Chapter 7
One-on-One Interaction with Students

Managing a classroom of many students is a complex task; equally important and challenging is working with individual students both inside and outside the classroom. This chapter offers suggestions to make your one-on-one dealings with students as effective, efficient, and comfortable as possible.

Office Hours

Most teaching assistants will hold one to three office hours each week. This time is usually provided so that students can drop in for individualized information, clarification, or advice.

Where to Hold Office Hours

Graduate programs typically provide office space to teaching assistants. Even when such an office is available, some teaching assistants prefer to meet with students in a public place, such as a coffee shop or a student lounge. We strongly recommend using a departmental office for office hours; the potential problems with meeting in a public place outweigh the potential benefits. Never meet at your home. Here are some of the pros and cons of each setting.

Meeting in a Departmental Office

Pros
- It maintains your authority as a teacher and as a representative of the department for which you work.
- It provides greater clarity about the nature of your meeting and your relationship with your students (specifically, you are the teacher).
- It helps maintain appropriate boundaries between students and teachers; it is the blurring of these boundaries that encourages
both students and teachers to think of each other as potential romantic objects. To this end, always keep the door to your office open; for discussions of a grade or other sensitive issues, you may want to close the door partway and lower your voice.

Meeting in the privacy of an office is a courtesy to students who come to your office hours to discuss sensitive issues such as their grades or personal problems that are affecting their work in the course.

**Cons** It can set up a more formal relationship than some teaching assistants would like to have with their students. However, the tone of your relationship with your students depends more on your approach and attitude than on the location of your meeting.

Departmental offices often lack “ambiance.”

**Meeting in a Coffee Shop**

**Pros** Many graduate students do not like their offices (typically windowless cubbies). And if no students come to office hours, it can be more pleasant to spend two hours in a coffee shop than in a shoe box.

It may make students feel that you are more accessible to them than university professors can sometimes seem to students.

**Cons** It can blur boundaries and lead to misunderstandings about the nature of your relationship with your students.

Students may feel obligated to purchase a drink.

Students may have trouble finding you in a crowded coffee shop, or they may not have a suitable place to wait if you are already meeting with another student (or graduate student friend) when they get there.

There can be many distractions in coffee shops.

It is easy for other patrons to eavesdrop on your meeting, which is not fair to students who come to discuss sensitive issues such as their grades.

If your department does not provide you an office, try to find a public space on campus where students can easily find you and your con-
versations are not likely to be overheard (e.g., a public room in a library or student union).

**Timing Office Hours**

You will save yourself and your students a lot of trouble by holding office hours at times when the students probably will attend. In other words, while you may be able to get a lot of your own work done if you hold your office hours from 7:00 to 9:00 A.M., you will probably have to find other times during the week to meet with interested students. You may also want to consider making sure that your office hours are not at the same time each day. For example, if you hold office hours from 1:00 to 2:00 on Tuesdays and Thursdays, students who cannot come to the Tuesday time because of a class are likely to have the same class on Thursday. That said, also schedule your office hours such that they work well with your schedule and do not interrupt a long stretch of potential work time.

Naturally, you should be on time for your office hours and have all of the necessary course materials on hand. If you need to change your office hours, even for a week, notify your students in advance. If a student cannot attend your scheduled office hours, find another time when you both can meet.

**Coordinating Student Meetings**

How long you spend talking with one particular student will depend on the nature of their visit and how many other students are waiting to meet with you. If another student peers into your meeting, ask them to wait outside your office and tell them approximately how long the wait will be. After that period of time, tell the student in your office that to be fair, you need to meet with the student waiting outside the office.

**Students Who Misuse Your Office Hours**

You will occasionally come across students who are much better at making it to your office hours than they are at making it to your class. If a student starts coming to your office hours regularly to find out about what is going on in the section or the lecture (or both!), you will want to nip this behavior in the bud. The best approach is to inform the student kindly that you would be delighted to discuss and clarify any
questions the student has about the section, lecture, or readings after
the student has obtained class notes and reviewed all the material.

Examples  “Do you know anyone else in the class from whom you
could get notes? Then if you have questions, we could talk
about those specifically.”

“Have you done the required reading for this week? Much
of the material we talked about in class is covered there, so
let’s talk about what seemed unclear to you in the read-
ing.”

This is also a good time to remind the student about your attendance
policy and the potential effect of multiple absences on their grade.

Ending Office Hours

If you are still meeting with a student when office hours end, feel free to
state politely that your office hours are over. If necessary, offer to have
the student return to your office hours next week to continue your dis-
cussion. Ending office hours can be difficult if you are in the middle of
meeting with a student who is very upset or angry. Again, politely
observe that your office hours have ended and that you can continue to
talk with the student more in the future if necessary.

See “Students with Personal Problems” and “Grade Complaints” in
this chapter for more information on how to end office hours.

E-mail

You should answer all e-mails from your students as quickly as possi-
ble, and you should send time-sensitive e-mails to students only if you
know they check their e-mailboxes regularly. If a student sends you
more e-mail than you can respond to electronically, suggest that the stu-
dent come to your office hours so that you can answer a number of their
questions at one time. A barrage of e-mails from a particular student
can be the surface manifestation of a bigger issue (e.g., a student crush,
excessive academic insecurity). Save all these e-mail messages and mon-
itor the situation so that you can manage further developments, if they
arise. Refer to the preceding section, “Students Who Misuse Your
Office Hours,” for information on how to address students who regu-
larly e-mail you for information instead of coming to class.
E-mail Tone

You can set the tone when you use e-mail to communicate with your students. Some teaching assistants like to keep their e-mails formal, while other teaching assistants like to use e-mail as a forum for more casual course-related discussion. If you feel that a student’s e-mails are overly familiar, all you have to do is bump up the formality of your response; most students will get the hint.

From a student:

Dear Sam,

I am in your Math 250 class. I was not in class on Wed. Sept 20th, due to the fact that I was suffering from a migraine headache. I was wondering if I could turn in my assignment for that day on Friday. If so I would really appreciate it. I do not have a doctor’s note, but I do have prescribed medication that I can show you if it is necessary. My migraines bring me to the point of near stroke, thereby rendering me unfit to attend class. I will describe it in further detail if need be. Please write and let me know if I can turn in my assignment. I understand your attendance policy, and will accept a negative answer if you must give one. I look forward to hearing from you.

Your student, Peter

Your formal response:

Peter,

Thank you for the note explaining your absence. I will accept the assignment on Friday and will not mark it down, although the absence will have to count as one of the three absences you are allowed during the term. I hope you are feeling better, and I’ll see you on Friday.

Sam

Your informal response:

Hi Peter. Thanks for the note. Your migraines sound miserable! I hope you are feeling recovered by this time—I hate to think of you teetering on the edge of stroke-dom. :-) Yes, I will accept your assignment on Friday, and I will give you full credit, given the nature of your absence. But I’m afraid that we’ll have to count it as one of your three absences. Take care of that head, and I’ll see you on Friday. —Sam
“Cc”-ing E-mail

If an e-mail conversation with a student becomes antagonistic or sensitive, or if you are discussing matters that may require departmental intervention, “cc” (i.e., send a copy to) the professor and/or the director of undergraduate studies in your response (and include the student’s original message). This way, the professor or director of undergraduate studies can monitor the situation and understand the details of the interaction if you later need advice or intervention. It also automatically brings in a third party to defuse the personal nature of the interaction between you and your student. The presence of a “higher authority” may or may not alter the student’s behavior, but it reminds them that your relationship is part of an institutional hierarchy.

E-mail Records

Save all of your e-mails from each of the courses that you teach for the duration of the semester (at least). This will provide you with an easily accessible record of your communications with students. Create a class file and save all class-related e-mail there, both messages from students and your responses (if you “cc” yourself in your response, you will be more likely to remember to save it).

Students with Attendance Problems

Some college students feel they no longer should have to abide by attendance or lateness policies. If you have a formal attendance policy, spell out explicitly on the syllabus how many absences students are allowed and how students’ grades will be affected by additional absences. Also tell students the point in time (e.g., twenty minutes) at which “lateness” becomes an absence (otherwise students may come to the last ten minutes of class to avoid an absence). Then, be consistent in enforcing the policy, or else some students may exploit your leniency.

Handling Student Excuses

Once students have used their allowed number of absences, they often will come to you with a distressing or complicated story about their next absence. Their story may well be true, but that does not necessar-
ily make it an excused absence. Sympathize with their predicament but firmly explain that if it were not for their previous absences, this absence would not be a problem. Allowed absences are not meant as days when students can skip class; you provide them knowing that emergencies can arise during the semester and students may have to miss class. If your students do not need them, they should not use these allowed absences.

Handling Excessive Student Absence

Students will usually miss multiple classes for two reasons: (1) they don’t care about the class; (2) something has gone very wrong in their personal lives. The first case is often grounds for failure, especially if students also are not handing in work. Do not feel guilty about this—these students know they deserve to fail for such behavior.

Students who miss many classes for personal reasons, unfortunately, still may have missed too many classes to do well or perhaps even to pass the course. If they won’t be able to attend all future classes and make up missed work, you can offer to give them a withdrawal from the class or an incomplete rather than failing them. It is your responsibility as an instructor not to pass students who do not complete the work in the course for whatever reason, but you usually have the option to authorize the student’s withdrawal from the course rather than fail them. Again, you will want to diagnose this problem before deciding on a solution.

See “Students with Personal Problems” in this chapter for more information on how to handle this situation.

Students with Learning Disabilities

The Nature of Learning Disabilities

Universities and their students are increasingly aware that there are competent students who also have learning disabilities. There is no relationship between being intelligent and having a learning disability; students with learning disabilities simply have some specific difficulty receiving or communicating information in one or more of the ways that are most common in academic settings.
What the Student Should Do

It is up to the student to alert you to their learning disability and tell you what kind of special accommodations they need before the first assignments are due or the first exam is administered. Students should come to you at the beginning of the term with official documentation of the problem and a request for special assistance. Any student with a learning disability should be able to provide a letter from the appropriate university office. This documentation likely will specify what you should do as an instructor and ensure that privileges associated with learning disabilities are not abused.

What the Teaching Assistant Should Do

Put a note on your syllabus asking students with learning disabilities or other special needs that you will need to accommodate to notify you immediately. When a student comes to you about a learning disability, you should make every effort to accommodate their special needs. However, you are not under any obligation to provide retroactive help to a student who alerts you to their learning disability after they already have had trouble in your class. Ask them what special accommodations they need for the next assignment or exam and encourage them to tell their other instructors about the learning disability as soon as possible.

If you feel that a student’s requests for special accommodations are unreasonable, contact the university office that issued the official documentation for advice on what is considered appropriate.

Student: I want to talk to you about my grade on the last exam. I didn’t do very well, and part of the problem is that I have a learning disability that makes it hard for me to work under time pressure.

TA: I am glad you let me know that you have a learning disability that got in the way of your performance on the exam. If this is causing you such serious problems, you should get documentation from the student services office that specifies the kinds of accommodations you need. Then we can arrange what you need for the next exam. In the future, you should let your instructors know about your disability at the beginning of the semester so that you get the support you need for the whole semester.

Student: Well, it works for me to take the same exam as everyone else but to just have more time to do it. But I am also worried that this bad first exam will hurt my grade in the course.
Students with Personal Problems

The Nature of Personal Problems

There are students with personal problems, and these problems often affect their academic performance. College students are at least as likely to suffer from troubles such as depression, eating disorders, drug or alcohol abuse, and violent relationships as are people in the “real world.” You may become aware of a student’s personal problems in a number of ways. Sometimes, a student will identify you as a caring person in a position of authority and come to you directly, send you an email, or attach a note to an assignment to alert you to the problem. Other times, you will become aware of a student’s personal problem when it interferes with the student’s ability to do their work in your course.

What the Teaching Assistant Should Do

It is not your job to diagnose or treat the problem. While you will want to be supportive of your students, you will compromise your role as a teacher if you also try to be a therapist. Do not try to solve the student’s problem. What you can do is help the student become aware of how their problem is interfering with their performance in your class (if they are not already aware of it) and point them toward help. Many university campuses offer free mental health services and academic counseling to students. It is highly likely that at some point you will come across a student who needs some sort of counseling; make a point of finding out about what services are available at your university.

It is a very natural reaction to want to accommodate the student as much as possible, especially if they seem upset, penitent, or frantic. But you may not be doing them a favor if you excuse them from the responsibilities of the class. If their problem is such that they cannot handle
their academic workload, they must confront this situation and seek outside help. They may need counseling or time off from school. Think of it as a “strict parent policy” in which you are enforcing fair rules and teaching students how to fulfill their responsibilities. Additionally, you can express your understanding that there are some semesters when difficult life events take priority over schoolwork. What is critical is that the student meet the problem head-on so that they can prioritize school again as soon as possible.

**Talking with the Student**

A student’s personal problems often will be quite severe before they significantly affect academic performance. You should not approach a student about a personal problem unless you are quite sure that something is going wrong for that student outside of the classroom. While you may be able to speculate about what is going wrong, you will have the most effective conversation with a student if you focus on what you do know: how the student is doing in your class. For example, you may notice that a student misses class often and smells of alcohol when they do come. Or, a student may seem to be extremely “down” and ask for repeated extensions on papers because they are unable to work productively.

**Where and When to Talk with Students about Personal Problems**

If you need to talk with a student about the ways a personal problem is affecting their work in the class, be sure to do it at a time and place where the student is likely to feel comfortable and where the conversation will not be overheard. Your departmental office may be a good place for a meeting like this. If you do not have a planned conference with the student, you will need to make a time to meet with them. If you need to plan a meeting, ask the student to stay after class and then make sure that you get them to set up a meeting with you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TA: Jamie, I want to talk with you about your work for the class. Could you meet with me on Wednesday at 4:00?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student: No, I have practice then.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA: O.K., when are some times next week that would work for you to meet?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What to Say in the Meeting

Regardless of what is going wrong for the student, once you have arranged a meeting, you can talk with your student about their work and suggest extra help in the following manner.

Example  “Jamie, I’ve noticed that you are missing class a lot lately and that you failed the most recent exam after getting a B+ on the first one. It seems like things outside of class may be making it hard for you to do your best in here. If you are interested, there are support services around campus, such as the counseling center, which can help you relieve stresses that are getting in the way of your academic work. I wanted to talk with you to find ways for you to do the best work you can in the course right now.”

Keep your focus on the student’s performance in the class. You and the student must determine if and how they can improve their performance in the class and how you can assist in that process.

When a Student “Blows You Off”

It is the student’s prerogative not to take your advice. In this case, be sure that you are clear with the student about where they stand academically and then do not pursue the issue further. Do not consider your efforts wasted: some people will seek out much-needed counseling only after they have heard the suggestion from a variety of people.

When a Student Approaches You

More commonly, a student will come to you to discuss a personal problem. When this happens, be sensitive to what they are telling you, without letting them “spill” too much. If you allow a student to give you an overly detailed account of their personal problem (e.g., confusion about how to handle their girlfriend’s pregnancy), you risk blurring the boundary between being their teacher and being their friend or counselor. As soon as feels comfortable, you can use the following guidelines to respond to the student.

• Acknowledge the problem and be sympathetic.
**Example**  “You were right to let me know that this has been going on for you, and it sounds really stressful. It is not uncommon for people to have trouble with (depression/eating disorders/romantic or family relationships).”

- If it feels like an appropriate time, tell the student about the university services available to help them with their problem.

**Example**  “Sometimes, it can really help to talk with someone about this kind of problem. If you are feeling like it would help to talk to someone besides your family and friends, you could contact the university counseling center, which has services available to students for just this sort of situation.”

- Talk with the student about where they stand in your class and how you can work together to get them caught up on the work. If the student’s mood makes it impossible to have a productive conversation, arrange for a future meeting.

**When a Student Cannot Do the Work**

Sometimes a student’s problems will become so overwhelming that they stop attending class or cannot do the required work. You must step in at this point and alert the student that they cannot pass the course given this situation. If you feel the student’s problems justify it, you can offer to withdraw them from the course rather than failing them. Do not feel guilty about this kind of action. These students know that they are incapable of doing the work, and they are rarely surprised by such consequences. While you may feel tempted to bend over backward to help the student through your class, this behavior may not be as helpful as you think it is. Many people will get help for severe personal problems only when they are faced with a clear consequence related to the problem, such as having to withdraw from a class. Be firm but also remember that it is important to express sympathy within appropriate boundaries; authority figures who are not appropriately sympathetic can be very hurtful.

**Antagonistic Students**

You will have antagonistic students. At times, students will make comments or write papers that are more antagonistic than thoughtful.
Though some students will do this by design, others will not even be aware they are being offensive or antagonistic. Your first reaction may be to protect yourself or other students from potential harm caused by an antagonistic student’s words. But your role as a teacher allows you to deal with these circumstances in a way that is constructive, not simply defensive. You want to promote intellectual disagreement; it is critical to a serious and productive learning environment. It is your job to help students present arguments and counterarguments that can be taken seriously.

See chapter 4, “Disruptive Students: The Antagonistic Debater,” for more information on how to handle this behavior in class.

**Problematic Terminology**

Sometimes students will unknowingly use terms or phrases that are offensive to you or to their fellow students. Sometimes students will knowingly use offensive terminology in order to antagonize you or their fellow students. First you’ll need to make a diagnosis: is the offense intentional or not?

If the student is using offensive language unwittingly, it usually only takes one comment (spoken or written) to remedy this situation. Gently explain to the student that there are more accepted terms and that they should be aware of the connotations of the terms they are presently using.

If the student is being deliberately offensive, you still need to see this as a teachable moment, both for the student and for their classmates. It is your responsibility to ensure that your classroom is a comfortable and productive learning environment. You can take this opportunity to talk with students about the wider ramifications of this kind of language and its power to derail any discourse, including a classroom discussion. Assuming that the student has a valid point to make, you can also show the student how this phrasing serves only to undermine the effectiveness of their argument.

See chapter 4, “Disruptive Students: The Bomb Dropper,” for more information on how to handle this behavior in class.

“I had a first-year student who used the word queer to refer to things he thought were weird. I pulled him aside two weeks into class and gently explained to him how and why that word might be offensive to his classmates. He was shocked: the term was used at his high school all the time, and he had no idea it could be offensive.”
Problematic Arguments

At times, students will mistake polemic for proof. This is especially likely when students have strong personal and antagonistic feelings about an issue. Your best approach is to show students how weak a proofless polemic is. Push students (either in spoken discussion or in written comments) to defend their positions with specific facts and a recognition of the merits of their argument in light of opposing views. Antagonistic arguments are often based on generalizations and empty rhetoric. When grading papers with these kinds of arguments you can show students (with your comments and their grade) that this kind of argument—antagonistic or not—is not effective. If your grading is based on the quality of the argument, you can explain it to the student without having to engage in a personal discussion of your views on this particular issue.

When Reason Fails

In extreme cases, you may find that talking with an antagonistic student or writing reasonable comments on their papers is failing to curb their behavior. You can begin by consulting with the professor or with the director of undergraduate studies about how to control the student’s behavior in class or how to respond effectively to their written assignments. Make and keep copies of the student’s antagonistic writing if you feel that you may need to seek advice from other teachers. If any part of your interaction with this student is occurring on e-mail, “cc” (i.e., send a copy to) the professor and/or the director of undergraduate studies to keep them informed on how the situation is progressing. The director of undergraduate studies has the authority and responsibility to meet with students if their behavior becomes disruptive and to transfer them to another section if necessary.

These situations can prove to be personally upsetting. Use the professor and your colleagues as moral support so that you are not drawn into a personal debate with the student. You will never gain by letting yourself become visibly angry or irrational with the student, so find other outlets for your frustration, hurt, or anger.

“Once I had a student who wrote a paper entitled ‘Democrats Suck.’ He had clearly written it to antagonize me, to see what I would do. I gave him a D. I gave him that grade not because I disagreed with him but because the paper was terribly written. He immediately e-mailed me to ask for a conference
about the grade. I knew it was going to be an unpleasant conference, and beforehand, I went over all the problems in the argument and in the proof so that I felt prepared. When I met with him, I was open about our differences in political views, and I acknowledged that some of his criticisms of liberals were potentially strong points. I then pointed out all the structural weaknesses in the paper itself. I pushed him for specifics to back up his generalizations and pointed out his leaps in logic. He walked away angry, but more with writing than with me.”

Fraternizing with Students

Social Activities with Students

Though you may like many of your students, it is not appropriate to include them in your social circle while you are their instructor. Socializing with your students can compromise your professional authority. Students are not necessarily prepared to think of you both as a peer and as an authority figure; it is critical that you not compromise the latter in an effort to “connect” with your students. In addition, socializing with your students exposes you to all sorts of risks.

- Many students drink illegally; you do not want to be a part of this activity, even as a witness.
- Spending time with your students as a peer encourages them to think of you as a potential romantic interest.
- Spending time with your students as a peer encourages them to think they can ask you favors about grades, exams, or other course work as a friend.
- Here is a scenario to avoid: a student blithely mentions to their parents that they were out drinking with their teaching assistant on Friday night. The parents call your department to ask about the appropriateness of that behavior.

You have lots of people who can be your friends. Let your students be your students. So, if you are invited to come to a student party or to join your students for a drink after class, thank them for the invitation and tell them that you cannot make it.

Socializing with former students, once the term is over, can still be problematic. They or their friends may take classes from you in the
future, and appropriate teacher-student boundaries may be more
difficult to maintain. However, one potentially rewarding part of teach-
ing is maintaining ongoing mentoring relationships with some students.
Use your judgment in establishing such relationships.

Crushes

Crushes can go both ways. However, it is more common for students to
develop crushes on their teaching assistants. These crushes often are
harmless, as both the student and the instructor know that the student
has no plans to pursue this romantic possibility. Ignore these crushes
unless the student decides to act on their feelings. Be firm in turning
down invitations for social activities and, if necessary, tell the student
explicitly that romantic relationships between students and instructors
are not appropriate.

| Student: | I was wondering if you would want to grab coffee with me some-
time. |
| TA: | If you would like to talk about the course, I would be happy to
talk with you during my office hours or to make another appoint-
ment if that time doesn’t work. |
| Student: | No, I was just wanting to grab coffee and hang out. |
| TA: | I appreciate the offer, but I find that it doesn’t work for teaching
assistants and students to hang out together socially. |
| Student: | Right, but I was thinking that we could just get to know each other
better. |
| TA: | Well, thank you for asking, but like I said, it won’t work. |
| Student: | Well, how about when the semester’s over? |
| TA: | I really don’t think that will be feasible. |

Teaching assistants also can find particular students attractive. Do
not act upon this attraction and be careful not to show any favoritism
toward a student you find attractive. Do not allow yourself to consider
the possibility of a romantic relationship with a student, even as some-
ting to be discussed as a “future possibility.” Do not dabble in the gray
areas (e.g., inviting a student “just” for coffee); most students will feel
obliged to accept such an invitation even if they would rather not—a
situation that could feel to a student like sexual harassment.

Once the term is over, you are technically free to do as you please at
most schools, taking into account that your responsibilities as an instructor can extend beyond the term (requests for recommendations, enrollment in another course with you). But during the term, you should in no way jeopardize your teacher-student relationship.

Attraction between students and teaching assistants is a tricky area. You must not forget that the power dynamic of the classroom affects all of your relationships with students, including ones that feel like genuine attraction. The difference between romance and sexual harassment is that sexual harassment involves a power differential that could potentially be abused.

See the next section, “Sexual Harassment,” for more information about what constitutes harassment.

“The second time I taught first-year composition, I had sixteen first-year men in the class, about ten of whom stared at me with adoring, puppy-dog eyes during every class meeting. And they would come to my office hours all the time. ‘I have an idea for my paper—can I come talk to you about it?’ ‘Will you take a look at my rough draft?’ ‘Will you read my new introduction?’ But it was all very safe (and very endearing). I knew they weren’t going to do anything about these crushes, and they knew they weren’t going to do anything either. And, whatever their motives, their writing sure did get a lot better!”

**Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment involves an abuse of power. Teachers always have more institutional power than students; students sometimes have more physical or cultural power than teachers. Sexual harassment between teachers and students can go both ways. Instructors may be sexually harassed by a student, but it usually happens the other way around.

**Sexual Harassment by Teaching Assistants**

You are in the position of authority with regard to your students; you must, therefore, be especially careful not to abuse your power. Many teaching assistants are close enough in age to their students that they may flirt with the idea of having a romantic encounter with one of them. These thoughts may be fueled by the fact that students often have crushes on their teaching assistants. Under no circumstances should you pursue a romantic and/or sexual relationship with a current student. In addition, you should never do *anything* that might be construed by a reasonable person as a sexual advance.
DON’T  Touch your students.

Make suggestive comments to them.

Use “racy” or sexually explicit language inappropriately in class.

Ask students to read “racy” or explicit material aloud in class or to write sexually explicit or provocative papers.

Invite a student for a “datelike” encounter (e.g., coffee, lunch, a movie).

Encourage a student to call you at home.

Call a student at home unless absolutely necessary for class-related business; whenever possible, use e-mail.

Meet with a student at your home—or theirs—even about strictly academic matters.

Meet with a student behind closed doors. If a student has come to you about a personal problem, lowered voices can provide the necessary privacy. See “Students with Personal Problems” in this chapter for more information on how to handle this situation.

Discuss your personal life with your students.

These guidelines hold for students of the opposite sex or of the same sex. It is a mistake to think that sexual harassment occurs only across sexes.

While these guidelines are designed to protect your students, they also protect you. At the most basic level, you do not want to do anything that would expose you to an accusation of sexual harassment. More generally, you do not want to compromise your position as an educator or your students’ ability to feel comfortable learning in your classroom.

**Sexual Harassment by Students**

*Defining Sexual Harassment by Students*

The standards for what constitutes sexual harassment by a student are slightly different than those for harassment by an instructor. Without
the power differential to abuse, harassment in this case is defined as any action that continues after an explicit “no.” Anything that feels like sexual harassment needs to be stopped as quickly as possible. Sexual harassment by a student can include (but is not limited to) the following.

Examples

A student makes subtle sexual comments to you after you have told them this is inappropriate.

A student asks you out for a date again after you definitively have said “no” the first time.

A student says grossly inappropriate things to you after you have told them what they are doing is inappropriate.

A student tries to touch you in a sexual way.

Responding to Sexual Harassment by Students

Your response needs to be firm and authoritative. If any part of this kind of interaction occurs on e-mail, send a copy of your responses to the director of undergraduate studies (including the student’s original message) to defuse the personal nature of the conversation and to alert the director to a potentially problematic situation.

Examples

If the student says things to you that make you uncomfortable, you may tell the student that their comments are inappropriate and leave it at that. If the student continues this behavior, you can tell them that you will be forced to report them because this kind of behavior constitutes harassment.

If you are asked on a date, you can say that it is not appropriate for teaching assistants to date their students. Saying, “I’m sorry, I’m busy” is not a definitive “no.”

If the student makes grossly inappropriate comments after you have told them to stop or tries to touch you in a sexual way, you have a choice to make: you can report the behavior to the proper campus authorities immediately, or you can tell the student that their behavior is not acceptable and that you will report it to the campus authorities if it happens again.
These situations are uncomfortable and unpleasant. Do not let your discomfort prevent you from responding with clarity and authority.

Most universities have an office that handles issues of sexual harassment. You should feel free to consult this office, the professor for the course, or the director of undergraduate studies for advice and moral support, even if you are uncertain about whether you will file a formal complaint.

**Plagiarism**

Find out about your university’s policy on plagiarism and explain this to students (in all seriousness) early in the term. If students will write papers for the course, carefully review how outside information (quotations and ideas) must be cited. Leave no room for questions about what constitutes plagiarism or the repercussions for doing it. Explain to your students that they may have their own questions about the proper citation of sources and that they should feel free to look to you for answers.

**Minimizing Opportunities for Plagiarism**

The best way to avoid plagiarism is to design assignments so specific to your course that students will not be able to copy material. Alternatively, or in addition, ask to see drafts of an assignment or have students discuss preliminary ideas with you (it is very hard to plagiarize a rough draft).

In addition, tell your students that you know about the term papers that are available in most fraternities and sororities and that you are familiar with the term-paper web sites (even if you aren’t!). If students know that you are clued in to these resources, they will be less likely to risk using them.

**Helping Students Use the Internet Appropriately**

With the growing popularity of the Internet, many students will do a preliminary Internet search on a topic before embarking on a paper or project. The Internet can be a valuable research tool if students know how to use it as such; you should explain to students the scholarly value of different types of Internet sites in your field and how they can begin to identify and use them. The Internet is also challenging traditional notions of copyright and plagiarism. Review with students how to cite
information found on the Internet, whether it be general ideas or specific quotations.

Spotting Plagiarism

There are often fairly clear signals of plagiarism.

- The topic of the paper is only marginally related to the assignment.
- The tone or style of the paper is noticeably different from the student’s previous work.
- The paper contains statistics, references, or facts that are not readily accessible to the student.
- There are very few grammatical mistakes or even awkward sentences.
- Two students hand in papers that are strikingly similar in the presentation and sequence of ideas.

Students sometimes will intersperse their own sentences or paragraphs into the plagiarized text, and you will notice shifts in style, tone, and grammatical correctness among these sections.

Unfortunately, you must accept that you will miss a certain amount of plagiarism. There are term papers on file in most fraternities and sororities, and there are now web sites of term papers on the Internet. Because these resources are widely available, you are best off tailoring assignments to make most of these “model papers” useless for your students.

Examples

Find a magazine advertisement that you think is interesting. Describe the techniques it employs to sell the product. Attach the advertisement to the paper when you hand it in.

Imagine that you are writing the introduction to a volume of articles that includes the articles by Sanchez and Miller that we have read. In 500 words, explain to readers how the articles’ arguments intersect.

Checking for Plagiarism

If you suspect a paper has been plagiarized, you have a few relatively quick options to check to see whether you can find the true source.
• Do a Lexis/Nexis or ProQuest search on the topic to find any relevant news articles that the student might have used.

• Search academic indexes for relevant scholarly articles.

• Do an Internet search on the topic.

• Type a suspicious phrase or sentence (surrounded by quotation marks) into Google.

There is a good chance, however, that you will not be able to identify the source; do not waste much of your time in this pursuit.

Meeting with Your Professor

Before you talk with the student about the paper, you should alert the professor that there may be a problem and decide on a course of action. You can draw on the professor’s experience with these matters. And you want to make sure that you and the professor agree on how the matter should be handled.

“One semester I caught two students turning in virtually the same paper. Plagiarism doesn’t get much more obvious than that! I told both students that they would be failed for the paper and might be referred to the board for academic discipline. But when I told the professor what I had done, he said, ‘Oh no, in a case like this, I simply ask the students to rewrite the papers.’ So, I then had to go back to the students and report the professor’s decision. Needless to say, I felt like my authority as their teacher was shot for the rest of the semester.”

Using University Resources

Most colleges and universities have offices that handle academic misconduct by students. You should feel free to consult with them at any point in the process as you decide upon a course of action. You may also want or need to forward the case to that office, after talking with the student, for a final determination on the case and for any sanctions at the university level (e.g., academic probation). University administrators ask instructors to alert their office about a student’s academic misconduct so that they can determine whether this is a one-time offense or part of a larger pattern.
Tempering Your Reaction

If you think or know that a student has plagiarized a paper, it is easy to feel angry and offended. But initially you must give the student the benefit of the doubt and allow them to explain if they can. Even if you have thoroughly discussed plagiarism in class, some students will not understand that, for example, rephrasing material from a source without citing it constitutes plagiarism. Or they will quote parts of a text and copy other parts of the same text without realizing that their citations do not cover the unquoted material.

Therefore, see your first job as “investigating the nature of the crime” to determine the circumstances and intentions. Start by saying, “I was wondering where you got this information.” The student may innocently tell you the source, and then you can discuss appropriate citation of secondary material. If the student claims the work is their own and you know it is not, then you have a clear case of plagiarism.

Talking with the Student

You should always talk with the student about a plagiarized or suspicious paper. The student should have the opportunity to explain what happened before any further action is taken. You can e-mail the student before you return papers and say that you need to set up a meeting to talk about the paper. Or when you return papers, you can tell the student that you need to meet with them individually to talk about the paper before you can grade it.

A Clear Case of Plagiarism

If you have the source of a plagiarized paper, we encourage you not to play games with the student by asking them how they came up with the idea. You can simply show the student the source and their paper and say, “Please explain to me how this happened.”

An Unclear Case of Plagiarism

If you strongly suspect plagiarism, start the conversation by telling the student that, after reading the paper, you realized that you need to speak with them before you could grade it. There are then several ways to proceed.
Ask the student to tell you more about a confusing or interesting idea in the paper; this will quickly reveal the student’s grasp of the material.

- Ask the student why they chose to write on this topic—and feel free to push them hard for a reason.
- Point to a passage that does not sound like their writing and ask them about the shift in tone or style.
- Ask the student to talk more about a source they cite in the paper.

Your suspicions will quickly become clear to the student, and that is unavoidable. Sometimes it will also quickly become clear that the student cannot talk knowledgeably about the paper. In this case, stop the conversation and simply ask, “Explain to me why you cannot talk about your paper.” Sometimes the student will be able to talk knowledgeably about the paper, in which case you may not have any solid grounds for suspecting plagiarism.

**The Dynamics of the Conversation**

When students are pushed and realize that they have been “found out,” they will sometimes admit guilt and plead extenuating circumstances. Students may also beg you to handle the case “in house” rather than alerting the professor or university office. The student will often frame the situation as if you had a choice about how to proceed. You should remind the student that they have put you in a position in which you must alert particular administrators about their academic misconduct.

**Example**

“I appreciate your Honesty, and I too am sorry that we’re having to have this conversation. But plagiarism is serious and needs to be dealt with at the departmental and university level.”

At the end of all conversations about plagiarism, you do not need to have the answer ready about what will happen next; often you will find that you need time to think about the situation and talk with the professor or director of undergraduate studies. You can say to the student that the conversation has helped you to understand more about the situation and that you will get back to them about what will happen next.

If the student becomes belligerent or offended and does not admit to
any wrongdoing, yet you still believe after the conversation that the student has not written all of the material in the paper, you should end the conversation. There is little to gain by arguing with the student; you will need to bring in a third party, whether that is the professor, the director of undergraduate studies, or a university administrator.

Example  “It seems that we see this situation differently. Let’s stop for now so that I can consult with Professor Marshall, and I’ll get back to you about what will happen next.”

The Follow-up to the Conversation

After your conversation with the student, you (and the professor, if appropriate) will have a choice to make. You may decide to turn the matter over to the appropriate university office for a decision and possible action. You do not need to be certain about the suspected plagiarism case to do this; you only need to have a strong suspicion of wrongdoing. A student who is found to have committed academic misconduct by this office will likely face consequences at the university level (e.g., academic probation). You must then work with the course professor to determine appropriate consequences for the student in your course (e.g., failing the paper, failing the course).

If the student’s protests have left you with serious doubts about whether plagiarism occurred, you may decide to deal with the matter yourself. Again, talk with the professor teaching the course to decide how to proceed. For example, the student can be asked to redo the assignment, to do the same assignment with better citations, and so forth. In some cases, you will simply have to swallow your suspicions and grade the paper. At some point, it is not a good use of your time to try to track down sources of papers you suspect are plagiarized.

In both clear and suspected cases of plagiarism, keep copies of all the student’s work in case you are faced with another suspected violation of academic codes of conduct by the same student later in the term.

Enforcing Plagiarism Policies

If the plagiarism is the result of honest ignorance (e.g., if the student rephrased sentences without citing the source as opposed to copying entire paragraphs or an entire paper), you can see your meeting with them as a warning and as an important part of the student’s education. Admonish them about the seriousness of plagiarism and alert them to
the fact that they probably will not see such leniency again in their academic career. Have the student rewrite the paper and then grade it.

If it is a case of blatant plagiarism and you have identified the source or the student has confessed, consult with the professor for the course or the director of undergraduate studies and then follow the university’s policy for handling this offense. There are no extenuating circumstances that make plagiarism acceptable. Because plagiarism is arguably the gravest offense at a university, it is critical that you take it seriously. Allow the university board for academic discipline to handle the matter.

**Cheating**

Cheating often is not hard to catch if you are alert and watch for it during an exam.

**Proctoring Exams**

There are easy steps to take to minimize the opportunities for cheating.

- Have students move their desks apart (if the desks are movable).
- Have students sit in every other seat in a lecture hall with fixed chairs.
- Make students put all papers, books, and cell phones into their bags and close them.
- Walk around the room during the exam period, and if you are sitting in the front, look up often.
- If any students are acting suspicious, watch them carefully (do not be subtle about this) or stand near them.
- Ask students wearing baseball caps to take them off or wear them bill backward so that you can see where their eyes are looking.
- Have two forms of the same exam—the forms can have the same questions but in a different order.

**Catching Cheating**

If you are proctoring an exam and catch a student using a “cheat sheet” (or a “cheat cap” or a “cheat arm”), *quietly* confiscate the illegal mate-
rial (if possible!). Ask the student where they are in the exam and mark that spot. Say to the student, “Finish the exam. I will discuss this with you when I grade the exams.” If it is not possible to confiscate the material (without the amputation of a limb), take the student’s exam and ask them to sit quietly until everyone else is finished in order to avoid a disturbance.

When you are grading the exams, consult with the professor and decide on a course of action. Inform the student of your decision; if you are concerned that the student will be belligerent, ask the professor to attend the meeting.

**Grading Exams**

If you find exams with strikingly similar answers and/or mistakes, you must talk with the students involved. First, tell the professor about the problem if you are leading a discussion section of a larger lecture and ask the professor to attend your meetings with the students. Meet with the students individually. Tell each one that you have found unusual similarities between their exam and another student’s and ask them to explain.

**Grade Complaints**

You can be fairly certain that, at some point along the line (and probably sooner rather than later), you will get a complaint about a paper, an exam, a quiz, or a final grade. There are a few universal reasons for grade complaints.

- Some first-year students who did well in high school may be shocked by their first set of (lower) college grades, and you may bear the brunt of that adjustment period.

- Some students will try to contest a grade just to see if you will change it; they may not believe they deserve a better grade, but they would be more than happy to get one anyway. They think it is at least worth a try.

- Some students will think that they can flirt a teaching assistant into giving them a better grade.

- Some male students will think that they can intimidate a female teaching assistant into giving them a better grade.
• You gave a particularly hard assignment or exam, and many students struggled.

• You give lower grades than another teaching assistant students have had.

Keep an open mind when discussing the grade but do not assume that you are wrong. The fact that a student has taken the time to come to office hours to question a grade does not justify a grade change. But naturally, if the error is yours, be gracious about changing the grade. Doing so in no way undermines your authority; stubbornly refusing to recognize a mistake does.

Complaints about a Graded Assignment

When you return graded material, be sure to tell students how the material was graded as well as when and how they should contact you with questions or concerns. If the majority of the grades were low and you expect students may be upset, do not hesitate to tell the class where they had problems and how they can deal with this grade in order to get a better final grade. Always remember that the final grade is a focal point for them and you are not “coming down a level” to discuss what they need to do in order to get the grade they want; see it instead as an incentive that makes them work harder.

When a student comes to your office hours with a grade complaint, discuss the grade with them calmly and rationally (regardless of their attitude). Do your best to be fair, poised, and authoritative in these situations. Indeed, the most difficult aspect of grade complaints is that students may take their grades very personally and may try to engage you in a discussion about what you have “done” to them. Never meet this approach head-on. Immediately shift the conversation away from being about a problem between you and the student. The grade reflects the student’s mastery of the material; position yourself as the helpful and informative teacher who is interested in helping the student increase their understanding of the course material.

Regardless of how the student approaches you, treat their grade complaint as a welcomed opportunity to clarify any confusion the student has about how you did your grading, the scoring system in the class, or the course material itself.

DON’T Immediately jump to the defensive and feel you must list every problem in the graded assignment.
Discuss grades right after class; students need time to digest the grade or your comments (and perhaps write a response).

**Do**  
Ask the student to come to the meeting with a written paragraph explaining what grade they feel would be appropriate for the work so that you can use it as a basis for discussion.

Make the student do most of the talking in a grade complaint situation.

Listen for where the student might have misunderstood the material and offer clarification.

At the beginning of the meeting, ask the student to explain what in your comments they did not understand and why they believe the grade is not appropriate.

Pick out the major problems you addressed in your written comments and ask the student to talk through their response to these criticisms.

Put their grade in the context of the other grades in the class; they may need a reminder that grades are relative and that other students may be doing better work.

Refer them to the criteria you established in the beginning of the course about grades; the clearer the criteria, the easier this situation is to handle.

*See chapter 8, “Grading Papers,” for more on grading criteria.*

**A Complaint about an Essay Grade**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>TA</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>TA</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>TA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don’t understand why I got a C on this paper. I worked really hard on it.</td>
<td>I know you worked hard on it. Did you understand my comments on the paper?</td>
<td>(looking at the comments): Well, yeah. But I don’t see why they make it a C paper. I know the organization could have been a little better, but you said the ideas were all okay.</td>
<td>So if you were going to revise this paper, how would you reorganize it?</td>
<td>(Muddles their way through trying to reorganize their ideas.)</td>
<td>That sounds much better. But as you can see, those are some pretty...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Complaint about an Exam Score

*Student:* I think you took off too many points on my exam. Why did I lose half the points on question 6?

*TA:* You only answered half the question. You needed to provide an explanation for why the mutation happens.

*Student:* But the question is really confusing and it doesn’t really say you have to explain it.

*TA:* It is a long question, but it does ask you to provide an explanation. Other students in the class did, so it is only fair to give them credit for having done so.

A Complaint about Consistently Poor Grades

*Student:* You keep giving me bad grades on my papers. And I keep doing what you say, and then you give me another bad grade.

*TA:* I understand how frustrating this is. In part it’s because my expectations go up with each paper. You need to fix the problems I comment on, but you also need to push yourself a step farther.

*Student:* But I don’t think I’ll ever get more than a B.

*TA:* You are very capable of getting a higher grade, but you’re really going to have to push yourself to do it. If you remember on the grade-explanation criteria handout, I wrote that an A paper shows innovation or pushes boundaries in some way. That is hard to do, and it involves more than just fixing mechanics.

A Complaint about “Hard Grading”

*Student:* You graded this test way too hard. My roommate took this course last year and said that if I studied, I would do well. And I studied, and you gave me a C+.

*TA:* I graded the exam as fairly as possible, and there was a wide range of grades in the class. Some students did very well. Remember, your grade is not a reward for hard work. It’s a measure of your mastery of the material.
A Belligerent Complaint

Student: I was really surprised to get my final grade for the course. I got a B– when I was expecting an A–.

TA: Here’s how I computed your final grade: you got a B on the first paper and a C on the second and third paper. I have you down for an A on the final exam and a B for class participation and attendance.

Student: Why did I get a B for class participation? I talked every day!

TA: You did participate on the days that you were there, but you also had four absences. I outlined clearly in the syllabus that your participation grade would be lowered for every absence past your second.

Student: That’s not fair! I had to go to my grandmother’s funeral. Did you expect me to miss that for your stupid class?!

TA: Of course not. Unfortunately you already had three other absences when you had to go to her funeral.

Student: I can’t believe this, I worked really hard in this class, and you stuck me with a B–, which is now part of my permanent record.

TA: I know that it is disappointing to get a lower grade than you expected, but I graded you and everyone else according to the standards that I set out at the beginning of the semester. I would be happy to adjust your grade if you found that I had miscalculated your points on any assignment or your total points for the semester. Otherwise, your grade stands as it is.

Student: This is unbelievable. You’ve totally screwed up my transcript, and you won’t do anything about it!

TA: Like I said, you will need to show me where I graded you unfairly. Short of that, I cannot change your grade. I’m afraid we’re going to have to stop this discussion for today. If you would like to, you can choose to talk with Professor Barry or to meet with the director of undergraduate studies.

Student: That’s it?! That’s all you’ll do?!

TA: Yes, that is all I will do. I have other students to meet with now.

Student storms out of office, muttering obscenities under her breath.

TA, clearly shaken, reassures himself that it is more important to be fair to all of his students than it is to adjust his standard for belligerent students.
Complaints about a Final Grade

Make the student do most of the talking in a conference about a final grade. Remind them that unless you have made a mathematical error in calculating their grade, it is not fair to change their grade and not their classmates’ grades. Some students might argue that they need a B+ instead of a B to get into the graduate school of their choice and believe that you can and will change the grade for them. Emphasize to them how unfair this action would be for all the other students in the class.

Some students will ask about their grade on e-mail. Here is an effective formula to follow in your response.

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Marvin,

I appreciate your concern about the grade, and I am glad that you asked for clarification. According to my records, you got a B– on the midterm, a B on the final, a C and a B+ on the two papers, and a B+ on the presentation. You were absent four times, and as you were only allowed three absences, that affected your participation grade. Following the grade percentages on the syllabus, I calculated your final grade to be a B. If you have anything different for any of these grades or for the final calculation, please let me know, and I will be happy to discuss changing the final grade. But otherwise, it would not be fair to your classmates, who were graded according to the same criteria, to change your grade. Best of luck in the coming semester.

Tasha
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Students with Persistent Complaints

If a student is persistent in their complaints and you are an assistant in a large lecture class, tell the professor about the situation as soon as you see that the problem is not going to be resolved easily. It is the professor’s responsibility to support you or help you deal with this kind of situation. It is most helpful for the professor if you keep them apprised of the situation as it develops. Once you have talked with the professor and the student then says, “I am going to go talk to Professor Choi about this grade,” you can say, “That is a good idea. Do you know how to get in touch with her?” This response will take much of the wind out of most students’ sails or provide students a recourse if they truly feel the grade is unfair. If you are teaching your own class, alert the director of undergraduate studies to this situation.

If it becomes evident at any point in the semester that a student may
complain persistently (and perhaps hostilely) about grades, keep a detailed record of your interactions with the student in case you need it at the end of the semester when it comes down to the final grade: photocopy papers with your comments, photocopy exams, take notes on meetings you’ve had with the student, and so on. You may never need to use this material, but you will be glad to have it if you do.

Letters of Recommendation

Because you often teach small classes of students and thereby come to know your students individually, students may regularly come to you asking for letters of recommendation.

Responding to the Request

When students ask you for letters of recommendation, be honest with them about how comfortable you feel writing such letters. Take every such request under serious consideration before agreeing or not agreeing to write a letter. You do not want to find yourself in the position of writing a letter for a student you cannot comfortably endorse.

Good Student

If you know the student well, agree to write the letter with enthusiasm (students often are nervous about asking, and this will reassure them).

Whether or not you know the student well, agree to write the letter but ask for additional materials (e.g., a résumé, a personal statement written for a graduate school application, a writing sample, a paper they wrote for you, etc.).

Average Student

Decide whether or not you can write a helpful letter. If so, ask for additional materials if you need them. If not, ask the student whether there are other instructors who might be more familiar with their work and academic strengths.

Poor Student

Ask the student whether there are other instructors they can ask— instructors who have seen their best work and perhaps know them better. If you need to, say that you do not think, given
what you have seen of the student’s work, you could write a helpful letter.

If you find yourself in the middle of trying to write a recommendation and realize that you cannot honestly write a supportive letter, you need to contact that student as soon as possible and advise that they seek out another recommender.

**Writing the Letter**

If you agree to write a letter, ask for as many details as you can about the position for which the student is applying and why they are applying—in other words, how they are going to use this letter. Ask for statements of purpose or résumés if you wish. The more specific and tailored you can make the letter, the more helpful it will be. Show that you *know* the student and describe unique, outstanding characteristics, if you can. A few hints:

- Include specific details (e.g., an incident in class, a paper the student wrote).
- If you have minor reservations, include those also—they can make the letter more balanced and believable. However, remember that letters of recommendation tend to be “overinflated” across the board. Be extremely careful, therefore, in phrasing these reservations if you do not want the student’s application to be adversely affected.
- Describe the student’s “extracurricular self” if you know the student outside of class.
- Describe the student’s work, communication skills, interaction with their peers and with you, goals and drive to achieve them, improvement, and so on.
- Compare the student’s work with that of other students if it will highlight the student’s strengths.

Include descriptive details whenever possible but still keep your letter pithy; potential employers and admissions committees want to be able to find the important points of your letter quickly and easily. To this end, front-load the paragraphs with the important points in case the readers do not read the entire paragraph.
Ask when the student needs to have the letter mailed off and then meet this deadline. Feel free to ask students to provide you with stamped and addressed envelopes if they have not done so.

Keep electronic versions of all of your letters of recommendation on file. You often will find that you can tailor an old letter of recommendation to fit another student rather than starting from scratch.

See appendix G for sample letters of recommendation.

Further Reading


