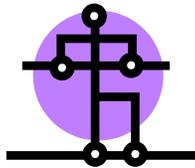


# Walking the TA Tightrope



Center for Teaching  
Excellence  
Sept. 24, 2004

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*Note for online pdf version: Several sections from the handout had to be cut for the online version due to copyright issues. If you would like a full version of the handout, please contact CTE at [cte@duq.edu](mailto:cte@duq.edu) or (412) 396-5177*

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IV. Take good care *Cut from pdf version*  
See [http://www.successfulacademic.com/webdocs/Avoid\\_burnout.html](http://www.successfulacademic.com/webdocs/Avoid_burnout.html) for ideas.

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Walking the TA tightrope becomes easier with BALANCE.  
 But first, you have to figure out exactly what it is that you have to balance this year...

## I. IDENTIFY Responsibilities and goals

Time period: \_\_\_\_\_ (semester, year, October, etc.)

My responsibilities	My goals for each of these areas (be realistic!)  <i>By _____ I would like to have this accomplished:</i>	Steps needed to reach this goal.
Teaching:		
Academic work:		
Community/Family/interpersonal:		

Overwhelmed yet? Try a “reverse calendar.” Plot the date of your goal or deadline and work backwards, plotting into the dates the steps you will need to accomplish the task

## II. Know thyself...

Now that you have identified your goals and what you have to do to reach them, take some time to learn about yourself and your time-management habits.

- **What can be let go?** It's very easy as grad students to want to get involved in everything – joining committees, presenting at conferences, developing the department website, etc. Yet, spreading yourself too thin can leave you less productive. Once you have made your to-do list and calendar, **set priorities**. Learn the four “D”s and sort your tasks into those that must be **done**, those that can be **delayed** and when you can return to them, those that can be **delegated** to others, and those that can be **dumped**. Take time to really think about the last one...what will happen if you let something go? Will another opportunity arise later? What would you have to give up to accomplish this task? Is it worth it?
- **Are you a perfectionist or a procrastinator?** Chances are you are both. In fact, many perfectionists are masters of procrastination because they know once they get started on a task they will have a hard time letting it go.
- **What do you do to procrastinate?** Are there ways you can limit your engagement in these activities? For example, if you like to cook, but find you are spending three hours a night in the kitchen, choose one or two nights a week as your “cooking” nights and make simple meals the rest of the week. Or if you are spending hours on the internet, set a time when you can surf the web and hide your modem the rest of the time. A good time would be an hour before you have to be somewhere to avoid getting sucked in. **Identify your “time stealers” and set limits.**

**I most often procrastinate by:**

**I can limit these activities by:**

- **What is your “prime time”?** Most writers know when their best time for writing is (usually in the morning). Identify your best times for writing but for other activities as well, and capitalize on those times. For example, you might set aside two hours to write in the morning when you are at your peak level of creativity, and plan your class after dinner with coffee. You might want to exercise in the late afternoon if you normally get sleepy at these times. Play around with times and activities until you find what works best.

**These times are good for...**

**Early morning:**

**Late afternoon:**

**Mid-morning:**

**Evening:**

**Afternoon:**

**Late night:**

- **Where do you work best?** Many people get distracted by working at home. Some people like the background noise of a coffee shop. Others prefer the dead silence of the library. (I know some people who worked on their dissertation in the room where they would eventually defend it – to better imagine themselves there!) Find out where you work best, even if it is different spots in your home (e.g., kitchen table, sun-porch). Be wary of working in bed. Many of us picked up this bad habit while living in the dorms, but it can often lead to sleepiness and difficulty with paying attention. Conversely, your bed becomes associated with work which can lead to insomnia.



**Keep your bedroom fun!**

### III. When it comes to teaching...

#### Teaching well without over-preparing

Many graduate students are so nervous about teaching that they compensate will through over-preparation. Unfortunately, this often leaves them feeling like they have to rush to cover everything. The sense of frustration and failure that follows is often unnecessary and can be avoided by setting more realistic classroom goals.

Take the time to ask yourself whether some content can be let go in order to slow down and make sure your students are on track. Many activities take only minutes and can serve multiple purposes such as: helping students to crystallize and better understand complex concepts, assessing student learning, and revitalizing class attention.

Here are two examples and many more are available from the Center for Teaching Excellence

**Minute paper.** Students provide anonymous, brief written responses to a question. Because you are not grading these or providing individualized feedback, you can read several responses in just a few minutes, and use these to tailor the next day's review. Vary the minute papers you assign in ways such as the following:

- Give another example of this concept (perhaps from your own experience, or textbook).
- Define XXX in your own words
- List the steps in the process of XXX. Make sure they're in order.
- What is the muddiest point for you in today's lesson?
- Explain the main point of today's lesson to someone not familiar with this field.

**Think-Pair-Share.** This 3-5 minute activity involves each student, allows you to diagnose understanding and builds in accountability because students don't know who will be asked to share their response with the class. Because they have worked on the answer with a partner, they may not feel as much pressure as having to answer alone. Follow these steps:

1. Answer the question individually (either thinking or writing).
2. Share your answer with a partner.
3. Create a new answer together that is better than your original attempt.
4. Share it with the rest of the class. same question without putting them on the spot. It allows you to know what the primary concerns are.

From Laurel Willingham-McLain's (2002) article "Practical tips for planning and teaching a lesson." CTE newsletter, Early Fall 2002. Available online at: <http://www.cte.duq.edu/newsletter/2002newsletters/earlyfall02.pdf>

#### "Quick Starters"

In his article, "Quick Starters: New Faculty Who Succeed," Robert Boice outlines several characteristics of "quick starters": new faculty who were excelled at balancing their many responsibilities and also enjoyed their new roles on campus.

According to Boice's research, "Quick starters":

- ❖ "Lectured in a facts and principles style but in a comfortable fashion that allowed time for student involvement. This more relaxed pacing included verbal and nonverbal cues for students to participate."
- ❖ Sought "advice about teaching from their colleagues, via reading and observing, and from faculty development programs. Specifically they spent an average of four hours per week in social contacts with colleagues that included discussions about teaching."
- ❖ "Settled into patterns of work allocation that typically included no more than one and one-half hours of preparation per classroom hour by the third semester."
- ❖ "Integrated their research and scholarly interests into undergraduate classes..."
- ❖ "Displayed high energy, broad interests, concerns with self presentation, and a sense of humor"

From: Boice, R. (1991). Quick Starters: New Faculty Who Succeed. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 48, 111-121 (available at CTE)

## **V. And most importantly, keep a sense of humor...**

### **THE LIGHTER SIDE OF GRADUATE SCHOOL**

You just might be a graduate student if...

- ...you spend more on books than on tuition.
- ...you actually hope your professor assigns homework.
- ...you get a 3-hour final with 5 questions or less.
- ...the words "free time" are unfamiliar to you.
- ...you spend Saturday morning waiting for the library to open.
- ...you've memorized your professors' home phone numbers.
- ...your professors know your home phone number.
- ...more than 25% of your textbook is "left as an exercise for the reader."
- ...you are on a first-name basis with everyone on the library staff.
- ...you can analyze the significance of appliances you cannot operate.
- ...your carrel is better decorated than your apartment.
- ...you have ever, as a folklore project, attempted to track the progress of your own joke across the Internet.
- ...you are startled to meet people who neither need nor want to read.
- ...you have ever brought a scholarly article to a bar.
- ...you rate coffee shops by the availability of outlets for your laptop.
- ...everything reminds you of something in your discipline.
- ...you have ever discussed academic matters at a sporting event.
- ...you have ever spent more than \$50 on photocopying while researching a single paper.
- ...there is a microfilm reader in the library that you consider "yours."
- ...you actually have a preference between microfilm and microfiche.
- ...you can tell the time of day by looking at the traffic flow at the library.
- ...you look forward to summers because you're more productive without the distraction of classes.
- ...you regard ibuprofen as a vitamin.
- ...you consider all papers to be works in progress.
- ...professors don't really care when you turn in work anymore.
- ...you find the bibliographies of books more interesting than the actual text.
- ...you have given up trying to keep your books organized and are now just trying to keep them all in the same general area.
- ...you have accepted guilt as an inherent feature of relaxation.
- ...you reflexively start analyzing those greek letters before you realize that it's a sorority sweatshirt, not an equation.
- ...you find yourself explaining to children that you are in "20th grade".
- ...you start referring to stories like "Snow White et al."
- ...you frequently wonder how long you can live on pasta without getting scurvy.
- ...you look forward to taking some time off to do laundry.
- ...you have more photocopy cards than credit cards.
- ...you wonder if APA style allows you to cite talking to yourself as "personal communication".

- ...you can identify universities by their internet domains
- ...you are constantly looking for a thesis in novels.
  - ...you have difficulty reading anything that doesn't have footnotes.
  - ...you understand jokes about Foucault.
  - ...the concept of free time scares you.
  - ...you consider caffeine to be a major food group.
  - ...you've ever brought books with you on vacation and actually studied.
  - ...Saturday nights spent studying no longer seem weird.
  - ...the professor doesn't show up to class and you discuss the readings anyway.
  - ...you've ever travelled across two state lines specifically to go to a library.
  - ...you appreciate the fact that you get to choose \*which\* twenty hours out of the day you have to work.
  - ...you still feel guilty about giving students low grades (you'll get over it).
  - ...you can read course books and cook at the same time.
  - ...you schedule events for academic vacations so your friends can come.
  - ...you hope it snows during spring break so you can get more studying in.
  - ...you've ever worn out a library card.
  - ...you find taking notes in a park relaxing.
  - ...you find yourself citing sources in conversation.
  - ...you've ever sent a personal letter with footnotes.

### **The Top Ten Lies Told by Graduate Students:**

10. It doesn't bother me at all that my college roommate is making \$80,000 a year on Wall Street.
9. I'd be delighted to proofread your book/chapter/article.
8. My work has a lot of practical importance.
7. I would never date an undergraduate.
6. Your latest article was so inspiring.
5. I turned down a lot of great job offers to come here.
4. I just have one more book to read and then I'll start writing.
3. The department is giving me so much support.
2. My job prospects look really good.
1. No really, I'll be out of here in only two more years.



