Teaching Assistant Responsibilities

Although it is hard to say explicitly what makes a good TA versus a bad TA, here are the baseline responsibilities:

Communication – Much of being part of a working team is an ability to communicate. For example, suppose you have a major conference deadline during the quarter. Tell the professor upfront so the two of you can work out a way to decrease your workload that week. Your professor will understand. On the other hand, you could just not tell the professor and disappear off the map for a week. Clearly, the latter choice would hurt your relationship with him/her. Another example – suppose a student or professor asks you a question you need some time to answer. Take a minute or two to reply saying "I'm working on it" – then *be sure to follow-up*. As a general guideline, either on forums or in e-mail, you should reply to a student or the professor in no greater than 24 hours (and most often less than that).

Attention to Detail – Students and professors understand you make mistakes time to time, but frequent errors on solutions or mistakes in discussion can result in a general loss of confidence. For things like solution writing – remember you are not just a student doing the homework – you *need* to be correct. If you need help, enlist friends to help review it with you or ask the professor if a particularly hard problem is troubling you. For things like grading – it means recognizing you weren't consistent grading a problem and going back through the homework to re-grade it.

Care about the students – Students will appreciate you if they recognize that you care about their learning. This means listening patiently to their requests for re-grades and helping struggling students during office hours. You will be quick about replying to e-mail and forums, especially on days before the homework is due.

Don't try to fake it – Suppose you are asked a question and you don't know the answer. Don't try to fake it and give them a potentially incorrect answer. Say you don't know, promise you will find out the answer and get back to them, find out the answer, and give it to them on the website or at the next discussion. If you fake it and say something wrong in the same way you give correct answers, students will be confused and will lose significant confidence in you.

Give examples that relate to the students - Much of computer science can be taught with good analogies. Chose interesting, relatable analogies and the students will learn the material better and appreciate you for doing it. Be creative!

Praise in public, admonish in private - In discussion or any other public forum do not harshly criticize a student's answer. However, if a student asks a really insightful question or you see a really clever solution on a homework, feel free to praise the student. In the case of a clever homework solution, try not to use their name (you don't know if they are comfortable with you doing so), but they'll recognize the solution as theirs and be proud.

Be positive and excited – Even the most experienced TA can forget this. Suppose you TA your favorite research subject, you will almost inherently convey your interest and excitement in the topic. The next year you may be a TA for a "trivial" introductory course. While the material may seem trivial to you, don't make the mistake of not being excited about it.