Worksheet: Start-of-Term Meeting with your Advisor

Some advisors are very familiar with the time requirements of being a TA. Others are… well, not. At our university, a standard TA position is 50% employment for a quarter, or 20 hours a week for about 11 weeks. This is clearly a substantial amount of time and will greatly impact your research. But since most American colleges are teaching colleges, balancing teaching and research is a needed skill.

We recommend meeting with your research advisor before the quarter begins to discuss how you will be organizing your time. This is best done with a little prep work and a plan on your part, so consider the steps below.

1. Use your favorite calendar (hardcopy or program) to schedule the term ahead. There are several parts of a TAship that have physical dates and times. Mark those that affect you on your calendar:
   a. Lecture days and times
   b. Exam days and times, plus associated grading times
   c. Regular training meetings or meetings with faculty
   d. Teaching hours, office hours

If any of these times are under your control, aim to combine as many as possible onto single days. Try to teach discussions or lab on days you also have lecture, hold office hours on the same day as you teach, etc.

2. Schedule prep time for teaching. If you are teaching on a Wednesday, you will need time on Monday night or Tuesday to organize the most recent lecture material and design discussion activities to address the most important topics. This will take you at LEAST three hours for each hour of original class-time. Add a bit more if you need to read the textbook carefully and research some of the biology.

3. Schedule grading and administration time. Most discussions require some sort of quiz or assignment several times during the term. Depending on the grading load, schedule grading hours. Talk to a grad student who has taught this class before for hints on heavy grading weeks.

4. Now that you have the “teaching” part of your term scheduled, print up or photocopy these months and lay them out in a row in front of you.

5. How confident are you of your research goals for this period? If you know precisely what your advisor wants you to have done by the end of the term, start penciling in how that needs to be done. Plan experiments, lit reviews, data analysis, etc. If you don’t know what needs to be done, start making a list of questions for your meeting with your advisor.

6. If you have any presentations to give, when will those be worked on? Pencil those in as well. Add poster making, 199 mentoring, lab meetings, and any other duties you may have.
7. Are you familiar with your department’s policies on attending departmental seminars and journal clubs when TAing? Your advisor may not be familiar with these. Contact the graduate student advisor of your department, especially if you see an obvious conflict (like with lecture or discussion time).

After you have completed these additions to your calendar, you are ready to meet with your advisor. Take your filled-in calendar, any paperwork about your TAship, and any questions you have about your research goals for the term.

When you meet, be ready to discuss:
1. Your TA responsibilities
2. Your research goals for the term, in order of importance
3. How the careful balance of both teaching and research will move you forward in your professional career.