A Practical Guide for Teaching Assistants in English Courses at Stanford

Second Edition

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Foreword

TAing can be one of the most rewarding experiences of a graduate student’s career. The time you and your students spend in section can profoundly affect their understanding of and interest in literary studies. It also can enliven your own graduate work. Teaching may confirm your decision to study a particular field, or it may steer your passion for literature in exciting new directions.

However, TAing for an English class also may be one of the biggest challenges you face during your time at Stanford. Many graduate students in English, MTL, and Comparative Literature come to Stanford with little or no teaching experience, and facing a classroom full of undergraduates for the first, or even the second, time can be a daunting task.

This guidebook is intended to help you navigate both the joys and challenges of being a teaching assistant, offering practical advice on issues that teaching assistants face before, during, and after they TA an English class at Stanford. From the basics, such as the TA assignment process, to pedagogical concerns, such as how to formulate and accomplish section goals, the following pages contain concrete information for making the most of your time as a teaching assistant, whether you are a first-time TA or a seasoned section leader.

The first edition of this guidebook was published in the early 2000s and was keyed to a pedagogy class for first-year teaching assistants. This second edition, which responds to significant structural changes in the English PhD program and the undergraduate English curriculum as well as to more general developments in the University’s operating procedures over the past few years, is meant to be a useful resource for all English, MTL, and Comparative Literature graduate students, regardless of how long they’ve been at Stanford.

Brianne Bilsky
Editor, second edition
Chapter 1: Basics

Overview of Being a TA in English

The PhD programs in English, Comparative Literature, and MTL at Stanford are designed to provide teaching experience while also allowing you to focus on your own coursework and scholarship. As such, your teaching responsibilities will occur in discrete if intensive blocks of time, allowing for quarters in which you can focus wholly on your academic program: coursework, orals preparation, and scholarly research. A series of workshops during the fall quarter of your first year constitute your main TAing pedagogical training. You will TA for one quarter in both your first and fourth years. There also may be additional teaching opportunities as you proceed into your advanced years of dissertation research and writing.

Undergraduate English courses at Stanford that require TAs tend to be introductory survey classes or slightly higher-level classes that fulfill a departmental or university requirement. Undergraduate seminars are smaller, discussion-oriented courses that generally do not require a TA. Although your two sections the first time you TA are capped at 20 students each, actual numbers might vary anywhere between 10 and 20. Ideally, each section will have 15-18 students. TAed courses usually come in two formats: the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday class (a 50-minute lecture on each of those days) and the Monday, Wednesday or Tuesday, Thursday class (a 90-minute lecture on each of those days). Sections for both types generally meet for 50 minutes one day a week. (Thursdays and Fridays are days on which the department and Registrar often schedule sections. For a comprehensive list of allowable section times, see section II of the appendix.)

As you likely have discerned, TA assignment is not an exact science. It is not at all uncommon, for example, to have an uneven number of students in your two sections. In addition, scheduling conflicts for students enrolled in the class may mean rescheduling section times and obtaining new room assignments. However, despite these unpredictable variables, you can do certain things during the first and second
weeks of the quarter to assist the TA assignment process as well as student placement in sections.

**Stanford Undergraduates and English Courses**

Perhaps the first thing to know about Stanford undergraduate students is that they are very busy. Many students participate in multiple activities including varsity athletics, intramural sports, student government, clubs, and various mentoring programs. Students also take on heavy loads in their coursework. Double majoring and minoring are fairly popular at Stanford. Although you likely will have many students who are very busy and even overextended, Stanford students are also enthusiastic, eager to learn, friendly, and collaborative.

Depending on the course, the make-up of sections can vary tremendously. Certain courses, particularly those that are more specialized and serve an area requirement, may attract mostly English majors. All English majors must complete the English Core, which comprises six classes. Three of these classes form a team-taught, three-quarter sequence that provides a broad perspective on the history of literature in English from the Middle Ages to the present. The historical core sequence is not a survey but rather a narrative investigation of key literary themes, movements and innovations across a broad sweep. In addition to the literary history sequence, students also must take three methodology courses as part of the Core: Poetry and Poetics, Narrative and Narrative Theory, and Critical Methods. To round out their English major, students need to complete one senior seminar and six to nine additional courses, depending on their degree emphasis (e.g., Literature in English, English and Foreign Language Literature, English and Philosophy, etc.).

Students from other departments take English courses for a wide variety of reasons, some of which include: fulfillment of major requirements (e.g., American Studies), interest in reading specific authors/works/periods, and interest in working further on their writing. In addition, all Stanford undergraduates must fulfill the “General Education Requirement,” which requires at least three courses in the Humanities and Social Sciences as well as two courses designated as Gender Studies,
American Culture, and/or World Cultures. Ultimately, the more information you can gather in advance about the course in which you plan to TA the better your sense will be of the enrolled students’ interests, needs, and expectations.

During the first meeting you can get a sense of the particular make-up of each of your sections. Consider the majors, interests, and goals of the students as a whole in planning various assignments and activities over the course of the quarter. This may just be a matter of doing different types of things from week-to-week, while still maintaining a certain amount of consistency, to address students’ various goals, interests, and learning styles. Even if your section consists mostly of English majors, there will likely be a great deal of diversity of background, academic and professional interest, and writing style. Many English majors double major or minor in fields as diverse as engineering, math, political science, and pre-med; for them English may be a “creative” outlet. Long-term academic and professional goals among English majors also vary considerably. You very well may have one contingent of students for whom English is a discipline they hope to pursue at an advanced level, another who take English courses very seriously as preparation for some other field (e.g., public relations, communications, publishing, teaching, law, etc.), another who are there out of “pure interest” but are eager to learn about literature, and another who hope to have a break from their “real work.”

Right from the start, try to determine the composition of student you do have in each section. Consider their needs, interests, worries, and discussion preferences. Try to foster an environment that is varied enough to engage students with different expectations and backgrounds while also establishing consistency in terms of intellectual rigor and expectations for participation and assignments. Draw on the students’ diversity—on their various strengths. You could have a senior English major give a short presentation on a particular theoretical concept that came up in lecture; ask a Biology student to discuss his or her understanding of the science during the period; solicit expertise from History and American Studies majors on the context for a poem, novel or play; or make periodic connections between literary analysis and other disciplines. The list of course goes on. Regardless of how you handle such issues, don’t
be afraid to check in with the students over the course of the term for feedback and suggestions.

One caveat: although it is important to consider your students’ literary and general academic interests when thinking about how to approach section, you should not let their interests primarily drive the class. Ultimately, each course’s teaching team—the professor(s) and the TA(s)—is responsible for shaping the students’ overall learning experience. Discuss the course’s learning goals with your professor early on, and then refer back to these as you plan the objectives of each section.

**The Student Perspective**

Here are some thoughts from senior English majors at Stanford on what they most want to get out of a section, what pitfalls to avoid, and what really works.

**What do students most want to get out of an English section?**

- “Deeper discussion of readings and issues from class.”
- “Insightful comments from peers.”
- “Straight talk, no fluff, reasonable claims.”
- “Reassurance that we understand the material.”
- “Learn to engage with others like a ‘well-read, confident speaker’ rather than learning how to spout out ‘intellectual’ gibberish.”

**What methods work well in sections?**

- “Discussing what interests the class.”
- “Creativity.”
- “Group work.”
- “When the TA has a genuine interest in the material and knows when to talk/not talk to stimulate a discussion.”
- “One where students aren’t the only ones talking or the TA is not the only one talking. In other words, where the TA talks for about 10 minutes, setting up the discussion, and then students talk.”
• “Pick one “thing” besides general discussion to do consistently throughout the quarter.”

• “Specific questions about the reading.”

• “Short in-class writings.”

• “TA bringing in historical/cultural background information relevant to text. Students bringing in ‘quick’ things (as opposed to lots of discussion questions or lengthy presentations), such as bio sketch of the week’s author(s).”

• “When the TA listens closely and helps develop the students’ interests. When the TA has an informal approach, but has the preparation and insight to enrich discussion of issues as they are raised.”

• “Write on the board! Put ideas/concepts up so we can stare at them during section.”

What are common areas for improvement in sections?

• “Keep pushing/challenging us because I think that behind many of the things we say that seem to go nowhere, there are many things to be learned and thought about.”

• “Having fun, interesting discussions. A lot of this is dependent on whether or not people have done the reading.”

• “Getting everyone involved in class. Making it interesting. Finding good questions to motivate discussion.”

• “Being prepared for section (with background, themes, questions to discuss, etc.). We appreciate that, and the discussion is usually better. Figure out whether people have actually read the text and steer discussion accordingly (if nobody’s read, do a close reading).”

• “Don’t try to be the students’ best friend or try to be as authoritative as the professor.”

• “Be consistent in what you do and what you ask students to do. Last-minute changes are not appreciated.”
Chapter 2: Getting Started

Basic Timetable for Getting Started

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<th>TIME</th>
<th>TASK</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fall quarter</td>
<td><strong>First-years:</strong> attend pedagogy workshops; <strong>Fourth-years:</strong> TA for second time; <strong>Advanced grads:</strong> TAing opportunities based on availability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During fall quarter</td>
<td><strong>First-years:</strong> make arrangements with a fourth-year or advanced grad to sit in on a section or two; <strong>Fourth-years and advanced grads:</strong> think of yourselves as mentors for the first-years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By end of fall quarter</td>
<td><strong>First-years:</strong> give Student Services Manager your TA preference form for winter TAing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By end of winter quarter</td>
<td><strong>First-years:</strong> give Student Services Manager your TA preference form for spring TAing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First few days of classes</td>
<td>Attend possible TAing courses, emphasis on preferred ones; meet casually with professor to express interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First or beginning of second week</td>
<td>Once assigned to a class, meet with professor and other TAs to discuss professor’s TAing philosophy, any syllabus issues, and section assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After 2-3 course meetings</td>
<td>Poll students re: section times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By 2-3 days before section</td>
<td>Assign students to sections; announce and post assignments; coordinate with teaching team to prepare section guidelines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By day before section</td>
<td>Visit section room; assess its appropriateness for section; make sure any equipment works and you know how to use it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Day of first section</td>
<td>Show up a bit early. Breathe! Relax! Enjoy!</td>
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**TA Assignment for First-Years**

The choice is yours—winter or spring. How do you decide which quarter you want to TA? Take stock of your own psychological preferences. After fall quarter, some
graduate students are ready and anxious to get started. Others decide that they would like another quarter to focus on coursework, to learn from their peers who go first, or simply to contemplate pedagogical ideas, issues, and models. Next, visit the Stanford Bulletin Explore Courses page (http://explorecourses.stanford.edu/CourseSearch/) and the English Department website (http://english.stanford.edu/courses.php); see when the highest concentration of classes interesting or necessary to you as a student are offered. Then consider the undergraduate course offerings—which would be interesting or useful to you as a teacher? Note that this does not always mean choosing a class that plays to your specific interests. TAing for a course outside of your literary comfort zone can benefit you in several ways. If you are a first-year, this can be an excellent way to fill in a particular gap in your literary knowledge and get a head start on preparing for Quals. For fourth-years and advanced grads, it can be an exciting way to challenge yourself and expand your teaching experience. Since the university limits to ten the number of units TAs can sign on for in their capacity as students, the best combination is to find a promising class to TA in a quarter not swamped with offerings for you as a student. After choosing the most likely quarter, keep an eye out for a memo from the Student Services Manager a couple of weeks before the start of your TAing quarter. She’ll ask for your preferences (usually ranked top four) among the class offerings for that quarter.

Unfortunately, the next choice is not yours—to which of those preferred classes you will be assigned as a TA. Because Stanford students participate in a “shopping period” and do not pre-enroll in classes, class numbers are impossible to predict with any accuracy (though the Student Services Manager’s memo will have estimated student numbers, from which you can deduce estimated TA numbers; usually 25-30 students per TA). TAs are not assigned until students actually show up for class—in fact, until they show up for class several times. Number counts are taken in classes throughout much of the shopping period. Enrollments and preferences are then juggled, and assignments are made.

Are you completely helpless as your TAing fate is decided around you? No. Though receiving one of your top choices is never guaranteed, TAs often do end up in
classes in which they have expressed a strong interest, especially since first-year TAs are given priority in assignment over fourth-years and advanced grad students. In addition, several informal strategies exist to make the process less random. A caveat, though: professors here do not choose their TAs as they do at many other institutions and in other departments. Though going to see a professor you might TA for helps to create a foundation of rapport with him or her, it will not get you anywhere in the actual assignment process.

Often talking to each other can be more helpful. See who is TAing which quarter, and which classes people want in your teaching quarter. You’ll have a better sense that way if you’re the only person interested in a given class, or if you’re somewhere in a queue of five possible TAs for a class with an average enrollment of 30. Adjust your expectations accordingly.

Also, attend the different classes you’ve listed as preferences. This makes for a fairly hectic start of the quarter, since you’ve usually put down four choices, but then you can see first-hand what enrollment is like and how engaging the professor and/or the syllabus actually are. How can that help once your preferences are in? There is a limited amount of flexibility to those preferences once the quarter begins. Be smart about this though. The Department clearly will be more receptive to you changing your first choice if you are requesting a course in need of a TA. Also keep in mind that the Student Services Manager is extremely busy at the beginning of the quarter, and pestering her will not forward your cause.

A little tip regarding class count: usually, the class totals that count for TA assignments are the ones for the second class meeting. Make sure that those numbers promptly find their way to the Student Services Manager. Professors are normally responsible for this, but sometimes they can be a bit slow.

Most importantly, though, don’t get too fixated on assignment machinations. Most first-time TAs end up teaching a course they wanted anyway. And even if you get your third or fourth choice, your TAing experience will be substantively as satisfying as if you had gotten your first or second. The content of a course doesn’t actually leave the most lasting impression; the quality of your teaching experience does. Worrying about
the assignment process takes your time, energy, and attention away from what really matters: starting your work as a TA.

**Starting Your Work as a TA**

The *Explore Courses* site ([http://explorecourses.stanford.edu/CourseSearch/](http://explorecourses.stanford.edu/CourseSearch/)) contains information regarding the format and meeting times of your preferred courses, so spend some time looking over it as soon as it becomes available. Attending lectures consistently from the beginning, even during the flux of shopping period, helps immeasurably as you plan for your first section. Knowing the background information that students have received on the course subject will assist you in determining how to supplement or build on it. Usually most TA assignments are finalized by the end of the first week or the beginning of the second, so the phase of attending four different undergrad lectures and three or four of your own classes (or balancing dissertation work if you are a fourth-year or above) will be blessedly brief.

After you have been assigned to a course, another assignment process begins: getting your students put into sections. Like TA assignment, section assignment is an inexact science. Students filter in and out of a course with great regularity during the shopping period, and their hectic schedules further complicate attempts to create balanced sections. Frequently you will end up with fewer than 15 students in one or both of your sections, or one section that is much larger than the other. Just do your best to even out numbers, since discussion sometimes becomes difficult in sections that are either too large or too small. Also, to the extent that it is possible, see that each section contains a mix of types of students: a blend of freshmen and seniors, majors and non-majors, generally enriches the learning experience for you and your students.

Occasionally you may have a few students whose schedules do not fit any of the sections offered. If this happens, first see if the students actually are able to adjust their schedule. Oftentimes what they see as a scheduling problem is often a prioritization problem. For example, they may participate in a club or organization that meets at the same time as your section. Remind them that their academic schedule takes priority over their social schedule. In some cases, however, students have legitimate scheduling
conflicts and simply cannot attend any of your sections. If this happens, you may have
to meet separately with those students, perhaps during office hours or some other
established time each week.

Scheduling preferences can be polled in a number of ways. One effective strategy
involves listing possible meeting times and then asking people to write down more than
one choice in order of preference as well as section times they absolutely cannot attend
and why. You can then assign students to sections based on their stated preferences and
avoid a situation where every student signs up for the 4:15 Thursday section and no
students sign up for the Friday 10 a.m. one. However, if you would like to avoid the
paperwork involved in this approach, consider using online technology to identify and
manage your students’ section preferences. For example, you could use Doodle
(http://www.doodle.com) to survey electronically your students’ section preferences.
No matter what approach you take, remember that certain days and times work better
than others for section. If, for instance, the lectures for your class meet on Tuesdays and
Thursdays, it would be best to schedule your sections after the last lecture for the week
so that each section covers the same material. The “Allowable Section Times” chart in
the appendix is a good place to start your quest for the ideal section time. Then, for
courses with multiple TAs, decide on the basis of schedules and preferences who will
lead which section. Remember to email the section lists early enough (one to two lecture
meetings prior to the first sections) for students to know in plenty of time where they
should be and when.

When you have attended the first few lectures of a course and assigned students
to sections, you are ready to begin planning for that first section meeting. But you don’t
operate totally independently in planning your teaching; the professor of the course
usually will have input about what that first section and those to follow should cover.

**Working with Faculty**

If you imagine your progress though academia as advancement within an
apprenticeship system, you have now graduated to head apprentice. You guide and
instruct the novice apprentices, but are still instructed by the master artisan. An
interesting position to be in for sure; one with great benefits and great challenges. While your autonomy remains incomplete, you have the opportunity of professional practice in teaching without real ultimate responsibility for the end product. While constructing yourself as a figure of authority toward those on the lower rungs of the ladder, you linger halfway between a pupil and a colleague in relationship to “the master.”

The apprenticeship metaphor as presented here is apt in some ways, and provocingly inaccurate in others. Some colleagues would argue that no such hierarchical ladder exists or should exist in an intellectual community, while others would maintain that it highlights important dynamics between faculty and TAs, between TAs and undergraduates, and between faculty and undergraduates. Here are some varying faculty perspectives on a course’s environment of teaching and learning:

• **On apprenticeship and the ideal professor/TA working relationship:** “The relationship should be contractual with a sense of mutual obligations. For the TA, this means doing the job he or she is paid to do . . . .The TA is important for mechanical things that are totally crucial to the smooth running of the class. The professor’s side of the contract may be more broadly defined. . . . Since ideally this is an apprenticeship, the professor is also teaching how to teach and sharing professional knowledge. . . . The relationship is not a dyad. The professor and TA share a contract to promote the learning experience of the undergraduates. That’s the relationship that matters; that’s the most important thing, always.” —Jennifer Summit.

• **On the difference between lecture and section:** “Section is a place where students get to participate. It’s a time for digging more deeply into topics that weren’t covered or not covered in great detail in lecture. It’s also an opportunity to talk about paper writing, mechanics, and grading.” —Michelle Karnes

• **On faculty interactions with undergraduates in courses with TAs:** “TAs need to remember that TAing creates a distance between professors and students, and this needs to be negotiated carefully. TAs are an important bridge to tracking the student.” —Claire Jarvis
Whatever the metaphor or framework you choose to understand the interactive dynamic of a course, remember that you are working within a teaching and learning community, comprised not just of your students, but also of your faculty supervisor and mentor. For this reason and for others, you should meet early with that faculty supervisor. Introduce yourself if you have not met already. Explain your interests in the course material and objectives—e.g. you study the period covered, or you’re looking to fill a gap in your undergraduate curriculum before Quals.

As soon as you’ve been officially assigned to a course, you should arrange a meeting with the professor and any other TAs. Issues to discuss at that point include:

• **Are elements of the syllabus still in flux?** The answer to this generally should be no; the professor should have decided on the basic assignment sequence, the grade percentage breakdown, and other fundamentals of the course before you enter the situation. However, the professor might have left leeway for your involvement in aspects of course management like assignment definition or grading.

• **Does the professor have a laptop policy for lecture?** Because some students use laptops for things other than taking notes in class (i.e. e-mailing, managing their social network, or general web surfing), some professors have a “no laptop policy” for lecture. Others may allow laptops but have a “no wifi policy.” Know what your professor’s policy is and what he or she would like you to do to help enforce it in lecture.

• **How will section assignment occur?** The TAs usually handle this process, but sometimes the professor will have opinions about it, or will want to be more actively involved.

• **How does the professor understand the place of section within the overall structure of the course?** If section attendance is not already a mandatory activity that receives weight in the overall grade breakdown, strongly (though of course diplomatically) encourage the professor to make it so. Students must perceive sections as an integral part of the course, or you will be unable to lead them effectively. Typically, section counts for 10-15% of the overall course grade. Also,
professors often have preferences about what relation section discussion should have to lecture material—e.g. sections should reinforce lecture material, or sections should cover what lecture missed. Claire Jarvis, for example, envisions section as “a place where students can have a more relaxed discussion environment and introduce new topics from lecture. Ultimately, section should support and supplement lectures and always stay tied to the focus of the course.”

- **Will there be weekly section assignments of some kind, and if so, how will these be evaluated?** Often professors want students to write weekly reading responses. If your professor wants something like this, ask how these responses should be incorporated into the course and into section, so that this information can be put on your section guidelines sheet. If no provision has been made for this kind of assignment, consider requesting some form of it.

- **What kind of interaction among the teaching team does the professor envision?** Some professors like to meet with their TAs every week to discuss the content of section and get an update on section progress. Others want very little involvement, preferring to give TAs nearly complete autonomy. Especially with your first TAing experience, try for weekly meetings if the professor is willing. Also note that “teaching team” does not always mean one professor and one or more TAs. Certain English courses, such as the three-quarter Literary History sequence, are team-taught by two or three professors. In these cases, you should make a point of discussing how the professors plan to divide the course’s teaching and administrative responsibilities. For example, which professor will submit final grades? Does one of them prefer to be a point of contact for the TAs or should the TAs discuss any issues with the entire team?

- **When/how often will the professor visit section?** He or she should visit at least once, but sometimes professors want to see multiple meetings of the same section. Make sure your professor gives you feedback on the visit, either in oral or written form.

- **Will the professor write you a letter of recommendation?** Though clearly not an issue to be discussed in your first interaction with a professor, this question
should be in your mind throughout the quarter. Letters like these form a cornerstone of your eventual teaching portfolio.

- **Will you have the opportunity to lecture?** Many professors are willing to have TAs deliver a lecture, but you will often have to ask. Even if the idea of delivering a lecture is intimidating to you, do ask whether the opportunity exists, since you’ll be gaining confidence and expertise throughout the quarter.

- **Who will be responsible for handouts describing individual assignments?** Students need clear instruction on paper assignments and exam guidelines, and if the professor wants TAs to have significant input into the ultimate shape of an assignment, you may be the one creating handouts that give your students that clear instruction. For instance, you may be the one suggesting possible paper topics. The teaching team also should coordinate the paper evaluation policies and late penalties that will appear both on individual assignment sheets and on your section guidelines handout. When you have drafted your section guidelines, review them with the professor and any other TAs.

- **What role will the professor play in grading?** The grading primarily will be done by you, but some professors ask to see a representative cross-section of major assignments, or the top three papers from each section, or something similar. Ask your professor whether he or she will consult with you on difficult cases, and how you should handle challenges to grades you’ve assigned, if they occur.

TAing provides you with a wonderful opportunity to participate in the creation and implementation of a literature course; it also provides you with an experienced teacher who can guide you and help you develop your teaching skills. Take advantage of the experience offered.

**Planning Your First Section**

When the teaching team is all on the same page, and the students have been assigned to sections, the time finally has come to figure out what you’re going to do for 50 minutes that first day. The good news is the first day requires so much bureaucracy
that you won’t have much time for anything else. The bad news is the first day requires so much bureaucracy that you won’t have much time for anything else.

Subsequent chapters discuss how to put together a successful section, but the first day presents singular challenges. How do you work with a space that may not be suitable to your purpose (too big, too small, too dark, too stuffy)? How do you plan for and react to your students’ forming an initial impression of you and your teaching style? How do you get the students interacting easily with you and with each other? How do you make the inevitable bureaucracy fun as well as informative? How do you set the tone for future sections when this first time you will engage in very little of the activity that dominates the rest of the quarter—discussing the assigned texts?

With all these variables, first days can often be awkward, so don’t judge the situation too harshly if you haven’t changed your students’ lives by the end of that 50 minutes. That being said, here are some tips on what usually works.

• Check out the room by the day before at the latest. If there’s a serious problem, alert the U.G. Student Services Coordinator. If there’s a bothersome problem, figure out a solution. If you’re going to use technology in the classroom, test it ahead of time. Section must start on time. Setting a precedent is key here.

• Think consciously about issues of persona and how you will begin to create the one you want in your classroom. The way you dress, move, and speak in the classroom, every bit as much as what you say, signifies more or less accurately who you are as a teacher. You can produce very different effects simply by keeping your head down, looking at your notes as students enter, or by greeting students as they come in the door. No one persona works best; do what feels most natural and efficacious to you.

• First days always contain an obligatory group name sharing. They need to know who you are, to see if they’re in the right place; you need to know who they are, to take attendance and start learning names (make sure that in the excitement you do actually record who’s there); and they need to know who the other students are, to create any kind of discussion flow.
• But don’t spend too much time on this activity. The first section is a time to set expectations for the rest of the quarter. Make sure you go over your section handout carefully and explain any weekly section requirements. Careful explanation of the expectations for and logistics of such assignments, as well as of your plan to incorporate them into the learning process of section, will go a long way to making them productive exercises from the start.

• Although you have a certain degree of nuts and bolts information to cover, the first section should be a working section. Start discussing the literature as soon as possible. To maximize this time, consider communicating with your students before the first section. Direct their attention to a focused topic you plan to cover, or questions you’d like them to consider, etc.

**What is a section guidelines sheet?** Your TAing equivalent of a syllabus (see the Appendix for examples). In it, you will articulate all your section policies, complete with requirements and penalties, on such matters as:

- attendance and excused absences
- punctuality
- amount and quality of participation
- paper policies on drafts, extensions, late submissions and revisions

Your section guidelines sheet also will present your philosophy on grading. This encompasses both your policies and the theory behind them. Point to that theory by including:

- indications of the organic relationship between your expectations for section and the expectations of the professor for the course as a whole;
- the basic grading rubric that will guide your evaluations of your students’ work;
- individual assignment sheets if possible

All these items should be coordinated linguistically and ideologically with one another, so that the same terms and underlying philosophy recur in all sections.
Chapter 3: Interacting with Students

As you already have gathered, your pedagogical role as a TA will be both central and manifold in the overall operation and success of the course to which you are assigned. Section will serve both as a counterpart to lecture in its more intimate and discussion-oriented format and as a forum for student questions, ideas, issues, and for course administration. Ultimately, being a TA in English presents an exciting opportunity to cultivate positive relationships with your sections as a whole and with individual students around both the topics covered in lecture and more general skill-based issues such as writing and exam preparation. Recognizing that you are in a challenging but potentially rewarding “middle ground” — both teacher and professor’s assistant — is perhaps the first step in developing methods for cultivating a teaching persona, a good classroom environment, and a relationship with students that “works.”

Teaching Personae and Section Ethos

As you prepare to introduce yourself and your section, you should spend some time thinking hard about self-presentation and the kind of persona you want to project as a TA. Of course every teacher already has a strong personality, likes and dislikes, and a series of selves or personae, all of which are important. But every teacher also assumes certain positions or locations within the classroom and the University, and these should be examined as well as thought about in relation to the specific requirements of TAing an English section, your own personality, and other personae or styles. As you build your teaching persona, here are some important issues to consider:

• **The tone you want to take in section.** Aim for friendly, firm, and fair. In the words of an undergraduate English major: “There’s often a temptation to be ‘one of the guys’ or super tough, but don’t go to either of those extremes. Find a happy medium. Be friendly without being ‘buddy-buddy.’”

• **How you will refer to students.** Ask students to introduce themselves on the first day, as they would like to be referred to. You should probably avoid class nicknames, since they may offend some students. Learning student names early
can prove very helpful to setting a good tone in section.

- **How you want students to refer to you.** Most TAs go by their first name. You also should consider how you will describe yourself—as a TA, a graduate teaching assistant, and so on. Students often value hearing about your background as well as your specific interests in the course.

- **How you will be “read” by your students, especially in terms of age, gender, race, ethnicity, and any other aspects of your identity that may shape student perceptions.** Identity is a crucial element of all teaching lives (and student lives), so reflecting on aspects of identity and their relationship to your teaching personae is especially important. For example, a straight white male TAing a course on African-American women writers needs to think about relating his subject position to the material and to the students in the class.

- **How your choice of demeanor, dress, and language will affect student perception.** Again, there are no rules to follow here, but you should be aware that students draw conclusions based on such characteristics all the time and that such conclusions can affect your teaching persona. In general, more formal clothing can suggest authority and credibility, just as a serious, businesslike but interested demeanor suggests careful attention to classroom work.

Creating an ethos for your classroom is, of course, closely related to your teaching persona, and as such calls for careful planning and management. You most likely want to aim for an atmosphere that is lively and conducive to learning, one in which all participants are respected and all views weighed fairly. Achieving such an atmosphere starts with your first day, with the assignments, policies, and procedures you set forth, and it is reinforced during the first days of class as you introduce yourself and each of the students. If there is one key to such an ethos, it is probably consistency of policy, tone, grading, and treatment of students. Some issues regarding student behaviors arise over and over again, however, and you should consider how to address them carefully:

- **Arriving on time/packing up early.** Your section handout should include some
form of the course policy on promptness and on leaving early. You will want to stress these policies during the first day of class, insisting that students inform you, in advance, of any unavoidable absence. In addition, many TAs sometimes open a class with a brief writing assignment or reserve an important section activity (such as discussion of the midterm exam or paper grading) for the last minutes of class. You may also want to ask students to submit any out-of-section assignments at the very beginning of class.

- **Contributing effectively and constructively to class discussion.** All students should contribute to section discussion on a regular basis with insightful comments and provocative questions. Sometimes, though, a few students begin to dominate the class; others can behave in disruptive ways. You should make your expectations for section participation clear and explicit in your handout and on the first day of section. To deal with discussion-dominating students, you might begin by calling on other students to speak or by gently asking the persistently talkative student to hold comments for a while. Students in the section often will help out with balancing the discussion, as they will with monitoring and controlling the behavior of potentially disruptive students. If a student is disrespectful or disruptive, however, you should speak to the student one-on-one as soon as possible. If appropriate, bring this difficult behavior to the attention of the professor, who might be able to help you develop a series of strategies for dealing with such behavior.

- **Asking problematic questions or raising problematic issues.** Students may sometimes ask questions you already have answered on a number of occasions, ask you over and over again for a verbal assessment of their status or grade in the class, or ask questions or raise issues that are loaded or hostile. As in dealing with other disruptive behavior, you should begin by speaking privately with the student, pointing out the ways in which the questions or issues fall beyond the bounds of appropriate classroom etiquette. If the problem persists, you should bring it to the professor’s attention. If you are TAing with other graduate students, draw on one another for advice and support. Students occasionally
vent frustrations about lecture during section. Remember that you are both teacher and assistant—try to convert such frustration into specific questions about the content of lecture, thereby reconfiguring it into a fruitful discussion/mini-lecture. At all times, maintain your professionalism with respect to the relationship between section and lecture.

- **Disrupting class; harassing you or other students.** Stanford students are, for the most part, courteous and polite. We do, however, experience some disruptive behavior in sections. To prevent such inappropriate behavior, keep a copy of the Stanford Fundamental Standard (of conduct), found at [http://www.stanford.edu/dept/vpsa/judicialaffairs/guiding/fundamental.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/dept/vpsa/judicialaffairs/guiding/fundamental.htm). If problem behavior occurs, take careful note of it (time, place, description of behavior, anyone else present). Then alert the professor and talk over how best to respond to the problematic behavior. In addition, you may decide in consultation with the professor to notify the student’s Resident Adviser or the University Advising Center of the problem. This is a good option when you’re concerned about the student’s overall well being in addition to the disruptive behavior.

- **Using sources inappropriately; plagiarizing.** Students today are likely to use sources inappropriately, failing to cite them fully or even plagiarizing them, for several key reasons, including carelessness or a deliberate attempt to deceive. First, learning to work with sources and weave them seamlessly into one’s own writing is a very difficult task, one that even professional writers continue to struggle with. In addition, the “information wants to be free” nature of the Internet has led to increased cutting and pasting, as though anything found on the Net must fall under the concept of fair use. Perhaps most importantly, there is a growing awareness that concepts of intellectual property are highly culture-bound and that copyright does not even exist in other societies. These realities demonstrate that what once seemed a straightforward, simple matter of “plagiarism” is today fraught with complexities of all kinds. For these reasons, you should include the university policies on academic honesty and intellectual property in your section handout and discuss specific points relevant to paper
writing before essays are due. If you suspect that a student is using sources inappropriately, talk to the professor first. You should not accuse a student of plagiarism, though you can ask questions about how the student is using sources and where the sources were found. Remember that directly accusing a student of plagiarism or in any way penalizing a paper based on your suspicions violates Stanford’s Honor Code. Any penalty assessed must be a result of a judgment reached by the Judicial Board set up to adjudicate matters of academic conduct.

**Availability Outside of Section**

Students often get a great deal out of one-on-one meetings with you, particularly when preparing to write essays or to take exams. You can structure your out-of-section availability in a number of ways. TAs generally hold one or two office hours a week and then also provide *specific* times that they are available for appointment. On your section handout and during the first day, make sure to provide the days, times, and location for your office hours as well as contact information. Consider carefully the location you select and the type of persona you want to foster. Certain locations work better than others. Be aware of the pros and cons of the space you choose. Ask your students for feedback about the location and hours you schedule; office hours are helpful only if students are able to attend them. Common locations include Coupa Café, the CoHo, the library lobby, the Bookstore Café, and the undergraduate lounge on the third floor of Margaret Jacks. According to university policies, a location for meeting with students should have a door that remains open unless a student is upset and requests the door be closed. In opting to meet with students outside the library (at Coupa) or at the CoHo, be particularly aware of the boundary between being a mentor and instructor and being a “buddy.”

During “peak” times of the quarter, you will find your time in even higher demand. It is up to you whether you will read drafts, work with students who have missed classes or sections, or hold review sessions. Regardless of the specific decision you and the professor make around such issues, try to be as consistent as possible. State (in oral and written form) policies for draft reading, late paper penalties, and review
sessions, and try to stick to them. Remember: teaching is never your only responsibility as a graduate student. You always will have to balance the time you devote to section (both inside and outside of the classroom) with your own coursework or dissertation work. Setting boundaries in writing—for both your students and for yourself—is a highly effective time-management strategy.
Chapter 4: Class Planning

The first rule in class planning is have a plan! Approach a section with specific didactic goals in mind, whether those be review, clarification of complex material, introduction of a cultural or critical context to the week’s readings, or a host of other purposes to which section time can be put. Whatever you might decide to accomplish in section on a given day, make sure you think it out beforehand and keep in mind the time constraints. That way, not only will meeting your goals be easier, but you also will be more likely to catch opportunities to relate your section goals to the wider goals of the course.

But you may recall being in sections or seminars where the DD, the Discussion Dictator, otherwise known as your professor or TA, marched you through a series of points that bore a striking similarity to a lecture. When you teach, then, certainly you’ll want to avoid this despotic approach. However, students really don’t appreciate a completely directionless classroom experience either. You may also recall being in sections or seminars where discussion wandered from point to point, led by students thinking more in terms of checking off a participation requirement than of participating in a conversation. You will want to avoid this approach as well. Essentially, you want to create an atmosphere in which the discussion has focus, and students feel engaged. So as with everything in teaching, you must strike a balance between directing the flow of ideas and pursuing your group’s conversational impulses.

You can set that balance in your class plan by separating your preparation into two levels: the microcosmic and the macrocosmic. You can maintain control of the agenda on the macrocosmic level while allowing the microcosmic to transform itself as it will. Here are two examples:

- You decide you want your students to grapple with the meta-concept of ambiguity in Emily Dickinson’s poetry. You might start out by giving a brief indication of critics’ tendency to resort to biographical detail in explicating her poems, intending then to go through several of the so-called “lesbian” poems in order to discuss the ambiguity, even caginess, of their expression. In the middle
of asking a question about the critical history of one of these poems, a student bursts out in frustration at a confusing but deceptively simple stanza (a common occurrence in Dickinson discussions). Other students want to jump onto the complaint bandwagon, and the session threatens to turn sour. But you recall your overall goal, abandon the attempt to proceed through the lesbian poems, and instead ask the student what specifically is confusing (or rather, what is ambiguous). She complains about the strange effect of the dash on the syntax of the sentence. Voila! The discussion of ambiguity in Dickinson’s poetry is born anew in the focus on her mechanical and syntactical idiosyncrasies.

- The readings for the week are portions of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and his *Tale of a Tub*. Difficult as *Tale of a Tub* is, you want students to start reading comparatively across Swift’s oeuvre and thinking critically about the complicated role of the reader in both works. Thinking that some raw reader response will get you where you want to go, you ask the class to start calling out readerly reactions to both works and move to the board to record them. Surprise, surprise: comment after comment deals only with *Gulliver’s Travels*. It seems many in the class have not read *Tale of a Tub*, or have given up on it too early to make any kind of critical contribution. What to do? You remember from reading the section’s weekly responses that one quiet but thoughtful student chose to respond to the more difficult of the two texts. Realizing that this student at least has read the work in question, you say, “Doug, you wrote on *Tale of a Tub* in your response. What did you think of the experience of reading it?” Keying off his response, you pick one of the passages from the *Tale of a Tub* that you thought beforehand might be a critical node to explore as back-up in case discussion lagged. You ask another quiet student to read the passage aloud, and then inquire of the whole group how this passage illustrates what Doug has said.

To sum up the point of these examples, separate out in your mind what you want to accomplish in section from how you want to accomplish it. Allow for freedom in the latter, while always checking it against the progress of the former.
**What You Want to Accomplish**

Perhaps the most fundamental goal we seek to achieve for our students is their transformation from passive receptacles of information to active procurers of knowledge. Try to make your students equal partners in section as much as possible. When you sit down to create a class plan, look for ways to enfranchise your students in the learning process.

The concrete aspects of how to enfranchise students end up more in how you go about accomplishing your goals than in deciding exactly what you want to accomplish (though picking section goals to pursue that you think will engage students is essential in getting them active). But what you want to accomplish in a given section should be considerably more concrete than “Make students equal partners in the work of learning.” More specific goals keep your section discussion focused.

- Say you’ve noticed that your students have a tendency to speak animatedly about plot and character but rarely offer substantive analytic points about language and style. Your section goal might be to rectify this by increasing the ratio of close readings to wider structural commentary. Notice here that though there is a strategy for accomplishing the chosen goal—i.e. do more close readings—you can retain flexibility within that format by the way you conduct those close readings.

- Or say the professor has assigned a provocative pairing of texts for the week but in lecture has considered them mainly in and of themselves. Your section goal might be to explore the main textual linkages and their significance.

- Or maybe your students have said in mid-term evaluations that they feel that section discussions don’t ever seem to come to any definite conclusions about the texts discussed. Your goal might therefore be to structure the hour’s activities so that section ends with some feeling of finality, or so that students’ notions of “conclusiveness” with regard to literary analysis are reexamined.

Section goals can address a multitude of teaching concerns. They can be a response to the amount of student participation, type of student participation, quality of
student participation; they can be a response to the content or style of lecture; they can be a response to the complexity or volume of assigned material. They can deal with what you want to contribute to the discussion, be it a methodological sophistication, an historical context, or a model for defining and using key terms; they can deal with what you want to elicit from your students. They will vary with the advance of the quarter and the schedule and type of assignments that are coming due. There is no one right goal for any given section. Just try to gauge what your intellectual responsibility to your students is, and also what you and they would enjoy.

When planning, first consider what students need from you, and then what they want. As you sit down to prepare the week’s section, think through necessary business—due dates, grading criteria, writing guidance, extra session reminders, etc. If the professor has specified material that he or she wants covered or recovered, that normally qualifies as necessary business. Then mentally review the week. What were the main topics and underlying critical goals of lecture? How did they relate to the overall course themes? How could these topics, themes and goals best be incorporated into the section format? Think also about coverage. What have the students read that hasn’t been discussed? Usually it’s a good idea to direct some portion of section discussion toward previously uncovered assigned material. The key point to remember here is that section is meant to support lecture. It is not your own personal class, so when planning section, don’t stray from the goals and content of the professor’s syllabus.

Further, were there points made by the professor that might need clarification? Times when you looked around the lecture hall and saw signs of puzzlement or mystification? Section provides an opportunity to address confusions like these. Resolving them might involve some discussion of terms used in lecture but not yet familiar to students, giving a critical context to a theoretical assumption mentioned quickly in lecture, or just getting students to talk through their version of the point at issue, and dealing with problem spots. You’ll probably want to maintain tighter control over the flow of discussion in this part of section than you will with the more open analytical speculation that will follow. Consider also lecture ideas that were provocative
without being completely explored. For example, students unfamiliar with much African-American Studies criticism might well need time to discuss the implications of Zora Neale Hurston’s relatively unusual socioeconomic subject position, if its impact on her work was mentioned only casually in lecture.

So you’ve handled what they need — now what do they want? Students want many things: they want to be challenged, they want to be coddled, they want to be praised, they want to be entertained, they want to be included and engaged; they also want to discuss, to demonstrate what they know, and to learn from their peers.

Many courses set up institutional opportunities for TAs to gauge what students want: weekly responses. When deciding on section goals, read these responses carefully. Do they indicate trends in student engagement or perplexity? Both students and TAs generally enjoy section more if its goals address consistent communal interests or confusions. Note: mid-term evaluations, if thoughtfully constructed and diligently reviewed, can often provide broad supplements to the information provided in this vein by weekly section assignments.

Goals that reflect students’ wants and needs necessarily utilize both what you bring to section and what students bring. You experience, read, and critique literature based on the training you have received in literary criticism. Students often experience, read, and critique literature from a vastly different point of view — though it is important to remember that most classes will contain majors and non-majors, first-years and seniors. “Students” is far from a monolithic category, and the members of your section can often learn as productively from each other as they can from you. When planning, then, remember that you’re not just writing a plan for yourself, but a plan for other people as well, whose interests can be incorporated into your goals, and whose contributions can be incorporated into your methods. As Claire Jarvis notes, “You really want section to be your class, but you have to remember that you’re not the only one in the class. Section is primarily there for students to try out their ideas rather than to discuss yours.”
**How You Want to Accomplish It**

Section plans can employ a multitude of specific methods to accomplish section goals. What you’re going to do should follow clearly and organically from what you want to accomplish, from strategizing about the most effective method of accomplishing your goals. So as previously stated, prepare a method for accomplishing your intended goal, but be open to alternate methods that your students seem to prefer.

The “how” element of the class plan boils down to two main elements: what you’re going to do, and how long it’s going to take. Think about the types of activities you want to facilitate. Since students (and TAs) appreciate some variety, you should try to create a mix of different classroom modes. Try one or more of the following methods.

- Use handouts sometimes; other times write background information on the board.
- Balance times when you’re at the board leading general brainstorming with time for small group work. Group work can help shy students become more willing to speak up.
- Take some time for individual work, like an in-class writing assignment or passage analysis, the results of which are then shared with the whole group.
- When possible, step out of critical and into performative mode—read poems aloud and stage scenes from plays.
- Remain largely or wholly silent while student discussion leaders find ways to prompt their peers into conversation.
- Encourage students to be reflective at the end of section. For example, ask them to recap some of the main discussion points and have one or two students write these on the board.

Usually discussion will be, and should be, the substance of a section, since students don’t often have a chance to participate in lectures (and especially since they typically have a portion of their grade riding on participation). But varying the mode of activity in the classroom, from section to section and within any given section, can benefit the collective energy, and can produce intellectual results that discussion on its own might
not. Just remember: time management is the key to incorporating effectively activities into your section.

There’s usually a natural order to different combinations of activities that enhances a section’s momentum. But sometimes it doesn’t matter. When it doesn’t matter, organize things with students’ attention span in mind—around 20 minutes of undivided concentration. Having a “shifting gears” moment, of whatever sort, either at 15-20 or 35-40 minutes into class isn’t a bad idea. Remember that shifting gears doesn’t have to mean shifting format; moving from a close reading to a discussion of literary critical methodology often has the same revitalizing effect as splitting up for small group work.

Also, watch out for the beginning and end of class. It’s easy to lose time at both ends, and a 50-minute section can sometimes be far too short for what you want to accomplish. Starting promptly should always be part of the game plan. Announcing business items and soliciting questions are often good ways to begin section because the trickling in of late arrivals is not as disruptive then as it is when you’re trying to get a discussion going. Short writing assignments also employ that time usefully. At the end of class, a clear “section leader final comment,” if that comment is more than a couple of sentences, tends to cut down on the bag packing that begins as soon as students’ internal chronometers indicate the approach of freedom.

But you can probably imagine a very different scenario as well—one in which 50 minutes, instead of being rushed, is painfully, torturously, hideously slow. How in the world does one plan for that? Pray? In fact, if discussion is dragging, elements of your class plan can help you.

Close reading is, in so many ways, a literary critic’s best friend—especially when leading a section discussion. Discussion often can drag because generalizations about a text are hard to sustain, and sometimes the students just haven’t done their reading. Close reading provides specific material for reaction and analysis—an almost sure-fire jump-start for the conversation. When planning discussion segments, go through the assigned text(s) and pick provocative passages to turn to in case of discussion apathy. Record the page numbers for easy access. In addition, close reading can be
implemented in a number of ways, so you can remain responsive to what will engage your students. Depending on the group energy level or the dynamics of participation, you can:

- have a student read a passage aloud, then ask another to give an initial response to it; this can get apathetic or shy students involved
- ask two students to stand up and give contrasting performances of a passage, and discuss oral performance as a kind of analysis or interpretation; for example, reading the opening monologue from Richard III with sardonic frustration and then with melancholic self-doubt produces very different Richards, and very different interpretations of what follows
- write a complex sentence or line on the board, and work with it diagrammatically; this works equally well with Henry James or language poetry
- go through a series of 2-3 passages that play with the same key terms

Remember to let the conversation move with the students’ interests. A good section goal can be accomplished by examining any number of different textual moments, because, to reiterate, a good section is one in which the TA has solid control over progress toward some aim, but allows freedom in the methods by which the group progresses to that aim. On the level of the class plan, this means knowing what is and is not essential in what you’ve planned.

The first couple of times that you teach, over-preparation is a beneficial panacea for nerves. But even as you consciously over-prepare, do it with an eye to what you want to accomplish versus how you want to accomplish it. Be flexible, and treat your class plan like an accordion—make sure it can expand or contract as necessary. Have contingency plans for the scenario where what you thought would be a sure-fire hit flops, and be prepared to abandon non-essential items if you’re running out of time. The physical object of your class plan might include obvious visual cues indicating how integral different elements are—e.g. place brackets around dispensable activities and
place stars next to items that absolutely must be covered, write in large font so you can read it easily at a glance. See the Appendix for various examples of actual class plans.

Save your class plans as you go through the quarter, regardless of how ephemeral they might sometimes seem. They provide helpful information on what has and has not been covered (or at least, what you planned to cover). Also consider taking a few minutes after each section to assess the information you actually covered and how well you covered it. What worked well? What could you improve? Did the students meet your learning goals? Why or why not? This information is important for planning later sections and review sessions and also helps you keep your professor updated on what’s been happening in section. When you begin to build a teaching portfolio, you may want to include a particularly effective class plan or two, so store them in an easily accessible way. And when you begin teaching literature classes of your own in a few years, you may want to recycle elements from the plans you made as a TA.

Preparation plays a hugely significant role in the success of a given section, and in your success as a TA. Good preparation takes effort—the effort to plan creative and rewarding activities for you and your students. It takes focus—the focus required to set substantive goals and work toward them consistently. And it takes flexibility—the flexibility to assess your plan given what you actually encounter in section and adapt it to produce a useful and dynamic section experience.
Chapter 5: Section Methods and Discussion

Overview

Planning, guiding, facilitating, enabling, and energizing discussion is a central (if not the central) role you play as a TA in English. However, both the form and content of specific discussions can vary tremendously. First, various and often competing theories exist about facilitating discussion in general and discussing “literary” texts in particular. Second, depending on such factors as lecture, readings, and range of student interests, the particular methods and topics for discussion that you employ likely will vary from week to week. At the same time, cultivating discussion is not the only role you perform as a TA in English. Rather, as you probably have come to realize, being a teaching assistant is something of a balancing act. In any given day you might also be fielding and answering questions about the lecture or assignments; “mini-lecturing” on key concepts or topics as a supplement to course lectures; structuring and incorporating both in-section and out-of-section writing assignments and presentations; meeting with students outside of section; as well as grading, evaluating, and providing feedback. Thus, as you develop methods, strategies, and specific techniques for facilitating discussion, an important consideration will be how to connect and integrate section discussions with your other pedagogical and administrative activities.

As a way of framing this discussion, consider the following as potential goals and activities for section discussions.

Goals and Activities

- Frame section with a “big picture” question about the reading(s).
- Solicit student questions, concerns, and ideas about core concepts, terms, or arguments forwarded in the week’s lectures.
- Draw on the diverse knowledge stored in the minds of individual students. In other words, enable students to learn from and teach one another.
- Engage in performative and group readings.
• Facilitate a close reading of important passages within a text. Model close reading.

• Recruit students in identifying topics/questions for further discussion.

• Discuss a text’s position in a broader literary, social, economic, or political context.

• Raise and explore theoretical issues.

• Probe student understanding of course materials and topics.

• Discuss administrative business.

From these activities, several key concepts emerge that may be helpful to keep in mind as you read and as you develop your own approach to fostering discussion in an English section.

**Key Concepts**

• A section is both a complement and a supplement to lecture.

• (English) students value balance between guidance and flexibility.

• Students appreciate your expertise and extending lecture in section.

• Students want both to express their views and to hear from their peers.

• No two discussions are (nor should be) alike.

• Variety (in discussion and question methods, in materials, in topics, etc.) is key to an effective English section.

• Expertise in reading literary texts closely is a key strength that you can leverage as a TA.

• Students really love to use, play with, and explore their (conflicting) readings.

• Students participate and engage material in different ways.

• There are different ways to engage different types of students.
How you frame section and, in particular, discussion early on can set the tone and can help to establish guidelines and goals that enable every student to participate in, contribute to, and learn from section. In terms of the discussion component of section, finding ways to foster dialogue as well as additional learning about the material covered in lecture is key. Recognize that students are comfortable with different forms of expression, and, with this in mind, develop different opportunities for participation such as verbal comments, active listening, weekly writing, in-class writing and presentation. In addition, let students know that participation also includes coming to see you in office hours to discuss topics from lecture, questions, ideas, concerns, and paper writing. Finally, find ways to foster active reading. Consider how you can help students, as they are reading outside of and in section, to think about the broader themes, literary developments, and historical issues discussed in lecture and to note aspects of the texts that especially interest, challenge, or trouble them.

The Question

What kind of questions should you ask students in discussion? To be more specific, how do you decide if, when, and how to ask “directed” questions (e.g., “What biblical allusions is Hawthorne making on page 10?”) as opposed to more “open-ended” questions (e.g., “How does the letter ‘A’ function in The Scarlet Letter?”). A central theoretical distinction particularly relevant to leading discussion in a humanities course is the one between Socratic and, what we might call, Dialogic teaching philosophies. The Socratic approach focuses more on the “what” of discussion—the outcomes for students. Using this method, you could develop discussion (or a part of discussion) around a series of focused and connected questions that build to an argument or set of conclusions you would like the students to reach. This approach could be particularly valuable in helping the students come to understand the reasons for and to define features of a particular literary school (e.g., the influence of Romanticism on twentieth-century poetry) or to clarify an argument the professor made in lecture.
However, keep in mind that teaching the “Socratic way” is very difficult to do well, especially if you are TAing for the first time. You may feel more comfortable taking a “Dialogic” approach which focuses more on the “how” of discussion—the skills students develop in sharing and debating ideas and in developing oral arguments about literary texts. Under this approach, you might bring a set of questions and issues to section but rely on small-group activities, oral readings, or student response papers to guide the discussion. At the end of section, you might ask students to make connections and conclusions out of the potential mélange of topics generated. This approach can work especially well in close readings of texts or in discussing the connections between specific authors within a certain period. Regardless of the approach you take, always try to imagine how your students might respond to the questions you craft. This can help you to avoid questions that are too abstract or otherwise difficult to discuss productively.

**Getting Students to Talk**

That being said, ultimately your questions (though at times relatively central) are only one component of section. Students, you can hope, will often take the reins. In particular, don’t be afraid of heated debate between students. Dialogue is something many students really enjoy. After all, section is their chance to speak their minds and to hear from their peers. Helping students express and develop disagreements with each other, with the lecture, or with the text itself can be extremely fruitful.

If you conducted a survey of 100 English TAs (or English professors), you would likely get 100 different tips, tools, and suggestions for achieving an effective discussion. To simplify, here are three tips to keep in mind: be prepared; facilitate, don’t dominate; and evaluate. On the one hand, by using such techniques as open-ended questions, student presentations, and constructive feedback and by maintaining a safe, respectful, and dynamic discussion environment, you can facilitate the development of important and provocative ideas. On the other hand, by paying attention to student involvement levels, pausing to review and summarize key conclusions and points of connection, and
asking students how discussion is going, you can both bring things together and validate the variety of student contributions to section.

Now, what happens when you ask a thought-provoking and important question, perhaps one that many students are interested in, and you are met with silence? Well, first, remember that time moves very differently for the instructor and the student. Be patient. Silences are never as long for students as they seem for you, so resist the urge to fill the silence immediately. Also, be prepared to ask a question in different ways or to go to the text itself and ask students to read a passage or two.

Generally speaking, successfully generating a discussion and constructive group dynamic will involve responding to the specific group in front of you. In particular, the same methods may not work equally well for each of your sections. The concerns of students that may influence participation can be manifold. Really listening and responding to students is one of the most effective techniques you can employ to generate enthusiastic responses to section questions and activities. When a student does make a comment, set a precedent of dialogue. Ask a follow-up question, respond to their response, make connections to other students. That is, avoid leaving comments hanging. You might ask such follow-up questions as: “Could you give us an example of what you mean?” “Does any one else read the text similarly? Why or why not?” “We have two readings, here. Can we brainstorm the support for each?” “Perhaps these two readings aren’t mutually exclusive?” If all else fails, offer your own reading or your own elaboration of a point made in lecture and ask for opinions. As you get ideas rolling, don’t be afraid to use the board— a great way to record and recognize as well as to build on student comments.

Past and present TAs recommend the following techniques for jump-starting and building on a section discussion:

- If you have a general subject to cover (such as, What is an essay? or What is a sonnet?), have students give what they can, while you record on the board, then fill in where necessary. They often will get most of it. It may be helpful to write out the result for distribution in the following week.
• Consider short presentations from each student, one per student per quarter spread over the quarter. These can get each student to say something and can help organize discussion.

• Close reading often gets discussion going and yields important findings for the students; it also models analysis that students can translate into improved writing.

• Have students prepare in advance to discuss a passage assigned the week before, then call on someone to start discussion.

• Give encouragement after a student has talked, but push the student to take another step (another sentence even) if appropriate. Make sure every comment has some kind of feedback, even if from another student.

• Avoid vague questions such as “What do you think?”

• Start small, with concrete examples and specific examples, and grow from there (e.g., “Why does Hamlet say, ‘this is hire salary, not revenge,’ when deciding not to kill Claudius? rather than Why does Hamlet delay?”).

• Relate observations made by students to other texts or passages that they have already read and discussed. Ask students to make such connections across texts.

• If you use response papers, refer to them from time to time at relevant moments. (Students are not always comfortable reading their own writing out loud.)

• It is very tempting to try to guide a discussion to your own conclusion. Students usually grasp this, and feel some anxiety about getting the “right” answer. A way out is to take any answer as a point of departure and let it flow, even if “your answer” is never reached.

**Troubleshooting**

As veteran students of English classes, we all have had the experience of a terrific discussion: that feeling when leaving an English seminar or section of having worked collaboratively to cover a wide variety of key topics, shared ideas around a central
question, engaged in sharp close readings, and attained new and provocative insights about a literary text. Perhaps more than anything else, a great discussion also makes connections between individual ideas and between distinct topics, tying key arguments and findings together in compelling and interesting ways.

If such a discussion is perhaps the “ideal,” the “less-than-ideal” discussion not only is an unavoidable reality but also can serve a constructive and positive function for the section as a whole as well as for an individual student’s learning experience. Regardless of how much TAing experience you have, you can expect to face some of the following challenges at one time or another:

**Common Challenges:**

- Bewildered, puzzled, or sleeping students.
- Awkward silences.
- Rough transitions.
- Tough student questions.
- Complaints over “boring” or “weird” texts.
- Discussion “chaos.”
- Not enough time to cover everything.
- Unprepared students.

You might also hear yourself make the following complaints after facing such challenges:

**Common Concerns:**

- “I just could not get into a rhythm today.”
- “A student asked me about a text I had never read, and it was downhill from there.”
- “The students seemed a little reserved today.”
- “We didn’t cover everything, but I think some interesting comments came out.”
• “This one student really dominated the discussion.”
• “My Thursday section is so different from the Wednesday group.”
• “It’s mid-term, and I don’t think anybody read.”
• “That just did not go as well as last week!”

The intent here is not to provoke a full-blown panic attack before you enter the classroom. Rather, it is helpful and healthy to prepare yourself for “ups and downs” in discussion “success.” What follows are strategies and techniques that will help you prepare for and respond to such challenges both during and after a particular section.

**Strategies and Techniques**

Theoretically speaking, a “bad” or “frustrating” discussion can play a positive role in the overall trajectory of a course, a section, and an individual student’s education. First, what often feels like a difficult or rocky moment in an English discussion to the TA, may not be experienced as such by the students. Silences can indicate not just indifference but also thoughtful consideration, shyness, uncertainty or insecurity. Rough transitions are at times unavoidable; but as you move through to a new topic you can highlight new connections with a prior topic/question as they arise or pause to summarize and pull seemingly disparate ideas together. The students you will have in English sections are bright, inquisitive, and multi-talented. Expect, therefore, to get the occasional question that you can’t answer (exactly). While this experience can be unnerving, it can provide the chance to turn a question over to the group and spark a dialogue and truly collaborative learning process. Students do not expect perfection, but they do value honesty and candor. Student hostility or frustration over difficult, strange, or rigorous reading also can provide the chance for dialogue. Finally, the sensation of both chaos and disorder in a section and of not accomplishing everything you planned also can translate into productivity for the students and the instructor alike. In particular, unlike a lecture, a discussion is (and should be) more open to the element of unpredictability and change.
Again, in theory, these challenges often imply high levels of student interest and participation. The ability to respond and adapt to student interests in an English section (interests which may differ markedly from either the lecture or your own plan) can be key to an effective discussion. In developing an approach to and philosophy for crafting section, a key question to consider is what methods and tactics can work to channel such frustration, debate, and contention into creative and productive discussions of literature.
Chapter 6: Feedback and Evaluation

Before You Grade

Assignment evaluation is often the most personalized attention a student gets in a literature course—a distinctly double-edged sword in Stanford’s intensely grade-conscious culture. So evaluation, which students usually experience in the form of a grade, must be imbedded in a context of narrative feedback that helps the student understand how the evaluation has been conducted.

But both feedback and evaluation happen after the fact. Grading actually begins well before a student starts an assignment—and not because you’ve decided beforehand what grade each student should receive. Students need to know your grading policies and the philosophy behind them before they attempt to produce something for you. So you need to articulate your grading criteria early and often. It’s not a bad idea to discuss it in some form on the first day, maybe by circulating a grading statement with your section handout. And as students begin assignments of whatever sort, you should reiterate what your expectations are, especially as they concern that specific type of assignment. If the professor has not already done so, you should provide your students with an assignment sheet that gives them guidance in executing the assignment and explain how you plan to evaluate the result.

Even if your professor has created an assignment sheet, take the time in section to discuss an upcoming assignment. Students need an opportunity to ask questions about the general concept of a paper and specific ways of executing it; the clearer they are on what you expect, the more likely you are to get that. Helpful pieces of information to include in assignment sheets and oral explanations of your expectations for a given assignment are:

- **The due date and time**—e.g., at the beginning or end of lecture. Be wary of this though; lecture attendance and attention will inevitably suffer with this kind of deadline.
- **The location for the paper drop**—e.g., in your campus mail box (specify building and floor number clearly) or in your email inbox.
• **General description of assignment, including estimated page/word count and expected formatting:** Accepting only papers in 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with standard 1-inch margins, for example, negates unnecessary and irritating formatting shenanigans, as does a brief explanation of page count as a means to an end, and not an end in and of itself.

• **Possible ways to approach the assignment:** Always consult your professor and any other TAs in creating these so that the whole teaching staff has the same conception of a given assignment.

• **Some indication of your evaluative criteria:** Give a version of your general philosophy statement on grading adapted for this particular assignment. Again, always align this with the professor’s expectations.

**Grading in a Department and University Context**

Grade inflation is a systemic problem that is nearly impossible for an individual TA to mitigate. The harsh reality: low grading throughout the term means poor evaluations, evaluations that end up in your permanent file. Unfortunately, the most pedagogically sound formula for grading usually involves grading low on the early assignments and easing up as the course goes on. The grade range within which most TAs work doesn’t allow for any real dramatics in this line.

Though it would take a concerted community effort to make any substantive change to this system, the professor and TAs in a course can and should work with a shared grading philosophy that could buck the norm to a certain extent. Talk with the professor of your course about the kind of grade curve he or she expects. In addition, grading should always be relatively consistent across sections, so coordinate with any other TAs to confirm a similar spread of grades. Don’t be afraid to set high expectations.

**Informal Writing Assignments**

But only a fraction of your time as a TA will be devoted to grading papers. For most of the quarter your focus will be on section preparation and discussion leading.
Nothing is more frustrating for undergraduates, though, than having no idea how they’re doing in a class. Undergrads crave feedback throughout, in whatever form.

Many courses have institutional opportunities for more informal and frequent student evaluation. Often professors will insist on some form of brief reading response, be it via paper or email. Professors also usually provide some leeway for TA input into this kind of assignment system; the TAs are the ones who read, evaluate, and put these responses to use. Useful formats include a close reading of a passage, an explication of a key term using the OED, an interpretation of a recurring theme, a creative response to the text as a whole, a series of questions on lecture, or a discussion prompt question. If possible, insist that these responses, whatever their designated form, be turned in to you by the night prior to section. Devices like this are always more effective if used as discussion aids rather than reading checks.

Reading responses provide multiple opportunities for feedback. Both individual students and the section as a whole can gauge their performance based on your reaction, written and oral, to these brief assignments. Consider the various levels possible in your reaction:

- The teaching staff for your course will decide on a set manner of evaluating the quality of the responses. If they are to be completely ungraded, you can just keep track of who has turned them in, and how often. When some evaluation is necessary, though, TAs frequently use the “check, check plus, check minus” system as a ballpark indicator of quality, thereby avoiding the baggage of a letter grade. Sometimes TAs assign a certain possible number of points to the task and award a numerical value to the response’s merit. Still others simply write one or two sentences of narrative feedback and make a general qualitative assessment when they go to assign a grade to a student’s work in this area. Whatever grading tack your teaching team takes, make sure that you specify to your students the manner in which these assignments will be evaluated and the percentage of the overall course grade that it determines. Stanford students have legalistic minds for this kind of detail. Basic evaluative
judgments like the check system fulfill their need for some form of consistent feedback on their progress.

- However, merely evaluating weekly assignment performance does not suffice. You need to give narrative feedback that shows students the strengths and weaknesses of how they are responding to the course’s readings. Only then do students have any real opportunity to improve.

- Feedback shouldn’t just happen at the level of the individual student. Especially when responses are being used as a preliminary tool to inspire section discussion, take the time in section to go over the critical strengths and weaknesses of the group as a whole. Applaud the general level of engagement in the responses; encourage greater discipline in citation practices. Note the fruitful variety of reactions; advocate discussion of material not covered in lecture. A general assessment like this also fits nicely around week three or four of a course.

- Remember to actively pursue opportunities to incorporate responses into section discussion. Students resent nothing more than work that seems without purpose except to monitor elementary effort; they want to have left busy work behind with high school. If you have assigned reading responses, make sure they play an active role in discussion—it’s a basic sign of respect for the work that the students have put into the weekly assignments. You can ask a few students to summarize their responses to begin a section; you can ask a student to complicate a point that has been made with his or her competing view; you can encourage a shy or quiet student to speak up by pointing out the relevance of his or her piece of writing. Each time you do this, you tell the members of your class that their work has been worth your time to read and digest, and has been of help in the intellectual process of section. The same applies on the level of the individual: when you choose to incorporate the response of a student into section discussion, that student has been given a valuable message about the worth of his or her participation inside and outside of class.
Though some form of reading response is by far the most commonly assigned informal writing in literature courses, your professor may choose to require some other short work, such as an abstract or proposal for the term paper. Proposals give you a chance to head off potential problems in a non-judgmental (i.e. non-graded) mode. The same general rules apply to giving feedback on proposals as to giving feedback on reading responses:

1. coordinate with your teaching team—this includes the professor and any other TAs—on a basic evaluative strategy (proposals are usually ungraded, but decide together how much feedback and guidance is appropriate);

2. compose a succinct assessment of the plan’s critical strengths and weaknesses and suggest possible strategies for enhancement or improvement;

3. if any given strength or weakness is shared among a significant number of your students, address that issue in section.

In addition, you may choose to use some form of in-section writing activity at various points throughout the quarter. These informal writing assignments—having students do individual close readings that are then shared and compared with the whole group, having them compose a line of poetry in iambic pentameter or in old English alliterative style, or having each student work up an explication of a different word in a given passage—can sometimes be a nice complement to other section modes. They generally are ungraded, and often are not even handed in to you. With these assignments, too, though, you need to provide feedback. How do you do this, when they might not even be handed in? By making sure they play an integral role in the rest of the day’s section activities. Active incorporation of material from in-class writing into discussion tells students that their contributions in this line are a vital and valued part of the intellectual work of section.
Formal Writing Assignments

The only other genre of informal writing that you’ll get from your students will be the draft. Formulate your policy with regard to drafts before your first section meeting; for equity across sections, coordinate with any other TAs and the professor. State your draft policy on your “Section Guidelines” sheet. You may decide to look at anything a student wants to show you. Since many students are not organized enough to create a draft at all, you won’t necessarily be swamped with work just prior to the paper deadline— but you might be. There always will be some students who want to submit three drafts for a 5-6-page paper. Consider a few of these parameters:

- A set time after which you will not accept drafts— e.g., noon, two days before the paper is due
- A set forum for submission— e.g., only paper copies in your mailbox, or only files attached to email messages
- A set format for content— e.g., only full drafts and no outlines, or an outline only if it comes with page references for textual support (this should be decided in relationship to any pre-writing that is already required by the course)
- A set number of possible drafts to be reviewed— e.g., no more than two versions

At the same time, consider the other end of the paper writing process— your policy on revisions. Again, set this in consultation with the professor and other TAs for your course. Put it on your initial section handout, and perhaps also on the individual assignment sheets that follow. Issues in revising are:

- How will a revision affect the initial paper grade?
- How many opportunities for revising will a student have— for any given paper and for how many papers throughout the term?
- How long after a paper is returned does a student have to revise it?
- What standards for improvement are necessary for a grade change?
And in the middle of the writing process, the matter of extensions:

- Will any extensions ever be given?
- If yes, under what circumstances?
- How long before the deadline must a student notify you of a non-emergency situation necessitating an extension?
- In what form must a student notify you of such a situation? (e.g., in writing)

The issue of extensions may seem far afield from the topic of feedback and evaluation, but in fact, in order for you to have sufficient time to read, comment on, and grade your students’ work, and then get it back to them in a prompt manner that leaves them the possibility of revision, the papers need to come in on time. Thus, penalizing for late submissions at some previously announced rate is not simply totalitarianism; it’s a necessary tool for completing your work within the tight schedule of a quarter.

So now you have all your students submitting their papers nicely on time. What do you do with them at this point? Theories abound regarding the proper way to comment on a student paper. Ultimately, you’ll have to experiment and find the most efficient and effective commenting style for you. However, the one rule that’s pretty much universal is the one we often have the most trouble with: our job is to comment, to coax, to elicit, to plead even, but never to edit. Students will learn only by doing.

Let’s look at the pros and cons of some of the main commenting methods. The following items are organized roughly according to the order in which you will be encountering a given issue in the paper evaluating process.

1. **Ordering the Papers:** Some TAs like to put the papers they receive into a specific order before they start to read them. You can alphabetize according to students’ last names; you can arrange them in a projected order from best to worst; you can arrange them in a projected order from worst to best. Other TAs object to this and choose the opposite approach: request that students submit papers with a cover sheet. This way you can turn over that first page and evaluate the paper blind to who submitted it.
Some Pros to Ordering:

**Efficiency:** Papers arranged in a projected order of quality tend to be faster to grade.

**Satisfaction:** When papers are ordered from probable worst to best, you get faster as you go, since better papers require fewer comments. Also, you finish on a good note, reading good papers.

Some Cons to Ordering:

**Fairness:** Can you create a projected order of quality and remain open to papers that are not what you expect? If not, grading blind or randomly is your obligation as a TA.

2. **Quick Read-Throughs:** Before you begin to comment, consider reading quickly through some or all of the papers. If you decide to do this, do it without a pen or pencil in hand. The purpose of the quick read-through is diagnostic, so don’t get bogged down marking here and there. Otherwise, your “quick” read-through rapidly will become something else entirely.

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<th>Pros to Quick Read-Throughs:</th>
<th>Cons to Quick Read-Throughs:</th>
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<td><strong>Grading Calibration:</strong> At the group level, your ability to judge relative quality will improve.</td>
<td><strong>Efficiency:</strong> When you first start doing this, getting caught up in a given paper’s problems or strengths is probably unavoidable. You have to learn how to move quickly. But eventually this practice will make your commenting, and thereby the whole evaluation process, more efficient.</td>
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<td><strong>Commentary Triage:</strong> At the level of the individual paper, you will be able to isolate what should be the main strands of your commentary and thereby avoid smaller, less significant issues that diffuse students’ focus.</td>
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3. **Extensive Marginalia:** When you do settle down to write comments, decide where in the paper you’re going to expend the most ink. Two basic options—the margins and the end. You always should have some kind of summary end comment to encapsulate your evaluation of the paper. While responsible end comments can involve up to three or four paragraphs of detailed analysis (though if your end comments are actually that long, be rigidly sparing in your marginal comments), some TAs choose to make that end comment only a short paragraph, and do the majority of their commentary in the margins of the paper.
itself. Do be aware, though, that a wash of ink in the margins sometimes daunts students, even if you’re busy praising their work. Whether you write a lot or a little in the margins, have a commenting game plan that is set by your assignment sheet. Gear your comments toward how well a paper delivers up what you asked for.

### Pros to Extensive Marginalia:

**Local Control:** Some problems (e.g. recurrent and distracting grammatical mistakes) can only be explained effectively at the local level, but are systemic enough to require attention. Attempts to deal with these in an end comment often are unwieldy.

### Cons to Extensive Marginalia:

**Editing:** Marginal comments often verge on editing, and students take them as such. End comments force students to look for and fix problems themselves.

**Efficacy and Efficiency:** Perspective is hard to retain when you’re commenting heavily in the margins. You’ll be tempted into making less systemic and significant comments, and that inevitably takes longer.

### Formulaic End Commentary:

For most teachers, summary feedback on student papers falls into a predictable rhythm, in which you

- reiterate what you’ve understood to be the paper’s main argument;
- praise the paper’s greatest strengths, giving specific examples;
- point out the paper’s greatest weaknesses, giving specific examples and bracketing your constructive criticism with commendation if at all possible;
- offer suggestions for improvement geared either toward revision or future critical endeavors;
- give a grade

A formula like this produces a succinct expression of all the main components of feedback and evaluation, but you also should tailor your end comments to the paper you’re reading. Instead of saying, “Your close readings are deft, but your use of secondary criticism needs to be better incorporated into the flow of your ideas,” say something like, “On page 4, you do a great job of playing Emma Bovary’s words off...
against her actions in the early marriage period. But you drop in a quote from Tony Tanner on page 7 that could be pushed farther in relationship to your assertion there about transgression. Can you do something similar with Tanner’s text to what you did with Flaubert’s?” Students learn more with this kind of specificity. Notice also the commentary pattern in this example: praise, critique, then offer a way to use a strength to improve a weakness. In general, whatever the assignment, imbedding criticism in praise helps students to be more receptive to the substance of the critique.

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<th>Pros to Formulaic End Commentary:</th>
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<td><strong>Efficiency:</strong> Having a set formula keeps you from getting bogged down, mulling over the best way to structure your comments.</td>
<td><strong>Tone:</strong> Formulas often sound dully repetitive to you; they sometimes therefore lure you into unproductive or inappropriate informality.</td>
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<td><strong>Efficacy:</strong> The pattern is tried and true, and contains pretty much everything that a student needs to know about his or her writing.</td>
<td><strong>Specificity:</strong> Formulas are just that—formulas, not specific to a given situation. You must add comments that are particular to a given paper.</td>
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5. *Questions as a Commentary Tool:* Every paper is different, so there actually are no hard and fast rules to guide the substance of your comments (other than to use your assignment sheet’s expectations as your guidelines and its major terms as your keywords). But you can begin to think about the form your comments should take. Many instructors make frequent use of the question as a commentary tool, for example, “How are these two ideas linked?” This question does make a statement—e.g., the transition between these two ideas isn’t clear—but it also asks a legitimate question that the student needs to answer.

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<td><strong>Engagement:</strong> Questions encourage students to become involved in the critiquing process instead of receiving your comments passively.</td>
<td><strong>Pretense:</strong> This style sometimes devolves into leading questions that don’t actually engage students in the process.</td>
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6. **Extensive Commentary on Mechanics**: Because you will be teaching a literature course, not a writing course, your main focus will be on the critical ideas expressed in your students’ papers. However, a basic tenet of communication asserts that ideas cannot be separated from the language in which they are expressed. Thus you will find yourself making comments on mechanical issues. When evaluating the mechanics of a student’s writing, separate out facets of communicative expression from proof-reading. Don’t waste your time with proof-reading errors. Merely state in the end comment that proof-reading is a requirement (which you no doubt already specified on the assignment sheet), and lower the grade accordingly. Do be aware that what appears to be poor proofing—misspellings, obvious fragments, glaring subject-verb disagreements, and the like—may be normal communication for students raised in a tradition of non-standard English or for whom English is a second language. From section interaction, you will be aware when this is the case and can reorient your comments accordingly. You also may suggest that these students make an appointment with a tutor in the Hume Writing Center to work on such issues.

You should limit your commentary on mechanics so that you have sufficient time to spend on the other elements determining a paper’s quality. The four main categories of paper assessment are: ideas, organization, style and mechanics (though distinctions among these often blur, since, for example, good ideas cannot be conveyed effectively with poor organization). Everyone basically grades according to these general criteria; however, different teachers emphasize different elements. TAs in literature classes, unlike writing instructors, tend to privilege or prioritize good ideas—ambitious theses, inventive readings, unexpected conclusions—over other factors in their commentary and evaluation.

To assist with this, here are some thoughts about assessing ideas:

- Evaluate the student’s approach to the assignment. Has he or she done as asked? Has he or she sought to do it in an interesting way?
- Evaluate the thesis. Does it make sense? Is it interesting? Does the essay explore it consistently and in the end prove its persuasiveness?
• Evaluate the student’s work with text. Is textual evidence used to support interpretive claims? Is that evidence persuasive? Is it interesting?

**Assigning Grades**

Now that you’ve commented fully on your set of papers, it’s time to assign the grades. The primary goal in doing this should be fairness—establishing a consistent grading scale across a set of papers and across the different sections of the course. The read-through you might have done before you began to comment helps establish a scale in your mind early. After commenting and assigning tentative grades, examine the grade breakdown. Readers tend to judge the first papers they encounter more harshly than the ones that follow. Was that the case here? Also, does your grading curve match approximately with that of the other TAs in the course? Plan a meeting with those other TAs to discuss the course’s commenting and grading; perhaps exchange a representative cross-section of papers and compare responses. Further, does the grading curve match what the professor expects? Consider meeting with him or her as well, especially if you would like assistance with or support on a difficult paper.

If you consistently have reiterated your expectations for the execution of an assignment, and have provided pointed and ample commentary on how a paper meets or doesn’t meet those expectations, few students will consider balking at the assigned grade. You might have a smattering of grade inquiries, where students will come to you and ask for further clarification, which is easily provided when you’ve read the paper closely. You might even have one or two outright challenges. In these situations, try not to become defensive; it puts you at a disadvantage unnecessarily, and often students who do this are testing boundaries, seeing how far they can push you. Merely reiterate the expectations, how the paper met those expectations, and how the disseminated grading rubric thereby determined the grade—a straightforward basis for evaluation.

Grade challenges, though rare, do point to a fundamental awkwardness in the teaching assistant position. In most literature classes, TAs do all the grading, but the professor is the final arbiter of the grades students receive, as he or she usually submits
them to the Registrar. To avoid difficulties in the process, consult your faculty member on cases that you have trouble judging definitively.

**Exams**

Many of the same general considerations about paper feedback and evaluation also apply to grading exams. Just as you key the content and language of paper commentary to the assignment sheet and the overall course goals, key the content and language of exam commentary to the questions on the exam and the overall course goals. Though drafts, extensions and revisions won’t be an issue, exams—be they in-class or take-home—have elements that require explicit policy: length of time a student has to complete the exam, location for turning it in, and so on. Commentary issues remain much the same: consider placing exam booklets in an order of some sort; consider reading through a couple exams quickly to calibrate your judgment; consider where it might be best to make the most commentary, the margins or the end; consider the type of comment that will be the most effective—questions, shorthand notations, advice on mechanics, or response to ideas.

But exams do differ significantly enough from papers that the mode of commentary you choose for papers might not be right for bluebooks. The main differences can be summed up as follows:

- exams offer less opportunity for original analysis and usually produce more regurgitation of readings or lecture material than papers do;
- in part because of this, and in part because the quarter has usually ended, final exams are rarely picked up from where a TA deposits them;
- exams are never revised

Given the fact that students spend less time writing exams than they do writing papers, you should spend correspondingly less time commenting on exams than commenting on papers.
**Oral Presentations**

Keep in mind that not all opportunities for feedback and evaluation in a course are prompted by student writing. Some professors assign an oral presentation as part of the course grade, whether that be a turn leading discussion or a synopsis of research-in-progress for the term paper. Evaluations of oral presentations should utilize some of the same practices as paper and exam evaluation. Students should receive an assignment sheet indicating your expectations regarding the presentation’s form and content. Then you should judge how well those expectations were met. Of necessity, your comments will look more like an end comment on a paper than paper marginalia, given the lack of text.

**Overall Section and Course Grades**

Other non-written sites of student evaluation are the often nebulous participation grade and the often no less nebulous section grade. When calculating course grades at the end of the quarter, most of your work should be mere mathematical computation. You have the grades for individual assignments—papers, exams, presentations—and you have the percentage breakdown. Haul out your dusty old calculator and plug away.

But then you must calculate the section grade, usually comprising 10-15% of the overall course grade. The teaching team for your course should decide together what factors determine this section grade, and in what proportion. Attendance at and participation in section naturally play a significant role in this grade. Sometimes the weekly responses, whatever form they took, also count toward this grade, either as part of the participation grade or as a separate category altogether.

Decide from the beginning of the course how you will be evaluating student participation. Some TAs like to make qualitative judgments at the end of the quarter about the level of a student’s participation, intentionally keeping the process vague to allow room for intuitive assessment. Others keep a running record for each student indicating their amount of participation. Systems that are responsive both to quality and quantity of participation are usually most accurate as indicators of student
contributions to section. But the participation grade, and therefore the section grade, can be handled in any number of ways. As with most feedback and evaluation issues, you must decide how best to conform it to your personal teaching philosophy.
Chapter 7: TAing and Technology

Introduction

A 50-minute section does not leave much time for using technology in the classroom. One-sided activities such as PowerPoint presentations detract from valuable discussion time. As Michelle Karnes notes, “using technology in the classroom is more appropriate for lecture than for section because of time constraints. Students like section to be less structured so that discussions can develop organically.” That being said, technology can be a valuable and often necessary tool for managing section material outside of class. For the most part, you will find yourself utilizing four major computer-based tools: email, Microsoft Word (or some other comparable word document program), CourseWork, and Axess.

Email

Email is a handy way to communicate with individual students and can be a useful supplement to regular office hours—for a quick clarification of an assignment, for example. But don’t let emailing your students take over your life. Students unrealistically tend to expect quick email responses and at all hours of the day and night. To keep these expectations in check (and in line with what works best with your schedule), outline your email policy on the section guidelines sheet you distribute on the first day of class.

In some cases, you also might find it useful to have a documented record of communications with a student; by saving copies of your email correspondences, you can quickly provide a history of your interaction with a student. This might be useful, for example, if a student from a previous year asks you to write a letter of recommendation. Using archived emails you might be able to review and reconstruct your conversations and then write a letter making specific reference to this student’s understanding of this or that work of literature. At the very least, an archive of emails from the quarter might help you to better assess a student’s participation in the section.
Commenting on Student Work

Many TAs prefer students to submit papers as email attachments rather than hard copies. There are several advantages to using an electronic commenting system. First, students appreciate being able to read remarks instead of having to decipher cryptic handwritten comments. Second, you are able to retain a copy of every student’s paper, and your comments on those papers, without ever having to photocopy a single page. Third, you don’t have to write out the same comments over and over again on different papers; you write the comment once, save it to Word’s AutoText database and it’s there to use on every paper you grade. And fourth, going paperless makes it easier to return work to students who leave campus at the end of a quarter or the academic year. Students admit they usually do not take the time to pick up graded materials after a term has ended (this is especially true of final exams). If you require them to submit papers electronically, then you can avoid the hassle of tracking down students and, perhaps more importantly, the frustration of devoting a lot of time and energy to providing feedback only to have that feedback go unread because the student decides not to pick up the paper.

CourseWork

CourseWork ([https://coursework.stanford.edu](https://coursework.stanford.edu)) is Stanford’s learning management system, and it is an integral part of many English classes. Instructors and/or TAs use CourseWork to create course websites where they can manage and display course materials such as syllabi and assignments or post announcements to the class. When you meet with your teaching team in the first few days of the quarter, ask your professor if he or she intends to use CourseWork. If so, be sure to discuss how the site will be used. Is it intended for the class as a whole and thus managed by the professor, or will each TA manage a site for their particular sections? Although CourseWork sites are easy to design, they take time, so you should figure out if you’ll be using (or designing) one as soon as possible.
Axess

Students use Axess (http://axess.stanford.edu) to manage a wide range of information including their academic progress, financial status, and personal details such as mailing address and phone number. Most likely, you already are familiar with this program from enrolling in courses and paying your university bill. However, Axess also is relevant to TAs. You can use Axess to view your section enrollment and enter course grades if the professor has assigned this responsibility to you. Axess also is where you will find the results of your section evaluations. These results remain in your Axess account throughout your graduate career, so you can view them at any time. You also can download them as a pdf, which is extremely helpful when you are on the job market or applying for fellowships. However, please note: once you graduate and lose your SUNet ID, you no longer will be able to access this information, so be sure to either download your evaluations or print hard copies.

Technology Policy for Students

You also will want to think about if and how you would like your students to use technology in section. Many students bring laptops for note taking, but as in lecture, some students are tempted to use them for non-academic purposes. When making your technology policy for students, also keep in mind that many English courses use pdf’s as part of the course material, and undergraduates must pay to print on campus if they do not have their own printer. Therefore, completely banning laptops from your section is not always practical, but you can state clearly in your section policies any consequences for using them to do non-academic work in class.
Chapter 8: Following Through

Whether you are completing your first or your hundredth term of teaching, a crucial element in pedagogical development is integrating each individual teaching experience into a continuum, gathering information from yourself and the students as well as from colleagues and mentors to assess strengths and areas for improvement. In addition, “following through” can include collecting and recording information for a teaching portfolio that you use both on the job market and in developing discussion methods, section activities, and lectures in the future. What follows is a brief overview of these wrapping up activities.

Student Evaluations

The word “evaluation” understandably can sound intimidating, particularly when you are just starting out in the profession. However, you will receive a great deal of support from your peers and the department as a whole in finding constructive ways to solicit and respond to feedback from students. Generally speaking, the students are not out to get you. Quite the contrary; they tend to view section as a great place to share their ideas and to learn from your expertise as a graduate student. Feedback from students both informally and formally offers a good opportunity to innovate and enhance your own teaching methods and to clarify your strengths so that you can make the most of them.

Seek out as many avenues for receiving feedback as you can stand. Classroom visits remain one of the best ways to get input about your teaching style. Your professor should visit your section at least once during the quarter, but also consider inviting first-time TAs or advanced grads to visit as well. Each will offer a unique perspective based on their differing levels of teaching experience and their varying teaching philosophies. Fourth-years and advanced grads TAing for the second or third time should consider themselves mentors for first-time TAs. Share your teaching experiences with your colleagues and encourage them to discuss their questions and concerns with you.
Clearly your students also are treasure troves of helpful (and admittedly sometimes not so helpful) feedback. At the end of every quarter, students complete a formal section evaluation online. Once these evaluations are processed, you can view them via Axess at any time during your graduate career. This is especially important to remember when putting together a teaching portfolio for the job market.

In addition to the mandatory section evaluation they will complete at the end of the course, you also should give them an opportunity at mid-term for evaluating the section. If you do a midterm evaluation, keep it simple by asking questions such as:

- What aspect or aspects of section are most helpful to you and why?
- How would you improve or alter the section format or environment?
- Is section well integrated with lecture, why or why not?
- What has been most effective about the discussion facilitation?
- What has been less effective or needs improvement?
- Is there anything else you would like to be doing in or getting out of section?

Be sure to allow time for students to complete these evaluations. Thinking carefully about the language of an evaluation form and of the elements it asks students to assess (how much they learned, for example, about how to read medieval texts) should help to inform the teaching that you do and the language you use to describe the learning that takes place in your classroom. When you receive the completed evaluations, you will want to read them carefully and make notes about how these evaluations might help you in planning for the next time you TA. At mid-term, you also might want to take advantage of the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) evaluation resources. CTL offers various services to TAs that include conducting small group interviews of students in lieu of a traditional mid-term evaluation. TAs repeatedly praise such services and say they have learned a great deal about how to improve their classes through them.
Finally, you yourself contain a vast amount of information about your own teaching process. Take the time just after the quarter ends to write up a short narrative evaluation of the TAing experience. What went well? What would you do differently? Writing like this feeds nicely into your teaching philosophy statement, which will emerge as you do your teaching here at Stanford.

**Faculty Evaluation**

Throughout the term, you should meet regularly with the course professor to discuss how section is going as well as to arrange at least one section visit. Most of us feel very nervous about the professor visiting section. But here are some things you can do to facilitate the process. First, talk to the professor about what kind of role he or she plans to take within section (observation, participation, etc.) and ask for any general expectations and/or suggestions. Second, meet with other TAs for the course (if there are any) ahead of time to discuss that week’s section, if only to calm your nerves. Third, try to arrange the section visit in a week in which you will be well rested and will not have additional stressors. Finally, relax. You will have had several section meetings by this point. After the section visit, be sure to get some “immediate” feedback that you can integrate into your section methods over the remainder of the term. If you are able/willing to do a lecture for the course, that experience will be another important opportunity for feedback (proactively and retroactively). In addition, feel free to ask a colleague to attend your lecture so that you can get additional feedback.

At the end of the term, remind your professor about writing a teaching letter for your file (kept by the Department Administrator). This assessment of your teaching is something that the professor, ideally, should write not long after the quarter. In addition, the professor will receive the summary sheet (top sheet) of your section evaluations at the beginning of the subsequent quarter. It can be helpful to talk about the student evaluations, if you feel comfortable doing so, and to identify key areas of improvement as well as strengths to build on in future teaching and TAing.
A Note on the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL)

The CTL (http://ctl.stanford.edu/) is an invaluable resource for graduate students at any stage in their teaching careers. First, know that CTL has many evaluative and pedagogical resources that you should not hesitate to use throughout your time at Stanford. In contacting the director or graduate student liaison at CTL, you will be able to find out about workshops for new TAs, teaching statement workshops for advanced grads, class visits, small group evaluations with students, lecture and discussion preparation and coaching, and many other helpful services. In particular, you should meet with someone at CTL after TAing to start a teaching portfolio—perhaps one for yourself and one for the job market. And in addition to providing all of these tools and services, CTL also can help you to synthesize everything that you learn from your teaching experiences, maximizing what you take with you to the next stage of your career as a teacher.
Appendix

This appendix contains a collection of reference material for you to consult throughout your teaching quarters. It offers a few words on policies and procedures as well as specific examples of pedagogical genres like the section guidelines handout, the class/section plan, assignment sheets, and evaluation criteria.

I. Timetable for TAing and Next Steps for Development

You’ve seen some of this information before, at the beginning of “Getting Started.” And certainly, the start of the quarter that you TA holds the most pressing deadlines for things to do (as opposed to things to teach). But do check back with this expanded timetable throughout the quarter as it contains information relating to scheduling outside visits to your sections, conducting student evaluations and making other steps toward further professional and pedagogical development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall quarter</td>
<td><strong>First-years</strong>: attend pedagogy workshops; <strong>Fourth-years</strong>: TA for second time; <strong>Advanced grads</strong>: TAing opportunities based on availability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During fall quarter</td>
<td><strong>First-years</strong>: make arrangements with a fourth-year or advanced grad to sit in on a section or two; <strong>Fourth-years and advanced grads</strong>: think of yourselves as mentors for the first-years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By end of fall quarter</td>
<td><strong>First-years</strong>: give Student Services Manager your TA preference form for winter TAing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By end of winter quarter</td>
<td><strong>First-years</strong>: give Student Services Manager your TA preference form for spring TAing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First few days of classes</td>
<td>Attend possible TAing courses, emphasis on preferred ones; meet casually with professor to express interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First or beginning of second week</td>
<td>Meet with professor and other TAs to discuss professor’s TA philosophy, any syllabus issues, section assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After 2-3 course meetings</td>
<td>Poll students re: section times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By 2-3 days before section</td>
<td>Assign students to sections; announce and post assignments; coordinate section guidelines with</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
II. University Policies and Resources

Teaching assistants in literature courses work in close connection with English, Comparative Literature and Modern Thought and Literature departments, but they also function as university employees in a wider context of university teaching and learning. You need, therefore, to be aware of the various university policies outlined here on issues like the honor code and sexual harassment. For more information on any of these matters, consult the appropriate office, individual or text.

_Honor Code / Fundamental Standard:_ Violating the Honor Code is a serious offense, even when the violation is unintentional. The Honor Code is available online [http://www.stanford.edu/dept/vpsa/judicialaffairs/guiding/honorcode.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/dept/vpsa/judicialaffairs/guiding/honorcode.htm), and you are responsible for understanding the university’s rules regarding academic integrity. You should familiarize yourself with the code if you haven’t done so already. In brief, conduct prohibited by the Honor Code includes all forms of academic dishonesty, among them copying from another’s exam, unpermitted collaboration, representing as one’s own work the work of another, revising and resubmitting work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By day before section</td>
<td>Visit section room; assess its appropriateness for section.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day of first section</td>
<td>Show up a bit early. Breathe! Relax! Enjoy!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-term</td>
<td>Decide on mid-term evaluation format; administer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throughout the quarter</td>
<td>Schedule faculty visit to section; meet afterwards to discuss; ask if you can give a lecture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By end of the quarter</td>
<td>Ask professor to write a recommendation letter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At end of the quarter</td>
<td>Remind students to complete the online section evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By the grading deadline</td>
<td>Give professor final grades for submission to Registrar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right after end of quarter</td>
<td>Check Axess for your evaluations; write a brief reflection on your TAing experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(as in work from another class) without the instructor’s knowledge and consent, and plagiarism. The Honor Code also prohibits the proctoring of exams, which means that instructors and/or teaching assistants are not allowed to be present while students complete the exam. The only exceptions to this are briefly visiting the classroom to distribute and collect the exams or to answer students’ questions.

**Office of Accessible Education:** Students who have a disability that may necessitate an academic accommodation or the use of auxiliary aids and services in a class must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Students should notify the OAE in a timely manner in order to give them time to evaluate the request along with required documentation, recommend appropriate accommodations, and prepare a verification letter dated in the academic term in which the request is being made. For more information, visit the OAE website at [http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oaes](http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oaes).

**Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS):** For help with personal problems and difficulties such as stress, anxiety, or depression, contact or visit the CAPS office, part of the Vaden Health Center. Detailed information is available at [http://vaden.stanford.edu/caps/index.html](http://vaden.stanford.edu/caps/index.html).

**The Ombud:** If you need help with a situation related to classes, grades, or any other school-related dispute or misunderstanding, contact the Office of the Ombuds. For more information, visit [http://www.stanford.edu/dept/ombuds/](http://www.stanford.edu/dept/ombuds/).

**Sexual Harassment Policy:** Stanford’s sexual harassment policy is available at [http://harass.stanford.edu/](http://harass.stanford.edu/). Familiarize yourself with all of the rules and regulations under the “About Sexual Harassment” section on the website. If you have questions about the policy or need to discuss or report a situation involving sexual harassment, contact the Sexual Harassment Policy Office.
**Hume Writing Center:** Located in the basement of Margaret Jacks Hall, the Hume Writing Center ([http://hwc.stanford.edu](http://hwc.stanford.edu)) provides appointment-based and drop-in tutoring for Stanford’s undergraduate and graduate students. They are a great resource for students in English classes, and also for international students who may have difficulty adjusting to the essay-writing conventions practiced at American universities.

**Allowable Section Times:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00 am - 8:50 am</td>
<td>Monday through Friday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 am - 9:50 am</td>
<td>Monday through Friday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00 am - 10:50 am</td>
<td>Friday only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00 am - 11:50 am</td>
<td>Friday only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:15 pm - 1:05 pm</td>
<td>Monday through Friday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:15 pm - 2:05 pm</td>
<td>Friday only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:15 pm - 3:05 pm</td>
<td>Monday through Friday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:15 pm - 4:05 pm</td>
<td>Monday through Friday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:15 pm - 5:05 pm</td>
<td>Monday through Friday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:15 pm - 6:05 pm</td>
<td>Monday through Friday</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: For English classes, the Department recommends trying to avoid scheduling sections between 10am and 3pm, Monday through Thursday, but always double check your choices with the Undergraduate Student Services Coordinator or the Student Services Manager before announcing them to your students.*
III. Sample Section Guidelines

These sheets reflect a variety of approaches and teaching philosophies. Determine your own approach and philosophy in consultation with other members of your teaching team—the professor and your fellow TAs.

Section Guidelines Checklist

(From Marvin Diogenes’ “PWR Syllabus Checklist”)

Here’s a checklist of items that you might want to include in your section guidelines. Some of the information listed below may already be covered in the main syllabus for the course. While you may not want to restate general information or university policies (Honor Code, etc.), it is to your benefit to reiterate course assignments, due dates, and exam schedules, alongside your own statements about section goals, policies, and procedures.

1. A title

2. A description of the section and its goals that emphasizes its relation to the course and its goals and describes how the activities and assignments are connected to those goals

3. A specification of the work students are expected to do in section

4. A list of required texts and materials for section (you might include informal writing assignments as section materials, as well as a reminder to students about the importance of bringing relevant books and readers to each meeting)

5. A clear schedule of reading and writing assignments and when they are due

6. A clear schedule of exams (refer to the time schedule for exam dates, times and locations)

7. A description of the evaluation criteria and methods of evaluation that you plan to use for each (type) of assignment (which you may develop further on individual assignment sheets)

8. A list of important class policies: attendance, late work, manuscript format, etc.
9. A list of university policies: honor code, sexual harassment, etc. (if they are not included in the course syllabus)

10. Resources available to help students succeed in the course (CTL, peer tutoring, etc.)

11. A listing of your office hours and contact information (email and/or phone number)

12. The daily section schedule (this is especially useful if students will be doing in-class presentations or if you are scheduling film screenings or events in addition to regular section meetings, such as exam prep sessions)

Section Guidelines Example #1

English 150
Poetry and Poetics
TA:
Email:
Phone:
Office Hours: Wednesday 1:30-2:30, and by appointment
Office Hours Location: TA Offices, English Department (460-404)

The purpose of discussion sections for Poetry and Poetics is for you to have a chance to “talk back” to the poems on the page. We will focus on close readings and intensive discussion of individual poems, concentrating on the analysis of poetic style and how form and content work together in a poem’s meaning. Please come to each section having done the week’s readings and having selected a particular poem, or a passage in a poem, that interests you and that you’d like to talk about. You should also come to section with any questions you have from that week’s lectures.

Section requirements:
Weekly attendance. More than one unexcused absence from section may result in a lowering of your section grade.

Active participation.

One brief presentation—see below.

Presentations:
Each student will be asked to do a brief presentation of a poem in section. The presenter should read the poem, make a few observations about how it works and offer questions to spark further discussion. Presentations should last no more than five minutes. Please let me know what poem you’d like to present in class on Tuesday the week you’re scheduled to present.
Papers and Conferences:
Paper 1 (350 words on a Shakespeare sonnet): Due in section Thurs., October 12.
Paper 2 draft (600 word comparison) and short anthology: Due in section Thurs., October 19.
Paper 3 draft (1800 words): Due in section Thurs., Nov. 16.
Conference 2 with WIM consultant*: Mon., Nov. 20-Weds., Nov. 22.
Final anthology (20-25 poems): Due in section Thurs., Nov. 30.
Final paper (1800 words): Due in class Thurs., Dec. 7.
Final exam: Dec. 15, 8:30 am.
I encourage, but do not require, you to have conferences with me as well about the drafts of your second and third papers.

**Late Paper Policy: Unless otherwise indicated, all assignments are due in section on the due date. Late assignments may be penalized up to a full grade for each day late and will not be accepted more than five days after the deadline. If you need an extension, please consult with me well in advance of the deadline.

Section Guidelines Example #2

English 42E/142E
The Films of the Coen Brothers

Course Requirements

3 units
  Scene description, due before class on Tuesday, October 14th (10%)
  Final paper/anthology, due by noon on Thursday, December 4th (70%)
  Final paper: 4-5 pages
  Participation (20%)

5 units
  First scene description, due before class on Tuesday, October 14th (10%)
  Second scene description, due before class on Tuesday, November 4th (10%)
  Final paper/anthology, due by noon on Thursday, December 4th (60%)
  Final paper: ~8 pages
  Participation (20%)

Participation and attendance

I will require active participation from you, which you can demonstrate through some combination of the following: comments in lecture, thoughtful responses to other
students’ comments in lecture, enthusiastic engagement in section discussion, and productive use of my office hours. If you are shy, please find time outside of class to talk to me about alternate ways of participating. Section should not be fearsome or daunting. I hope you’ll see it as an opportunity for you to articulate your own thoughts and ideas.

You are expected to attend lecture and section faithfully. Please communicate with me in advance if you have to miss section.

Contact Information
TA name:
Email:
Office Hours: Tuesdays 4:00-5:00 and Wednesdays 11:00-12:30, Stanford Bookstore Café
Also available by appointment, via e-mail.

Weekly Paragraph E-mail

As part of your participation grade, all students will be required to send me a three-part e-mail each week by Wednesday at 7 p.m. These e-mails will help structure section discussion. Please begin by simply listing a quotation and a scene from the movie that you’d like to discuss. The quotation/scene you choose might be one we didn’t cover in lecture, one that you have a different take on, one that you find generative or meaningful, or one that you simply like. For the third part of your e-mail, write a paragraph about some aspect of the film. Please don’t just rehash something we discussed in lecture, but otherwise anything’s fair game: cinematography, objects, sounds, music, make-up, performances, dialogue, accents, inconsistencies, allusions, editing, geography, etc. As a guide, a full paragraph should run somewhere between 100 and 180 words. Quality counts: be thoughtful, be coherent, be generative. Please think of these paragraphs as a place to jumpstart your thinking about the week’s film, as well as an opportunity to practice writing about film (in this sense, the paragraphs help prepare you to write your final paper). You may take one week off from sending this e-mail (choose wisely!).

Paper Guidelines

All of your written assignments should be e-mailed to me as a .doc, docx, or .rtf attachment. I am running a Mac with Microsoft Office 2008. **You are responsible for making sure that your attachment file can be successfully sent via e-mail and subsequently opened.** You can do this by sending it to a friend, roommate, or an alternate e-mail account of your own. Please do not wait until the last minute to try to send a paper; plan ahead for contingencies.
Your papers should follow a standard format: 12-point font, double spaced, standard margins, a standard font (e.g. Times New Roman, not Courier), a short heading or title page, page numbers, etc. Because these papers are handed in electronically, it is very easy for me to spot inconsistencies.

The anthology assignment may allow for different formats; we’ll discuss that later in the quarter.

Extensions and Late Assignments

The ten-week Stanford quarter moves very quickly; thus, it is always to your advantage to keep up. Extensions must be requested in advance, and such requests should come with a good (ideally verifiable) reason. Assignments handed in late without permission will lose ½ a grade (A- to a B+, B to a B-) for each day late.

Section Guidelines Example #3

English 146C
TA:
Email:
Office hours: Friday, 11:00am – 12:00pm; or by appointment
“Office” location: Bookstore café

Section 1: Friday, 1:15pm – 2:05pm (Building 460, Room 301)
Section 2: Friday, 2:15pm – 3:05pm (Building 460, Room 301)

Participation:

Section is your chance to actively engage with the texts and the information presented in lecture. Students are expected to come to section (please bring the necessary texts with you) prepared to share their ideas and participate in discussion as well as any other class activities. Such activities include serving as a discussion leader for a particular text and writing occasional short response papers (a few paragraphs).

Discussion Leader:

This activity is designed to help you improve your analytical reading and oral communication skills. Basically, being a discussion leader means being the person who sets the initial agenda for discussion. You should be ready to point to a few passages that spark your interest; offer commentary on these passages and how they relate to larger issues raised by the text(s); and pose a question or two that you would like the rest of the section to consider.
Attendance:

As the syllabus states, attendance at both lecture and section is mandatory. Because scheduling conflicts inevitably occur during the term, you are allowed one “section switch.” This means that you may attend one of the other sections if you are unable to go to your assigned section. However, if you would like to take advantage of this option, you must notify me, as well as the TA whose section you wish to attend, by Tuesday of the week you need to switch. For all other attendance-related issues, including missing a lecture, please contact me to discuss whether or not you’ll need to complete any make up work.

Grading criteria for essays:

A/Excellent: An elegantly formulated essay that makes a persuasive argument about the chosen texts. Contains neither grammatical nor spelling errors, and has an effective structure. The argument is stylish and well supported with relevant evidence and observation.

B/Good: A largely persuasive and well-written essay which presents an intelligent argument without major flaws, but which may contain minor stylistic, grammatical, or organizational problems.

C/Adequate: The adequate essay demonstrates a satisfactory understanding of the assignment and is characterized by competent writing, but is weakened by significant flaws in argument, structure, style or grammar. It may also present multiple instances of vague or imprecise writing, or may fail to provide sufficient evidence to support the argument.

D/Weak: An essay that contains useful observations or accurate description, but does not effectively assert a thesis. It may be poorly organized and wander from topic to topic, or it may present an overly simplistic treatment of the subject at hand.

NP/Failing: Writing does not respond to the assignment or is not submitted.

Late Assignments:

Students are expected to submit essays on time. The grade for essays received after the due date will be lowered one letter for each day late.
IV. Class Plans

The way you plan for section follows organically from the substance of the week’s readings, the content of the week’s lectures, the quality of past section discussions, what you hope to inspire in future discussions, and a multitude of other factors. As a result, class plans are distinctly individual creations, and no one set format works best. Look through the specific examples provided here for helpful ways of structuring time or varying activities, as well as handling content preparation.

Class Plan Example #1: a Section on Renaissance Poetry

CLASS BUSINESS—note next week will be exam prep, announce new office hours, questions (4 minutes)

*Introduce new material. Herbert biography. Highlight religious training and print history (re: printing practices/religion/politics in lecture). Handout copy of two poems from the first edition facsimile (10 minutes)

DISCUSSION: (30 minutes — include general questions here)

HERBERT: (no more than 15 minutes)

ask students to read first poem

*form: what is your impression of Herbert's poems? How does the first edition printing compare with our anthology? How does it affect your reading of the poem? How does form related to the subject of the poem? (kw: devotional)

*compare/contrast: what other poetic forms did we encounter this week/thus far? ask students to choose: ask form/content relations, compare to Herbert? Donne would be my pick, especially re: representing religious views v. secular subjects. [have one or two examples selected — ask students to read poems]

(Half-way point) Work around to Marvell, whose poems students seemed to find difficult (as per comments made during lecture)

RELIGION — work from lecture comment about underlying importance of religious views in all Renaissance literature.

*reactions
*where do we see it? [have one or two examples]

*where don't we see it (and is it there) [point to specific lines, stanzas]

POLITICS—how is it related to religion

*discuss role of King with regard to religion (lecture review)

*how is this an issue for Marvell in particular? (identify particular passages, look for contradictory statements or ambiguities)

Summary (five minutes)—note where we've gone, what we've covered-link to Milton for next week (repeat first reading assignment)

**Class Plan Example #2: Ideas for a Section on Chaucer**

Optional translation exercises to help them prepare for the mid-term.

Required individual meetings during Week 6 to discuss the large paper.

Possible Topics for this coming Discussion:

Pilgrimage, relics and reliquaries

More specifically, who is Thomas a Becket, where is Canterbury

Medieval World View (*briefly* a cosmological model, to emphasis mutability v. stasis; also the three estates and how does Chaucer play with convention [Mann]; help explain, too, the differences among the religious characters)

Revisit a portrait—perhaps the Cook or the Clerk—and read together; create a modern stereotypical portrait (e.g. a General or a Medical Doctor)

Final words on the *Knight's Tale* to provide background for next week's reading, as well as emphasize the importance of the narrative links between the tales.

Other Topic Ideas:

How is the CT known to us today? (fragments, editing, etc.)

During *W of B*, read "Gentilesse" and an excerpt of *P of F*. 


Priess’s Tale, discuss ritual murder—maybe read Roger of Wendover or Matthew Paris—as well as maybe other anti-Semitic Marian miracles; why this ugly side to devotion of Mary?

Class Plan Example #3: Poetry Class

[Business]
Attendance.

Anthology due Thursday after Thanksgiving.
Final paper due at the last section, Th Dec. 7.
No extensions on final draft.

Identification quiz?

Talk about the final exam.
I: 30 minutes. 10 short identification passages; identify and briefly discuss significance of 5.
Two essays, 60 min each.
II: Compare two poets in some way, e.g. self-presentation in Jonson and Dickinson.
III: Compare one poet (e.g. Hardy) to two other poets we’ve read.

[Mini-lecture]
Introduction to modernism: Pound and Eliot.

The style of modernism: Pound’s imagism.
“An Image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (96).
The 3 tenets: 1. Direct treatment of the thing; 2. Use no word that doesn’t contribute to presentation; 3. Substitute musical rhythm for conventional metrics.
Shakespeare’s “Dawn in russet mantle clad”: “There is in this line of his nothing that one can call description; he presents” (99).

The mind of the modernist poet: Eliot’s "catalyst."
“process of depersonalization”; “continual extinction of personality” (2173). Cf. Keats “negative capability.”
Poet’s mind as catalyst: “The poet’s mind is a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together” (2174); poet’s mind creates a new “concentration” (2175); rejection of Wordsworth’s formula.
Can we see these ideas at work in the modernist poems we’re discussing? Keep in mind that these readings in poetics can provide a great framework for a paper; they can often give you some background against which you can discuss a poem and its strategies.

Be thinking about comparison in two ways.
For your paper: When you reach an interesting or difficult moment in the poem you’re reading, think about other poems we’ve read that might reflect on it.
For the exam: As you read a poet’s work, be thinking about connection you might make between that poet and other poets we’ve read.

[Student presentations]
Nicoli: Williams, "The Young Housewife." (NMP 322)
Rhythm: basically a four-stress line, with the exception of “to a fallen leaf,” which perhaps enacts what it describes.
Think about the question for the paper about “relating to larger issues of kind of poem.” What “kind of poem” is this? Is it in the same category or genre as any of the other poems we’ve read (e.g. is it a sonnet, is it a love poem, a devotional poem, an ode)?

How would you describe the scene in the first stanza? What’s the speaker’s relationship to the scene? How is the woman portrayed and what is her relationship to the men in the poem?
“Then again”: what’s this mean?
“I compare her / to a fallen leaf”: how does this metaphor work? Is she actually “like a fallen leaf,” or is the process of comparison being foregrounded? How is she like a fallen leaf?
What’s the significance of the speaker driving by in his car? What about the “dried leaves” he drives over? To what/whom does he “bow”?

Bill Hanson: Stein, "Susie Asado."

Sarah: Stevens, “The Snow Man.”
V. Assignments

TA involvement in course assignments will vary based on the philosophy of the course’s teaching team and the nature of a given assignment. Sometimes, you will be designing, explaining, collecting and evaluating assignments; sometimes, you only will be responsible for evaluating them.

Assignment Sheets

Assignment sheets (no more than one page long) for each essay or assignment should include the assignment itself as well as

- Goals of the assignment (yours, to which the students should add their own)
- Sources and evidence of the assignment (you may have a reader with historical background students may wish to incorporate into their essays; you also may discuss quoting from the main text and set citation guidelines for students to follow)

It also may seem useful to mention audience and the type of writing that students will be doing (for an academic audience of university level students in the major, for example).

Assignment sheets should aim to be helpful and clear. They also should introduce the terms and criteria that you plan to use when you evaluate the assignment.

Assignment Sheet Example #1: Guidelines for Essay Assignment

1. All essays must be typed and must stay within page limits for the assignment.
2. Double space and use one-inch margin on all four sides. Use only 12 Point font.
3. Avoid wordiness. Use vocabulary with which you are comfortable and make your sentences clear and concise.
4. Underline and capitalize the titles of films and books. Capitalize the titles of articles and put them in quotation marks.
5. Avoid the following grammatical problems
   a) Typographical errors
   b) Misspellings
c) Errors in basic punctuation
d) Subject/verb disagreement
e) Sentence fragments and/or run-on sentences

6. You must write your paper by yourself. Be careful to document outside sources that you employ in Your essay. Use MLA or CMS style of documentation.

7. When writing papers remember a simple but essential structure:
a) Introduce your thesis, your principle argument, in your introductory paragraph. A concrete clear thesis will help you structure your essay. Make sure your thesis answers the question proposed and your introduction tells the reader about the argument you are outlining in the essay.
b) Demonstrate the main points that support your argument in the following paragraphs.
c) For the purpose of clarity, do your best to provide topic sentences and transitions for all your paragraphs.
d) When providing examples from texts, make sure that you understand the evidence and its significance. Also remember that your examples do not speak for themselves; they are intended to follow some logical plan, strategy, argument within your paper. In other words, do not simply insert isolated examples without explaining the logic to the reader; the relationship/connections are not always as clear to a reader as they are to you. Continuously ask yourself: How is the example relevant to your main point? How does it support your thesis? How does this example connect with your argument?
e) Finish your essay with a solid conclusion that defends and summarizes your thesis and main points. End with some new insight if possible. Again, ask yourself if you’ve answered the question(s) and whether the logic behind your essay is clearly explained. Does your essay provide a clear and convincing roadmap for your argument?

8. Remember you can't separate form from content. How you say something is as important as what you say. Organization, spelling, grammar, clarity, transitions, detail, structure—all these indications of writing ability count. These factors will greatly influence your essay development, persuasiveness, as well as overall clarity, and make a big difference between an "A" and a "B" paper.

9) **Re-grade Policy:** If you are unhappy about a grade, we are willing to consider grade adjustments, however they are not always granted. We ask that you wait at least one day, after the assignment has been returned, before approaching us about reconsidering a grade. During that time we ask that you develop your claim and make time to see us. Also, we suggest that you wait no longer than 2 weeks to submit a regrade request; the sooner you talk to us, the better.
10) If you have received a D or lower on an essay assignment, you are able to resubmit the assignment; however, your new version should show significant improvement from the original one. Your new grade will be based on an average of the first and second scores. Please do not see this policy as an excuse to do poorly on the first paper. Your original version should be submitted with the new version. The second version of the paper will be due exactly one week from when we return your graded essay. There are no extensions.

11) Make and keep a copy of your essay before turning it in to protect against loss.

12) Papers turned in after the class session in which they are due are considered LATE. All late papers will lose 10 points. Late papers will only be accepted for 48 hours after the end of the class session in which they are due. After that time the paper will no longer be accepted. Exceptions are made for documented emergency situations only.

Assignment Sheet Example #2: Evaluation Criteria

Final Essay for 65B/165B: Due by 5pm on Monday, Dec. 11th – in my mailbox, 2nd floor, Bldg. 460

General Description of Essay for 3 units:

Write an essay of approximately 5 pages, in which you analyze textual material from the course syllabus. I would strongly urge you to use only one text; do not use more than two. In an essay of this length, fewer texts allow for a more substantive treatment. Format: Times New Roman, size 12 font; 1-inch margins on all four sides; double spaced.

General Description of Essay for 5 units:

Write an essay of between 10 and 12 pages, in which you analyze artistic material, and support that analysis with outside research. Format: Times New Roman, size 12 font; 1-inch margins on all four sides; double spaced; MLA format for citation.

What I expect of an A paper:

Topic: A clearly focused approach to a significant and complex problem.

Argument: A clear formulation of your approach.
Evidence:
for 3 units – Close attention to textual analysis. Quote not for the sake of quoting, but to wrestle with and analyze critically the language of the quotation.

for 5 units – Close attention to textual analysis. Quote not for the sake of quoting, but to wrestle with and analyze critically the language of the quotation. Also, a sophisticated engagement with either primary sources not assigned in class, or secondary criticism, or both, which clearly enhances and supports your argument but does not overwhelm it.

Style and Mechanics: Though I do not weight polished form over creativity of thought and persuasiveness of argument, writing can only argue and persuade through the medium of language, which is inevitably strengthened by an engaging style, a clear organization, and careful proof-reading.

I evaluate according to these criteria; the grade lowers if these criteria are not met.

VI. Evaluation Criteria

Evaluation criteria must be sensitive to context: to the assignment that is being evaluated, to the course in which it is being evaluated, to the pedagogical goals of the course’s teaching team, and to the wider departmental and university environment. This section includes a grading rubric used in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric, which may or may not be appropriate for your course in its A to F grade breakdown, but which is extremely well-conceived in its articulations of various levels of argument quality. Consider adapting its evaluative content, if not its specific grading scheme.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Excellent work; clearly demonstrates understanding of course concepts and applies them appropriately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Good work; demonstrates understanding of course concepts and applies them fairly well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Adequate work; demonstrates some understanding of course concepts and applies them with some difficulty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Fair work; demonstrates limited understanding of course concepts and applies them with significant difficulty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Poor work; demonstrates minimal understanding of course concepts and applies them poorly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table with Grading Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>The content of the response is accurate, well-organized, and relevant to the question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>The response demonstrates an understanding of the concepts, and provides a clear analysis of the situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>The response is well-organized and easy to follow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>The response is clear and easy to understand.</td>
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### Additional Notes

- **Content**: The content of the response is accurate, well-organized, and relevant to the question.
- **Analysis**: The response demonstrates an understanding of the concepts, and provides a clear analysis of the situation.
- **Organization**: The response is well-organized and easy to follow.
- **Clarity**: The response is clear and easy to understand.
VII. Recommended Reading

The following is a list of pedagogical resources that are particularly relevant to graduate students. Most of the books can be found in the CTL’s library.

Select Bibliography


