

Introduction

This book is designed to be an accessible, pragmatic teaching guide on a wide range of issues that arise both inside and outside the classroom for many first-time teaching assistants. The advice stems not only from our own experiences in the classroom but also from extensive consultation with other experienced teaching assistants as well as university faculty in a variety of disciplines who are highly regarded for their teaching skills. Important principles in pedagogical theory underlie much of the material presented here, and all our advice is grounded in broader pedagogical approaches. But our focus remains on the practical, day-to-day matters you will face as a teaching assistant and how you can approach them effectively.

Graduate students teaching in university settings face unique issues in the classroom. Much of the material in this book will be helpful to new teachers at other stages in their careers, but some of the material is aimed directly at new graduate student teachers.

We strongly recommend that you familiarize yourself with the excellent material published on pedagogy in higher education, and we offer suggested readings throughout this book. We also recognize that not all theoretical material on pedagogy aims to provide practical advice (on such banal matters as when to do your photocopying); we offer this book as a complementary resource for first-time teaching assistants. There is great value to theoretical material about teaching; there is also great value to practical advice.

The kind of collaboration that has created this book is one of the keys to successful teaching at every level. We all develop as teachers throughout our careers as we learn from our own experiences as well as the experiences of others. Much of this collaboration happens informally—over lunch or during a chance meeting in the hallway. Some of it happens more formally during pedagogical workshops or training sessions. In this book, we have tried to record a range of teaching wisdom so that first-time teachers will have immediate access to a teaching resource when there is no workshop planned and the hallways are empty.

Organization of the Book

Each topic in this book is divided into headings and subheadings for easy reference. The Contents and Index will help you locate exactly what you need at any given point (or moment of crisis) during the term.

Each chapter includes explanations and examples, from hand-outs to conversations. Appendixes at the end of the book include longer exemplary documents. In each chapter, we also share teaching anecdotes that we have collected to help you realize that whatever happens to you (especially if it is embarrassing or painful) something similar, if not worse, has happened to someone else. These appear in boldfaced type and are set off near the margins. At the end of each chapter you will find a short list of possible further readings should you wish to pursue a particular topic; we have limited these references to generally relevant books, many of which contain excellent bibliographies with more specifically directed books and articles.

Terminology

Teaching Assistant

Graduate students at different universities prefer different terms for referring to their teaching role in the classroom: teaching assistant, graduate student instructor, graduate instructor, and so on. We had to pick one, and we settled on *teaching assistant*. There are connotation problems with *teaching assistant*, the most important of which is that it implies that the graduate student is necessarily helping a professor to teach, which is not always the case. Many graduate students run their own courses, and even those who run a section for a larger lecture course are still teaching on their own. The term *teaching assistant* is, however, the most widely accepted and used term for graduate students who teach; we hope no one will take offense at the selection of this term.

Singular Generic *They*

In writing general material about teaching assistants and students, it is impossible to avoid the “generic pronoun problem.” Luckily, Anne has devoted (frighteningly) many research hours to this subject and, for better or worse, has strong views on the matter. Lisa, a psychologist, deferred to Anne, the linguist, entirely on this matter. Please send all contrary responses on this subject straight to Anne.

English does have a generic singular pronoun: it is *they*, and most of us use it in spoken language all the time. Grammar books finally have accepted that “generic *he*” is not generic, which leaves us with the “acceptable” option of *he or she*, but that can sound awkward (and it would make this book longer!). Grammarians state that while using *they* with a singular subject might create gender agreement, it violates number agreement. Not necessarily so. The pronoun *they* has taken on a singular function with singular subjects of unknown gender, and English speakers and readers are rarely significantly confused about the number of people in question (this change is not without precedence: *you*, formerly only plural, took on a singular function). We have opted, therefore, to be on the cutting edge of written language change, to stick to our guns, and to use singular *they*.

The Authors

Lisa Damour received a B.A. in psychology from Yale in 1992 and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Michigan in May 1997. With all her newfound free time (if we ignore that she then started a postdoctoral fellowship), she decided to write a book with her friend and squash/swimming/running partner, Anne. Lisa worked as a teaching assistant for six semesters at the University of Michigan. She now has a private practice in Cleveland and is an adjunct faculty member at John Carroll University and a clinical instructor at Case Western Reserve University.

Anne Curzan received a B.A. in linguistics from Yale in 1991 and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Michigan in June 1998. To “complement” the work of writing her dissertation, she

decided to write a book with her friend and squash/swimming/running partner, Lisa. Anne taught English for two years at a university in central China after graduating from college; she worked as a teaching assistant for six semesters at the University of Michigan and received the David and Linda Moscow Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Composition. She is now Associate Professor of English at the University of Michigan.

Since 2003, Lisa and Anne have been invited by the organizers of T.A. training programs around the country to present workshops or organize full programs for graduate student teaching instructors.

Changes to the Third Edition

One of the real joys of teaching and working with new teachers is that we continue to refine our own practice of college teaching and how we think about introducing that practice to new teachers. This edition of *First Day to Final Grade* incorporates what we have learned since the second edition was published in 2006. This edition also includes two major additions.

First, we have added a new chapter titled Preparing for the Job Market, which helps prepare teaching assistants to apply for academic jobs, both in terms of creating a teaching portfolio and preparing for job interviews. Second, we have tried to account for some of the notable changes in college teaching that have emerged since the publication of the last edition, including the pervasive use of technology in all aspects of teaching, the growing number of college students whose mental health issues affect our teaching, and the increasing role of students' parents in some of our interactions with students.

As was the case with the second edition, many of the changes that we've made for this new edition have grown out of our direct work with graduate student instructors at our home schools and at the universities where we have conducted T.A. training workshops or programs. We welcome the chance to grapple with the range and variety of challenges that face graduate student instructors and feel grateful for their willingness to share their experiences with us.

 **Acknowledgments**

This book would not have been possible without the help and support of so many of our friends, colleagues, and mentors. In particular we would like to thank Eileen Anderson-Fye, Matt Baker, James Beitler, Mary and Mike Curzan, Kate Gjaja, Karen Glen-nemeier, Johns Hopkins, Emily Hoyer, Darren Keefe, the late Glen Knudsvig, Mark Koch, Rosemary Kowalski, Nathan Kutz, Zak Lancaster, Sumati Murli, Chris Peterson, and Terri Tinkle for their time, meticulous reading, and invaluable comments on earlier versions of the manuscript. Special thanks also go to Doug Burger, Susan Montgomery, Fran Smith, and John Whittier-Ferguson, who all provided experienced advice on a multitude of teaching issues; to our students and instructors, who have taught us what it means to teach; and to Joel Smith, who provided, from the beginning, the backing that allowed our idea to become a book. Our families have given us unflagging support, counsel, and love throughout the process, and our friends have provided us with a never-ending supply of ideas and memorable quotes about teaching. For all of this and more, we are immeasurably grateful.