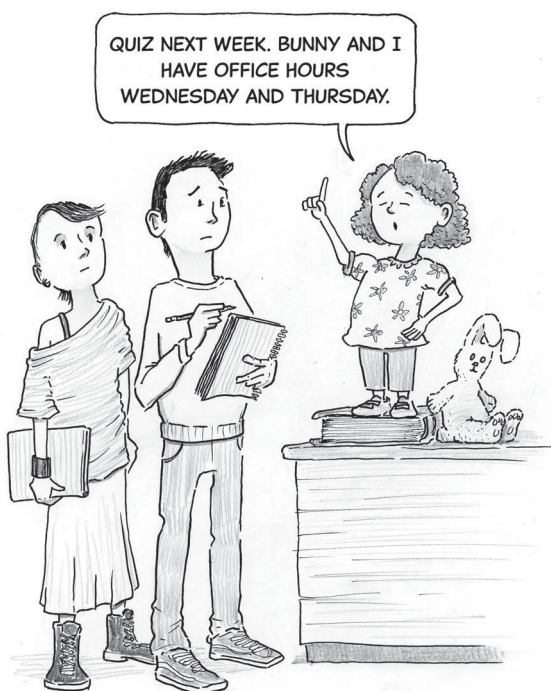
THANK YOU FOR TEACHING! Teaching Assistants (TAs) are an important part of the academic experience of most college students. Interacting with TAs in labs and discussion sections can be the most personal academic experience students have in college, especially at campuses with large lecture classes that can feel impersonal.

Good teaching helps students become critical thinkers. Good teaching helps students develop skills they will use in school and beyond. Good teaching promotes equity and access ensuring that all students have chances to learn and succeed. Through your teaching, you will share ideas and information that are important and interesting.

From a career standpoint, the benefit of teaching experience is obvious if you plan to stay in academia where leading lectures and labs is part of the job description. If your career plans are not in academia, you will still use your teaching experience as you train new colleagues or explain your work to a broad audience. For many TAs, teaching is part of the financial equation that supports their education or supplements their income—it helps keep the lights on! The work you do as a TA will benefit you *and* the students you teach.

Have a positive mindset: No one is born knowing how to teach a college class. Teaching is a skill—a set of skills, really—that you learn and hone with practice.

2 Introduction



MAGGIE, TEACHING PRODIGY, AGE 3

If you are like most new teachers, there will be some teaching skills that come easily and some that will be harder to acquire. You will try some things in class that work well and some that do not work and that you can improve in future class meetings.

Even if you have never taught before, it is important to remember that you aren't starting from zero. You have been observing teachers throughout your education and that experience, good and bad—but hopefully mostly good—will inform your teaching.

It is normal to feel anxious prior to the start of your first teaching experience. There's nothing I can write here that will completely

relieve that anxiety. However, the goal of this book is to give you some of the tools you need *right now* to get your class off to a positive start.

Who this book is for: This book is intended for first-time college Teaching Assistants,¹ many of whom are graduate students. A 2022 survey by the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that more than 135,000 graduate students were employed as TAs in the United States. If we assume that each of these TAs interacts with 20–100 students in a year, we realize that the reach of all these teachers is millions of college students annually. Of course, not all first-time teachers are graduate students. You may be a recently hired part-time faculty member, a postdoctoral researcher, or an advanced undergraduate student. The goal of this book is to help you get off to a good start in your teaching.

WELCOME TO MONICA 101.
MY NAME IS CHEMISTRY,
AND I'LL BE YOUR TA.



¹TAs go by different titles at different institutions such as Teaching Associates, Teaching Fellows, Learning Support Associates (LSAs), Instructional Associates (IAs), Higher-Level Teaching Associates (HLTAs), and others. In this book, “TA” will be used to refer to all these positions.

This book focuses on teaching in a setting like a science lab or a discussion section. These are the settings where TAs are most likely to find themselves. If you are teaching in a different setting, like a large lecture class, many of the ideas and strategies described here will still be useful.

Many new TAs are first-year graduate students facing several new experiences at once. You may be taking graduate-level courses, getting your thesis research started, and adjusting to life in a new place with new people around you. Add the challenge of teaching a college class, and it is enough to overwhelm anyone. It is not surprising that many TAs experience feelings of stress from their simultaneous roles of student, researcher, and teacher (Mazuka 2009).

If you feel overwhelmed and a bit intimidated by the prospect of teaching, you aren't alone. Hopefully, this book will be a resource to help you ease into teaching by sharing strategies and insights from education research, and the practical experiences of many new TAs. Throughout the book, you will see quotes from TAs who were once exactly where you are now. They were also anxious about stepping in front of the classroom for the first time. They all got through it and went on to become successful teachers. You will too.

This book is short and practical. There is information you need *right now* to help your teaching get off to a strong start. There is information that you might revisit once you have more experience. This book will help you recoup the initial time investment that you will make in your teaching now so that you will not have to spend as much time and energy preparing to teach in the future.

We start with the importance of boundaries in your interactions with students and describe how well-defined boundaries foster a positive, respectful class (Chapter 1). Next are the three most important things to do as you prepare for your first class (Chapter 2), and what to do *after* that first class to make future teaching easier (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 addresses a common concern among new TAs—how to prepare for the content you will be teaching. This chapter also lets you in on a secret: Students might learn a subject *better* when their TA isn't an expert. The next chapters focus on making the classroom more inclusive and welcoming (Chapter 5) and more interactive with strategies that encourage all students to participate (Chapters 6 and 7). Chapter 8 is about writing good assessments (quizzes, exams, etc.) and grading without having to pull all-nighters. Finally, there is an Appendix with information about your rights and responsibilities as a TA.



"WELCOME TO GRADUATE SCHOOL! BY THE WAY,
YOU'RE A TEACHER NOW TOO."

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HOW HAS BEING A TA BENEFITED YOU PERSONALLY OR PROFESSIONALLY?

"I'VE GAINED A TON OF CONFIDENCE—LEARNING HOW TO SPEAK IN A COHERENT WAY TO GET PEOPLE EXCITED ABOUT A SUBJECT I LOVE. TEACHING HAS BECOME MY SAFE PLACE OVER THE COURSE OF GRADUATE SCHOOL. I KNOW THAT I CAN GO [IN THE CLASSROOM] AND BE SUCCESSFUL."
– Annie, 2nd year graduate student

"IT'S BEEN REALLY A BIG PART OF FINDING COMMUNITY. I FEEL MORE CONNECTED TO THE INSTITUTION AND THE STUDENTS. AND IT'S BEEN A GOOD WAY TO GET TO KNOW A LOT OF THE FACULTY HERE TOO."
– Kerstin, 2nd year graduate student

"I THINK OF MYSELF AS A LIFELONG LEARNER. SO, IT'S BEEN VERY GOOD TO CONTINUE LEARNING NEW THINGS THAT RELATE TO THE COURSE SUBJECT."
– Kate, 2nd year graduate student

"IT HELPS YOU COMMUNICATE TO AN AUDIENCE AND ARTICULATE IDEAS SO THEY AREN'T JUST UNDERSTANDABLE TO YOU, BUT TO OTHERS."
– Spencer, 2nd year graduate student

Most new TAs I have worked with, even those who start out unsure about their ability to be an effective teacher, end up feeling good about their work with students in class. I hope this book will help you get there too.