

Teaching Guide for GSIs

Evaluating and Improving Your Teaching

Graduate Student Instructors make an enormous contribution to the teaching mission of UC Berkeley. That contribution is made possible by GSIs' high degree of motivation as well as their high standards for themselves and their students. This section of the Teaching Guide provides concrete ways GSIs can translate their motivation and high standards into increasingly expert teaching practices.

You may also want to consult the Professional Development section of the Teaching Guide, which discusses ways GSIs can consolidate their teaching experience into a first-rate professional profile for the professoriate.

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Five Ways to Improve Your Teaching

by Linda von Hoene

Becoming an effective teacher involves seeking out multiple sites of input that can enable you to reflect on and improve the teaching and learning that takes place in your class. This section is designed to provide you with some suggestions about sources for dialogue and methods of feedback.

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Dialogue with Yourself through a Teaching Log

One very important, but often overlooked, source of input on teaching is you, the teacher. A first step that can form the foundation for other critical reflection is to keep a daily teaching log or journal on your teaching. Start by writing your lesson plan on the right-hand side of your teaching notebook and reserving the left-hand side for comments and reflection. Questions to ask yourself and reflect on in writing might include, What worked well in this class, and why? What didn't, and why? Where did the students seem to have difficulties? Were there any noticeable points where the students seemed very engaged with the material? What types of things may need greater clarification the next time? Were there any particular pedagogical strategies that seemed to work well? What will I change the next time I teach this topic?

In addition to informing your teaching on an ongoing basis, the reflection fostered by keeping a teaching log will greatly assist you in writing up a statement of teaching philosophy for your teaching portfolio.

For further information on how to keep a teaching log, see:

Stephen Brookfield (1995). *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 72–75.

For more information about the teaching portfolio, see:

Peter Seldin (2003). *The Teaching Portfolio*, 3rd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

(Both items are available at the GSI Teaching & Resource Center.)

Solicit Feedback from Your Students

More often than not, we reflect on (or worry about!) our teaching in isolation, without realizing that our own students can be a great source of feedback on the teaching and learning that takes place in our classrooms on a day-to-day basis. While end-of-semester evaluations tend to summarize the students' overall responses to the class, this type of input comes too late to be of use to you and your students during the current semester. There are several techniques you can use to solicit ongoing feedback from your students on the class in general or the learning that takes place around specific topics and activities.

After the first couple of weeks of class, ask students to take out a piece of paper and write down three things that have helped their learning in the class and, on the other side of the paper, three things the students would like to change about the class to improve it. After reviewing their responses, decide what you can and will change and what you either cannot change or find pedagogically unwise to change. You can also let the students know what you will be changing based on their suggestions. This type of informal feedback can be gathered at different points over the semester.

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Classroom Assessment Techniques (CAT) enable you to get feedback about the learning that has transpired in a particular class period or after a specific activity. Perhaps the most commonly used CAT is the “one-minute paper,” in which students are asked to write down answers to questions such as the following, “What was the most important thing you learned during this class?” and “What questions do you still have on this topic?” This type of technique enables you to find out how the students are processing and synthesizing material as well as which points need to be reiterated or elaborated before going on.

For an excellent discussion of various classroom assessment techniques, see the groundbreaking work:

Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993. (Available at GSI TRC.)

(Sample CATs can be found on the web.)

Dialogue with Faculty

The degree of dialogue between GSIs and faculty about teaching varies from department to department and from course to course. Many faculty teaching courses with GSIs hold weekly meetings. These meetings should cover not only course logistics, but also pedagogical strategies for teaching sections. (Please see the [Graduate Council’s Policy on the Appointment and Mentoring of GSIs](#). You should also arrange for the professor you are teaching with to observe your class. This formative classroom observation should not be a “critique” of your teaching, but a mutual exchange of ideas, in which both parties discuss teaching goals, practices, and strategies for improvement. We strongly suggest that faculty and GSIs use a [tripartite structure for observations](#), which includes a pre-observation discussion, a class visit, and a post-observation discussion. In the pre-observation meeting, you should discuss how the class is going; what you will be teaching and what pedagogical techniques you will be using; your goals for the class period and what you would like the students to take away from the class; and which areas of your teaching you would like feedback on. After the class visit, you should meet with the professor to discuss the class and to set goals for those areas of your teaching that need improvement.

For a concise description of these techniques, see:

LuAnn Wilkerson (1988). “Classroom Observation: The Observer as Collaborator.” In *POD: A Handbook for New Practitioners*. Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education: 95–98.

For additional articles on classroom observation, see:

Karron Lewis, ed. (1988). *Face to Face: A Sourcebook of Individual Consultation Techniques for Faculty/Instructional Developers*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.

Dialogue with Peers

One of your greatest resources for reflecting on and improving your teaching is your peers. GSIs teaching sections of the same course should meet weekly with faculty to discuss ideas on how to teach specific topics, and to exchange materials, resources, and suggestions on how to promote a stimulating learning environment in the classroom. GSIs are also encouraged to pair up with a peer to do classroom observations. Many GSIs who have visited each other’s classes have reported that observations and dialogues emanating from this type of peer collaboration provide them with an invaluable opportunity to learn from the teaching styles and techniques of other GSIs. Peer observations should follow the same procedures as those recommended above for faculty observation of GSIs. GSIs can also exchange ideas with peers in departmental 300-level pedagogy seminars, at informal gatherings within their departments, and across disciplinary and department borders at the GSI Teaching & Resource Center.

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Seek Outside Consultation

Staff at the GSI Teaching & Resource Center provide [confidential individual consultation for GSIs](#). Consultants assist GSIs in developing specific teaching strategies, reviewing feedback received from students, and finding ways to improve teaching and learning.

Consultants are also available to conduct classroom observations and video-recording, together with preparatory and follow-up discussions when these programs are not available in the department. Video-recording is an effective tool for reflecting on teaching, as it enables GSIs to see themselves in action and to develop strategies, in dialogue with a consultant, on how to improve teaching. Please arrange for observations and recording at least two weeks in advance.

Articles GSIs may wish to read in conjunction with video-recording include:

David Taylor-Way (1988). "Consultation Through Video: Memory Management Through Stimulated Recall." In *Face to Face*. Ed. Karron Lewis. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press, 159–91.

Barbara Davis (2009). "Watching Yourself on Videotape." In *Tools for Teaching*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Available at the GSI Center.

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Conducting a Midterm Evaluation

Our students can provide valuable feedback on the teaching and learning that take place in our classrooms. End-of-semester evaluations tend to summarize students' overall responses to the class, but by that point it's too late for their input to assist you in making adjustments to your teaching in the current semester. Midterm evaluations, on the other hand, provide feedback from the students' perspective while you still have time to address their concerns.

Assembling a Midterm Evaluation Form

You might ask two simple questions, to which students write their answers anonymously: What are we doing in section that is helping you learn? What might we change about section so that it becomes more useful to you? This makes the assessment more about the students than about you, which is appropriate. You might also go beyond the two-question format and ask students to give you input on aspects of your teaching. The following links bring up three survey forms that vary from simple to complex:

[Midterm Teaching Survey — Paragraph \(doc\)](#)

[Midterm Teaching Survey — Short Answer \(doc\)](#)

[Midterm Teaching Feedback — Numeric \(doc\)](#)

Your faculty member or pedagogy instructor may already have a preferred midterm evaluation form for you to use. Double-check with your department.

If you know students' handwriting, you might recreate one of the above survey forms in an online survey tool such as [SurveyMonkey](#) or [Zoomerang](#). Or you could pair up with another GSI teaching in the course and type up the results for each other's section so that you don't connect students with their handwriting. You need to assure students that you will protect their anonymity so that their comments won't affect grades.

Administering the Midterm Evaluation

Make sure that students know they are giving input about your section, not the entire course. They should not be evaluating the professor or elements of the course that are not under your authority. Don't ask for input the day you give back midterm exams; responses might be affected by the grades students receive.

Some first-time GSIs feel vulnerable doing a mid-semester evaluation. Try to approach it as a way to find out about student learning rather than as a referendum on you as a teacher — this will make it less daunting and keep the exercise on target. Tell your students you are interested in hearing how the section is going from their perspective. You want to make section meetings as useful as possible, so you would like to give them a chance to give input on the section.

Give the students ten minutes or so at the end of the class to fill out the evaluation survey. Leave the room while they are doing so. Recruit a student volunteer to collect the forms and drop them off for you in the main office.

Interpreting the Evaluations

What do you do once you've heard from your students? Look through the evaluations for repeated themes. (Extreme comments often cancel each other out.) Notice both things that students are finding work well for them and things students suggest changing.

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Keep doing the things students are finding useful. Think about whether the changes they suggest are feasible or even desirable for your class. Students often have excellent ideas that you may not have thought about; think about implementing those. Sometimes one group of students may say they find a certain thing helpful while another group says that the same thing should be canned. Don't despair — what this tells you is simply that students are different and not everyone learns in the same way. Some students may comment about things you have no control over: for example, "Get rid of the textbook." That is information you can pass on to the faculty member for the next time the course is taught, but it's something you can't change.

Reporting Results

Finally, report back to the students and thank them. Let them know what the general drift of the evaluations was. Some instructors even provide a typed and detailed report. Students benefit from a broader sense of each others' experiences, and they come to know that you value their perceptions.

Making the Most of Your Results

We encourage you to discuss the results of your mid-term evaluation with the faculty member you are teaching with. In the event that you would like to discuss the results with a Teaching Consultant at the GSI Teaching & Resource Center, or if you have questions about the process, please email gsi@berkeley.edu.

Mid-Term Teaching Feedback

Students:

Please take the time to fill out this questionnaire thoughtfully. The information will be used to ascertain how the section is progressing and to let me know which aspects are particularly good and which aspects need improvement.

Please circle the number that is most appropriate for each statement according to the following scale.

- 1 = never
- 2 = rarely
- 3 = sometimes
- 4 = frequently
- 5 = always
- n/a = not applicable

GSI demonstrates command of the subject matter.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
GSI is fully prepared for class.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
GSI provides clear and comprehensive explanations.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
GSI asks thought-provoking questions.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
GSI encourages student discussion.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
GSI makes sure everyone understands the material.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
GSI is accessible when I seek assistance.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
GSI gives helpful written comments on assignments.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
GSI seems genuinely concerned about my learning.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
Overall, how would you rate the quality of your GSI's teaching?	1	2	3	4	5	n/a

poor <-----> excellent

Please make any additional comments regarding your GSI's style of presentation, the course, the texts, etc. below or on the back of this form.

Midterm Teaching Survey

Instructions to Student

I would like to get your input on how our section is going and how it is helping you in your learning. Your comments will remain anonymous.

1. Please identify those aspects of the section that you are finding most useful or valuable for learning.

2. What suggestions would you make for improving the section?

Midterm Teaching Survey

Instructions to Student

In this survey I am asking you to assess my specific classroom behaviors for use in instructional analysis and improvement for this section. A midterm assessment is more likely to affect how this particular section is being taught than one administered at the end of the semester. Please try to be both thoughtful and candid in your written responses so as to maximize the value of feedback.

Your comments should reflect that type of teaching you think is best for this particular section and your particular learning style. Try to assess each issue independently rather than letting your overall impression of the instructor determine each individual section. If you need additional space please use the back of the sheet.

- 1) Clarity of teaching

- 2) Effectiveness of teaching style

- 3) Section organization and structure

- 4) Pacing of section presentations and activities

- 5) Clarity and appropriateness of section assignments and grading criteria

- 6) Quality of interpersonal relations between you and me

- 7) Quality of interpersonal relations between you and your fellow students

- 8) Please identify those aspects of the section you have found most useful or valuable for learning.

Adapted from materials at UT Austin Center for Teaching Effectiveness
<http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/getfeedback/>