

Demonstrating Teaching Excellence - USC TA Training

1. Small Group Sessions:

| Do's | Don'ts |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate high competency / knowledge: Speak without notes, know your subject! | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't read off of slides or notes. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frame your session. Provide students up front with well-defined objectives, structure, and expected outcomes / competencies • Give every student a sequential number (e.g., 1 thru 3) and divide them into groups. This will encourage collaboration between students who aren't well-acquainted (i.e., eliminates discussion groups composed of close friends, which are not always the most productive). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't give students the option of selecting. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individualized, skillful guidance of students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Know your students to a much greater degree than you would in a lecture. Small groups allow you to recognize each student's strengths & weaknesses. ➤ Listen carefully to questions, and interpret seemingly irrelevant / "dumb" questions into the real question that the student is asking. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't stray from the focus of the session. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divide the class into even smaller groups for breakout sessions to answer questions relevant to the session objectives. Breakout sessions should be brief (2-3 minutes, but sometimes longer depending on complexity of question). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Be sure you either provide enough questions to keep all groups busy during the stated discussion time, or limit the discussion time to ensure that no groups have time left over to stray away from focus of session. ➤ Listen and be proactive. Walk around and ensure that students are focusing on the session objectives. Interject and ask how they're doing if they're not on topic. ➤ Share interesting discussions you have with the entire group if the discussions took place with only a subset of students. ➤ Consider developing a general problem-solving tip sheet and provide it to all students. This may help minimize questions and is a fair method of helping all students equally. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't respond with condescending tones or phrases (sometimes difficult to catch yourself doing this, may want to ask a colleague to observe your teaching style). • Don't let students stray off topic. |

2. One-on-One Teaching (e.g., Meeting during office hours)

| Do's | Don'ts |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be respectful | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be fair / reasonable / rational / objective | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't be opinionated or biased |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate high competency / knowledge | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't allow students to all show up at the end of your office hours. Tell them at the beginning of the semester what your office hours are, but instruct them to arrive no later than an hour before office hours end (or some other reasonable time frame). |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be personal and encouraging: Seek to understand why the student is asking the question or struggling. Even if the student is wrong, give credit for what he / she does know or has done correctly. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't assume that all students learn the same way. Even bright students struggle when material is presented in a certain way or with specific subjects. If you can't help them, seek advice from your fellow TA's or professor. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider asking your professor to inform you if a particular student is performing poorly. You can contact the student for a 1-on-1 meeting to help clarify the source(s) of poor performance and offer solutions that the student may not have been aware of. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't allow students who need help to continue avoiding you. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mail: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Use BlackBoard as a tool to share responses to questions with all of your students, so all students benefit from your answer and duplication of questions is minimized. ➤ To limit emails at bad times (e.g., near the end of the semester), establish a written policy in the syllabus for how you will reply to emails (frequency, will reply to all, last date for emails relative to an exam or end of semester, etc.). Share this policy verbally as well at the beginning of the semester. | |

3. Classroom / Larger Group Lectures

| Do's | Don'ts |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know your audience and tailor your lecture as much as possible to the majority | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't speak at a low volume or with a monotonous tone |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase motivation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Maximize relevancy of materials to common life issues: Use real life examples. High profile "newsy" items have a broad audience appeal. ➤ Consider incorporating small group discussion breaks (see next bullet point) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't discourage audience from asking questions by being short, condescending in speech or tone, etc. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider small group breakout sessions (e.g., 2-3 students per group sitting near each other) during the lecture (e.g., every 15-30 minutes) with the purpose of answering a question that YOU develop focusing on the material that has just been presented. Breakouts should be 2-3 minutes in length (sometimes longer), but you must set the duration and stick to it in order to keep the students focused. Randomly call on one of the students in each group (or as many groups as possible) to share answers with the class. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't get off the topic. Keep your audience focused on what you promised to deliver. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express passion for your topic, and deliver it with animation and zeal | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate some level of humility; audience members tune out lecturers who give the impression that they know everything and the audience knows nothing. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRACTICE! Consider writing every word of your lecture if it's your first time lecturing, and practice in front of a friend, relative, or video camera. Video cameras are often the most effective, revealing bad habits that you would not otherwise catch. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate humor if you can | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeat questions into the microphone so everyone can hear them. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider adding external elements (e.g., patient, devices, other 3D visual aids) to clarify complicated information. | |

4. Grading, violation of student conduct standards, etc.

- Grade assignments in a timely manner. Otherwise, students will not get the feedback needed to avoid the mistake in the future (particularly important for assignments that must be mastered in order to move on to the next learning phase). Example: Post sample answers the day after the exam, and promise a specific turnaround time for grading such as 3 or 4 days.
- Fairness: A disciplinary action can only be “fair” if standards of conduct are provided up front and understood by each student. Consider providing every student with a copy of the student rules of conduct pertaining to homework, exams, etc. Consider condensing the rules and having every student sign a form indicating that they understand the rules and consequences.
- Consider reminding students of behavioral standards before every exam (e.g., all cell phones away, keep eyes on own paper, etc.) and consequences that will occur if these are violated.
- If an exam standard is violated, TA’s should inform the professor as soon as possible. TA’s should not be caught in the middle.
- Consider using a plagiarism detection tool such as Turnitin, available through USC’s Blackboard. Turnitin will screen every paper for plagiarism against a database of every document in print and every documented submitted into Turnitin for review.
- Consider using a grading rubric, if applicable, which will help minimize arguments from students about why a certain score was not achieved.