

# Developing Your Style

A Teaching Handbook for Philosophy  
Graduate Student Instructors

University of Arizona  
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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. Purpose of Handbook

This handbook was originally created in 1988, while I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan. Just a few years earlier, Professor Donald Munro's extraordinary dedication to undergraduate teaching had led him to develop a training program for the UM graduate students who would be working as teaching assistants. Graduate students participated actively in the program, not only as trainees but as facilitators, and in the sessions that took place each fall, we exchanged pedagogical techniques and tips for handling a host of teaching challenges. Having picked up a wealth of ideas from Professor Munro, other participating faculty members, and fellow graduate students, I conceived the idea of collecting these ideas together in a handbook which would provide a resource for future philosophy teaching assistants. This University of Arizona edition preserves the ideas contained in the original handbook, with some updating, while substituting the relevant UA resources and information for the UM resources and information contained in the first edition. I remain grateful to Professor Munro for his inspiration and to my fellow graduate students for their invaluable advice and input.

Connie S. Rosati  
University of Arizona  
August 2009  
[csrosati@email.arizona.edu](mailto:csrosati@email.arizona.edu)

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The purpose of this handbook is to provide guidance for teaching assistants in philosophy derived from the experience of other TAs. The handbook offers a "grab-bag" of tips and techniques, reflecting a wide variety of viewpoints on teaching and a wide variety of effective teaching styles. The hope is that it will prove useful to people in developing their own teaching styles and in dealing with the array of challenges that typically confront teachers.

For new TAs: You are bound to feel overwhelmed at times as you begin teaching. You may also find the number of suggestions contained in this handbook overwhelming. Keep in mind that the suggestions here represent the accumulated experience of many TAs over many years. It will take some time to develop your own teaching style, and you will surely have many ups and downs along the way, as we all have. Developing a teaching style is a process that involves both learning about how to teach and learning about yourself. Many different approaches and techniques can be highly effective; some will work for you, others will not. You do not have to be a particular sort of teacher—e.g. "the entertainer"—to be successful. The way to find out what works best for you is to allow yourself to experiment and make mistakes. The hope is that the suggestions provided herein will spare you some of the more common problems and help you to have a pleasurable teaching experience as you develop a teaching style that is comfortable for you.

Comments under each heading in this handbook are arranged into two categories: those things that TAs generally view as "must dos and don'ts," and those things they regard as a matter of personal style. Matters of style have been set off from the more general shared views. Disagreement about which category an item falls into have been indicated.

Please email me if you would like to share suggestions or offer additions or corrections so that the handbook will serve as a "living document," passing on year after year the collected wisdom of experienced TAs. And happy teaching!

## **B. Contributors**

The following people contributed to the first edition of this handbook: David Anderson; Nahlini Bhushan; Richard Dees; Gary Ebbs; Eric Gampel; Eileen John; Stefan Koch; Don Loeb; David Reed-Maxfield; Joel Richeimer; Chris Roberson; Connie Rosati (editor); Michael Winstrom; and Darryl Wright.

We have all benefited from training sessions with Don Munro, Jack Meiland, Frithjoff Bergman, Louis Loeb, Peter Railton, and Stephen Yablo. Many of their suggestions inform this handbook.

Many thanks to Jason Matteson for his helpful contributions to this 2009 UA edition.

## **II. GENERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS**

### **A. Meeting Your Class for the First Time**

It is extremely important to *use the full period* of your first class meeting for a number of reasons.

1. The first meeting helps to set the tone for the class, to make clear your expectations, and to communicate your seriousness about the section and the importance of philosophical discussion.
2. It is important to begin immediately establishing a good rapport with your students.
3. The first class affords you time to begin to introduce your students to philosophy.

#### ***Things to do the first day:***

1. The first day your sections meet you should have a handout (one page should suffice) with the following information: (a) your name, email address, office phone number and room number, and office hours (ordinarily, 3 hours per week); (b) course policy regarding attendance and participation, late assignments and plagiarism (some people save the part on plagiarism and academic dishonesty until the first assignment), and so on; (c) your expectations for what the section will be like. Be sure to *go over* the handout, if not during the first section meeting, then the next time you meet: do not count on it being read. Due to budgetary constraints, rather than distribute paper copies of your handout(s), you will need to arrange with the professor to post a copy on the course “**D2L**” website (or give you the requisite permission to post things yourself). D2L is an online course management system adopted by UA, which allows password protected posting of course materials, and has tools for creating an online grade book, managing submission of student work, and much more.

NOTE: The professor for the course will ordinarily have announced the grading system, etc. in the course syllabus and in lecture; what you may need to add is information about attendance and participation *in section* and how those affect grading. Any information you provide must be

consistent with the professor's policies and requirements, so please confer with him or her before producing the handout.

**STYLE:** Some people think it is not a good idea to talk much about grading the first day of class because this may get students too focused on grades rather than on the content of the course. Try to strike a balance so that you communicate your expectations clearly without intimidating your students. One way to do this is by asking students to read the relevant parts of your handout and the course syllabus for the next meeting, then leave time at the beginning to answer any questions they might have, though again, some would stress that it's best not to spend more than a few minutes on this—cover the basics and tell them you are happy to take up questions as they may come up during the term. Remember that the grading system is determined by the faculty member and he or she should field most general questions. Also, some TAs stress that it is a good idea to start off the semester with a firm position on late assignments, and so on. It is much harder for the TA—and confusing to students—if the TA begins with a very casual atmosphere and then tries to impose rules when problems arise. Better to have clear rules that include a caveat (e.g. “except under extraordinary circumstances”), as this gives students the necessary guidance, while leaving room to handle special cases.

2. Explain to your students the purpose or point of studying philosophy—especially the areas of philosophy to be covered in the course. People have different views about this, of course, but the TA can at least share his or her own perspective with the students and encourage them to think about what (other than course credit) they hope to gain from studying philosophy. It is also important to explain the purpose of the discussion section—i.e. tell them what they stand to gain from preparing for, attending, and participating in section. This can help to motivate them to get involved. Additionally, you should say something about the kind of atmosphere you hope to create in the classroom and encourage students to participate freely and to become comfortable with the possibility of making mistakes. Finally, you can encourage students to solicit help from you outside of class when they need it.

3. Begin learning your students' names. In a class of manageable size, it is important to learn as many names as you can. This facilitates communication in the classroom by helping to create a community in which students know and can address one another. It also communicates your interest in them as people, and tends to enhance their interest in participating.

**STYLE:** If you have trouble learning names, you might try the "Ann Landers" method: when a student speaks, ask his or her name, and repeat it several times in the course of responding to his or her comments. Some TAs pass out 3x5 cards, asking students to put down, e.g., their names, majors, previous philosophy, email address, and phone numbers, as a way of helping them to learn names.

4. Female and foreign TAs (that is, non-native English speakers) sometimes find that they have more difficulty being taken seriously by their students. So if you are a female or foreign TA, it is especially important that you be well-prepared and make serious use of the first class. This provides a chance to demonstrate the fact that you are articulate, competent, and serious about teaching. For foreign TAs, you'll want to do your best to make sure your explanations are clear, so you make a good impression, establish your competence, and encourage their confidence.

5. Once you have taken care of the nuts and bolts, *do something substantive* with the remaining time; do not simply end class early.

**STYLE:** You can do any number of things the first day of class in order to stimulate your students' interest and begin introducing them to philosophy, even if your section meets before the first lecture. Some ideas:

(a) Have a discussion about what they (and you) think philosophy is, and their expectations for the course. Why did they decide to take a philosophy course? What do they expect to learn?

(b) Have a discussion about the importance of learning to think clearly and carefully, giving them examples – e.g. from television, etc. – of bad reasoning.

(c) If you know of an issue that will be discussed in the class for which you are a TA, you might begin to get them thinking about that issue. (e.g. Present an example that raises a problem about whether we have free will.) If the lecture has already met, as will ordinarily be the case, you can and should begin to discuss any material presented in lecture.

(d) Have the students introduce themselves and then say something about themselves – either why they are taking the course, or one fact they would like the rest of the class to know about themselves.

## **B. Organizing Classroom Time: Leading and Motivating Discussion**

However you decide to structure your sections, you will need to keep three central points in mind:

First, having a good rapport with your students and among the students is absolutely crucial to their learning – and to your own. Tone and body language are important to establishing a good rapport. E.g. Make eye contact; deal with student questions and comments in a thoughtful and non-defensive, noncombative manner; before responding, make sure you understand student comment and questions – and that other students do – by paraphrasing or repeating and expanding on them; avoid cursing around your students; don't lean up against the board for long periods or keep your hands in your pockets or stand around drinking coffee – teach with your whole body so that you come across as engaged with the class. Through your behavior you can establish that the section is a community of mutually supportive inquirers, not a battleground. Philosophy is a cooperative venture in which students have the right to be treated with respect, both by you and by other students, and the right to learn from others in that community besides the teacher. Also, if you establish a good rapport with your students, they will trust you, and this creates space for you to experiment and learn more about what works for you as a teacher.

Second, a large part of your role is to serve as a *model* of philosophical methodology. Try to keep this in mind and self-consciously model for them various philosophical skills, such as clarifying a question, drawing a distinction, setting out an argument, raising an objection that speaks directly to an argument, and so on. Tell them what you are doing as you are doing it.

Finally, allowing yourself to experiment with a variety of techniques will enable you to begin to identify your strengths and weaknesses and so to develop your own effective teaching style. Be generous with yourself, as well as with your students.

*Some general points about leading discussion sections:*

1. Do not repeat the instructor's lecture, and do not prepare lectures of your own. The purpose of discussion sections is primarily to clarify points from the lecture that may have been unclear, to take up students' questions, and to develop their understanding of the material and their philosophical skills through discussion. Your aim, then, is to get your students talking. If you create the expectation that you will lecture or you respond to their silence by filling in with a lecture, this will reinforce their silence. Don't be thrown when you raise a question and no one responds. Learn to wait for 15 seconds (try this out so you know what 15 seconds feels like); then rephrase the question.

2. Effective organization helps students to absorb material and follow the discussion. It also enables you to cover more material more effectively. So, aim for a *well-structured* discussion. It can be very helpful to put an outline on the board of what you hope to cover, to write out arguments on the board, and to write down any critical points as they emerge in the discussion; students tend to write down anything you do. (See also III. TEACHING YOUR OWN CLASS, F. Preparing Lectures/Ratio of Lecture to Discussion. The ideas in that section of the handbook can be adapted to leading discussion sections.)

3. Be clear about what you are asking when you pose a question. Avoid questions that are so general that students cannot answer them or so narrow that the answer is "obvious." (In the latter case students are sometimes afraid the obvious answer is wrong.) Various sorts of questions can be posed to open and encourage discussion:

(a) Informational questions ask people to explain material from the lecture or reading. Such questions give you important information about how well the material has been understood.

(b) You can ask questions that invite them to explain the relationships between concepts, theories, positions, etc.

(c) You can ask questions that call for them to apply concepts, theories, etc. For example, bring in an item from the newspaper that connects with issues you have been discussing. (e.g. Consider the case of King Boots, the dog who was "tried" and found "guilty" of murder. What would theories of free will say about this?)

(d) You can ask them to take a position on a question, or comment on a position on a question. (e.g. Why does it seem odd to hold animals morally responsible for what they do?)

4. Discussion will be enhanced if you work at developing your own communication skills, in particular, your ability to be a good listener, to clarify a student's comments or questions before responding or soliciting responses from other students, to reinterpret student comments when they are off point so that their comments do apply (i.e. find something good and relevant in what they are saying), and to pull the discussion together and keep students focused on one issue at a time.

5. Your own responses to students should be aimed at creating a non-judgmental environment and establishing trust. Misunderstandings can be corrected without telling the student that he or she is wrong. (e.g. You can simply state the correction, and whenever possible, say why the misunderstanding nevertheless contains an important or interesting point.) On the other hand, too much praise of students' comments can also lead them to feel that they are being evaluated. The way you respond to students will communicate to them how it is appropriate for them to respond to each other. (e.g. Encouraging them to paraphrase each others remarks or questions before responding teaches them to be good listeners.) If you respond respectfully and constructively to students and discourage disrespectful responses, everyone will feel more comfortable talking.

6. Be aware of the physical setup of your class. It can help to, rearrange the room so that your students will focus less on you and more on each other. Even when the desks are nailed to the floor, you can ask students to face towards the center of the room, so they can see and talk to each other (at least for relevant parts of the section meeting).

7. Let students know, insofar as you can (obviously this will depend largely on what has been covered in lecture), what is on the agenda for the next meeting and how they should prepare themselves for it – i.e. what to read, what particular points or questions to think about, etc. Students may find it easier to participate if they know in advance what the focus of discussion will be. The TA can be more or less specific about this, as appropriate. (e.g. Sometimes you might just tell them that the next time discussion will focus on whatever questions they have about such-and-such.)

**STYLE:** TAs use a wide variety of techniques for stimulating class discussion and structuring class time. Some ideas:

1. Raise questions about points from the lecture that you suspect may not have been well understood.
2. Pull the content of the lecture together with a question that is focused, provocative, and expressed in terms that students can relate to.
3. Take an argument presented in lecture, clarify, and lead critical discussion of it; present new counterexamples for discussion.
4. Make a ridiculous statement on an issue raised in lecture and defend it.
5. Conduct sessions in which you spend the hour discussing matters of form, such as how to analyze arguments, how to write a paper, how to read a philosophical article (e.g. read a passage aloud and have students analyze it). It can be useful to have such sessions every 3 or 4 weeks, especially keyed to upcoming assignments.
6. Spend some sessions explicitly going over different types of arguments in class (e.g. analogy), as these may relate to the readings or lectures. Have the class do exercises in which they distill passages from their readings into premise/conclusion form, and then analyze the arguments premise by premise. If this kind of skill is developed in class, it will be possible for students to utilize it in their written assignments.



7. Try having small groups of students work together on a problem, and then present their results to the class. This works best when each group works on slightly different projects so that each group will learn from the others. Small group work can allow more students to participate and allows shy people to discuss topics in a less intimidating setting. It also makes the class as a whole a little less formal and allows the TA to teach in a more informal way.
8. Make individual students responsible for leading discussion once during the semester.
9. Divide the class into groups and have a debate.
10. Bring in items from the news that pertain to an issue discussed class.
11. Ask students to relate a topic from class to other classes they are taking.

Typically, there are ongoing concerns in discussion sections about how to encourage shy people to talk and how to discourage rude or aggressive people from monopolizing discussion.

*STYLE:* Some techniques one can use to encourage shy people to talk:

1. Require each member of the class to stop by once for office hours early in the semester. Talk with each of them and communicate your interest in hearing what they have to say in class. Some people do this after the first assignment is returned. (This can also make students at ease with seeking you out for assistance in the future.)
2. Give positive (only) class credit for participation, and tell students you will be doing so.
3. Establish a practice of calling on people randomly, to help ensure that people do the reading and/or feel involved in the class. This also prevents a few from monopolizing discussion, and if done non-aggressively and impartially, should not be too intimidating.

Dealing with rude or aggressive students is a bit trickier. Some suggestions:

1. Pose a difficult question to the person. In a nonconfrontational way, use his or her response to demonstrate that he or she has something to learn from the course.
2. Sometimes it can help to meet with the person outside of class. Hear the person out. If the person feels that he or she knows you and is understood, he or she may be less likely to act out in class.
3. Sometimes it is a matter of the student really wanting to impress you. When this is the case, you can encourage the student to talk to you on the side, and enlist him or her to help you to get others in the class talking.
4. Sometimes rudeness is best ignored. Sometimes it is best to respond directly and firmly but non-defensively and non-aggressively. Responding with a sense of humor can be helpful.

5. If a student is really "out to get you," you may need to respond firmly and publicly, both for your own sake (in terms of maintaining appropriate control of your class), and so that your other students do not feel frustrated by your failure to deal with the problem. (e.g. "X, when you interrupt like this it makes it difficult for others to follow the lecture/discussion. We are interested to hear what you have to say. But we/I also want the opportunity to express our/my points without interruption.")

How it will be helpful to respond will depend on the student involved, and why he or she is behaving in a particular way. Is he or she angry or confused about what the class is supposed to be about? Does he or she not feel heard? And so on. You might probe a bit to see what is going on before choosing a strategy. Unfortunately, there is no real substitute for experience in order to become adept at dealing with problem situations.

You should, of course, feel free to discuss any difficulties you may be experiencing with the professor or with members of the Teaching Assistant Advisory Committee. Keep in mind, too, that other TAs are always happy to help out and offer suggestions.

**STYLE: *Anne Baril's Tips for Leading a Discussion Section (2009)***

**Suggestions for beginning:**

- List the day's topics on the board. Choose a manageable list (3-6) from the week's lectures that you want the students to understand. List them on the side of the board. No matter where the discussion goes, try to achieve clarity on the listed topics subjects.
- Ask if there are any general questions, before you get started. (You can even prompt them to ask questions they might be embarrassed to ask, like: does everyone remember where to find the syllabus? And when the first exam is?) Starting this way can help to prevent students from interrupting discussion with questions like "When's the test?"
- Begin with a 'review' of what was covered in lecture – a review that *they* give, in response to your prompts.
  - Begin with the most basic questions imaginable, the points that anyone who was in class should remember. This gets them talking.
  - Build up from the easy stuff. Throw softballs to people. This is the time to try calling people by name; if the questions are easy enough, it shouldn't make people feel uncomfortable.
  - As a general rule, if someone gets a question wrong, make sure they don't feel bad about it; otherwise, it will be harder to get people to volunteer answers. Typically, saying that they were "close" sounds less harsh, keeps people talking. (On the flip side, if they get it exactly right, you can say "Exactly. Perfect.") (The exception is if someone is being rude, or arrogant, or misses the most obvious question you can dream up – it's ok to make them feel a *little* bad; this can keep the standards high.)
  - Pay attention to what they know; this provides cues as to the level at which to pitch the discussion.
  - Don't ask a question if you don't think *anyone* will be able to answer! It shouldn't be obvious to students that the other students haven't read/don't know what they're doing; if students realize this, they'll stop trying so hard.

### Suggestions for organizing the main portion of the discussion:

- How to organize the main portion of the class depends on how much material was covered in lecture. If it's a light week, there's more flexibility in what you do, and more time for them to talk about their experiences.
- A good, standard technique – get *them* to explain the material:
  - A good basic plan, on an average-to-heavy week, is to just continue with the 'review' you began class with, covering the material by getting *them* to explain it. Instead of asking basic, factual questions, you can get into deeper topics to foster a deeper understanding. You could ask questions about:
    - How one theory or idea relates to another.
    - How a theory or idea could apply to an actual situation, or what a theorist would say about X. (E.g. how would one reason in accordance with the categorical imperative, in this specific situation...)
    - Consider a theory or idea in relation to popular culture or current events.
    - Get them to offer reasons for believing a theory is true, or offer arguments for it, or defend it against criticism. (Use this language, or you'll likely just get simple claims about what they like or dislike.)
  - Read the room; flow from topic to topic. You can think up a list of questions beforehand, but just use it for ideas; sticking closely to it will inhibit the discussion. The idea is to try to flow naturally from question to question, topic to topic. Read the room; when people seem to understand a topic well enough, or are getting bored, move on to something else.
  - Spice it up with (their!) personal anecdotes. When the conversation lags, you can spice it up by asking for personal stories or opinions that relate to the theories. Don't spend too much time on such non-essentials, though; once they realize such stories don't help them on the exams or papers, they'll likely start seeing a discussion section that focuses on these stories as a waste.

#### MAIN THINGS:

- **Go slowly.** This is their time to *process* and *absorb* the new ideas.
- **Pitch it medium-high.** Don't explain things until *everyone* understands. They will (and should) need to study on their own, too.
- Other options (especially on a light week):
  - Bring in a news topic, put people in pairs to develop different positions on the issue, then ask them about it.
  - Act out something they've been learning (e.g. contrive a prisoner's dilemma).
  - Pick some difficult passages, circle up the desks and try to understand the arguments within. Or, if you get the sense that people are really lost, just go over some passages

line by line and get them to explain what is being said. Many of them are not used to the difficult language philosophers use.

- Small groups on a topic. (But make sure to keep them on track, e.g. by having them hand in something written down, or present their findings to the group.) They can:
  - Explain an argument
  - Apply a procedure (e.g. a utilitarian calculation).
  - Understand a passage
  - Pull an argument from the passage.
  - Contrast two theories.
  - Offer arguments for a theory.
- It's good to mix it up, since everyone learns in a different way. Make sure to do some group work at some point in the semester.

#### **Other discussion tips:**

- Appeal to philosophical interest, but occasional reminders about exams won't hurt. They are very busy, and need to be able to justify the time they spend on this class.
- Encourage students to be brave enough to argue for their OWN opinions, rather than (what is much easier for them) acting as defense for the strongest position, whether they believe in it or not – this will keep people engaged.
- Express a casual attitude about expressing normative points of view.
  - There's nothing strange about saying that an action is wrong, or that one theory is better than another; they do it all the time in their lives. But they pick up on our carefulness, and can sometimes balk at making any normative judgments at all.
  - To keep them engaged, you can try saying things like: "Well, to say an action is right or wrong doesn't mean you have to force your opinion on others. I want to know what *you* think."
  - Also, be aware that students tend to have certain associations with some words, like "judgments". (They think it's bad to make judgments.) You may have to explain how we philosophers use those words.

#### **Suggestions for ending:**

- End on time. There's nothing they hate more than being forced to stay there while you finish explaining something – and at that point, they're not listening anyway. Remember, your job in discussion section is not to get them to understand everything; it is just to use your class time most effectively towards that end.
- Leave a couple minutes for a little wrap-up. Ask again if there are any basic questions. Remind them of your office hours and anything coming up that they should remember.
- If you have another class to get to, make sure they know that this is why you're rushing out, and remind them that you're happy to speak to them at such-and-such a time.

### Attitude:

- You will develop a style that works for you. The one thing we should all strive to be for them in discussion section is **a kind and competent authority on the material**. You don't have to be an expert. (That's what the professor is for!) If they have a question about something beyond the course readings, it's perfectly fine to say that you don't know but that you will find out for them.
- Be conservative! Don't make any assumptions.

### Material –

- First thing you should do, every class, is to figure out how much they understand from the week's material. Don't assume!

### Humor –

- Better safe than sorry. Don't make any assumptions about political beliefs, etc. Even jokes based on what appear to be safe assumptions (e.g. that Bill O'Reilly is crazy) can ostracize people who are coming from a completely different background. You don't want any of your students to feel needlessly isolated from you and the other students.

### Reacting to what they say –

- Assume students are serious when they say something. Treat them seriously; they can always correct you if they were joking!
  - Sometimes students may sound initially as if they're saying something offensive, but digging deeper reveals that they were saying something else. Ask more questions; don't assume the obvious.
  - Even in the case where they *are* being offensive, it always goes down better if you **stay kind and laid-back**. You don't have to tolerate bigotry (indeed, *do not*), but don't dwell on it. If they are clearly saying something e.g. racist (or, more likely, homophobic or culturally insensitive), you can just say 'Well, I just can't understand that point of view. But we are now way off topic...' You can make your disapproval clear without making the situation heated and emotional.
  - Reacting slowly, and in the most conservative way, *will* pay off in the end. Overreactions are impossible to un-do, and can really turn a class sour.
- Be positive about the course.
    - Even if you don't agree with the procedures the professor requires you to implement, stay positive. It's tempting to grumble with students about procedures that even *you* think are unfair, but showing a negative attitude does a lot of damage.
    - On the positive side, point out how amazing the professor is. They are very lucky to be taking a class with our professors, and in our department. The class goes much better if they realize this.

## C. Handouts

Probably the two most important handouts to provide for your students are first, a handout on the first day explaining your basic policies and expectations (see "A. Meeting Your First Class"), and second, a handout explaining how to write a philosophy paper – though *only if* the professor does not provide such a handout, and if papers have been assigned for the course.

With regard to the latter, a number of points are worth including:

1. How to structure a philosophy paper. Do you want a particular format? e.g. Should introductions be written in a particular way? And so on.
2. What a paper should include (e.g. an introduction of a certain kind; arguments for one's thesis; replies to objections; explanations of technical or ambiguous terms).
3. What to avoid in writing a philosophy paper (e.g. appeals to authority or emotion; writing a purely expository paper).
4. What plagiarism is and how to avoid it (e.g. do you expect them to do any outside reading?; what sorts of references and bibliography do you expect them to provide?).

If the students are assigned more than one type of paper, it would be a good idea to prepare a handout with respect to each explaining the purpose of that particular assignment and the standards it should meet. Again, this applies *only* if the professor has not done so.

**STYLE:** Other kinds of handouts can be helpful:

- Study questions to help with the reading
- A handout explaining how to read a philosophical article or book
- A handout setting out an argument from the reading
- A handout on how to analyze arguments
- Copies of a news article or a passage from a philosophical work to structure discussion

Whatever handouts you might construct, it is a good idea to go over them with your students, because they often will not be read.

NOTE: Although handouts can be helpful, until you are teaching your own course, there is no expectation that you prepare handouts for your students. Doing so is purely a matter of how you choose to structure particular meetings, and the professor for the course may have views about this. Again, keep in mind that budgetary constraints will mostly preclude making physical copies of handouts for your students. You might consult the "**Teaching Resources**" webpage on the department's website under "Info for Current Grads." You will find various sample handouts posted there that you might consult.

## **D. Grading/Commenting on Papers/Online Resources**

### **1. Grading**

The professor for the course will ordinarily meet with you to explain how he or she would like for you to approach grading, so any guidelines you receive should be your reference point.

In addition to familiarizing yourself with any grading scale which the professor might want you to follow, you will want to be aware of the grading system used by the University as a whole. See <http://catalog.arizona.edu/2009-10/policies/grade.htm>. It is otherwise advisable to be aware of

the rough grading average in the department. Although you should not feel compelled to conform your average to the department average, some TAs feel that deviating too far would be unfair.

**STYLE:** Some TAs feel very strongly that one must blind grade to ensure fairness. Others do not believe this is necessary. For example, TAs who work closely with their students reviewing drafts of their papers may consider blind grading dishonest, since they are well aware of whose paper they are grading.

Where blind grading is feasible (especially with exams), many TAs recommend it. Whether or not you blind grade, it helps to ensure fairness if you have a clear point system in mind for exams and clear criteria for assigning grades to papers before you begin grading.

**STYLE:** TAs disagree about whether class participation should make a distinct contribution to students' grades or whether it should be used only to settle borderline cases. People who think it should be used only to settle borderline cases argue that the students' written work matters most; also, too many people have trouble speaking up in class and too many talk regardless of the quality of their contributions to make this policy good. On the other side, giving a grade or credit for class participation is a way of telling students that participation is an important part of the course and something with respect to which they need to make an effort. It communicates that doing philosophy involves discussion as much as writing. Here, as elsewhere, what you do may be governed by the professor's policies for the class.

## 2. Commenting on Papers

The guiding idea behind the following general suggestions is that students are entitled to have their work read carefully and to receive comments that are clear and constructive—that explain why a particular grade was received and what they might do to improve their work. Careful commenting will spare your students needless confusion and upset and will spare you the headache of grade disputes. [Note: D2L has tools for commenting online when students submit their papers via D2L. GTA Training Session II will explain this further. For additional information and assistance, contact Laura Howard ([lmhoward@email.arizona.edu](mailto:lmhoward@email.arizona.edu)), D2L, or the current GTA Mentors.]

*Some general points about commenting on papers and exams:*

1. Always begin by trying to say something good. Sometimes you may find this difficult; sometimes impossible. But most papers (and exams) have positive features, which you can begin your comments by mentioning. (e.g. "You have some interesting ideas about a difficult issue. I especially like what you have to say about..."; "Your paper shows good comprehension and is well-organized...") If it looks like the student has found an issue particularly difficult or frustrating, you might even begin by empathizing with his or her frustration.

2. Leave a clean break between your positive comments and your "negative" ones. The idea behind this is to try to make sure that each student receives some *unequivocally positive* feedback. When comments say things like "You have interesting things to say, but...", the qualification at the end has the effect of taking back the original positive comments. Formulate your positive remarks so that you feel you can express them honestly without qualifying them, and make sure there is a clear separation between your positive and negative remarks.

3. Negative comments should be frank and to the point, but constructive, and expressed in a “hearable” way, preferably as suggestions for how to improve this and future assignments. A student, ideally, should be able to read comments and understand both why he or she received a particular grade and what strategies to pursue to improve his or her work. Keep in mind that too much feedback can be overwhelming, so aim for comments that are brief and well-focused.
4. Be careful not to intimidate students with negative substantive comments about the plausibility of the positions they defend in papers, as if they were writing a critical response in a philosophy journal. Often students will defend positions that you think are pretty clearly indefensible or seriously problematic, and there is a temptation to overwhelm a student with your insights on the issue. It is better from the standpoint of the students' learning if you point out just a few of the problems and focus the bulk of your comments on the *structure* of the paper—i.e. is the issue carefully defined; are there arguments; what types of arguments are employed and are there suppressed premises that need explicit defense; are objections considered; are examples needed, etc.
5. Comments on papers should focus on those features of papers that correspond to the criteria students have been told will be used in grading their work (e.g. comprehension, argumentation, organization, or whatever). It can be helpful to students to separate comments into those pertaining to the content of the paper, and those pertaining to the writing and organization.
6. Try to catch English and writing problems early. Students with such problems can be referred to the Writing Skills Improvement Program. You should familiarize yourself with their services: <http://wsip.web.arizona.edu/>.

You might also make yourself aware of services through the Disability Resource Center <http://drc.arizona.edu/>, as some students will require testing or other accommodations. See also information about the SALT center, <http://www.salt.arizona.edu/>. Although your role is not to tutor students, you might find it useful to consult the “resources and handouts” at <http://www.salt.arizona.edu/tutTut.php#6>.

#### **STYLE:**

1. Some TAs use a set of abbreviations, distributed in advance to their students, in commenting on papers, for frequently recurring points (e.g. TNS (this needs support), AUTH (appealing to an authority), WEM (what exactly do you mean)).
2. Some use either a checklist or a comment sheet. This is a way of making sure that your commenting is consistent and reflects the criteria you said you would use in grading assignments. It is also (like 1) a way to *conserve your time and energy*, while providing targeted feedback that addresses common or recurring problems in student work. For example, you might type out a sheet that explains, in numbered paragraphs, common problems. You can then simply refer students, in your comments on their individual papers or exams, to the relevant numbered paragraphs on the comment sheet.
3. Some people comment primarily in the margins of papers or exams, with minimal comments at the end. Others put numbers in the margins and write comments on a separate sheet, presenting more general comments at the end of the paper. In general, it is a good idea to give some details along the way (whether you do this in the margins or not), with a



short paragraph at the end that provides an overview of the paper as a whole and areas to concentrate on for improvement. Some TAs word process their comments, so they can edit them and retain a copy for their records. As noted above under 2., D2L does have a system for providing feedback to students online.

4. Some TAs make it a policy to call in students who receive below average grades on their papers and exams to review the assignment, make sure the comments are clear, and provide encouragement.

How much commenting is too much, and how much is too little? Difficult question. If you give too little feedback, your students will not understand their grades or how to improve their work. If you give too much, they may feel overwhelmed and lost. Suggestion: as you are grading, ask yourself the following questions: (1) Do my comments explain why this assignment received the grade it did?; (2) Will the student be able to read these comments and see how to improve? As for amount, you might think in terms of roughly  $\frac{1}{2}$  - 1 page per five page paper (where this includes both marginal and final comments), although this will vary depending on the paper, and on whether any difficulties the student was experiencing with the paper are academic or motivational. If you use abbreviations and/or comments sheets (see Style 1 and 2 above), you can typically provide more feedback with less work. (Be prepared for the fact that some students will not bother to read the comments you have written.)

NOTE: It is a good idea when assignments are turned in to check right away for students who have failed to submit their work and to contact those students to encourage submission before all deadlines for submitting work have lapsed.

### 3. Online Resources

As noted earlier, D2L includes tools for creating an online grade book. The professor for the course may set up a grade book and ask you to record the grades directly online. Please be sure to consult with him or her about the use of D2L. For the most part, professors maintain their course websites, but you will find it helpful to get instruction in using D2L. Contact: Rachel Aguilar [raguilar@email.arizona.edu](mailto:raguilar@email.arizona.edu), (520) 621-3898, and Laura Howard ([lmhoward@email.arizona.edu](mailto:lmhoward@email.arizona.edu)).

UAccess <http://uaccess.arizona.edu/> is the UA's online system for accessing course rosters and submitting course grades. (Accessing this system from off-campus requires a special VPN connection.) You should confer with the course professor about the filing of final grades and access to UAccess. If you are the instructor of record on the course, you will automatically have access.

Managing Email: You may find that students often contact you by email with questions about the material or about assignments they are working on. Responding to their messages can be quite time consuming. You will want to decide on a policy regarding which matters you will take up by email and which will require a visit from the student during office hours. You might, e.g., avoid commenting on drafts of written work or lengthy questions about the material by email.

## E. Teaching Students How to Write Papers and Take Exams

### 1. Papers

Students tend to find writing philosophy papers extremely difficult and quite unlike anything else they have had to write before. So it is important to devote some time to teaching them how to go about writing a paper.

#### *STYLE:*

1. Spend a session or two during the semester talking about how to write a philosophy paper, using a handout as you go. Explain how philosophy papers differ from other papers (e.g. history or English papers).
2. Talk to them about how to structure a paper—how to write the introduction, the basic organization and elements of an argumentative essay, and so on.
3. Have a sample paper available for them to examine.
4. Take a sample paper topic and talk them through some strategies for how one might go about working on such a topic.

### 2. Exams

You can help your students prepare for exams by explaining the purpose and format of the exam—what will it be testing for (e.g. comprehension, ability to analyze a problem, ability to construct and defend a position, etc.; whether it will be essay, short answer, multiple choice). The professor should offer guidance on this, which you can reinforce.

#### *STYLE:*

1. Students may benefit from your conveying general points about test-taking. For example, they should answer first on an exam the questions that they think they can answer best. This helps to ensure that the exam reflects their best work, that they use their time well, and that they maintain confidence during the exam period.
2. Take a practice essay question and discuss with your students how to deal with ambiguous, vague, or complicated questions.
3. You might also discuss with your students how much detail and exposition of views you expect in an answer to an essay question.
4. You might spend time going over the grading of an exam.
5. If you are teaching your own course, you can make a sample exam available.
6. You might hold review sessions before final exams.

## **F. Dealing with Students' Academic, Personal, and Disciplinary Problems**

### **1. Referrals for Assistance with Learning and Writing Skills**

It is a good idea to try to catch any problems with writing or study skills early in the semester. As noted earlier, students can be referred to the following places:

Writing Skills Improvement Program: <http://wsip.web.arizona.edu/>  
1201 E. Helen Street, Tucson, AZ 85721. Phone: (520) 621-5849

Disability Resource Center: <http://drc.arizona.edu> E-mail: [uadrc@email.arizona.edu](mailto:uadrc@email.arizona.edu)  
1224 East Lowell Street, Tucson, AZ 85721, Phone: (520)621-3268

SALT center: <http://www.salt.arizona.edu/>  
1010 N. Highland Ave., Tucson, AZ 85721. Phone: (520) 621-1242.

### **2. Referrals for Assistance with Personal Problems**

Inattentiveness, late or incomplete assignments, or discrepancies between written work and verbal ability are often symptomatic of personal problems a student is having. These can include difficulties dealing with the many adjustments to college life, a current crisis, an ongoing problem, or just having taken on too much in a particular semester.

Ordinarily, you would notify the professor on the course of any problems you become aware of and direct the student to the professor, leaving it to him or her to address the matter. Sometimes, however, students may feel more comfortable speaking with you. Don't be afraid to call in a student who is doing poorly in your class, especially since some students react to doing poorly by withdrawing. (If the student is doing poorly because he or she does not want to work and simply needs the credit, he or she will let you know.) If a student approaches you with a problem, or if, while discussing a student's problems in your course, it becomes clear that the student's problems are not (primarily) academic, it can be appropriate to refer him or her to counseling services. The problem may also require you to alleviate some of the student's immediate stress, so you might (for example) negotiate (in consultation with the faculty member) what you believe to be a fair extension on an assignment, or require additional meetings with you to work on the material. It is important to strike a balance that relieves the student's distress and respects his or her autonomy, while setting limits (both so as to maintain fairness to your other students, and so that the student continues to have some structure to work within).

Typically if you were to refer someone for counseling, it would be for crisis counseling. The people who provide such services will be able to make any other needed referrals, whether it is for academic help, long-term counseling, or short-term specialized counseling (such as sexual assault counseling).

Counseling and Psychological Services:  
<http://www.health.arizona.edu/webfiles/caps.htm>  
Appointment # 520-621-3334, Third Floor of Campus Health.

### **3. Disciplinary Problems**

Please familiarize yourself with the Student Code of Conduct, the Code of Academic Integrity, Student Disciplinary Procedures, and Other UA Campus Policies and Procedures: <http://deanofstudents.arizona.edu/academicintegrity>.

*Some suggestions for handling cases of suspected academic dishonesty:*

1. Be sure to verify that academic dishonesty has occurred before you proceed further. Document what you find.
2. Notify the professor on the course of what you have found, and he or she will determine how to proceed.
3. Notify the student that the professor has been informed and ask him or her to schedule a meeting with the professor.

**STYLE:** TAs disagree amongst themselves about the appropriate way to handle cases of plagiarism and academic dishonesty. While some feel that such cases ought to be prosecuted and left to the appropriate body to decide, others are concerned that students be made to redo assignments and learn and with their suffering from having a record of academic dishonesty. Those who feel such cases should be prosecuted argue that you really are not doing your student a favor by dealing with dishonesty leniently: first, leniency is sometimes misunderstood and perceived as unfairness on your part; second, your (non-lenient) intervention may prevent the student from getting into worse trouble down the road. Additionally, they argue that handling such cases more leniently than University guidelines prescribe is unfair to other students in the class and encourages academic dishonesty by teaching students that the worst that can happen to them if they are caught is that they will have to do the assignment they were supposed to do anyway. Academic judiciaries tend, in any case, to be rather lenient in their dealings with students.

Please be aware that problems with academic dishonesty have been severe in recent years (and they continue to grow, given ready internet access to papers and other materials). Some instructors attempt to mitigate the problem by requiring submission of written assignments to an online system that checks student work for originality, such as **Turnitin.com**. Some TAs check papers by googling suspicious bits of text.

You can help to prevent academic dishonesty by announcing a clear policy regarding it early in the semester and in writing—usually, all you will need to do is verbally reinforce whatever the professor has already announced. Discuss with your students what plagiarism is, giving them examples. Some students honestly do not know and have never learned proper citation practices. You might explain to your students what you want by way of footnoting and bibliography and whether you expect them to do any extra reading to write their papers. Again, the professor will ordinarily have covered such matters. Caution students strenuously against the use (or purchase) of online “resources.”

If you report a case of plagiarism, the matter might ultimately be resolved in favor of the student. So you will need to keep in mind how you would have graded the assignment had you not thought it was plagiarized.

## **G. Sexual Harassment/Involvement with Students**

Please familiarize yourself with the University's Sexual Harassment Policy:

<http://www.hr.arizona.edu/policy/101>.

Equal Opportunity & Affirmative Action Office, University Services Building (Main Gate Center), Room 217, Phone: (520) 621- 9449.

Quite apart from whether sexual involvements between faculty and students constitute harassment, they are unethical. They compromise your ability to grade fairly, and they exploit the psychological advantage you have over someone who is (1) younger than you, and (2) subject to your authority. So do not get involved with your students, and do not make plans to get involved when the semester is over.

If you feel that a student is harassing you or making inappropriate remarks, you might initially try ignoring him or her, but otherwise, confront the student firmly and professionally, remind him or her that your relationship is strictly teacher/student, and notify the professor.

## **H. Creating a Non-Discriminatory Learning Environment**

Avoid using any examples which involve stereotypes, whether they are based on race, religion, gender, sexual preference, physical appearance, or developmental or physical disability. TAs generally advise using 'he' and 'she' alternately, and allowing some of the doctors, judges, etc. in your examples to be "shes"--and not always shes who present the flimsy arguments. It is all right to use examples explicitly involving women, members of particular minority groups, and so on, where these are aimed at making some appropriate and relevant point. (It is hard to avoid this, of course, if the topic under discussion is affirmative action, racial profiling, or sexual harassment!) As a general matter, be alert to changes in usage and avoid terms or expressions and comments or questions that would predictably cause offense. (e.g. Do not ask for the "woman's point of view.")

If comments made in class by students reveal attitudes or assumptions that are racist, sexist, ablist, etc., you might politely identify them as such, the way you might identify any questionable assumption behind a student's comments. That is to say, while being careful to respect freedom of expression and differing points of view, you might use it as an opportunity to educate. In some cases, e.g., where a student is simply being insensitive or rude, it may be more effective to ignore his or her remarks, thereby communicating to your students that they are inappropriate or not worthy of a response.

Finally, be aware that a certain aggressive philosophical style can be especially intimidating to some students. Small group discussions, for example, can help to lessen intimidation and include more students in class discussion. You might also check to see whether your grading standards reward only those who exhibit this aggressive style in their work, as opposed to those who exhibit philosophical acumen of a more subtle sort.

Your aim should be, while challenging your students intellectually, to create a comfortable learning environment for all of your students. Make sure all your students know you are available and happy to help.

### III. TEACHING YOUR OWN CLASS

#### A. Departmental Resources

Please check to see what departmental resources might be available to you (such as sample syllabi, sample handouts, photocopying, etc.). If you do so well in advance, you can spare yourself a lot of work. You will need to clear your syllabus with the Teaching Advisory Committee.

#### B. Copyright Laws

If you are planning to put together a coursepack or reader for your class, you will need to make sure that what you propose to do is within the bounds of "fair use" under Federal Copyright Law. The four factors that are considered in determining whether use is fair are: (1) the purpose of the use (e.g. is it for commercial or non-profit educational purposes); (2) the nature of the copyrighted item; (3) what portion of the work is being copied relative to that work as a whole; (4) how the use will affect the market for and value of the copyrighted work. See Library guidelines:

<http://www.library.arizona.edu/help/tutorials/copyright/index.htm>

An easy way to ensure you do not run into any problems is by making use of FastCopy in the student union <http://www.union.arizona.edu/fastcopy/> (they will obtain the relevant permissions) (FastCopy Copyright Department [copyrite@u.arizona.edu](mailto:copyrite@u.arizona.edu)). You can also set up a course site on D2L and post readings there, so long as you comply with the guidelines.

#### C. Preparing a Syllabus

The University of Arizona has specific requirements for syllabus preparation. You should be sure to obtain a copy of these before you prepare your syllabus:

<http://web.arizona.edu/~policy/syllabus.shtml>.

You should feel free to ask faculty and fellow graduate students for sample syllabi (as well as handouts, paper topics, and exams). It can be quite useful to look at other people's materials before finalizing your own.

Syllabi typically include at least the following items (but see Style-3):

1. Contact information/office hours.
2. Course requirements/assignments.
3. Course materials and where to get them.
4. A schedule of assignments and due dates.
5. Grading criteria.
6. Late or incomplete work and academic dishonesty policies.
7. Classroom etiquette policy.

**STYLE:** TAs provide syllabi with varying degrees of detail.

1. Some think it is a good idea to schedule a bit too much material the first time around, to allow yourself some leeway. (Let your students know you have done this.) But don't feel you have to hurry or cover everything. (Be careful, though, about asking students to buy materials that they may not need for the course.)
2. Some think a syllabus should have clearly defined periods for general discussion. Otherwise a few assertive people will be the only ones participating.
3. Some prefer to talk about academic dishonesty and criteria for grading in a handout distributed when the first paper is due, rather than in the syllabus itself. But check UA requirements, which are periodically updated.
4. Some syllabi are arranged around a few important issues; others are more historically oriented, focusing on a number of classic texts; still others involve a mix of these approaches, with a general theme running through the course.

How much reading material to assign will depend on your style and the difficulty of the material. Do you want to address broad lines of argument, or do you prefer to emphasize close attention to text? There can be drawbacks to each approach: if you try to cover too much, students can feel overwhelmed and lost; if you discuss less material but in greater depth than they are ready for, they can get bored. A good rule of thumb: about two hours of student reading or preparation per hour spent in class. You might, e.g. assign approximately one 20 page article per session, depending upon the difficulty of the article and how in depth you will go.

## **D. Assignments**

Whatever written assignments you require, be sure to clarify to your students in advance (1) the nature and purpose of the assignment and (2) what they must do in order to do well on the assignment. e.g. Is the paper testing mainly for comprehension or for ability to analyze an argument? Is the exam aimed primarily at testing comprehension or will it also test argumentative skills? What kinds of problems must they be able to solve in a particular logic exam?

For a basic, introductory philosophy course, TAs usually assign the rough equivalent of two 5-7 page papers, a midterm and a final.

*STYLE:* Various kinds of assignments can enhance student learning:

1. Give a short assignment that requires exposition only of some part of the text.
2. Give a short assignment on analyzing arguments.
3. Have your students write a short dialogue in which they state the competing positions, identify and present the arguments for each position, and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of those positions and arguments.
4. Require a series of short assignments that target specific skills and are designed to build up to a full length paper.

5. Require an ungraded draft paper in preparation for a graded paper.
6. Assign at least one 5-7 page paper.
7. Require a rewrite of one of their papers.
8. Give periodic quizzes rather than a midterm, to test for comprehension and help them keep up with the reading.
9. Given periodic essay exams in lieu of papers.
10. With regard to exam format, exams may be multiple choice, short answer, or essay format with questions given during the exam or with extra questions distributed in advance but the specific test questions selected on the day of the exam.

TAs in an introductory logic course typically assign the equivalent of 3 (one) hour exams and a number of homework assignments (e.g. every week or every other week). Some give a fourth hour exam and a final exam instead of homework. Some classes may even require a paper.

## **E. Formulating Paper Topics, Exams, and Handouts**

### **1. Paper Topics**

Paper topics can be constructed in a variety of ways. However you construct them, do so paying attention both to your criteria for grading and to what you want students to accomplish in a particular assignment.

#### ***STYLE:***

1. It can help to spark interest if you begin a topic with a puzzling quotation, or an example that poses the problem in a particularly clear fashion. e.g. Parfit's science fiction cases make for interesting topics on personal identity.
2. You might look for some item in the newspaper that shows how a philosophical issue creeps up in a contemporary issue (e.g. free will and Michigan's penalty of "guilty, but mentally ill").

In order to discourage plagiarism, you should generally avoid reusing paper topics and avoid using those from classes for which you have been a TA.

### **2. Exams**

In writing an essay exam, make sure questions are clearly formulated and, again, that you know in advance what you are looking for by way of answers. For example, do you want your students simply to explain a difficult theory or argument? Do you want them to draw connections between different theories, issues, and sections of the course? Do you want them to analyze an issue or position, or provide a critique?



**STYLE:** In writing an exam or a quiz, you might ask various sorts of questions:

1. Short answer questions that test for comprehension.
2. Short questions that test for comprehension by requiring application of theories to a case.
3. Long questions that test for comprehension by requiring application of theories to a case.
4. Long questions that require students not only to explain and apply positions, but critically evaluate them and/or argue for a position of their own.
5. Multiple choice questions that require real understanding of the material or analytical ability.

### **3. Handouts**

See section II-C for suggestions regarding handouts that TAs find useful. Which handouts will most benefit your students will depend on your own teaching style. But students generally appreciate any handouts that help them with their own reading and writing for the course (such as study questions and instructions for how to write a paper).

## **F. Preparing Lectures/Ratio of Lecture to Discussion**

### **1. Preparing Lectures**

You can structure lectures in many ways. Whatever you do, aim to develop a lecture style that maximally exploits your teaching strengths and that enables you to model the philosophical skills you are attempting to teach. This modeling can be achieved by means of a “Socratic-Method” style of teaching, as well as by means of a more straightforward lecture style. Before you write your lectures, you might begin by thinking a bit about your previous teaching experience: analyze your strengths and weaknesses. Above all else, do not be afraid to experiment; doing so is crucial to developing your own style.

**STYLE:** Here are two of the many possible ways of structuring a lecture:

1. You might develop your lecture by thinking in terms of the following structure, suggested by Jack Meiland:

PROBLEM  
POSITION  
ARGUMENT  
OBJECTION  
REPLY

**PROBLEM:** What problems(s) are you focusing on in this section of the course?

e.g. What is Free Will?; Do we have it?; Are we ever morally responsible for what we do?

It often helps to introduce the problem(s) by means of a simple, concrete example--something that makes it feel like a problem.

POSITION: e.g. Soft Determinism

What does the position maintain?

A position can be clarified, in part, by comparing it with other positions, and in particular, with others to which it is superficially similar.

ARGUMENT: What arguments can be given for this position? Why do its proponents believe it?

Here you have the opportunity to distinguish arguments from assertions—to discuss what an argument is and what makes for a good or bad argument.

Set out the argument in steps; invite them, and help them, to analyze it.

You can also here demonstrate the importance of understanding a position sympathetically, before one begins to criticize it.

OBJECTION: What objections might be raised to the arguments and to this position?

REPLY: How might one defend the position against objections?

You might stress the importance, to any adequate defense of a position, of responding to objections, which is something they will need to understand in writing their own papers.

This structure can usefully be tied to their own work for the course; it can help them in developing their papers, as well as in thinking about the issues.

2. In many cases lectures can be structured by outlining an article, or a section of a book. You can begin by putting the main divisions of the outline on the board before class begins, and then fill in the outline, writing main points on the board as you go. This can be useful in many ways: e.g. It can be used to teach students how to read a philosophical work carefully and to grasp the overall structure and defense of a position.

## **2. Ratio of Lecture to Discussion**

Most TAs agree—other things being equal, the more discussion the better. In teaching your own course, you will need to make sure that the general structure of the course is conducive to discussion. (See section II-B for suggestions on leading discussion.)

**STYLE:**

1. Some TAs think it is important to schedule discussion time in one's syllabus, or at least, to have designated periods for discussion. This helps to guarantee that students have enough

time to talk, and helps to make sure more students are included (as opposed to those few who are comfortable raising questions during lecture).

2. While some TAs advise against mixing lecture and discussion, others find this can work well.

3. Some TAs especially favor small group activities or class debates.

## **IV. RESOURCES FOR IMPROVING YOUR TEACHING**

### **A. TA Advisory Committee Visits**

Members of the department's TA Advisory Committee will visit your courses at least once during each of the first 4 semesters in which you are a teaching assistant, once when you teach your own class for the first time, and once again in the year before you plan to go on the job market. These visits will ordinarily take place in the first 4-6 weeks of the semester, and you will receive written feedback which will also be placed in your "teaching file." Additional visits will be scheduled as deemed advisable by the visiting faculty member. TAs may themselves request additional visits in order to obtain more feedback or enhance their teaching files.

The main purpose of these visits is to provide you with concrete feedback on your current teaching strengths and weaknesses, as well as to provide helpful suggestions for improving your teaching skills. In addition, feedback from these visits, along with student evaluations, will be used to fashion a strong teaching letter for your dossier as you enter the job market. It may also be used for purposes of making nominations for teaching awards.

NOTE: TAs should feel free at any time to contact members of the TA Advisory Committee with teaching related questions or concerns. In unusual cases, a TA may experience difficulties with the course instructor. TAs are, of course, advised to address all issues directly with the instructor. In the event that these conversations do not resolve the problem, it may be helpful to consult with members of the committee for suggestions as to how to manage specific difficulties.

### **B. Teaching Resources Webpage**

You will find on the department's website, under Ph.D. Program, Info for Current Grads, a Teaching Resources page, which contains links to a variety of sample course materials and links to various online resources, as well as information about the GTA training program. The section of the website for Current Grads is password protected—you must login on the department's website itself, using the link that say "login via CAS."

### **C. On-Line Instruction**

The GTA Teacher Training Program includes a session—GTA Training Session IV—geared to preparing to teach online courses. Laura Howard ([lmhoward@email.arizona.edu](mailto:lmhoward@email.arizona.edu)) handles all training and management of online courses and will announce when training sessions will be held.

## **D. University of Arizona University Teaching Center**

The aim of the UA Office of Instruction and Assessment (OAS) is to improve the quality of instruction on campus. OAS supports teaching improvement in a number of ways, providing individual assistance, running workshops, and collecting materials related to instruction.

<http://oia.arizona.edu/>

## **E. Learning Technologies Center (LTC)**

TAs may arrange to have their class video-taped through the LTC. The cost is approximately \$5.

<http://www.ltc.arizona.edu/index.cfm>

## **F. Student Evaluations**

### **1. Teacher Course Evaluation Reports (TCE)**

At the end of each semester, students fill out teacher course evaluation reports. These can be a useful source of information to improve your teaching. (In addition, some philosophy departments may request copies of your teaching evaluations as a part of the application process when you go on the job market.) After students turn them in, you can see your results at:

<http://aer.arizona.edu/AER/>

Student evaluations, as one would expect, are an imperfect source of feedback. Michael Huemer has a nice critical overview of what student evaluations are and are not good for:

<http://home.sprynet.com/~owl1/sef.htm>

One way of increasing the usefulness of student feedback is by choosing a more informative questionnaire. TCE has both “Long” and “Short” form questionnaires. The short form is the default and the one students will be given to complete unless you intervene and request the long form, by contacting Debbie Jackson in the philosophy department. The short form contains more of what are called high inference measures. For example, the judgment that an instructor was “effective” involves any number of inferences on the part of the student. But the judgment that an instructor defines terms in a useful way – the sort of judgment asked for on the long form – involves far fewer. By switching to the long form, you may receive more specific information about your teaching strengths and weaknesses.

To see the “Long” and “Short” forms, go to:

<http://aer.arizona.edu/AER/questionnaires/ques.asp>

For more on TCE reports: [tceua@email.arizona.edu](mailto:tceua@email.arizona.edu), 520-621-7337.

### **2. Mid-Semester Student Evaluations**

There are various ways to approach obtaining student feedback at some point earlier in the semester, while you still have time to make adjustments to your teaching. Some instructors simply ask students early in the semester how the course is going. A more formal approach would involve setting up a survey on D2L for students to complete. You might model any surveys you build on the TCE reports, although you might also include questions specifically relevant to the course you are teaching. You might decide to discuss the results with students and modify your teaching style

accordingly, or you might confer with a member of the TA Advisory Committee, any faculty member, or fellow TAs about how to interpret the results.

## **G. Journals & Anthologies about Teaching Philosophy**

### ***Journals:***

The journal *Teaching Philosophy* is accessible online through the UA Main Library.

### ***Anthologies:***

Kenkmann (2009). *Teaching Philosophy*.

Kasachkoff (2004). *Teaching Philosophy: Theoretical Reflections and Practical Suggestions*.

Kasachkoff (1998). *In the Socratic Tradition: Essays on Teaching Philosophy*.

Wilson (1988). *Demonstrating Philosophy: Novel Ways to Teach Philosophical Concepts*.