

“School Is Short and Life Is Long”: Advice for TAs

Wilhoit, Stephen W. *The Allyn and Bacon Teaching Assistant’s Handbook: A Guide for Graduate Instructors of Writing and Literature*. New York: Longman, 2003. 234 pages. \$42.00 (paper).

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I’ve been teaching a TA practicum nearly every fall for the past fifteen years, using a wide range of course materials—textbooks, essay collections, coursepacks—but never quite finding a perfect match between the needs of the TAs I work with and the readings we discuss. To be sure, there are plenty of first-rate books available for introducing newcomers to the art and craft of teaching composition, books like Erika Lindemann’s *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* and Cheryl Glenn Melissa A. Goldthwaite, and Robert Connors’s *The St. Martin Guide to Teaching Writing*. But neither of these books, nor any other book I know of, does what Stephen Wilhoit does in *The Allyn and Bacon Teaching Assistant’s Handbook: A Guide for Graduate Instructors of Writing and Literature*.

Wilhoit covers all the expected bases—the “how-to” information that every new writing teacher, TA or otherwise, needs to know in order to navigate the choppy waters of a composition course—everything from planning a syllabus to assigning final grades. But besides providing an abundance of practical “how-to” advice, Wilhoit also speaks directly and personally to TAs, addressing concerns that are, in many ways, unique to them. Writing from his own substantial experience as a TA supervisor, Wilhoit gives advice not only about conducting class but about conducting life: striking a healthy balance between work and family; integrating the multiple, often conflicting, roles TAs must fill; taking the job seriously without forgetting to enjoy it. Early on, in a section called “Balancing Demands: Life as a TA,” Wilhoit offers this sage advice: “Sometimes resolving problems in your personal life is more important than anything happening at school. When personal or family conflicts occur, take care of yourself and your family without guilt. School is short and life is long” (19). While this sort of “life advice” makes up a relatively small part of Wilhoit’s book, the humane tone he strikes here informs the book as a whole, giving credibility and heft to the practical, nuts-and-bolts advice about teaching that makes up the bulk of *The Teaching Assistant’s Handbook*.

In his Preface, Wilhoit anticipates the most likely objection to his book: that it overemphasizes practice at the expense of theory. He acknowledges that the thrust of the text is “clearly pedagogical” (xx) and suggests that faculty might want to pair his book with an anthology of theoretical essays. Indeed, Wilhoit’s *Handbook* would work beautifully in conjunction with a collection like Victor Villanueva’s *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*, recently out in a second edition from NCTE. For me, though, the shortage of theoretical discussion in Wilhoit’s book is not a significant problem. For one thing, he does address theoretical issues at several key junctures, including a section early in the book that briefly outlines widely discussed taxonomies of composition developed by Richard Fulkerson and James Berlin (28-31). Wilhoit uses this discussion to introduce the notion that all classroom practice ought to be grounded in a coherent theoretical position. Toward the end of the book, in an impressive section on professional development, he argues that effective writing teachers must become “conversant in the theories underlying [their] pedagogy and discipline.” “No one,” he reminds us, “teaches theory-free” (201). Wilhoit’s own discussions of teaching practice are theoretically well informed; he demonstrates for TAs the kind of theoretical sophistication he urges them to develop.

The nuts-and-bolts pedagogical discussions that form the bulk of Wilhoit’s *Handbook* are among the best I’ve seen. They show, throughout, an acute awareness of audience. Wilhoit never forgets that he is addressing *beginning* teachers, and if his advice at times seems obvious to classroom veterans (e.g., the importance of building bathroom and lunch breaks into a long stretch of student conferences), such advice is often precisely what TAs need if they are to avoid the sometimes painful process of learning by trial-and-error.

One of the book’s best pedagogical discussions is in Chapter 5, about responding to student writing, which includes an extended heuristic for teacher response, a taxonomy of responses, and a perceptive discussion of the various attitudes a teacher can assume in reading a draft: editor, average reader, academic reader, coach. There is also a superb and substantial chapter on presenting material in class, a topic given short-shrift in many how-to books about teaching writing. Here Wilhoit discusses the techniques and relative merits of lecture, discussion, oral reports, collaboration, and in-class writing. Chapter 8, on using technology in teaching composition, is another exceptional part of the book, offering TAs useful lists of Web resources, including OWLs, listservs, reference sites, and sites for plagiarism detection and professional development.

The wealth of detailed, audience-specific pedagogical advice, in itself, makes Wilhoit’s text valuable for new and experienced TAs—and for other faculty as well. But what truly distinguishes this book is not its teaching

advice but its coverage of concerns that TAs are *not* likely to share with more experienced teachers. The opening chapter is a case in point; here Wilhoit covers the full range of employment issues and English department conventions that most of us take for granted but that are, in fact, quite mysterious to the uninitiated—matters ranging from the TA's general role in the English department hierarchy to practical concerns about tuition remission, health insurance coverage, and campus parking. The chapter ends with a section, mentioned earlier, that discusses the challenges TAs face in balancing graduate study and teaching with their personal lives.

Other pleasant surprises in Wilhoit's book include a chapter about teaching literature, which many TAs, even those in rhet/comp programs, may find useful; one about the academic job search; and one about growing as a teacher, which offers advice on taking risks in the classroom and on the benefits of becoming a reflective teacher.

Perhaps the only unpleasant surprise about this fine and useful book is its price. I was taken aback when a textbook representative quoted me a figure of \$42 for a 234-page paperback. That's a good deal of money for underpaid TAs who have a tall stack of other books to buy every semester. At least for our TAs, however, the publisher agreed to provide copies free of charge because we happened to be using a Longman title in our first-year composition classes. WPAs who want to require Wilhoit's book in a practicum or other course, or as summer reading for incoming TAs, might want to check with the publisher about possible complimentary or discounted copies.

In any event, WPAs should do whatever it takes to get this book into the hands of TAs. Wilhoit's pedagogical advice is solid, detailed, and practical—the kind of advice many of us wish we'd had starting out. As Wilhoit points out, his book is not a substitute for the ongoing instruction and support that TAs need from supervisors, from faculty, and from one another. But *The Allyn and Bacon Teaching Assistant's Handbook* is, nevertheless, an invaluable introduction to teaching composition. It is also a resource that harried TAs can turn to for encouragement and moral support.

WORKS CITED

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