



UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO
FACULTY OF ARTS
Department of Political Science

Teaching Assistant Handbook

2022-2023

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Welcome!

We are pleased to welcome you as a Teaching Assistant (TA) for the Political Science Department! As a department, we are very appreciative of the contributions that TAs make to our teaching community, and we are fully committed to providing every support possible that you may need on your journey as a TA.

The following sections are intended to clearly outline the responsibilities of Teaching Assistants as well as provide information on helpful resources related to the administrative and logistical planning of your courses.

Teaching Assistant Assignments

Students will be informed of their course TA assignment by the Graduate Coordinator prior to the beginning of each term.

- **Fall term:** late-August
- **Winter term:** late-December
- **Spring term:** late-April

The [Undergraduate Schedule of Classes](#) will list details of your assigned course (instructor, date/time, and room/building). TAs should contact the instructor of the course to which they are assigned as soon as possible.

You can also use the Schedule of Classes to review course offerings in previous terms and to review preliminary course offerings for a future term. Students are welcome to request a specific course that may align well with their research area. However, not all requests can be accommodated.

Should you have any questions or concerns related to your TA assignment, please do not hesitate to contact the Graduate Chair or the Graduate Program Coordinator.

The Most Important Points

TAs are the “face of the department”

As a department, we rely on our TAs to make lasting, meaningful impressions on the students they teach. Many undergraduate students will have more direct and frequent contact with their TAs than with their course instructors. This means that, for most students, their impressions of the Department of Political Science will be strongly shaped by their impressions of their TA(s). The Department strives for teaching excellence through professional, engaged, and knowledgeable teaching. We expect our TAs to uphold our commitment to teaching excellence.

Effort, commitment, practice, and guidance

Being an effective TA is not something that simply comes naturally — it requires effort, commitment, practice, and guidance! The [Centre for Teaching Excellence](#) (CTE) offers a number of workshops and other opportunities to help graduate students develop and refine their skills as teachers. (Appendix B reproduces a number of adaptations of CTE tips sheets that are especially relevant for TAs).

TAs are teaching professionals

While a TAship is usually part of a graduate student's funding package, it is crucial to note that the department views TA positions as *professional* opportunities. Teaching Assistants are paid for their professional services—which are defined through a set of contractual obligations.

TAs should behave professionally in all course-related matters. This includes attending all required meetings and classes, notifying the course instructor beforehand of any unavoidable absences, strictly keeping posted office hours, and answering emails promptly and courteously. As a professional, TAs are expected to ensure that they are aware of their obligations and the expectations on them. TAs who fail to meet their professional obligations will not have their TAship renewed.

Ethical and Professional Behaviour

As a TA in the department, you may come across situations where you will have a conflict of interest. This could include marking the work of a family member or friend. It is expected that you declare all potential conflicts with your course instructor.

Although we encourage our TAs to build meaningful connections with their students, it is important to understand there is a line in ethical behaviour. TAs, like faculty members, are restricted from becoming personally involved with their students.

It is expected that you will treat all students equitably and fairly.

Sexual Harassment and Workplace Violence

The University of Waterloo and the Department of Political Science are committed to providing a safe environment for all staff, students, and faculty in accordance with the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#).

TAs are required to complete the Employee Safety Orientation and the Workplace Violence Awareness training offered by the Safety Office (see **Administration and Logistics** in this handbook for more details).

It is important that you know and understand your rights as an employee. You are in a unique position of authority and should both ensure your own safety as well as being mindful of your actions. TAs need to be vigilant in maintaining professional relationships; do not engage in language (body or verbal) that could be misconstrued as suggestive, aggressive, or could serve to make someone feel uncomfortable.

It is recommended that you schedule your office hours during the regular operating hours of the Department (Monday-Friday 8:30am-4:30pm). Additionally, you should leave the office door slightly open at all times. For informal meetings, it is recommended that an open, public space (such as a café) is used.

If a student approaches you about sexual harassment or a violent experience, please encourage them to contact Counselling Services, Campus Police, or the [Human Rights, Equity and Inclusion Office](#).

Please, never hesitate to contact any of the following campus partners with concerns you may have for yourself or for a student:

[Counselling Services](#)

NH 2080

519-888-4567 Ext 32655

[University of Waterloo Police Services](#)

[Commissary building](#) on Ring Road just north of the Davis Centre

Off Campus: 519-888-4911

On Campus: 519-888-4567 Ext 22222

[AccessAbility Services](#)

NH 1401

519-888-4567 Ext 45231 or 47922

access@uwaterloo.ca

[Women's Centre](#)

SLC 2102

519-888-4567 Ext 33457

womenscentre@feds.ca

[Health Services](#)

[Health Services Building](#)

[Health Services hours](#)

519-888-4096

[GLOW Centre for Sexual and Gender Diversity](#)

519-888-4567 Ext 38569 or 519-888-4567

SLC 2101

glow@feds.uwaterloo.ca

[Human Rights, Equity and Inclusion Office](#)

Commissary Building

519-888-4567 Ext. 49523

equity@uwaterloo.ca

When concerns of harassment arise, it is important to document what is happening as this can be important for case resolution. The Human Rights, Equity and Inclusion Office provides specific [Guidelines for Teaching Assistants](#) for responding to complaints. Further [campus resources](#) are also available online.

Contributing to the undergraduate student experience

The TA program provides important opportunities for our graduate students, including professional development and graduate student funding. However, the most important goal of the TA program is to contribute to the undergraduate student experience.

The central responsibility of the department is to ensure that the program achieves this goal. TA performance is appropriately monitored through student and peer feedback. Additionally, instructors are expected to complete an evaluation of each TA they have assigned to their course(s).

If an individual TA behaves in a manner detrimental to the undergraduate student experience (e.g. fails to complete grading on time, fails to meet office hour obligations, fails to respond to student

emails, etc.), it is the responsibility of the instructor, the Graduate Chair, and the Department Chair to rectify the situation. Rectification of the situation generally includes additional guidance to the TA. However, in some instances, a TA may be relieved of their responsibilities.

Responsibilities of a Teaching Assistant

TAs may have specific responsibilities assigned by their course instructors. These responsibilities will always be outlined as part of their TA contract. However, there are a number of key responsibilities common to all TAs:

Email Correspondence

The University of Waterloo's guidelines regarding the new Ontario Freedom of Information legislation **requires** that University business be conducted using University email accounts. Please only use your UWaterloo email account for correspondence with students. You may wish to remind your students that failure to check their UWaterloo email account is **not** a valid excuse for missed communications, deadlines, etc.

Ensuring Student Confidentiality

It is absolutely critical that all instructors and TAs respect student confidentiality as defined by the University. Confidentiality is defined broadly and requires that no student information (including names of students in classes and student ID numbers) be shared with, provided to, or handled by **any** person who is not an authorized university employee. No other student or third-party should have access— in any form or at any point— to a student's grades, personal information, or written assignments. Do not use Dropbox or other file sharing applications for storing student information, including grades. Please familiarize yourself with the University of Waterloo's [Policy 46 - Information Management](#), or the Records Management [Policy 46 Guide](#). For any points of clarification, please see UWaterloo's information and privacy website (<https://uwaterloo.ca/privacy/>) or contact UWaterloo's [Privacy Officer](#).

Campus Wellness

[Campus Wellness](#) services are available to all students who may require mental or physical health aid. As a TA, you may encounter a student who appears to be struggling with some aspect of their mental or physical well-being. Therefore, it is important to be familiar with the various services offered through Campus Wellness. It is also important to remember that these services are available to you as a graduate student and TA.

Students can be directed to [Counselling Services](#) for walk-in appointments and immediate assistance. Counselling Services also offers group therapy, coping skills seminars, online resources, workshops, and peer counselling through the [Mentor Assistance Through Education and Support \(MATES\)](#) program. Please visit the Campus Wellness [Hours](#) page for more information about specific service hours.

Important numbers

Counselling services: **519-888-4567 ext. 32655**

Good2Talk: **1-866-925-5454** (24/7 assistance)

Emergency Contact Information

If there is an emergency on campus, please contact the appropriate resource as outlined by the [Safety Office](#) on campus.

Exam Proctors

For final exams, graduate student proctors are assigned (by the Graduate Coordinator) to every course on a 1:50 ratio. You will not necessarily be assigned as a proctor to the course you held a TA position for. Proctors are responsible for personally contacting the instructor at least 2 days before the final exam to receive instructions, if any.

Your Individual TA Assignment

While your course instructor is required to provide you with information regarding your duties for your specific TA assignment in your TA contract, it is your responsibility to make sure that you understand what those duties are and to clearly communicate to the professor if there is any lack of clarity.

A full TAship involves 140 hours of work per semester. In theory, this means an average of 10 hours per week; in practice, of course, some weeks will involve more hours and some fewer. When assignments and exams need to be graded, your time commitment may be quite high. TAs are strongly encouraged to make sure that they know from the onset of the course what the distribution of the work hours will be among different tasks/responsibilities and over the term. Should you have any concerns about your ability to complete work in the assigned timeframe, it is imperative to let the instructor know as soon as possible.

You should keep careful track of your TA hours to ensure that you are not being asked to exceed 140 hours per term. If you anticipate exceeding 140 hours in a term, you should alert the course instructor as soon as possible. You should not normally be asked to complete more than double the weekly hours (e.g. 20 hours) in any given week. On weeks where a stat holiday occurs, TAs are expected to work only 8 hours for the week. You are not to perform any TA responsibilities on the holiday. If you have concerns in this regard, please speak either to the course instructor or to the Graduate Chair.

If you are grading assignments or exams, you should feel comfortable and confident with the outlined grading criteria and what the instructor expects from you in terms of grade range, average grades, grading criteria, style of feedback, etc. If you are uncertain on any of these points, please make sure to discuss the issue with the course instructor. It is certainly reasonable to request that the instructor review some example papers/exams with you to help clarify grading expectations.

Grading Complaints

Part of your responsibilities as a TA may be to handle and mediate grade complaints. We encourage TAs to clarify with their course instructor at the beginning of the term if this will be part of their responsibilities, or if the course instructor would prefer to handle all grade complaints directly. In either case, you should always notify your instructor of a grade complaint.

You can help mediate grading complaints by ensuring the grading expectations for your course are clearly laid out by the course instructor. When dealing with grading complaints, it is imperative that you maintain confidentiality, and make it clear that you are prepared to listen to the student's concerns in a professional manner. If you can clearly state the requirements/expectations for an assignment or exam, this will help the student see where their work might have been insufficient.

Academic Misconduct

The University of Waterloo provides campus resources to support and educate faculty, staff, and students on academic integrity. If you suspect academic misconduct from a student, consult with your course instructor immediately.

Academic expectations should always be clearly outlined in a course syllabus. However, it is important to familiarize yourself with the following:

[Academic Integrity for Students](#)

[Academic Integrity Fact Sheet](#)

[Policy 71 – Student Discipline](#)

Resources

Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE)

The [Centre for Teaching Excellence](#) provides workshops, microteaching modules, classroom observations, and other sessions that help prepare graduate students for their teaching roles. Graduate students who have taken full advantage of these opportunities have subsequently reported that they had more confidence in their role as TAs and felt better prepared for university teaching.

Graduate students are encouraged to participate in/complete the [Fundamentals of University Teaching](#) program (open to all graduate students). The program is aimed to support all Waterloo graduate students in developing their knowledge and skills as university teachers. As part of the program, participants will attend at least 6 teaching workshops and participate in 3 microteaching sessions to practice their teaching skills in small peer groups. The program can be completed in one or two terms. Upon completion of the program, participants will receive a Certificate of Completion issued by CTE. The completion of the program will also be noted on a participant's academic transcript, under the "Milestones" section.

International Teaching Assistants who are new to teaching in Canada are encouraged to register for [Preparing to Teach at Waterloo](#) (CTE210).

If you are interested in participating in a workshop, or have any questions, please contact the CTE (cte-grad@uwaterloo.ca). To register for the Fundamentals of University Teaching program, please complete the [online registration form](#).

Administration and Logistics

Payroll and Workday

Students hired as Teaching Assistants are required to complete an onboarding process through Workday, the University of Waterloo's HR system.

Steps to complete the onboarding process

1. Once you are hired into Workday, you will receive an email to claim/confirm your WatIAM system identity from watiam@uwaterloo.ca.
2. Using your WatIAM, log in to Workday to complete the onboarding items in your inbox. View the [Workday User Guides](#) (New Employees > Onboarding) for step-by-step instructions.

3. You will need to enter your personal information, tax forms, SIN number, and banking information in order to be paid through direct deposit.

Graduate students who have completed onboarding in a previous term will be prompted to verify or update their information. If you need assistance, please contact hrhelp@uwaterloo.ca or 519-888-4567 ext. 35935.

Safety Training

The training modules below are required for compliance with the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act](#) (AODA). All employees, whether full-time, part-time or contract are required to take this training.

For compliance with Ontario's Occupational Health and Safety Act, the following online training is considered mandatory for all employees:

Employee Safety Orientation

- Go to the [LEARN](#) home page.
- Login using your University of Waterloo nexus username and password (same as WatIAM).
- Click the "Self Registration" link at top of page
- Select "**Employee safety orientation (SO1001)**" from the list.
- Note: if you receive a "**not authorized**" error, contact [LEARN support](#) to have your User ID added to LEARN.

Accessible Customer Service

- Go to the [LEARN](#) home page.
- Login using your University of Waterloo nexus username and password (same as WatIAM).
- Click the "Self Registration" link at the top of the page
- Select "**Accessibility Training**" from the list – you have the choice of reviewing the transcript for all sessions or completing the interactive modules online

WHMIS 2015

- Go to the [LEARN](#) home page.
- Login using your University of Waterloo nexus username and password (same as WatIAM).
- Click the "Self Registration" link at top of page
- Select "**Employee WHMIS 2015**" from the list.

Workplace Violence Awareness

- Go to the [LEARN](#) home page.
- Login using your University of Waterloo nexus username and password (same as WatIAM).
- Click the "Self Registration" link at top of page
- Select "**Workplace Violence Awareness (SO1081)**" from the list.
- Note: if you receive a "**not authorized**" error, contact [LEARN support](#) to have your User ID added to LEARN.

Mandatory TA Training

Your online TA training will be completed in the [Teaching Assistant Training](#) site in LEARN. TAs are asked to complete the following mandatory modules:

- Preparing to TA at Waterloo
- Supporting Student Mental Health
- Giving and Receiving Feedback

You must complete the TA training modules by **September 15**. Your completion records will be shared with your department. Please submit proof of completion of each module to your Graduate Program Coordinator by email.

Please contact cte-grad@uwaterloo.ca if you encounter any trouble accessing the LEARN site.

Once you have completed the above training, please provide the Graduate Coordinator with **proof of completion**. A screen shot from your Workday account (go to *Learning* in the application menu, then *More* under the Progress menu, then *Learning History*) or LEARN account showing you have completed the training is sufficient. You will not be able to begin your TA duties until all 4 modules have been completed.

Absence Protocol

Part of the professional expectations of a TA include arriving on time for all scheduled/assigned appointments, meetings, exam proctoring assignments, and tutorial sessions. If you are unable to fulfill one of your designated TA responsibilities, it is important that you inform the course instructor (or Head TA in cases where there is one) immediately so alternative arrangements can be made. All planned absences (ex. traveling for a conference) must be approved in advance by the course instructor.

Failure to meet any of your assigned obligations (including proctoring duties), will result in a disciplinary review by the Graduate Chair. In some cases, TA funding will be terminated.

Appendix A: Graduate Teaching Assistantship Contract (Sample)

GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIP CONTRACT

Teaching Assistant Name: Click or tap here to enter text.

Student ID #: Click or tap here to enter text.

Term: Click or tap here to enter text.

Course: Click or tap here to enter text.

Instructor(s): Click or tap here to enter text.

Tutorial Section (if applicable): Click or tap here to enter text.

Total assigned hours: **140***

**On weeks where a stat holiday occurs, TAs are expected to work only 8 hours for the week. You are not to perform any TA responsibilities on the holiday.*

Duty	Assigned Hours	Brief description of unusual or especially time-consuming features of the duty, if any
Meetings with Course Instructor	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Class preparation	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Attending lectures	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Student consultation; office hours	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Lecturing	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Conducting tutorials	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Grading	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Proctoring exams	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Other duties (describe/explain)	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.
Totals	Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.

Use the space below to describe any anticipated excessive fluctuations in workload, or any known academic obligations on the part of the student that may interfere with their duties.

Click or tap here to enter text.

This document outlines the responsibilities associated with the employment portion of a Graduate Teaching Assistantship. The contract constitutes the formal agreement between the Department of Political Science and the student. This form **MUST** be submitted to the Graduate Coordinator by the end of the **second week of the academic term** during which the TAship is held.

Please note that TA duties extend from the date lectures begin until the due date for course marks and may be distributed unevenly over the term. However, the maximum hours of work required in any one week should not exceed 10 hours. On weeks where a stat holiday occurs, TAs are expected to work only 8 hours. You are not to perform any TA responsibilities on the holiday. An anticipated fluctuation in hours should be clearly identified at the time of course assignment. Graduate student TAs shall identify to the instructor any known academic obligations that may interfere with their duties.

Further, the number of actual hours for each duty may vary from the allocated amounts. The total number of hours for the entire term will not exceed 140 hours.

Instructions for Filling out the TA Contract:

Under “**Assigned Hours**”, list the total number of hours the student will perform each associated task during the term of this agreement (note that total hours for a single term cannot exceed 140). See below for some explanation as to how ‘hours’ may be assigned.

“**Meetings with Course Instructor**” TAs will be given the opportunity to meet with the course instructor(s) at least three times in the term with approximately 1 hour assigned to each meeting. But, additional meetings may be set, and the time for those meetings should be accounted for here.

“**Class Preparation**” TAs will be expected to complete the readings as assigned to them by the Instructor and in order to be prepared for office hours and/or tutorials with students.

“**Attending lectures**” TAs are expected to attend course lectures that the individual instructor deems necessary in order for the TA to be prepared for Office Hours.

“**Office hours**” TAs will be expected to hold one office hour a week. TAs may also be asked to be available to offer guidance to students by email. All consulting hours should be accounted for.

“**Lecturing**” TAs may be asked to present a lecture to the class. The date for the lecture will be assigned at the beginning of the term.

“**Conducting tutorials**” TAs may be asked to facilitate tutorials. Your tutorial section(s) will be assigned at the beginning of the term.

“**Grading**” TAs will be asked to grade assignments for the course and there will be times when grading may be heavy. Exam dates and marking deadlines will be given at the beginning of the term.

“**Proctoring exams**” TAs will be asked to proctor their course or other courses’ final exams. In-class examination dates will be assigned at the beginning of the term. Final exams are scheduled by the Registrar’s Office, and it is the TA’s responsibility to be available during the examination period. It is strongly recommended that your end of term holiday and/or travel schedules not be set until the final exam dates have been released.

“**Other duties (describe/explain)**” Note that some ‘other duties’ may include: picking up course materials (e.g., films, maps, or books from the library); showing a film; preparing course materials.

Appendix B: Centre for Teaching Excellence Tip Sheets

CTE maintains an [online collection of teaching tips](#) on a wide variety of topics – a number of which will be relevant to your experience as a TA. Below are adapted versions of some particularly useful examples.

Tipsheet 1: Key strategies for effective tutorials

For many graduate students, teaching tutorials is often their first — and in some instances, only — chance to apply and develop their teaching skills. Tutorials will run differently depending on your discipline, with the most common tutorial types based on discussion, problem-solving, question and answer, and review. Running tutorials can provide challenges for both teaching assistants (TAs) and faculty members. Numerous teaching aspects are involved in making tutorials productive learning events: planning, communicating, delivery, question strategies, activities, and motivation.

Planning

- **Tutorials should have their own learning goals.** Check that your goals are congruent with those of the course instructor and that they clearly define what students will do. Communicate these goals to your students. Focus not on “covering material” but rather encourage active learning among your students.
- **Define guidelines from the beginning.** Devote time early in the term to familiarizing students with your guidelines for how the tutorial will be run. Ask for their input. You might have nonnegotiable rules (e.g., late policies), but be flexible when possible (e.g., provide time for submitting assignments, locations for assignment submission, etc.). Be sure to provide students with a copy of these guidelines. Make sure that the penalties for infringement are clearly explained (e.g., how many marks will be lost).
- **Prepare a lesson plan for each session.** Begin with your learning objectives for the session as a way to help you limit your content to 2-3 main concepts for a 50-minute session. Make sure to include time estimates for each section of the tutorial.
- **Have your supporting materials ready.** If you plan to use visual aids (i.e., overheads, handouts), make sure they are legible and concise. If you plan to use the chalkboard, determine how to partition and use it. It’s also a good idea to prepare a few extra problems and examples in case students need additional practice. If you need to demonstrate equipment use, practice before the tutorial.

Related CTE Teaching Tips:

- [Course Content Selection and Organization](#)
- [Course Design: Planning a Class](#)

Communicating

- **Encourage students to participate.** Mention explicitly that you expect students to participate and that they should feel free to make comments and ask questions. Provide opportunities for participation.
- **Give students feedback.** With large classes, tutorials may be the only time when students can get expert feedback on their work. Explain what’s wrong, where and why. Put it in writing, if possible.

- **Make an effort to learn students' names and use them.** You could use name tents, ask students to say their name when asking questions, or return assignments to them personally. Students will regard the tutorial as more important if they feel that they are known to you, and that you will notice if they are absent.
- **Act in a professional manner.** Some tutorial leaders may feel nervous and behave in an overly strict or stand-offish manner. Assess your work climate by watching how your colleagues relate to students. Try to act naturally. If you are close to students in age, you may be tempted to socialize too much with them. Faculties have codes of conduct between staff and students. Remember that your job may require assessment and that you need to ensure that students do not question your objectivity.
- **Address disruptive student behaviour.** Although dealing with it can be awkward, you need to resolve it as soon as possible because it can deprive other students of their right to learn. Ask the disruptive students if they have questions. Remind students of expected classroom behaviour stated on the first day of class. You may also need to speak to the student(s) involved outside of class.

Related CTE teaching tips:

- ["Effective Communication: Barriers and Strategies"](#)
- ["Receiving and Giving Effective Feedback"](#)

Delivery

- **Keep pace with lecture progress.** Tutorials typically follow-up on a lecture. Try to attend lectures yourself (seek the instructor's consent first). Alternatively, arrange for students to bring you a copy of their notes, so that you have a better picture of what students have learned.
- **Make connections between the tutorial and the course.** Help students visualize the "big picture" and integrate the tutorial with the rest of their experiences in the course. Make statements like, "remember when we learned how to calculate x earlier in the term?" or "later on in the term, you will learn about..." You may also ask students to make such links.
- **Use relevant examples.** Illustrate points with examples taken from the field under study. When possible, share personal, research, or real-world experiences to help students visualize practical applications of concepts.
- **Engage your students.** Maintain eye contact during your tutorials so you can see raised hands and develop a rapport with your students. Speak loud enough and with enthusiasm to keep students' attention. Circulating around the room when students are engaged in individual or group work; this allows them to ask questions easily.
- **Avoid speaking to your visuals.** Whether you use the blackboard or a screen, you may be tempted to look at and speak to your visuals. Remember to point your toes to the back of the room before you speak so that students can hear and see you and so that you can see their responses to your teaching.

Related CTE Teaching Tips:

- [Polishing Your Delivery Skills](#)
- [Building Your Note-Taking and Study Skills: A Guide for Students](#)

Questions

- **Tutorials are the best times to ask detailed questions.** Make sure that students are aware of this. Suggest that they jot down questions and issues as they arise during lectures and bring their lists to the tutorial. Also let them know that you expect them to search for answers by themselves before coming to you.
- **Prepare questions in advance.** Challenge students to venture beyond their current knowledge. To help accomplish this, carefully design questions before the tutorial sessions. Even when you expect students to have questions during the tutorials, having prepared your own set of questions (and answers) can help you to improve their learning and increase your confidence.
- **"Are there any questions?"** Such inquiries are often viewed by students as a "ritualistic" exercise on the instructor's part and are usually met with silence. When asking for questions, be sure that your question is genuine and has a clear purpose. Ask for questions on specific topic areas. If your question is met with no response, be prepared to use follow-up probing questions, such as: "So if I were to ask you on an exam whether ..., how would you answer it?" This usually increases students' desire to understand the concept and elicits questions. Be sure to wait 10 seconds or more for a response.
- **Before answering, repeat questions.** By doing this, you will ensure that everybody has a context for your answer. An additional point to remember is to look at the whole class when responding, not just at the questioner.
- **Admit when you don't know the answer.** You will lose more credibility by trying to fake an answer than by stating that you don't know. Compliment the student on the question, then ask the class if anyone knows the answer (be sure to verify any responses). If there are no answers, volunteer to find the answer yourself and report back at the next class or ask the student to do this.

Related CTE Teaching Tips:

- [Question Strategies](#)
- [Asking Questions: Six Types](#)

Activities

- **Favour active learning activities.** Some activities to engage students and that can help students to learn by doing are: solving problems, discussing different perspectives, asking questions, answering questions, working out different approaches to problems or case studies, and engaging in debates.
- **Give clear instructions.** Before starting an activity, make sure that students understand what to do. Explain the goals and provide time breakdowns, then form groups if necessary. Write the instructions on the board, or consider providing printed instructions. When an activity is over, be sure to debrief to reinforce the goals and the "take home" message.
- **Avoid the temptation to turn tutorials into lectures.** You may decide to expand on lecture topics from time to time; however, if this becomes a trend in your tutorials, it may indicate that the learning goals are not being met during lectures. If you suspect this is the case, talk to the instructor.

Related CTE Teaching Tips:

- [Active Learning Activities](#)
- [Teaching Problem-Solving Skills](#)

- [Implementing Group Work in the Classroom](#)
- [Group Work in the Classroom: Types of Small Groups](#)

Motivation

- **Be sure your tutorials add value to the course.** Students can regard tutorials as optional and their attendance may be erratic. If it is possible to divert some of the course content and assessments into academic tutorial times, it is more likely that students will take tutorials more seriously.
- **Never put students down.** Showing respect for all students is critical. Students can be highly sensitive to snubs or sarcasm, especially if they are feeling insecure.
- **Acknowledge and thank participation.** Short phrases such as, “that’s a good point” or “I see what you’re saying, but have you considered...?” allow students to develop insight instead of feel inadequate or foolish. Acknowledge all answers whether they are accurate or not. Students get disheartened if their response is passed over without comment because it is not what the tutor wants to hear. However, be sure to provide or elicit an accurate response so the class has correct information.
- **Commend good performance.** Receiving praise for doing something well is highly motivating. Sincere praise from a tutor for insight, achievement, participation, or helpfulness will make students feel good and more likely to participate again.

Related CTE Teaching Tips:

- [Fostering Student Morale and Confidence](#)

Other strategies

- **Set office hours.** If you need to be available to students outside of class, set up office hours, post them on your office door or website, and make sure you are present. Office hours can minimize the interruptions to your research work that can occur when students do not know when best to approach you.
- **If you need help, ask somebody.** Your first resource should be the course instructor or coordinator. Whether it is a fellow TA or a faculty member, she/he/they will most likely have accumulated experience and insight to share with you as well as suggestions. In difficult cases, Waterloo's [Conflict Management and Human Rights Office](#) may be a source of assistance. Though the tutorials are your responsibility, you’re part of a team that can help you.
- **Keep good records.** Make notes about attendance, topics covered, questions asked and student difficulties with the material. Such records will be very helpful if you are involved in running the same tutorial again and may provide useful feedback to the course instructor.
- **Solicit student feedback.** Ask how they are finding their learning experience and what they think you should stop, start, and continue doing (and you can choose to do this anonymously through a survey). Check whether or not they have mastered concepts that have been covered already.
- **Don’t wait until after the midterm or end of the term to get feedback.** The instructor evaluation forms will not help you address problem areas in real-time. Monitoring how your tutorials are impacting students will help you address issues right away. Evaluation data are also helpful for overall reflection on your teaching and they provide evidence of your teaching effectiveness.

Related CTE Teaching Tips:

- [Conflict Management for Instructors](#)
- [Holding Office Hours](#)

Resources

- [Centre for Teaching Excellence TA Manual](#)
- Nilson, L.B. (2010). *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
 - Part 3 of this book offers tips on facilitating effective discussions
 - Part 4 of this book offers tips on problem-solving, quantitative reasoning, and labs
- Nyquist, J.D., Wulff, D.H. (1996). *Working Effectively With Graduate Assistants*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Lubin, J. (1987). *Conducting Tutorials*. Kensington, NSW: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia.
- Race, P, Brown, S. (1998). *The Lecturer's Toolkit. A practical guide to teaching, learning, and assessment*. London, UK: Kogan Page Limited.
- Wankat, P.C. and Oreovicz, F.S. (2015). [Teaching Engineering](#) (2nd ed.). West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
 - Chapter 5 (Problem Solving and Creativity) offers tips on teaching problem-solving skill

Tipsheet 2: Why is Inclusive Instruction Important?

According to recent advances in neuroscience research, there is no such thing as an “average learner” (Rose & Meyer, 2002; Rose et al., 2013; Rose, 2016). Our courses include students with diverse backgrounds, unique lived experiences and varying abilities; these factors affect how they learn. Effective teaching involves considering students in the design and implementation of instruction.

While one-size-fits-all instructional practices may enable some students to excel, they pose barriers for others. Inclusive instructional practices, on the other hand, aim to remove unnecessary barriers and improve access for as many learners as possible. But inclusive instruction is more than the just the elimination of individual and systemic barriers. It means designing for variability so that all students can contribute to, and fully engage in, their learning. It means checking our assumptions about why some students succeed and others struggle, and why some students seek help and others don't. Moreover, inclusive instruction is about fostering a sense of belonging. Having a sense of belonging positively impacts students' motivation and ability to learn (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012; Trujillo & Tanner, 2014).

Implementing inclusive instruction can seem like a daunting task; however, many of the strategies that foster instructional inclusivity are really just effective teaching practices. Just as students are diverse, so too are instructors—you are not expected to be all things to all students. From the *Inclusive Instruction* suite of tip sheets linked below, select one or two areas to focus on at a time. Choose strategies that align with your course context, your intended learning outcomes, and your teaching approach. Start small and know that even just one change has the potential to benefit many students.

Recommended CTE Tips Sheets

- [What is Universal Design?](#)
- [Universal Design: Course Design](#)
- [Universal Design: Instructional Strategies](#)
- Understanding Essential Requirements (coming soon)
- [Supporting Students' Mental Wellbeing: Course Design](#)
- [Supporting Students' Mental Wellbeing: Instructional Strategies](#)
- [Gender Pronouns and Teaching](#)

References and Further Reading

Freeman, T.M., Anderman, L.H., & Jensen, J.M. (2007). Sense of belonging in college freshmen at the classroom and campus levels. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 75(3), 203-220.

Rose, D.H., & Meyer, A. (2002). *Teaching Every Student in the Digital Age. Universal Design for Learning*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Virginia, USA.

Rose, T. (2016). *The End of Average. How We Succeed in a World That Value Sameness*. Harper Collins.

Rose, L.T., Rouhani, P., & Fischer, K.W. (2013). The Science of the Individual, Mind, Brain, and Education 7(3), Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/mbe.12021>

Strayhorn, T.L. (2012). *College Student' Sense of Belonging. A Key to Educational Success for All Students*. Taylor & Francis, New York.

Trujillo, G., & Tanner, K.D. (2014). Considering the role of affect in learning: Monitoring students' self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and science identity. *CBE- Life Sciences Education*, 13, 6-15.

Tipsheet 3: Classroom management: creating an inclusive environment

Here are some tips on how to create a positive classroom atmosphere early in the semester:

- **Learn students' names.** By learning your students' names, you can create a comfortable classroom environment that will encourage student interaction. Knowing your students' names also tells them that you are interested in them as individuals.
- **Introduce yourself to your tutorial.** It is surprising how many students – especially in large classes – do not know their TAs name. In addition to telling students how you wish to be addressed, say something about your background: how you first became interested in the subject, how it has been important to you, and why you are teaching this course. Genuinely convey your enthusiasm for the field and the subject.
- **Give students an opportunity to meet each other.** Ask students to divide themselves into groups of three to five and introduce themselves. Or go around the room and ask all students to respond to one question, such as “What’s the one thing you really want to learn from this course?” or “What aspect of the course seems most appealing to you?”
- **Divide students into small groups.** Give groups a small task, such as a brainstorming exercise, then place responses on the board for discussion and interpretation.
- **Arrive early and chat with students. Ask how the course is going.** Are they enjoying the tutorials? Is there anything they want you to include in discussions?
- **Seek out students who are doing poorly in the tutorials.**
- **Listen attentively to all questions and answer them directly.** If you will cover the answer during the remainder of the tutorial, acknowledge the aptness of the question, ask the student to remember it, and answer the question directly when you arrive at that subject.
- **Try to empathize with beginners.** Remember that not all of your students are as highly motivated and interested in the discipline as you were when you were an undergrad. Slow down when explaining complex ideas, and acknowledge the difficulty and importance of certain concepts or operations. Try to recall your first encounter with a concept – what examples, strategies, or techniques clarified it for you? By describing that encounter and its resolution to your students, you not only explain the concept but also convey the struggle and rewards of learning.

Tipsheet 4: Facilitating effective discussions

"Initiating and sustaining a lively, productive discussion are among the most challenging activities for an instructor" (Davis, 1993). Here are some strategies that will help you prepare for and lead an effective discussion.

Preparing for a discussion

- **Plan how you will conduct the discussion.** Although the ideal discussion is spontaneous and unpredictable, you will want to do some careful planning. You should have a clear goal/objective for the discussion, a plan for how you will prepare the students, and a general idea about how you will guide the discussion (e.g., with activities, videos, questions, etc.).
- **Help students prepare for the discussion.** You can distribute a list of questions for each discussion, ask students to bring in their own questions, suggest key concepts or themes for them to focus on, or ask them to collect evidence that clarifies or refutes a particular concept or problem. Discussions will be more satisfying for you and your students if they are prepared.
- **Establish ground rules for participation in a discussion.** In order for a discussion to be effective, students need to understand the value of actively listening to their peers, tolerating opposing viewpoints, and being open-minded. They also need to recognize the importance of staying focused and expressing themselves clearly.

Starting a discussion

- **Refer to questions you distributed.** Start the discussion by asking one of the study questions you assigned or by asking group members which of the questions they found most challenging.
- **Make a list of key points.** Identify and list the important points from the reading and use these as a starting point for discussion.
- **Use a partner activity.** Ask students to come to the discussion with 3 or 4 questions prepared. Start the discussion by having students pair off and alternate asking and answering their questions.
- **Use a brainstorming activity.** Ask students to contribute ideas related to the discussion topic (no matter how bizarre or farfetched) and write all ideas on the board. After a set period of time or when students have run out of ideas, critically evaluate all the ideas or categorize them into themes.
- **Pose an opening question and give students a few minutes to record an answer.** The process of writing down their answers will enable students to generate new ideas as well as questions. After they have finished writing, ask for volunteers or call on students to share their ideas. This activity also gives quieter students the opportunity to prepare answers they can share with the group.

- **Divide students into small groups to discuss a specific question or issue.** Be sure to assign explicit questions and guidelines and give the groups a time limit to complete the exercise. Also ask them to select a recorder and/or a reporter who will report back to the entire discussion group.
- **Pose a controversial issue and organize an informal debate.** Group the students according to the pro or con position they take and ask the groups to formulate 2-3 arguments or examples to support their position. Write each group's statements on the board and use these as a starting point for discussion.

Encouraging student participation

- **Create an inclusive discussion environment.** Group members will be more likely to contribute to a discussion if they feel they are in a safe, comfortable environment. Here are some general strategies for achieving this:
 - at the beginning of term, use an icebreaker activity and ask students to introduce themselves and describe their interests and backgrounds so they can get to know one another
 - as the facilitator, you should also learn all of your students' names (using name cards may assist you and your students in accomplishing this task)
 - arrange the seating in the room, if possible, into a semicircle so that the group members can see each other
- **Positively reinforce student contributions.** You can emphasize the value of student responses by restating their comments, writing their ideas on the board, and/or making connections between their comments and the discussion at large. Also be sure to maintain eye contact and use non-verbal gestures such as smiling and head nodding to indicate your attention and interest in students' responses.
- **Limit your own involvement.** Avoid the temptation to talk too much and/or respond to every student's contribution. Try to encourage students to develop their own ideas and respond to one another (i.e., student-to-student interaction). You might also sit someplace other than the "head" of the table.
- **Balance students' voices during the discussion.** Here are some strategies for dealing with problem group members who can affect the level of student participation:
 - (a) Discourage students who monopolize the discussion by implementing a structured activity that requires each group member to be involved, avoiding eye contact with him/her, assigning a specific role to the dominant student that limits participation (e.g., discussion recorder), or implementing time limits on individual contributions.
 - (b) Draw quiet students into the discussion by posing non-threatening questions that don't require a detailed or correct response, assigning a small specific task to the student (e.g., obtaining information for next class), sitting next to him/her, or positively reinforcing contributions he/she does make.

(c) Clarify confusing student contributions by asking the student to rephrase/explain the comment, paraphrasing the comment if you can interpret it, asking the student probing questions, or encouraging him/her to use concrete examples and metaphors.

Guiding the discussion

- **Keep the discussion focused.** Have a clear agenda for the discussion and list questions/issues on the board to inform and remind everyone of where the discussion is heading. Brief interim summaries are also helpful as long as they don't interfere with the flow of the discussion. If the discussion gets off track, stop and bring the discussion back to the key issues.
- **Take notes.** Be sure to jot down key points that emerge from the discussion and use these for summarizing the session. You might also assign a different group member each week the specific role of recording and summarizing the progression of the discussion.
- **Be alert for signs that the discussion is deteriorating.** Indications that the discussion is breaking down include: subgroups engaging in private conversations, members not listening to each other and trying to force their ideas, excessive "nit-picking," and lack of participation. Changing the pace by introducing a new activity or question can jumpstart the discussion.
- **Prevent the discussion from deteriorating into a heated argument.** Remind students of the ground rules for discussion: they need to practice active listening, remain open-minded, and focus on ideas and content rather than on people and personal issues. Defuse arguments with a calm remark and bring the discussion back on track.
- **Bring closure to the discussion.** Announce that the discussion is ending and ask the group if there are any final comments or questions before you pull the ideas together. Your closing remarks should show the students how the discussion progressed, emphasizing 2-3 key points and tying the ideas into the overall theme of the discussion. Also be sure to acknowledge the insightful comments students have made. Providing closure to the discussion is critical for ensuring that group members leave feeling satisfied that they accomplished something.

Evaluating the discussion

- **Ask students to write a one-minute assessment of the tutorial.** You can ask students to write about how their thinking changed as a result of the discussion or how the discussion fits into the context of issues previously discussed. Have students hand in their papers and review samples to assess what they have learned.
- **Ask students to respond to specific questions about the discussion.** Was the topic defined effectively? Did the facilitator keep the discussion on track? Did everyone have the opportunity to speak? Was your participation invited and encouraged? What questions related to the discussion remain unanswered? In what ways could the discussion have been improved? You might also use a more formal questionnaire and have students rate these various aspects of the discussion.

- **Conduct your own informal evaluation of the discussion.** Consider the following questions when making your evaluation: Did everyone contribute to the discussion? How much was I, as the facilitator, involved? Did the discussion stay focused? What questions worked especially well? How satisfied did the group seem about the productiveness of the discussion? What would I do differently next time?

Suggested Reading

- Brookfield, S.D. (1999). *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Clarke, J.H. (1988). Designing Discussions as Group Inquiry. *College Teaching*, 36(4), pp. 140-143.
- Davis, B.G. (1993). Discussion Strategies. *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., pp. 63-98.
- McKeachie, W.J. (1986). *Teaching Tips*. Lexington, Mass.: Heath.

Tipsheet 4: Being an international TA in a Canadian classroom

There are many challenges to being a Teaching Assistant. It can be a steep learning curve for anyone, especially if you are an international student who has the added challenge of learning the nuances of a culture that may be very different from your own. If you are an International Teaching Assistant (ITA), the following information can help you to make the transition to a Canadian university classroom smoother and avoid common misunderstandings.

Differing Backgrounds

The depth and breadth of the material covered at both the secondary (high school) and post-secondary (university and college) levels differs dramatically among different countries. Therefore, you should not expect your students to know all of the same aspects of a subject that you may have been taught in your country, especially if you are teaching a first-year course. Be patient and willing to slow down your teaching of the material and to address questions.

Students' Level of Interest

Some students might seem to show little interest in your course. Avoid taking this personally. For many Canadian students, the university experience is about the social aspects as much as it is academic ones. Also, some students may not have settled into their specialty or even decided if university is where they want to be, especially if they are in their first few years. Members of your class may be taking survey courses to try out a topic area or because it is required, rather than because it is something in which they are keenly interested. Try not to become discouraged by what seems like student apathy. Show interest in your material and try to engage the students. The more enthusiasm you show for the course, the more likely it is that your students will see the value in it.

Informality in the Classroom

The Canadian university dynamic can seem very relaxed to ITAs whose experience of school is much more formal. For example, students in Canada do not stand when the teacher enters the room. Also, many students will eat or drink in class, and might arrive late or leave early. Many students are accustomed to calling TAs by their first names. If you are not used to this kind of classroom behaviour you might feel shocked or even angered by the attitudes and actions of the students (Lambert, p.16).

It's important to understand that in Canada informal attitudes from students are often a sign of approval and acceptance or respect. As well, students appreciate friendliness and openness from authority figures. TAs should maintain a professional distance from their students at all times; however, students will respond well to a TA who is willing to share personal experiences, laugh occasionally, and talk with his or her students outside of class. This kind of informal relationship signals to students that you care and are interested in them and their education.

Teaching Approaches

Students expect that their instructors, including their TAs, will be knowledgeable about the course material and will present the material in a clear, easy to understand, systematic way. Canadian students generally have the impression that the teacher's role is to give them detailed instructions and feedback on assignments and to explain step-by-step what they are expected to do. Sometimes

this teaching style is referred to as “spoon-feeding”, but it is better understood as a very involved level of interactivity between students and teachers and is a teaching style that most first- and second-year students expect; part of the university experience is to move students gradually toward a more independent learning style so that they can interpret assignments accurately and engage in self- and peer-assessment as they mature as learners (Althen, p. 7).

Here are some pointers to make your teaching more effective in this environment:

- Be enthusiastic about the TA experience and engage in it fully. Canadian students have been raised in a system that supports interactive teaching methods and aggressive questioning of the teacher (Lambert, p. 16). Some ITAs find these approaches disrespectful or intimidating, but it can be an excellent opportunity to expand your teaching experiences and gain insight into how North Americans interact. A positive attitude will go a long way in a Canadian classroom.
- Communicate honestly and encourage students to express their needs or misunderstandings. Students in North America will be understanding and supportive of an instructor who is willing to admit if he or she doesn't know something. If you have a student ask you a question that you can't answer, simply say you don't know the answer but will find it out for the next class (and then make sure you follow up on it). Make it clear to your students on the first day that they are free to ask questions at any time and encourage them to talk to you about any of the course material or requirements.
- North American students appreciate a certain level of entertainment and engagement in a classroom. What that means is that they prefer variety over having someone deliver information in a dry lecture format every class. Also, students are more attentive if they are able to participate in class (Althen, p. 7). Engage your students through activities such as debates, role playing or group work. There are a number of [CTE Teaching Tips](#) with ideas on how to vary your lectures or tutorials. See, for example, Key Strategies for Effective Tutorials, Active Learning Activities, Teaching Problem-Solving Skills, and Implementing Group Work in the Classroom.
- In some parts of the world, negative or direct criticism is seen as an effective teaching tool; however, in North America negative feedback can be very hard on a student's morale (Ronkowski, p. 27). When addressing students' responses or comments, be encouraging and recognize their effort to contribute (Althen, p. 8). Students expect praise when they do well and encouragement when they are incorrect. As an example, if a student offers a wrong answer, you can respond by saying, “You have the right idea, but there's more to it than that” rather than simply stating, “No, that's wrong.”

Language Concerns

Being a TA is a great opportunity to improve your English if it is not your native language. Teaching in English can be a major challenge when you first start, but your position as a non-native speaker in front of the class can work to everyone's advantage. It is good for students to learn to understand English with other accents, and if you are able to relax and enjoy the situation, you may be able to use the 'language barrier' to connect with your students.

Whether inside or outside of the classroom, make every effort to practise and improve your English. There is a difference for students between adjusting to an accent and simply not being able to

understand a teacher because he or she does not have adequate language skills. There are a number of ways to strengthen your English: the university offers labs, courses, tutorials, mentor programs and other forms of support (visit CTE's [ITA page](#) to find links to these programs). You can also engage in conversation with native speakers in your Department, your classes, or even where you live. You can surround yourself with colloquial English by having the television on or listening to a Canadian talk radio station, for example, the CBC.

If you believe your English skills might be an issue while you are a TA, acknowledge the language issue on the first day of class. When you are introducing yourself, state that you are still learning English, and let the students know that they can ask you to repeat yourself if anything is unclear. Students will be much more open and supportive if they know you recognize that your English is not perfect and that you are sincere in your efforts to be understood. Also tell the students that you might need them to speak more slowly or clearly than they are used to in order to help you understand them. Students appreciate and engage easily in this kind of cooperative teacher/student dynamic; it is not seen as diminishing your position of authority to be honest in this manner.

Here are some suggestions to further help with language issues:

- Constantly check student understanding. Some ITAs speak very quickly (Ronkowski, p. 26), so when you make a major point, ask your students if they've understood you. If they haven't, repeat your point more slowly and clearly, phrase it in a different way, offer an example and/or write it on the whiteboard.
- Before answering a question from a student, restate his or her question and then ask if that's what the student meant. For example, you could say, "What you're asking is ... is that correct?" That way you confirm that you have understood the question and you have made sure that the entire class has heard it.
- Make an outline of the main points to be covered in class. You can put the outline on the board at the beginning of class, briefly reading through it at first and referring to it as you move from one point to the next. This will help students keep track of where you are in the lesson and more easily follow your ideas even if they are struggling with your pronunciation or accent.
- If you present a technical term or theoretical concept that is new to the students, write it on the board, on an overhead, or have it in your PowerPoint presentation (Ronkowski, p. 25). If you are unsure how to pronounce something, ask a colleague in your Department before class, or write it out for your students and ask them how it is pronounced.

If you find that you are feeling overwhelmed by your TA responsibilities, discuss your struggles with your supervisor. It is also useful to talk with other TAs in your Department or someone who has previously been a TA. There is also support available from Centre for Teaching Excellence. Read through some of the Tips sheets or set up an appointment to have a TA Developer observe one of your classes and give you feedback and suggestions on how to improve.

The Canadian classroom can be a space of powerful learning for you as well as your students, once you understand the dynamics. Try out some or all of these tips and see what works for you. Above all, remember to relax and enjoy the experience.

References

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- Ronkowski, S. (1999). "The International Teaching Assistant Handbook." Santa Barbara: Regents of the University of California.