

One of Those Days

Introduction to the New GTA

Have you even woken up in the morning, and things just didn't seem to go right? The news calls for rain, so you bring your umbrella . . . and it's sunny all day. Your friend calls you to go shopping and on the way to pick her up, you get a flat tire—and *that's* when it rains ! We all have our moments, and some of them arise when we least expect them. The Greeks had a name for that moment that arises out of the situation. They called it *kairos*. Gorgias, a Greek orator considered the most eloquent among his contemporaries, was known to challenge the audience to suggest any topic whatsoever for him to speak on. You might think Gorgias thought himself a hot-shot, but lore has it that the reason he performed that way was that he trusted in *kairos*. He believed it was the seedplot of all possibilities. His training didn't hurt either!

We never know what might come up in any situation, especially when people from diverse backgrounds come together to share their ideas and stories. What follows is a series of short anecdotes told by faculty, lecturers, and GTA's. They've been assembled to give you a sense of the funny, weird, and even outrageous situations that can arise. In Amy Riordan's piece, for instance, you'll see an experienced teacher thinking about how to prepare for the unexpected. Her piece is called "Modern *Kairos*." My wife, Toni, helped to title these. She thinks the stories are lovely. I happen to agree.

I hope you enjoy these "snippets" as well as your new experience at UTA. The people here are very accommodating, and they will do what they can to help you make a smooth transition. To inaugurate this new section to the *Guide*, I am going to share my own story—about being a new GTA. I hope this begins a tradition for future FY Guide editors.

In the Blink of an Eye

Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* has been all the rage in the circles I move in. *Blink* is a popular book recently released that you may have read or heard about. In it, Gladwell says that within two seconds of coming into contact with a new person, television program, book, or anything else, a person draws a whole host of predictions and conclusions about the experience encountered. Those two seconds have become very interesting to him because he thinks important information can be found in that short time span; the conclusions can occasionally be quite accurate and sometimes powerful. I couldn't agree more. Within a few minutes of being in the GTA training course that July some years ago, I thought, "this is going to be good." It has been. While I couldn't have predicted the diversity of experiences I was going to have here, I felt strongly that this was a beneficial place for me. What I hoped for (but couldn't be sure about) was the number of strong friends and close connections I would make that first July. I guess you can't predict it all, right Malcolm !

Enjoy reading the rest of these stories. You'll have your own to tell soon enough

--Robert Leston

My First Day of Teaching

On the morning of my first day as a GTA, it was raining very heavily. I did not yet have my faculty-parking pass and I spent almost an hour trying to find parking in the student-designated lots. By the time I parked my car on a side street and walked in the rain to my classroom, I was drenched. I was trying my best to dry off in the bathroom when a girl walked in and (trying to make conversation) asked me if it was my first day at UTA. I responded, “Yes, actually, this is my first day as an instructor.” She was visibly surprised and said, “Really, I thought you were a student?”

While I walked down the hall to my classroom, I wondered what my students would think when they saw me. Would they see a fraud pretending to be a college instructor? Would they see the fear in my eyes? Would they notice that I was new and inexperienced? I paused at the door to the classroom and walked straight to the lectern at the front of the room. I set up my notebook, attendance sheets, and pens. When I finally looked up, I saw my students looking at me. They too were dripping from the rain. They also had trouble finding parking. For most of my students that day, I was the first UTA instructor they had met. I saw the fear in their eyes.

I understood how they felt. To alleviate their anxiety as well as my own, I asked them to introduce themselves. As the semester progressed, I discovered that I was not a fraud. My students had much to learn and surprisingly, I had a lot to teach.

--Prisna Virasin

Eat, Drink, and ...Come Back

I knew, starting out, that just because I am a “morning person” and love being in a classroom at 8 a.m., that not all my students would share my enthusiasm. Additionally, I learned, rather quickly, that many of my freshman students carry certain high school behaviors into their college classrooms (for many, an 8 a.m. Fall Semester Freshman English class is truly their first college experience).

Such behaviors may include raising their hands to go to the bathroom, expecting to be “called on” to answer questions, and not realizing that they can bring food and/or beverages into the classroom. I realized the latter behavior a little late in the semester and so announced that it was acceptable for them to bring food/beverage of their choosing to the classroom (all in an effort to keep them awake during class time).

After making the announcement, we sat down to do some group work. “Tom” asked if he could go and grab a “snack.” At the time, there were snack and coffee machines located on the first floor of Preston Hall and I told him that he could, thinking that he was going to retrieve something from these machines. I began to worry about him when fifteen minutes had passed. Twenty minutes after his departure he re-arrived in class ... with a full three-course breakfast meal from the Student Center! I had to make an additional announcement about bringing “appropriate” food/beverages to class.

--Sandi Hubnik

A Halloween Prank

The strangest experience I've had as a teacher at UTA is undoubtedly one connected to a 1302 student's astonishing prank performed in class on the day before Halloween. From the beginning of the semester, this student (I'll call him "Pete"), had styled himself as the class clown, despite having not once elicited anything other than a few chuckles from uncomfortable peers -or worse- having frequently elicited genuine laughter directed at him.

Now, I certainly try to bring humor into class discussions, etc., but judiciously; Pete had no subtlety, amused no one but himself, and was deaf to my requests, as well as those of fellow students, to "tone it down."

To continue, in class that day, students were asked to get into peer groups to discuss essay drafts. Ten minutes late, Pete entered the room, nervously looking around and wearing an oversized army jacket that no one with warm blood would ever wear on such a hot day. He joined his peer group and sat down—without taking off his jacket or even unzipping it.

A few minutes later, I noticed a commotion in his peer group. When I asked about what was happening, Pete said that he had badly cut his arm on the way to class and that, unfortunately, he was still bleeding! He held up his arm and, sure enough, the sleeve of his jacket was glistening with "blood."

A bit flummoxed, I told Pete that he should immediately report to the university health center; he got up and walked out of the room, leaving behind his draft, his backpack, and some red smears on his desk! At this point, Pete's peer group was quite disturbed, and the rest of the class quickly started asking questions. After a minute or two, Pete returned, having wrapped a gauze bandage—which he just coincidentally had been carrying with him—around his forearm. And then, to everyone's amazement, he sat down at his desk as if nothing unusual had happened and was ready to resume the peer workshop!

I started to ask him to seek medical attention, but Pete, sensing that events were getting out of hand, stood up and admitted, with visible embarrassment, that this was all a joke. He showed how he had rigged up a small bag with "blood" in his jacket.

I told him, calmly but firmly (not easy to do!), to clean himself up, and I asked him to stay after class. Our conversation was brief; I told him that such antics were completely unacceptable, that I was offended by his actions, and that any more "jokes" would result in some form of punishment for misconduct. I am pleased—and relieved!--to say that the semester passed without further incident.

--Kevin Porter

Audience Etiquette 101

One teaching event that really baffled me occurred during my 1302 final paper presentations at the end of the semester. One particular older, “non-traditional” student was the first person to present on the second day of presentations.

During the preceding class period, the students had clapped after each presentation. Since this student was the first person to present, however, not many students clapped for him or maybe no one did at all (I honestly cannot remember). I must mention at this point that the student was arguing (not very convincingly, I might add) that the U.S. moon landing had been staged.

Anyway, the student ran over his time limit, and I had to interrupt him and tell him that his time was up. The next couple of students presented their arguments, and everything was fine. We clapped for them. At that point, the older student jumps out of his chair, yelling about how he didn’t understand why no one clapped for him, and saying that he deserved clapping like everyone else.

He paced back and forth in the room, lecturing the class on respect. Most of the students thought he was joking, but I could tell otherwise. I managed to say, “____, I’m pretty sure we did clap for you. Please sit down, you’re overreacting. Your presentation was great.” I was scared to death, and was thinking about calling the police, but he did finally sit and pouted for the rest of the class time.

I think I learned from this experience that you never really know your students, and that they may at any time decide to snap. I was just relieved it was the last class period. Now I preface all presentations with a little speech about clapping etiquette, and tell them not to take it personally if we forget to clap.

--Michelle Sanders

Some Things Are Better Heard

I taught 1302 last semester (Spring 2005). Towards the end of the semester, I was discussing chapter 13 from *Perspectives on Argument* with my students. The chapter is about visual and oral argument. I emphasized certain points like: recognizing this kind of argument, its special features, why it’s convincing, and how to critique it by using argument theory.

After we finished our discussion, I asked the students to do exercise E on page 410 as an application on what they had learned about oral argument. The exercise was about Martin Luther King’s famous speech “I Have a Dream.” I gave the students some time to read the speech silently before attempting to answer the questions.

Suddenly, I heard, along with all other students, the voice of King himself delivering the speech. I realized a short while later that one of the students had a laptop, and she had opened on the speech from the website of top American speeches prescribed on the exercise itself. As a result, the students become more engaged and the discussion became more lively, as it is a speech meant to be listened to, not to be read. After all, it is an oral argument, not a written one.

--Kifah Al Umari

A Sign for Attention

In a course of mine a few years ago, one of the students would sit in the front row and act ostentatiously bored. Her papers were marginal; they didn't show much understanding of the readings. She would sigh and make resistant noises. All of this was on her own; she wasn't part of a pack or sect of the bored. This grew, but I didn't give commands; everyone's got a right to be bored, and if you've seen me in faculty meetings, my student was only doing what I do myself when the conversation slips into areas I don't want to follow. But I pulled her up short one morning when she opened *The Shorthorn* and started to read just as class began. I do this very politely and firmly, when it needs to be done. The student put the paper away.

She started to come up after class and ask about her papers, and about the content of lectures or discussions or readings. It was clear that the acting out, culminating in the newspaper incident, was a plea for attention, and that any kind of attention would do the trick. Her work improved once we started to talk about it; maybe from a D/Z to a C, nothing remarkable, but important in terms of her academic progress overall.

You hear it said that a student who misbehaves (mildly) is looking for attention, but I never saw quite such a textbook case till then. Sometimes the common lore about teaching crystallizes into a single object lesson.

--Tim Morris

Ask and Ye Shall Receive

As a class, we were responding to poems by contemporary (read living) poets and up next was a poem by Robert Pinsky. This was back when he was Poet Laureate. I don't remember the poem, but do remember that, during class discussion, several students raised questions about a particular spot (the turn, I think). So there was a great deal of pondering and offering possible ways out of the difficulty, then a student who hadn't spoken much so far that semester raised her hand (this didn't happen often in this class) and said that she'd had the same difficulty, so had e-mailed Pinsky to get his input. Then she read a surprisingly long and thoughtful response that praised her question, pointed out the subtleties in what she was asking, and then (rather modestly) offered what Pinsky called his own thoughts on the matter.

In a different course, something similar happened when a student, working on a paper, e-mailed Peter Elbow with a question. Elbow responded with a free-writing exercise.

--Tim Richardson

MLAHH Style

At the beginning of every semester I teach 1301, I always recall a specific incident that happened during my second semester of teaching. I had a student who had been absent long enough for me to think he had elected to drop, yet, surprisingly, he returned. He entered the classroom one day, after his class had dismissed, holding a copy of the guidelines for the first essay—which I assumed he had acquired from one of his classmates.

The handout, of course, covered only the bare bones of the assignment; class attendance was necessary to gain full insight. He approached me, handout in hand, with no interest in discussing his absences, or past in-class assignments, or the exact subject matter of the essay. Portentously, he informed me, “I have written this essay and I could turn in it right now, but I want to know how many points I’ll lose if I don’t do the mlahh part.”

I was a little slow on the uptake and asked him to repeat himself. “I just want to know what I’ll make,” he stated boldly, “if I have an A paper, but I don’t have any of the mlahh in it.” “Mlahh?” I responded. He was a little frustrated with me, I suppose, and tried to desperately to enlighten me: “You know, the mlahh! The mlahh on the handout!” He pointed to the handout, which indicated that the use of MLA style was required.

Suffice to say, our conversation shortly segued from the MLA issue and turned to that of his serial absences; based on the criteria of the syllabus, it was soon realized that all the mlahh in the world would not be able to save his grade at that late date.

--Natalie Gaupp

Messed Over by the Girlfriend

Last year I had a student who turned in a paper that I was sure was plagiarized. I went to Google; sure enough, there was the paper word for word—including the errors. I talked to the student right after the next class.

On being confronted with the evidence, he exclaimed, “I didn’t plagiarize. Honest. My girlfriend told me that she would write the paper for me.”

When I informed him that that too was plagiarism, all he could say was, “I’ve been messed over by my girlfriend.”

I’m sure that the couple had an interesting discussion that night.

--Ervin Starwalt

Effective Writing

In English 1302, argumentative writing, I ask the students to write a Rogerian letter concerning their research topic and address the letter to a real person who can actually do something about their issue. This past semester many students chose to write to President Bush.

One student addressed the issue of abstinence only education in public schools. She argued that abstinence only education is a disservice to students because much of the information disseminated in the class is incorrect and does not help students make informed decisions.

After sending the letter to the White House, it was forwarded to the Department of Health and Human Services. A representative from HHS sent a reply back addressing the student's concerns and reiterating President Bush's position on the matter. This exercise illustrates that argumentation is an important skill for students to have.

Additionally, this exercise shows the students that their ideas and concerns do have an actual audience that is interested in their thoughts and ideas. Also, by receiving a letter in return, the students can participate in a dialogue with policy makers and possibly effect change.

--Milissa Riggs

A Pigeon in Hand ...

“John” (we’ll call him) was an animal lover. John also believed that a bit of humor, a cute smile, and a lot of charm was all it really took to pass a college course. John was alone in this latter belief, not that he didn’t try very hard to convince me that he was not. John was often late to class, but wore a big smile when he did arrive.

On one particular morning, John, upon entering the classroom late, came up to me and whispered that he needed to leave class immediately. I thought to myself, “I can only imagine why.” As it turned out, I couldn’t. John said that he needed to take a hurt animal to the vet and that he needed to do so right away.

I asked him if it was a pet. He said, “Not exactly – it’s a hurt pigeon.” My curiosity was peaked. Where was this pigeon? He then informed me that said pigeon was in his backpack! I, not really believing him, asked to see inside his backpack. When he opened it, there was, indeed, a pigeon in it.

After quickly agreeing that he needed to leave with the bird, I felt compelled to announce to the other students that under no circumstances were animals allowed in the classroom.

--Sandi Hubnik

Snippets...

Sometimes I learn as much from my students as they do from me. I learned that a lot of these students are juggling families, jobs and school—some with more success than others. I learned that they don't always think before they speak. Why else would they actually tell me that the reason they missed my class was to study for another one that was more important? Or that the reason they missed so many classes was that it was just too hard to get up in the morning? (This was a 10 a.m. class.)

I also learned not to stereotype students. I had a student in one of my Literature classes who looked like a slacker—multiple piercings, bed head, etc. She had some of the best insights in the class and always made valuable contributions to class discussions.

The one thing I dislike about teaching is grading papers, but sometimes I get a chuckle from some of them. For example:

A student wrote about a funeral being delayed because the body had to be “in-bombed.” (Thought it might be a new burial method until I realized she meant “embalmed.” Sometimes it helps to read statements in papers out loud.)

A student, in an essay on Anzia Yeziarska's “The Lost Beautifulness,” wrote about the final scene in which Hannah has been evicted from her apartment. The student wrote that Hannah sat on the curb—housebroken.

Students also don't pay particular attention to spelling in emails. Sometimes this leads to unintended messages. My favorite is the male student who was having some personal problems that were causing him to miss class. His email asked me to “bare” with him. (I think that's against the rules.)

Student emails are not always funny. One student actually e-mailed me after the final paper was turned in. He said he knew he needed a 91 on the final paper to get an A in the class, but, if he didn't get that grade, would I please “bump it up” to an A anyway to help him get a scholarship! (He earned an 85 on the essay and didn't get “bumped up.”)

--Ruth Gerik

Silence is Golden

I was giving private conferences on a writing assignment and, as scheduled, one of my students walks in. He was a large, older gentleman, around 45, rather imposing, very dignified, someone who always dressed in a dark suit and tie. I was a bit intimidated by his personality and the fact that it was difficult to understand what he said. He had a really thick southern accent, combined with another dialect from somewhere else, and he spoke softly, making conversation all that more difficult.

We sat down and both of us looked at what he'd written, an essay on something that had appeared in the newspaper, and we were going over it line by line, when he looked up at me and said, "I'm a bastard, you know." I was stunned and didn't know how to take it. Did he mean he wasn't a nice guy, that he hurt people? That didn't seem likely, so it was probably that his parents weren't married. Okay, I thought, but why was he telling me?

I planned out a speech, how being a bastard was a time-honored thing, and bastards were usually the heroes in literature (leaving out all references to evil bastards usurping thrones, blinding fathers in King Lear, etc.), but I didn't say anything, because even that seemed weird and dangerous.

The student kept talking, and about five minutes later, with me doing nothing but nodding sagely, I realized he had actually said he was a "pastor," not a "bastard," that he ran a local part-time church. I was so glad I'd kept my mouth shut.

Since then, I have a cardinal rule that has helped me immeasurably in teaching -- when I don't know what to say, and that happens more than you would think, I don't say anything. I don't ad-lib, I don't wing-it. I just look as friendly as I can and keep silent. It has saved me so many times.

--Patrick Murphy

Modern Kairos

My aunt's parents have become a set of extended grandparents for my brother and me. But they are the relatives who always give the unpredictable (and sometimes bizarre) presents for holidays: A Wizard of Oz red slipper pin for Christmas, a two dollar bill for my birthday, a singing bird alarm clock for my wedding. I mean, where do they get this stuff, and what am I suppose to do with it?

Likewise, in teaching I've often wondered how *do* you prepare for the unpredictable? Each semester, as much as possible, I plan and organize for the first exciting weeks of class. For starters, I look at my rosters, examining the classifications beside each student's name, hoping they will reveal possible personalities and interests. I count the number of weeks in the semester in hopes of accurately mapping out engaging assignments and activities. And, every semester I attempt to acquire and create thought provoking (yet relatable to mostly 18 year olds) essays and projects.

The one thing, however, I found I could never plan for was the individual atmosphere and personality of each class. As a student, we often fail to recognize our own class's uniqueness, but as a teacher it is impossible to ignore. Though we only teach two classes per semester, I'm always astounded by the remarkable differences between each class. Of course you may have the group of students who are on the edge of their seats, ready to engage with ideas, which often parallels the class that blankly stares at you waiting for your knowledge to funnel into their heads. But also consider that one class may be feminist, another ultra conservative, one very political and health conscious. One class may be interested in politics and pop culture whereas another may be focused on religion and politics. These interests seem to then create each class's overall personality and it often has nothing at all to do with the overall GPA of the class. Really, the variations are endless as are my extended grandparent's gifts!

Being concretely prepared for the unpredictable is impossible, but being flexible enough to adjust to each class's diversity is a priceless gift you can give your students. So, what is the relationship between a bird alarm clock and two classes of 1301 or 1302, you ask? You never really know what you are going to be given on that fateful first day of the semester until you open the door to your classroom, which is much like my relative's gift giving. And by the way, the bird alarm clock has been thoughtfully and lovingly re-gifted to the Salvation Army.

--Amy Riordan

Editing Mom

One of my most memorable teaching experiences was dealing with a student plagiarism during my first year of teaching. The student was hanging on by a thread, and I had talked to him about the importance of doing well on the last paper.

When I read his paper, it was evident that the paper *was* certainly better work than his past papers, to such a degree that it wasn't his voice or style. I Googled some of the phrases and found portions that were plagiarized.

When I confronted him, he admitted copying portions of the paper from the Internet. The clincher for me, though, was when he matter-of-factly explained that other portions I had highlighted were not copied...his mom had written them. He was surprised when I failed him and turned him in for plagiarism.

The whole situation got more interesting, though, when his mother called me at home to angrily question me. When I told her that he had admitted to the plagiarism and to her writing portions, she quieted down a bit. To my enjoyment, it cut the conversation quite short. I wished I had told her that she had a couple of comma splices.

--Bridgitte Arnold