

# TA/TF TRAINING, PRE-SEMESTER LECTURE:

## *PRELIMINARY ISSUES*

Handouts:

1. Scenarios Document
2. Sample Syllabi and Department Template
3. Sample Examination Policies
4. Math Dept Teaching Fellow Policy Manual
5. Students Rights and Responsibilities Document
6. List of Math Courses with Descriptions

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. Preliminary Matters

1. Introduce the “contact mentors”.
2. Review syllabus.
3. Count:
  - (a) How many students will serve as graders?
  - (b) How many students will serve as recitation instructors?
  - (c) How many students will teach their own class?

#### B. Why take Math 5000?

1. If you are a grader, you will eventually move to either teaching a recitation section or teaching your own class.
2. If you are a recitation instructor, you will eventually be in charge of your own class.
3. Many TFs will be assigned graders.
4. Some may also be assigned a large lecture section, complete with own TAs.
5. In summary, all of what we discuss will eventually be valuable to you as a teacher.
6. TA's, TF's, and graders are sometimes fired for not upholding UNT and math department policies. Teaching at UNT differs from teaching at other institutions.
7. This course should be viewed as a list of recommendations for the classes you will teach and assist with over the next 2-6 years at UNT. This class should also prepare you for complete autonomy of your own class, at any institution.

## II. BEFORE CLASSES BEGIN

- A. Formulate your policies and syllabus BEFORE your first class meeting, and hand out your syllabus on the first day of classes.
- B. The syllabus formally states course information and your contact information, policies, and expectations.
- C. The syllabus is your **contract** with the students. The students expect you to stick to the rules laid out in the syllabus. You will often/usually meet with disaster if you deviate from the written policy. (Even if to boost student grades...?)
- D. The syllabus is your chance to head off most difficulties in your course. Don't blow this golden opportunity! A couple of sentence in your syllabus (e.g., on late homework) can ward off numerous arguments in your office and on the phone (as well as meetings with the chair of the math department). For example, stating "no extra credit ever" may prevent you from answering 20 emails the day before the final. Your syllabus backs you up in the event your final grades are contested. (Think like a lawyer!)
- E. Spell out your *expectations*: when you inform your students of how you expect them to act, most will rise to the expectation (and drag the rest with them). Don't assume that students know basic tenants of class behavior (for example, stapling homework as opposed to using duct tape): write everything out concretely.
- F. Be careful of cultural differences. Ordinary expectations in your own country may seem excessively strict here. Can you forbid students from chewing gum? From walking in late (lock the doors)? From taking notes or doing homework in pen?

*Example: John Q's wife: "Bless you" during an exam.*

- G. Your policies and style will change over time.
- H. Your syllabus should be finalized only AFTER you have attended all pre-semester meetings and learn all administrative duties and directives. For example:
  - 1. (Grader) Are you expected to deal directly with the students? If so, are you required to hold office hours?
  - 2. (TA/Grader) Do you have to grade sloppy/illegible work?
  - 3. (TA/Grader) What are you to do about late homework?
  - 4. (TA) Are you required to attend the lectures?
  - 5. (TA/TF) Are you allowed to quiz your students at will?
  - 6. (TA/TF) Is there a mandated make-up policy?
  - 7. (TA/TF) Are you allowed to require attendance? Should you?
  - 8. Other issues?
- I. If you are serving as a recitation instructor or grader, you will need to discuss policy issues with your lecturer. **You should meet your lecturer before you hand out any syllabus or policy document relating to your portion of the course.**
- J. If you are responsible for your own course (TF), you must attend the course coordinator's meeting, regardless of how many times you have taught the course.
- K. Important polices should be presented to students in writing. Verbal announcements just don't carry the weight of a rule in writing.
- L. **Warning:** The policies and classroom atmosphere that you establish during the first few class meetings will be those that you are stuck with for the semester. In particular, NOW IS THE TIME TO DO YOUR PLANNING.

### III. YOUR SYLLABUS

- A. From the Departmental template, what is the minimum information that should be included in your syllabus?
- B. Look at a few examples from the “Scenarios” document:
  - 1. Discuss Scenarios items 68, 63, 64, 65.
  - 2. Review disciplinary information.
- C. There are several resource manuals available on-line. The University of North Texas offers:
  - 1. The Revised TA/TF Handbook, available at [www.unt.edu/vpaa](http://www.unt.edu/vpaa).
  - 2. The Department of Mathematics TA/TF policy manual, available at [www.math.unt.edu](http://www.math.unt.edu). Look under *Course Information* and then *Instruction Information* for the *TA/TF policy manual*.
- D. Your syllabus should describe:
  - 1. Your duties: you may wish to include some things that students can and should expect from you as the instructor.
  - 2. Expectations: spell out your expectations of the students.
  - 3. Policies stated clearly (on homework, quizzes, exams, projects, etc.)
  - 4. Office hours: 4 per week. State when and where.
  - 5. Prerequisites.
  - 6. Grading policy and grading scale.
  - 7. Exams and final:
    - (a) Dates and location. (Watch Out: check that your classroom is reserved for your final if teaching an evening class!)
    - (b) Calculator policy (discuss the philosophy). Note that some classes (1100) allow the use of calculators on the common final.
    - (c) The make-up policy. (“I missed the exam because my mom was just diagnosed with prostate cancer.”)
    - (d) The nature and coverage of the final (comprehensive — though not a sufficient condition for earning a given grade).
  - 8. Quizzes and homework:
    - (a) Homework versus in-class short quizzes: which is better?
    - (b) Late assignment policy.
    - (c) Drop policy (e.g., drop two lowest homework scores?).
    - (d) Expectations for written assignments prepared outside of class (e.g., problems submitted out of order?).
  - 9. In-class quiz and examination conduct (why include this?).
  - 10. Attendance and punctuality expectations/policies.
  - 11. Special issues:
    - (a) The day before Thanksgiving.
    - (b) The day before Spring Break.
    - (c) The day after Spring Break.
    - (d) Dead week (no exams for sure).
  - 12. The Americans With Disabilities Act information: this must be included.
- E. You may want to include a day-by-day schedule and complete list of homework problems.
  - 1. What are the benefits to the instructor?
  - 2. What are the benefits to the student?
  - 3. Be sure to include the “tentative” disclaimer.

#### IV. SOME SPECIFICS AND FIRST DAY

##### A. For Recitation Instructors and Graders:

1. Meet with your instructor(s) right away.
2. Make sure you have a copy of your instructor's syllabus.
3. Familiarize yourself with the information contained in your instructor's syllabus.
4. Determine the extent to which you are free to enforce your own policies. For example,
  - (a) Attendance?
  - (b) Administration of quizzes?
5. If you are expected to collect homework, find out which problems are to be graded.
6. Let your lecturer know if most students miss a particular problem.
7. Make sure you have obtained clear guidelines regarding how rigorously problems are to be graded and how partial credit should be assigned. You need to ask.
8. **NEVER** tell students that topic "X" will or will not appear on an exam unless your have been so instructed by your lecturer. While this warning applies to recitation instructors and graders, it also applies to those teaching Math 1100, since in this course there is a common final exam.
9. Make sure you know what your lecturer is doing and prepare the material beforehand.
10. Don't underestimate the material, and teach yourself to anticipate questions and difficulties. Have a list of examples/problems always ready!
11. Think long and hard about what to include in your syllabus — and OK everything with your lecturer first.

##### B. For Those Responsible For Their Own Class:

1. Be sure to attend all relevant meetings **before formalizing** your syllabus, including the course coordinators meetings.
2. I encourage you to prepare a day-by-day schedule. Note that for 1010 it is done for you. For other courses, your course coordinator may be able to provide one, or direct you to someone who has one already prepared.
3. Decide on and fix your exam dates before classes begin. Best to include these in the syllabus!
4. Be sure your syllabus is consistent with the expectations of the course coordinator and with all departmental and university policies. When in doubt, consult a course coordinator, contact mentor, or graduate advisor.
5. You should be aware of prerequisite verification:
  - (a) Rita Sears in the math department's advising office checks prerequisites. She is the expert.
  - (b) The computer will usually not allow a student to enroll in your course unless he/she has met the prerequisite.
  - (c) Occasionally, the computer may allow someone to enroll without the prerequisite. In that case, Rita Sears will email you directly and tell you what to do.
  - (d) When dealing directly with students regarding the testing and prerequisite policies, be as positive as possible. For example, emphasize that this is to help students succeed: "The policy helps you direct your time and money to courses you will do well in! Prevents you from dropping courses later..." Emphasize that being familiar with a topic is not the same as knowing (being proficient with) a topic.
  - (e) Don't sign anything — check with your course coordinator first.

C. You do not have administrative rights for the department. Therefore, **DO NOT**, under any circumstances, give any student permission to add, change, switch, sit in on, or monkey around with your class. Specifically:

1. **Do not give students permission to switch to your section because your classroom is not full.** Often it may appear that you have room based on your class role or available space, but there is a time delay between when a student registers and when the name appears on your printed list.
2. **All section transfers must go through the math office.** (There is often a time delay between when the student registers for your course and when he or she shows up as well.)
3. You will certainly be asked by desperate students if they can add, monitor and/or sit in on your class. **JUST SAY NO!** Department policy prohibits you from accepting such requests. The student will need to either
  - Use the web to change his or her schedule; or
  - Go directly to the math office and ask for permission.
4. **WARNING: Do not tell a student that it is all right with you for him/her to sit in on your class. Do not tell a student that it is all right with you if he/she adds your course.** Desperate students will understand this to mean that they have just received “the instructor’s permission.”

D. Getting to class the first day:

1. Show up **on time**, if not five minutes early, for your first day of class.
2. Your students are paying for a full class period, so use the whole class period. Do not cut class short just because it is the first day.
3. Classroom computers can be used as an “official” clock.
4. Parking is atrocious during the first week of class. Arrive on campus EARLY.
5. The copiers may ALL be busy or broken the hour or two immediately before your class. Photocopy well in advance!

E. Assume authority on your first day of class.

1. **DO NOT GET INTO THE HABIT OF LETTING YOUR STUDENTS LEAVE CLASS EARLY.** If you do, they will begin to expect it and you will rapidly lose control of the dynamics earlier and earlier each class meeting. This is a common problem for inexperienced instructors.
2. You are paid to use the *whole* class period, every lecture. Have ready worksheets, group problems, practice quizzes, review material, etc. in case you finish early.
3. It is easy to begin with a high degree of strictness and then to gradually relax. **It is nearly impossible to regain control of a class.**
4. You **owe it to your students** to make sure that your class is under control.
5. Don’t wait for a small side comment to develop into a weekly disruption. Head ’em off at the pass! Address the problem RIGHT AWAY and be firm. Read the “student’s rights and responsibilities” document found at [www.unt.edu/csrr](http://www.unt.edu/csrr). An excerpt:  
*“...Students may not disrupt class or any other university process by any means (including sideline conversations, comments, arguments, noise of any kind, or other activity which would hinder access to or utilization of academic information...”*
6. If you can develop a reputation as fair, students will usually give you the benefit of the doubt when awkward situations arise.  
*Example: Magic John’s really bad joke to “minimize cost”.*
7. Dissention and discord will destroy a class. Always deal with such problems immediately. Obtain help from your course coordinator if necessary.

8. Decide how you want your students to address you: “Anne” vs. “Ms. Shepler”. (Or “Miss Shepler”? Or “Mrs. Shepler”?)
9. Pay careful attention to your appearance:
  - Your dress should be “professional.” Any elementary or high-school teacher will tell you that your attire psychologically affects how well students learn. The same happens at the university level.

*Example: Teaching 1680 in summer vs. long semester*

- Leave the short shorts, muscle shirts, University of Nebraska lineman shirts, skin-tight clothing, Speedo swim trunks at home. Flip flops? Women: short skirts? Low cut shirts?
- There is a university policy, though it is frankly ambiguous.
- The principle is to make sure that your manner of dress is not a distraction. Your dress helps establish your professional identity.

*Example: Gretchen in CS106B*

- F. If you properly establish authority, students will perceive one of two scenarios:
  1. Instructor and student vs. course material.
  2. Instructor and course material vs. student.
- G. Make sure the “playing field” is level. In particular,
  1. Enforce your policies consistently and fairly. Grade blindly.
  2. Don’t reward those who push the boundaries.
- H. Seek audience participation:
  1. Involve your students in your lectures and problem solving sessions.
  2. Foster an atmosphere that welcomes (appropriate) questions. What are some unhelpful/inappropriate questions?
  3. If your students sit silently each lecture, it is time reconsider your teaching style.
- I. Be prepared:
  1. CAREFULLY AND THOROUGHLY PREPARE FOR EACH AND EVERY CLASS MEETING.
  2. Make sure you **always** have more material prepared than you expect to be able to cover.
  3. For problem solving sessions, prepare questions and solutions in case students don’t ask any questions.
  4. Make your lectures clear and directed. Whatever the key topics are for the day, do lots of examples in complete and careful detail.
- J. Take the time to visit your classroom before the first day. Some things to look for are the type and amount of board space.

*Example: Mary Ann teaching in ESSC 255*

- K. Remember to bring chalk or white board markers. An eraser can be helpful as well.
- L. Don’t be afraid to say that you don’t know. If stuck, MOVE ON: just say “something is not right here; let me get back to you next class period”. If pressed, explain that you prefer to sort this out in a quiet room, where it will take you 10 seconds, rather than using everyone’s time now.
- M. NEVER TRY TO FOOL YOUR STUDENTS. For example, a test review should not be *completely* different than the test itself.