

Classroom Communication for International TAs and Others

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Session Outline

- ❑ Expectation of teaching assistants (TAs) in a US classroom
- ❑ Tips for classroom communication
 - ✓ What you say
 - ✓ How you say it
- ❑ Facilitation techniques



TAs in the U.S. Education

- TAs lead the recitations and office hours (OH), answer questions via email/online class page
 - Recitation is not only a TA-led revision of material, students are encouraged to participate (Active learning!)
- Guest Lecturing
- TAs grade the assignments & exams, sometimes write problem sets/exams

Presentation Style

- There are many different presentation styles- Everyone is different!
- Whether you are soft spoken or have an accent, the key is to be heard and understood.
- Being confident is important, which comes with practice and preparation

Effective Classroom Communication



What You Say: Organization

A lecture often follows a structure of:

- Introduction

- Key Point #1

- Elaboration, Reason
- Example, Demonstration
- Transition to the next point

- Summary

- Key Point #N

- Elaboration, Reason
- Example, Demonstration
- Transition to the next point

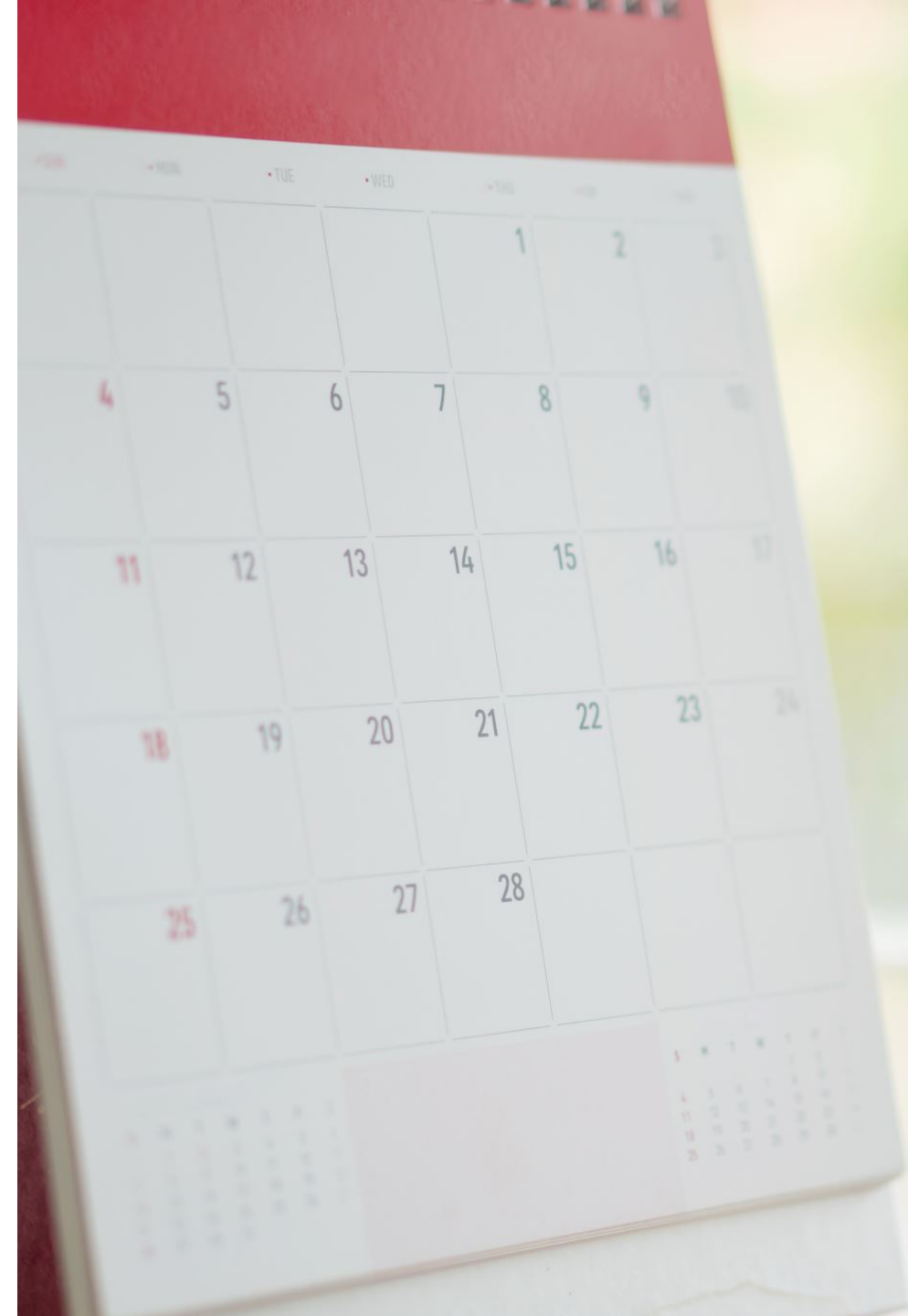
What You Say: Organization

Use “Review - Preview”, just like in TV series

For example: during your introduction,

“In the last lecture, we covered ABC. Today we will see how XYZ helps us to solve ABC.”

Introduction sets a clear and engaging agenda for students.



What You Say: Transition Phrases

To connect the dots smoothly, for example...

Let's cover ____ with three main aspects...

First, let's start with...

Similarly.... / Moreover ...

On the other hand....

Therefore....

Our next important element is...

Now that we've covered the theory, let's see it in action ...

We introduced X earlier; let's explore that further now.

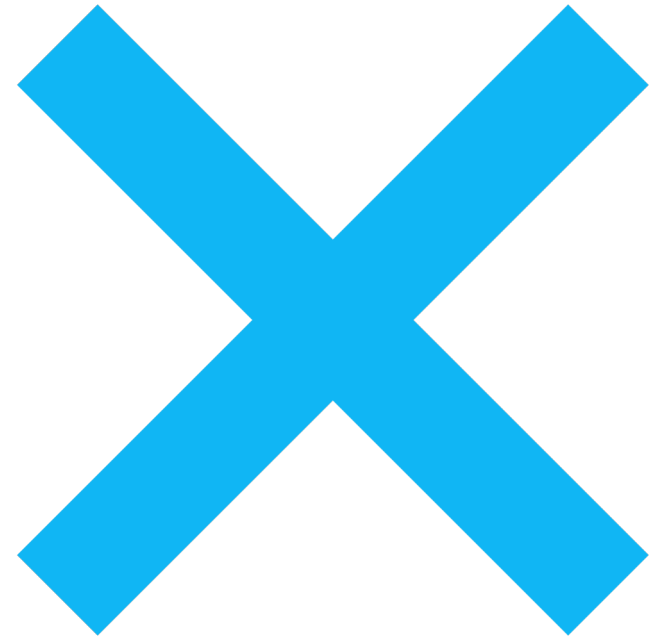
Let's recap what we've covered today ...

In your homework set, you will solve a similar problem...

Next time, we will learn ____

Common Mistakes

- ❖ Incompatible transitions
- ❖ Too many tangents
- ❖ Over-using the same transition
- ❖ Miscalculating your transition



What You Say: Asking Questions

- Some goals of asking questions:
 - To check if students understand core concepts
 - To probe students to think deeper on a topic
- Questions are genuine invitations:
 - What parts of this are still a little unclear or confusing for you?
 - What are you wondering about that I haven't yet addressed?
- Types of questions: open or closed
 - Closed: What is the data input in this inversion $D=GM$?
 - Open: How does the data choice impact this inversion?
- Aim for direct, clear, specific questions
- Ask one question at a time

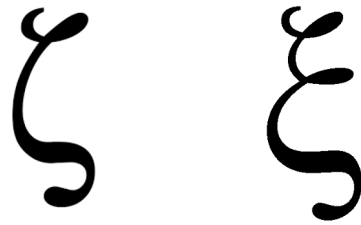
What You Say: Handling Questions

- Let students know if they can interrupt with questions or should save them till the end
- Make sure you understand the questions. If not, ask the student to clarify the question
- Repeat a student's question before answering (especially in large classroom setting)



What You Say: Tricky Words

- No jargon and acronyms, unless introduced
- Write/draw technical terms or concepts on board
- Present ideas in a few different ways
- Check pronunciation and spelling for difficult terms ahead of time



What You Say: A Summary



How You Say It: Non-verbal & Verbal



Posture

- ✓ Sit straight or stand tall
- ✓ Watch out for physical signs of nervousness
 - e.g. hand in pockets, mindless movements



Movements

- ✓ Find movements that feel natural
- ✓ Keep your movements within the computer screen
- ✓ Walk around, utilize the stage
- ✓ Use gestures and other body languages



Eye Contact

- ✓ To engage the entire room
 - Look at foreheads or just above audience
 - Choose just a couple of places to look back & forth
- ✓ Look at the camera as much as possible



Verbal

- ✓ Remember to enunciate
- ✓ Project your voice based on room size
- ✓ Watch out for pace, long sentences and “uhmm...”
- ✓ Vary tones and pitches



What you say?

How you say it?



Scenario 1

The student's idea is unclear, confusing or contradictory

- **Paraphrase:** summarize what you think the student said
 - “Is this what you mean...”
 - “It sounds like what you are saying is ... is that right?”
 - *Mirror:* use the students own words/vocabulary
- **Draw people out:** ask open-ended questions to encourage them to explain more.
 - “Why is this important?”
- **Linking:** try to make connections between their ideas and the topic of discussion
 - “Is that important because ...?”

Scenario 2

No one is speaking or answering the questions that you ask

- Wait to allow students to process
- Rephrase your question
- Ask leading questions
 - “Are there solutions in the area of ...”
- Change the discussion format:
 - Think, pair, and share
 - Individual writing
- *What if nothing worked out...?*

Scenario 3

The conversation is being dominated by one or two students

- Encourage others to join the conversation:
 - “Are there any other ideas?”
 - “Can I hear from someone who hasn’t spoken yet?”
 - “Can I hear from someone on this side of the room?”
- Balance: ask for other perspectives:
 - “Are there other ways of looking at this?”
 - “That’s a good point. We will get back to it later. Other ideas?”
- Change up the structure of the discussion so everyone has a chance to participate:
 - Example: structured go around

Next Steps

- ✓ Be prepared and flexible
- ✓ Be brave and confident
- ✓ Have fun and enjoy the process
- Please visit <https://teach.caltech.edu> for more resources on teaching remotely
- Visit <https://learn.caltech.edu> for more resources on learning remotely
- Visit <https://rjavier.caltech.edu/> <http://www.writing.caltech.edu/> for more resources on STEM communication