Teaching lab sections for large intro classes

• Objectives
  – Understand what is important in a syllabus
  – Understand what students expect of you
  – Understand what professors expect of you
  – Understand what you should expect of students
  – Understand what you should expect of professors
Syllabi

• What do you think when you get a course syllabus?

• What if the professor changed something about the class part of the way through the semester?
Your responsibilities

• What do you think the students expect from you?
• What do you think the professors expect from you?
• What do you think your fellow TAs expect from you?
Your expectations

• What do you expect from your students?
  – What if they don't meet those expectations?
• What do you expect from your professors?
• Where should you draw the line with students?
Practical details

• What do you think is going to be hard about:
  – Grading
  – Writing quizzes
  – Time management
• How would you deal with cheating?
Common syllabus

- Lab sections for every section will have a common syllabus developed by TAs and/or instructor

- Requirements:
  - Your name and contact info
  - Break down of grade – quizzes, attendance, lab reports
  - Absence and late work policy
  - Text book
  - Lab schedule

- Consider listing:
  - Disability statement
  - Schedule
  - Grade – be sure not to conflict w/ instructor!
  - Honor statement
  - Your hours at tutor center
  - Grading criteria

- See sample syllabi
A syllabus is like a contract

- Grade appeals often depend on contradictions between the syllabus and practice.
- It tells students what you expect of them and what they can expect from you.
- A good syllabus preempts problems and lays out rules for dealing with problems that occur. It allows students to anticipate the work load, plan their semester, and evaluate their ability to succeed in the class.
- A good syllabus should not include rules that you may not be able to follow, for example:
  - Detailed grading guidelines or cut-offs
  - Overly strict absence or late work policies
Your responsibilities

• Show up to class on time (preferably ~10 minutes early).
• Show up prepared – **you should have done the lab** and spent some time anticipating problems.
• Understand the lab equipment and make sure that all lab stations have working equipment before lab.
• Put lab equipment away and report/repair any broken lab equipment.
• Grade students' work fairly, accurately, consistently, and in a timely manner.
  – Timely = 1 week after turned in. 2 weeks in exceptional cases.
  – If I have to ask a TA to grade students' work, I'm already angry.
• Report students' grades to them and the instructor, usually in Blackboard.
• Respond to emails from students in a timely manner. (Timely ~1 business day)
• Treat students, fellow teaching assistants, and the professor with respect.
• **Report plagiarism and cheating or evidence thereof to the professor.** Discuss unconfirmed suspicions with the prof. (Note that failure to do so is a violation of the honor code.)
• Treat students equally, within reason.
You should expect

- You should not work more hours than you are paid for. You are also a student and your teaching should not interfere with your studies. If you find you are spending more time on teaching than your stipend covers:
  - 1. Consider ways you can be more efficient and budget your time.
  - 2. Discuss how you can be more efficient with the instructor.
  - 3. If you still think your teaching responsibilities exceed the amount of time you are being paid for, discuss it with Jim Parks.

- You should be treated respectfully by students (and other TAs).
  - Refer problem students to the instructor. Discuss how to deal with problem students with the instructor.

- Teaching schedules should not interfere with your class schedule.

- Enough working lab equipment to teach the class. If this is a problem, discuss it with Jim Parks and the prof.

- The previous TA should leave the lab in working order, even if that means (s)he has to stay late to do so. If the previous TA does not do this, ask nicely 2-3 times. If it's still happening and it's interfering with your lab, contact the prof and Jim Parks.

- You should be able to understand the professor's expectations and any class rules. If you do not, you should able to get clarification from the professor.

- You should be able to ask the professor if you are having trouble with the material. It is better to do this before you are done grading.
You don't have to:

• Reply to students' emails immediately.
• Answer homework questions over email. You can insist they come in. (Typing equations is hard!)
• Give students your cell phone number. (Strongly recommend not doing this.)
• Meet with students outside class and outside your TA hours.
  – You can as long as this does not become overly burdensome. Consider referring your students to other TAs so it works better for others' schedules.
Grading

• Usually you will not get detailed instructions from the professor and you are expected to come up with your own guidelines.

• Discuss reasonable guidelines with the prof if you are unsure – but don't expect to get hours of guidance.

• Above all, grade all students consistently.
  – Recommend keeping notes, grading each part consecutively.

• You will make mistakes. This is OK. Fix genuine mistakes quickly and without complaint. Hold your ground if you did not make a mistake – never give unearned points back.

• Premeds want clear, consistent, fair grading. Use objective grading criteria whenever possible and when using subjective grading criteria, give an explanation.

• Grade each lab out of the same number of points throughout the semester and make the grade book clear so that the professor can understand what you did. K.I.S.S.

• Ask for help on Blackboard if you need it.
Writing quizzes

- Many of you will give lab quizzes. Usually the TAs write these quizzes.
- You will (almost definitely) overestimate the level of the students at first.
- Quizzes should be legible and straightforward.
- Writing quizzes and homework problems is actually pretty hard.
- Don't try to be too clever with your questions.
- If you write a bad question, own up to it, issue a clarification if it's not too late, and choose a fair way to grade it.
- I strongly recommend writing the quizzes as a group, with your fellow TAs, and using the same quiz for all sections, even if this is not required by the professor.
Cheating and plagiarism

- Common lab issues:
  - Turning in lab report from previous section
  - Copying data
- Tell your students not to save a copy of their lab report on the desktop and periodically check.
- Spot check for copied data.
- You won't catch all of it but that's ok – it doesn't help most of them anyways.
- **DO NOT DEAL WITH IT YOURSELF. REPORT IT TO THE PROFESSOR.**
- He or she may be fine with what you want to do in response but the professor needs to know. There may be a pattern.
Time management

• Your biggest issue as a graduate student

• Prioritize:
  – Teaching lab, preparing for lab, cleaning up after lab, grading students' work
  – Grading is the most elastic. It can take as much time as you give it.

• Experiment I did as a TA:
  – Graded labs with stop watch, making myself go through them quickly
  – Went back and looked to see if I would have graded differently with more time
  – There were a few points here and there I would have changed but nothing major.

• Discuss the lab with other TAs, including TAs who have taught the class before. They can tip you off to major problems before you run into them.

• Budget time replying to student emails.

• Limit time meeting with students outside of class hours. Refer them to the tutor center.
Tips

• Learn your students' names.
  – This makes a major difference in teaching evals and it demonstrates to the students that you see them as people.

• In the second week of class, ask students some questions about themselves – why they're taking this class, what they hope to get out of it, and something interesting about themselves. It makes it easier to remember their names and it changes students' perceptions of you – another easy way to get better teaching evals.

• Treat your students like human beings.

• Grade harder in the beginning. You can back off later but you can't get stricter later.

• Have a strict but reasonable policy on late work.
Don't date your students. Just don't.

- Consider meeting with students only in a shared office or the tutor center.
- Socializing with your students outside of class is strongly discouraged. (Mentoring is different. Discussing careers in physics over coffee is acceptable and even encouraged. Drinking at a party with your students is a bad idea.)
- You are now in a position of power. Use it wisely.