

# FAQs About the Role of a Teaching Assistant (TA)

## **How can I become a TA?**

The best way to become a TA is to exhibit both of the following types of behaviors. The first is to perform exceptionally well in the class in which you would like to become a TA. This will demonstrate to your instructor that you have mastered the knowledge, skills, and characteristics (KSCs) that are the student learning outcomes of the class. However, the mere possession of these KSCs does not guarantee that you can function as a successful TA. The second set of essential behaviors goes beyond your ability to perform well in the class. These behaviors center on your ability to (1) help other students to perform well in the class and (2) to assist the professor with important aspects of the class. Examples of these skills and characteristics are as follows.

1. the interpersonal skills necessary to interact successfully with your instructor and her/his students who will differ widely in their academic ability, motivational level, degree of preparedness, and demographic characteristics (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, and gender)
2. the ability to understand and follow the written and oral instructions your instructor will give you and a willingness to ask for clarification of these instruction if they are unclear or if you do not fully comprehend them
3. the capability of communicating with students in a timely, positive, and effective manner
4. the initiative and persistence necessary to begin and complete your assigned tasks without having to be told to do so
5. a positive attitude about the class, the instructor, and the students you will be helping, especially when circumstances make this difficult
6. the ability to manage your time effectively so you come to class, come to class on time, and come to class prepared
7. genuine enthusiasm about the value of the material you are teaching
8. the willingness and ability to serve as an academic role model for the students in the class

The next step in the process of becoming a TA is relatively simple: you must ask the professor who teaches the class in which you want to serve as a TA if she or he needs a TA in that class the following semester. If the professor needs a TA—and perceives you as a person who possesses the eight qualities described above—then the answer will most likely be an enthusiastic YES! If the answer is no, it is most likely because she or he has a sufficient number of TAs already. If that is the case, be sure to tell your professor to keep you in mind for future semesters.

## **What will I do if I become a TA?**

A TA is just that—an assistant to a teacher. TAs perform many tasks, and these tasks depend solely on what their instructors want them to do. The following is a non-exhaustive list of these tasks grouped into seven basic categories.

1. Modeling appropriate behavior for students
  - a. attend class regularly and on-time
  - b. understand the course material sufficiently to explain it to students
  - c. be positive and enthusiastic about the class, the instructor, and the students
  - d. avoid behaviors that disrupt the teaching-learning process
2. Keeping records
  - a. take attendance
  - b. record grades
3. Creating course materials and procedures
  - a. construct study guides
  - b. suggest new learning activities to the instructor
  - c. write exam questions

4. Grading
  - a. collect, grade, and return homework
  - b. grade quizzes and exams
  - c. provide assistance with formal writing assignments (e.g., papers written in APA style)
5. Teaching
  - a. conduct lab sessions
  - b. schedule and coordinate guest speakers and field trips
  - c. proctor exams
  - d. act as a supplemental learning assistant
6. Providing assistance to students
  - a. conduct review sessions
  - b. contact students who are performing poorly in class to offer assistance/tutoring
  - c. provide students with strategies to master course material
  - d. meet with students outside class time
  - e. answer e-mailed questions from students correctly, thoroughly, and promptly
  - f. refer students to helpful campus resources (e.g., the Writing Center) when necessary
  - g. provide encouragement and motivation to students who are performing poorly
7. Providing feedback to the instructor
  - a. inform the instructor about how students are responding to exams and assignments
  - b. provide the instructor with suggestions about how to improve student learning in the class
  - c. alert the instructor to students who are struggling in the class
  - d. notify the instructor of the existence of any academically dishonest behaviors

### **What are the benefits of being a TA?**

1. The most important benefit of being a TA is the opportunity to develop the skills described in the preceding section. It is then possible to list these skills on your resume or curriculum vitae that you will send to potential employers or graduate school admissions committees. The following is the section of a resume written by a student who served as a TA in B103 Orientation to a Major in Psychology. Note how she has identified the responsibilities she had and the skills she acquired as a TA.
  - a. Teaching Assistant in B103 Orientation to a Major in Psychology (Spring, 2006)
    - a. Responsibilities
      - 1) teaching APA writing style to students
      - 2) organizing and scheduling weekly student presentations
      - 3) providing constructive and developmental feedback on written assignments
      - 4) mentoring students who display less-than-optimal academic progress
      - 5) writing a final report that contains recommendations to improve the course
    - b. Acquired Skills
      - 1) teaching and mentoring
      - 2) scheduling and organizing
      - 3) evaluating and providing feedback
      - 4) counseling, coordinating, and advocating
      - 5) communicating (writing in APA style, speaking, and e-mail)
      - 6) collaborating within a teaching team and serving a diverse student population
2. Another very important benefit of being a TA is that you will have the opportunity to work closely with a faculty member. If you carry out your duties in a competent and faithful manner, it will be easy for your instructor to describe your performance in a letter of recommendation for graduate school or a job. The following paragraphs are taken verbatim from a letter of recommendation written about a B103 TA.

The class Michael took from me (B103 Orientation to a Major in Psychology) requires students to write a nine-chapter “book” that explains how they plan to use their undergraduate education to prepare for and accomplish their post-baccalaureate aspirations. Michael wrote a well-researched and carefully crafted

book that reflected hard work, letter-perfect APA style, and perceptive personal insights. He also presented a collaborative oral report with several of his peers that was clear, articulate, and successful in its ability to communicate valuable information about a campus resource to his classmates. He was a pleasure to teach because he came to class prepared, asked intelligent questions, and used the feedback that his TA and I provided in a positive and productive manner. He never complained even though I require much more in my one-credit-hour class than many instructors require in their three-hour classes. The words to describe his performance in this class would be *savvy* and *persistent* because he proved to me that he knew what to do, he did it correctly, and he continued to do it until it was completed in a professional manner. He earned an A+ in this class, and I was so impressed with his performance in this class that I invited him to be a TA in B103 for the next semester.

Michael continued to use his strong academic and communication skills in his role as an APA-style writing mentor to my B103 students by providing them with insightful and constructive feedback on their weekly writing assignments. He performed his role in exactly the manner I demand; he was unwilling to allow his protégés to write in less-than-perfect APA style, but did so in a positive, supportive, and humane manner. I have professionalized the TA position in this class by requiring my TAs to assume the role of ***academic case managers*** who use the CREATE model to produce and sustain academic success in my students. CREATE is an acronym I constructed that represents the following six roles performed by my B103 TAs: **C**ounselor, **R**eferral agent, **E**valuator, **A**dvocate, **T**eacher, and **E**ncourager. Michael was responsible for a small “family” of B103 students each semester, and he successfully carried out these six roles in the following manners.

- In his role as a **counselor**, Michael developed an understanding of his family members (FMs) and used this knowledge—paired with his experience as a successful B103 student—to help them adapt to and succeed in the class by utilizing their strengths and strengthening their weaknesses. He also helped his FMs to understand things about themselves that could prevent them from performing well in the class (e.g., that they can no longer procrastinate and expect to perform as well as they have in the past). He accomplished this by developing a trusting relationship with his FMs, which permitted honest and insightful examinations of dysfunctional academic behaviors (e.g., an inability or refusal to use feedback to improve performance) and the development of more functional behaviors.
- In his role as a **referral agent**, Michael identified his FMs’ academic challenges and their subsequent need for assistance that required the assistance of specialized campus resources. He was then able to connect them with these resources to eliminate or decrease the severity of these challenges (e.g., Adaptive Educational Services, the Advising Office, the Career Center, the Writing Center, and the Office of Counseling and Psychological Services).
- In his role as an **evaluator**, Michael assessed the quality of the APA style and format of his FMs’ book chapters and provided them with constructive and supportive feedback that enabled them to improve the quality of their future chapters. Part of this role involved careful record keeping and the production of a comprehensive end-of-semester report of each of his FMs’ academic accomplishments.
- In his role as an **advocate**, Michael worked hard to support his FMs when their busy and complicated lives made it difficult for them to meet my high academic standards. In these instances, Michael acted as an advocate to lessen the academic cost of not meeting the requirements of the class by explaining the causes of an FM’s poor performance to me so I could determine if an exception in class policy should be made (e.g., the extension of a deadline).
- In his role as a **teacher**, Michael used the strong knowledge of APA style he developed in B103 to enable his FMs to acquire this challenging and demanding professional skill. He also taught his FMs “by example” by modeling the characteristics of a successful psychology major such as involvement in departmental activities, the establishment of productive relationships with faculty, and the ability to set academic and professional goals and to create and implement strategies to achieve these goals.

- In his role as an **encourager**, Michael motivated his FMs to perform up to their optimal levels by enabling them to understand the value of the class, identifying and reinforcing their academic progress, and providing the support they need to complete this rigorous class. Michael was able to use his kindness, compassion, empathy to bring about positive behavioral change in this role. Although this is perhaps the least academic of the six TA roles, it is none-the-less one of the most crucial in this very demanding class. It is the role in which Michael's exceptionally strong interpersonal skills enabled him to excel as a TA.

It is important to know that Michael was so effective and responsible as a TA that I invited him to serve as my Lead TA the following semester. This role required him to supervise the activities of nine other TAs, answering their questions, making sure that weekly activities were prepared (and prepared correctly and in a timely manner), while also working one-on-one with a group of students to help them learn to write in APA style. He performed superbly in this capacity.

3. Another benefit of being a TA is that you will have an opportunity to develop an even deeper understanding of the information included in the course than when you took it as a student. A B103 TA stated this quite clearly when she wrote, "I developed strong APA-style writing skills when I took B103 as a student, but I truly mastered these skills when I had to teach them to B103 students when I served as a TA.
4. The final benefit of being a TA is that it satisfies the strong need to help others that the vast majority of psychology majors possess. The positive feedback that TAs receive from the students they help serves as a very powerful reinforcer.