

Teaching Assistant GUIDE 2011-2012



Erin Aspenlieder
Graduate Student Development
Centre for Leadership in Learning
McMaster University



CENTRE FOR LEADERSHIP IN LEARNING

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Created by: Erin Aspenlieder

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McMaster University • 1280 Main Street West
Hamilton, ON
Phone 905 525 9140 • Email tanet@mcmaster.ca

Teaching Matters

Teaching assistants are essential to undergraduate education at McMaster. Working as a teaching assistant also offers you unique opportunities and experiences.

Teaching assistants at McMaster fill a number of important roles. You may lead class discussions; supervise a lab group; mark assignments; meet and correspond with students; or facilitate help sessions. Whatever role you fill, your work is very important to the success of the students and instructors you work with. So that you may confidently fill your role, this guide aims to provide you with some strategies for fostering an inclusive and dynamic teaching environment and to familiarize you with McMaster policies.

As important as teaching assistants are to undergraduate education, the opportunities and experiences that come from being a teaching assistant are also very valuable for you. Whether you plan to pursue an academic career or intend to enter a field that does not have teaching as a component, the skills you acquire as a teaching assistant will benefit you: facilitating discussions; planning and delivering oral presentations; evaluating the work of others and offering constructive feedback; and experience designing and assigning projects.

While your experience teaching will offer you valuable experience, teaching is not your only job; you have many other responsibilities, not the least of which is your role as a student. This guide therefore aims to provide suggestions that will make your role as a teaching assistant not only enriching for you and your students, but also easier and more efficient, thus allowing you to succeed as both a student and as a TA.

This is an introductory guide and is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather it is meant to provide suggestions and ideas for you to test out and refine in ways that respond to your students and satisfy your expectations as a teacher. We hope that you will take advantage of the resources and professional development opportunities of the Centre for Leadership in Learning and the Teaching Assistant Network. The Centre for Leadership in Learning offers a range of workshops designed to enrich your teaching experience.

We hope that you find your teaching experience engaging and rewarding and look forward to seeing you at the Centre for Leadership in Learning.

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Teaching Assistants at McMaster

This section explains what a teaching assistant is and what a teaching assistant does.

McMaster began employing teaching assistants in 1985 to assist course instructors. Teaching assistants may be graduate students, undergraduate students or individuals who apply to specific departments.

The duties assigned to teaching assistants vary depending on the course and the instructor. For instance, teaching assistants may lead weekly tutorial groups, grade essays or assignments, supervise laboratories, or work as a “super tutor.” Before your teaching assistantship begins you will meet with the course instructor to discuss and agree upon your duties. Together with the instructor you will complete an “Hours of Work” form that specifically details your duties.

This form not only specifies what duties you will perform, but also how many hours you will devote to each duty. Teaching assistants at McMaster work 130 hours per term. By specifying what duties you will perform and by estimating the time commitment of these duties, you can ensure that you devote the appropriate and fair amount of time to your teaching responsibilities.

Note

Teaching assistants at McMaster are represented by CUPE local 3906. If you have questions or concerns about your TA role, including your hours of work form, you can contact CUPE 3906 at cupe3906@mcmaster.ca or call 905-525-9140 x24003.

Possible Duties

Tutorial Leader

Tutorial leaders regularly meet with a group of students. The number of students will depend on the Department and the nature of the activities to be conducted in tutorials. Tutorial leaders may attend lectures; read the assigned material; take attendance; lead student field trips; evaluate student participation; lead discussions; review course concepts in a mini-lecture or question and answer session; administer tutorial assignments (presentations, quizzes, etc.); respond to student correspondence; hold office hours; grade assignments, tests or exams; and meet with the course instructor to report on tutorial activities.

Laboratory Supervisor

Lab supervisors attend and supervise student laboratory sessions. Lab supervisors may attend lectures; complete the pre-lab activities or reference material; grade laboratory assignments; review and enforce safety

regulations; demonstrate laboratory techniques; respond to student correspondence; hold office hours; and meet with the course instructor to report on laboratory activities.

Marking Assistant

Marking assistants, or “markers,” are principally responsible for grading. They may grade assignments, test and/or exams. Marking may be distributed throughout the term or may fall in clusters, depending on when assignments are due. Markers may develop a marking rubric; provide written and/or oral feedback; respond to student correspondence; hold office hours; give presentations on expectations for assignments; and meet with the course instructor to discuss the grades or the grading process.

Super Tutor or Head TA

The duties of the “super tutor” will differ depending on the course and the instructor. Some instructors may ask that these TAs offer guidance to other TAs in the course section or hold workshops on a particular topic for other TAs. The “super tutor” may hold sessions for all students on a particular topic (e.g. writing essays or preparing a lab report) or hold additional office hours to meet with students. The “super tutor” might be required to mark assignments, attend lectures, or deliver a lecture. Because the duties of this position tend to vary a great deal be sure to clarify with the course instructor what will be expected of you and check in regularly to ensure that you are comfortable completing the duties you have been assigned.

Other Duties not Specified

The positions and duties specified above may be included in your hours of work form, but other duties, not specified here, may also be included. If you have any questions or concerns about the duties you are being asked to perform do not hesitate to contact your CUPE 3906 representative or CUPE 3906 directly.

Training Opportunities

You have several opportunities to receive job training before and during your teaching assistantship. The first opportunity is **Graduate Student Day**, which is held the first Wednesday after Labour Day each year. This free, one-day event offers a range of workshops that offer tips and strategies to improve your teaching.

The second opportunity is **Education 750: Principles and Practices of University Teaching**. This graduate level course helps prepare students for an academic teaching career by offering an introduction to research and theories on teaching and learning in universities and by allowing students to practice relevant skills (e.g. lecturing, leading discussions, active learning techniques). Students also have the chance to prepare a teaching philosophy and a course design.

A third opportunity is the Workplace Health and Safety training which each Department provides before you begin your duties. The hours you devote to this training should be included in your Hours of Work form.

The **Centre for Leadership in Learning** runs a variety of workshops throughout the year that may be of interest to you. Keep a close eye on <http://cll.mcmaster.ca> for advertisements for these workshops.

Finally, the **Teaching Assistant Network** gives you the opportunity to get more involved in teaching and learning here at McMaster. The Teaching Assistant Network brings together interested TAs from all departments on campus to design and run department specific workshops. If you would like to get involved in TAN either by running a workshop or participating in one, please contact tanet@mcmaster.ca for more details.

Teaching in Labs

This section considers some of the unique skills and strategies used by teaching assistants working in the lab setting. It will describe a typical lab session, strategies for preparing for and leading a lab and responses to common lab questions and situations.

A Typical Laboratory Session

Before the lab: Students

Before the lab takes place students will often complete a pre-lab exercise or read a lab manual (a book or a .pdf that details the theories and procedures necessary to complete the lab). You may assume that your students have read their lab manual, though some courses include a pre-lab quiz to ensure that this pre-lab work has been completed.

At the lab

Before students begin work on the lab you will likely give a pre-lab talk. This talk might remind students of the steps of the lab and/or procedures they need to follow (e.g. where to dispose of waste). You may want to talk about what kinds of results you want recorded in their lab reports and how to record them so that your marking expectations are clear. This is also a good opportunity to remind students of safety expectations and procedures and to answer any questions. The pre-lab talk should be short and concise.

Students may then watch a video demonstration or watch you demonstrate any important laboratory skills they may be unfamiliar with (e.g. titration or palpating).

Students may then begin to complete the lab. During this time you will supervise their activities and answer any questions that may arise. If you can, try to circulate through the whole lab speaking to each student and small group. This will help build a collegial environment and may invite questions that a student was hesitant to raise with the whole class.

After the lab

When the lab is finished students will usually complete a report or an assignment in order to demonstrate the knowledge they have gained by completing the lab. You may be responsible for collecting these labs and marking them or this marking may fall to another TA. Be sure to find out the procedures for marking before the lab so that you can clearly communicate to the students the expectations for the lab report/assignment.

Strategies for Preparing for and Leading a Lab

Follow these five steps to **prepare** effectively for your lab:

1. Read the lab manual and relevant sections of the course textbook.
2. If you can, complete the lab yourself and note any difficult sections in your pre-lab talk. If one has not been provided, write a lab outline for you to follow.
3. Prepare your pre-lab talk. Be sure to include safety reminders and necessary definitions or calculations.
4. Distribute a marking rubric for lab reports or assignments to your students.
5. Arrive at your lab early to make sure the necessary equipment is available.

Follow these five steps to **lead** your lab effectively:

1. Start your lab on time and keep your pre-lab talk concise and ideally under ten minutes.
2. Circulate throughout the lab addressing individual questions, correcting lab procedures and monitoring lab safety.
3. Try to talk to every individual and/or group at least once.
4. If more than one group is having difficulty with a particular aspect of the lab, clarify the problem for the whole class.
5. Ask questions like “What would you predict would happen?” or “Why did this happen this way?” to stimulate further thinking.

Note

If a question arises during the lab that you do not know the answer to you can respond, “Great question! I don’t have the answer right now, but I will find out and email you by Monday,” or “What an interesting question! How would you find the answer?” It is perfectly acceptable not to immediately know an answer; it is important that an answer is found and discussed.

Responses to Common Lab Questions and Situations

Lab Equipment: How do you make it work? Is this right?

Check that the student has consulted the lab manual for directions or a diagram. Ask the student to clarify what part of the equipment or equipment set-up does not work or what specific aspect they are concerned about.

Lab Procedure: What should I do? Is this right?

Ensure the student has read the lab manual. Invite the student to confer with their lab partner, if they still have difficulty encourage them to consult their lab manual and to predict appropriate responses. If you suggested outcomes or highlighted important procedures in your pre-lab talk remind the student of what you said earlier.

Lab Results: Why did it do that? Is this right?

Ask the student whether the results they have are what they expected, and if not, to suggest what point during the lab their results may have been compromised. Encourage your student to consider each part of the lab and its contribution to the final result.

Lab Data and Calculations: Is it okay to be off? Is this right?

It is not okay to be “off” in your calculations. Some variation in data is to be expected, but calculations based on that data should be accurate. Ask your students where they are having difficulty with the calculations. To check whether the calculations are right, invite your student to check with their lab partner, or to perform the calculation again.

Note

Try to avoid answering the question “Is this result right?” directly. Instead, encourage your students to consider why and how something in the lab has happened or should happen and to assess whether their results or calculations align with their predictions. Invite them to collaborate with colleagues and to refer to their lab manuals. In response to “Am I doing this right?” you may assure students that they are performing the lab procedure correctly.

Discuss with your course instructor and fellow TAs what the procedures will be for dealing with students who do not read the lab manual before class, who request extensions, or who you suspect of academic dishonesty.

Teaching in Tutorials

This section explains a typical tutorial session, suggests how to prepare for and lead an effective tutorial and suggests some responses to common questions and problems in tutorials.

A Typical Tutorial Session

It is misleading to say there is a “typical” tutorial session. What happens in your tutorial will depend on the kind of activities the course instructor would like you to carry out or supervise. What follows, then, are some common procedures and activities for a tutorial, but you may find that your tutorial runs differently.

Before the tutorial: Students

Before the tutorial students will read the assigned material for the week. This material may be the same as that for the lecture or may be material unique to the tutorial. If your tutorials involve student-led presentations, demonstrations or discussions, the students may have met with you to discuss their activity.

During the tutorial

At the beginning of the tutorial session you may wish to make any important announcements and then introduce the tutorial agenda (i.e. what the class will cover in that session). Depending on the tutorial, you may then lead the class through an instructional activity (see **Chapter 7: Instructional Strategies**) in order to clarify or introduce course material. This might include, but is not limited to: a lecture, a large group discussion, a video clip, guided reading, small group discussions, a debate, individual writing assignments, a student presentation, or a question/answer session.

After the tutorial

Students may have written assignments or reading to complete before the next tutorial. They may contact you by email or come to your office hours to discuss questions or concerns they have with the material or with an assignment. You may be responsible for collecting and grading student assignments.

Note

Student attendance in tutorials may be optional or it may be required. Attendance may factor in to participation grades. Be sure to check attendance policies and expectations with the course instructor. Help your students by making these policies and expectations explicit and consistent.

Strategies for Preparing for and Leading a Tutorial

Follow these five steps to effectively **prepare** for your tutorial:

1. Read the assigned material and make note of any difficult passages or concepts.
2. Determine what the key concepts or skills are that you will teach or discuss in the tutorial.
3. Prepare an explanation of difficult ideas or write down a question that relates to key concepts that you could use to start a discussion.
4. Write a lesson plan that includes what instructional activities you will use in the tutorial and how long each activity will take.
5. Arrive to your tutorial early to make sure you have all necessary materials ready.

Follow these five steps to effectively **lead** your tutorial:

1. Learn student names and use them to invite students to join the discussion or to give a response to a question.
2. If possible, arrange the classroom furniture in a way that helps facilitate a discussion (i.e. a circle of chairs is more conducive to conversation than rows).
3. Begin each tutorial with a brief outline of what you will cover in that particular session. If you let students know what to expect they will likely relax and more freely participate.
4. If a student gives an incorrect answer to a question try to avoid telling them they are “wrong.” Instead advise them the answer they have given is incorrect, but that you are interested in finding out how they arrived at that answer. This will encourage students to participate even if they are not sure whether their answer is “right” or not, because they know that you are interested in finding out their thought process, and not just the end result.
5. Aim to begin and end your tutorial on time.

Responses to Common Tutorial Situations

Students are not participating in the discussion

There are many reasons why students do not participate in discussions: they may not have read the assigned material; they may be unclear about what the question is asking and so are unsure of how to respond; they may be intimidated speaking in front of other students; or they may simply be distracted.

You can check at the beginning of the class to find out how many students have read the assigned reading by asking for a show of hands (if you are prepared to guarantee that you will not penalize students if they have not read the material). If most students have not read what you expected them to have read you may want to read a selection as a class, or have one student summarize the key ideas for the others.

You may also wish to review the expectations for the course in a discussion with students. If the question you ask is unclear students will have difficulty responding. See the section on **Instructional Strategies** for tips on

asking a good question. If you feel you have written a clear question, ask your students if they simply need more time to think about their response, or if they would like you to rephrase the question.

Students who are intimidated by speaking in front of large groups may feel more comfortable speaking in a small group. You can break your class into smaller groups and have a short discussion and then rejoin as a large group and have one student from each small group “report” their findings. This gives shy students the opportunity to express their ideas in a more comfortable setting, but still allows all students the benefit of the generated ideas.

One student dominates the discussion; or, the same student always answers the questions

The first way to approach this situation is to directly call on other students: the other students are likely interested in hearing from someone else, too. If this does not work, you can talk to the dominating student after class. Let them know that you appreciate their contributions, but that you would like to hear what the other students think about the topic, or that you need to assess what the other students know.

Students are not prepared for tutorial

Remind students of the expectations for the tutorial and the penalties for not coming prepared. If necessary, speak to the course instructor about introducing pop quizzes or an in-class assignment that will check that the students have read the material.

Note

If a question arises during the tutorial and you do not know the answer, you can respond, “Great question! I don’t have the answer right now, but I will find out and email you by Monday,” or “What an interesting question! How would you find the answer?” It is perfectly acceptable not to immediately know an answer; it is important that an answer is found and discussed.

Teaching in an Inclusive and Civil Classroom

This chapter introduces strategies and resources for creating and maintaining an inclusive and civil classroom. It explores what an “inclusive classroom” is and what steps you can take to create an inclusive classroom. It will address what a “civil classroom” is and how to prevent conflicts, and deal with them if they do arise.

The Inclusive Classroom

What is an inclusive community?

Human Rights and Equity Services at McMaster describes an “inclusive community” as “one in which there is real, visible and meaningful representation of the diversity evident in the wider community at all levels and in all constituencies on campus (faculty, staff, students, administration), one in which all members feel safe and empowered, valued and respected for their contributions to the shared purposes of the University: research and educational excellence. It is a community where the rights of all individuals and groups are protected. Inclusion occurs when an organization provides equitable access to its services, benefits and opportunities, when systems and structures facilitate full participation by all members and when members are treated equitably and recognized for their contributions. The key ingredients are equitable access, participation (especially in the decision-making processes) and equal attention to the needs and aspirations of all.”

What is an inclusive classroom?

An inclusive classroom is a classroom in which all students and instructors feel safe – physically and emotionally – and welcome to contribute ideas, views and concerns. In an inclusive classroom content is selected from a broad range of sources and is presented through a variety of teaching methods. Everyone in the class is responsible for contributing to the inclusive classroom by asking questions, challenging assumptions and allowing for mistakes to be made.

How do I create an inclusive classroom?

It may feel like a lot of work to create an inclusive classroom, especially if you are new to teaching and are already worried about creating a classroom at all. The steps to creating an inclusive classroom are not difficult and things you should be doing while you teach anyway. Simply put, teaching in a classroom should *always* be teaching in an inclusive classroom.

Suggestions for Creating an Inclusive Classroom

1. Recognize any barriers that might keep a student from fully participating in your class and work to remove them. Barriers can be found in attitudes; the architecture of a classroom; in the way communication is carried out; in the use made of technology; and in the “system” itself. To find out more about each of these barriers, you can go to <http://www.mcmaster.ca/accessibility>.
2. Get to know your students! Tell them about yourself and allow them the chance to tell you something about themselves. You could do this by inviting each of them to visit you during office hours, to send an email or voice message, or by chatting before and after class. Encourage your students to get to know one another! You could do this by working in small groups; having a round table discussion; or working with partners.
3. Set up classroom guidelines with your tutorial or lab group during the first class of the year. Specify what your expectations are for participation, attendance, deadlines, and classroom behaviour. Allow students the opportunity to respond to these expectations and to contribute their own. Be prepared to challenge students (or yourself) when you fail to meet these expectations.
4. When setting your attendance policy and carrying out your attendance keeping, make sure you are aware of religious holidays that may exempt some students from attending a particular class. You can check here http://www.mcmaster.ca/hres/religious_holidays.html to find out when particular holidays fall in a given year. Be sure that you systematically take attendance and do not rely on your memory to note how often particular students have missed classes. Sometimes a student’s appearance will make it more or less likely that you will remember whether they have missed a class.
5. Clearly explain your grading criteria to your students and allow an opportunity for students to express any concerns they might have about the criteria. Make sure you clearly communicate (in writing and orally) what modes of evaluation you will be using.
6. In class discussions strive to use variety in your cultural reference points or ask for examples from your students in order to maintain diversity in the kinds of examples that circulate.
7. Your instructional strategies should likewise be varied. If you prefer one instructional strategy to another (i.e. lecturing over discussions) consider including a handout, video link, chart or group follow-up discussion to allow students of all learning styles to be included.
8. Give students frequent opportunities to provide you with anonymous feedback both about the course content and about how the class is run. Be prepared to respond to the feedback either by making changes or by explaining to your students why you cannot make a particular change.

For more information on “inclusive classrooms” check out the following links:

www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/inclusiveclass: list of over thirty articles/web resources on inclusivity in the classroom with web links.

<http://www.mcmaster.ca/hres>: Human Rights and Equity Services at McMaster, an office that responds to enquires and concerns about discrimination on campus.

The Civil Classroom

What is a “civil classroom”?

A civil classroom is one in which students and instructors strive to respectfully respond to sensitive subject matter and charged conversations. It is a classroom in which students and instructors aim to minimize disruptive behaviour and to respond appropriately to disruptive behaviour when it does occur.

Note

It is easier to prevent disruptive behaviours than it is to deal with them after the fact. By defining your expectations for classroom behaviour in the first class you can prevent many problems before they occur.

Preventing Conflict

Have a discussion or distribute a handout in the first class that covers expectations for:

- Attendance: May students arrive late or leave early?
- Participation: Do students need to participate orally? Is there a limit on the number of times one student may respond during a tutorial? Is there a limit on the length of a student response? Who sets the agenda for the class?
- Deadlines: What will happen if a student paper is received late?
- Technology: What are your guidelines for appropriate use of laptops? What should students do if they are expecting/receive an important phone call? What is your policy on headphones in the classroom? What are the guidelines for online discussions and message boards?
- Formality: Should students address you as ‘madam or sir’ or by your name? Do students need to put up their hand to contribute a response? Are students permitted to wear hats in the classroom? May students eat snacks (or meals) during class time?
- Feedback: When will students receive feedback from you? How can they give you feedback? What will you do with that feedback?

When you are setting these expectations make sure you speak to the course instructor if you have any questions or if you feel like a particular policy will apply to the whole course (i.e. late papers). You need to be comfortable with the expectations you have set, and comfortable explaining both why you have set them and **enforcing** the expectations once you have set them. If you encounter a conflict be sure to contact the course instructor to let them know and to ask for their support.

It is also important to allow students the opportunity to provide feedback about the expectations you have set and to contribute additional ideas. You can encourage students to provide this feedback by leading a discussion about these expectations, inviting students to email with comments or suggestions, or giving time in class for students to (anonymously) write down their feedback. Including students in this process is **essential** for ensuring they feel not only accountable, but that you appreciate their personal expectations for the class.

Potential Conflicts

Review these examples of difficult situations and consider what you might do in each situation. If you are unsure of what an appropriate response might be, check with your course instructor, another TA or contact the Centre for Leadership in Learning's Teaching Assistant Coordinator at tanet@mcmaster.ca for suggestions.

- A student answers a question incorrectly.
- During a discussion a student makes a comment that you perceive to be inappropriate.
- A student comes to your office hour to discuss a grade they feel is unfair or unjustified.
- You suspect a student has plagiarized an assignment.
- Your course instructor has requested you mark an additional 25 papers, if you do so you will exceed your allotted 130 hours for the term.
- One student in your class consistently makes inappropriate jokes before and after class time.
- A student invites you out on a date.

IF IN DOUBT - SEEK OUT HELP

Special Cases

The following examples of possible difficult situations require specific responses. Review the situations and the suggested response. If you have any questions or concerns about either the situation or the response please contact the Centre for Leadership in Learning or the Teaching Assistant Coordinator at tanet@mcmaster.ca

- A student comes to you in emotional distress, or you suspect they are in emotional distress.

Pay attention to warning signs that a student might be in difficulty (e.g. depressed, withdrawn, repeated falling asleep in class, marked change in appearance, uncharacteristic change in academic performance, uncharacteristic change in class attendance, unusual or exaggerated emotional responses).

If you feel it is appropriate, and you feel comfortable, talk to the student in private when you are not rushed. If you do not feel comfortable contact the **Centre for Student Development 905-525-9140 x24711** or the **Campus Health Centre 905-525-9140 x27700** for suggestions. You may also want to refer the student to one of these services.

- You feel harassed or intimidated by a student.

In any potentially dangerous situation (i.e. a student is behaving violently, threatening a member of the class, or carrying a weapon) immediately contact **Campus Security 905-525-9140 x24281** or dial **88** from any campus phone. You may also ask a student from the class to make this call if it is not possible for you to do so.

If a student is harassing you or another student, or if you feel discrimination is taking place, contact **Human Rights and Equity Services** at **905-525-9140 x27581** or hres@mcmaster.ca

Harassing emails should likewise be referred to Human Rights and Equity Services.

Beyond the Lab or Tutorial: Office hours, emails, lesson plans

Strategies for managing office hours, the volume of emails and how to prepare an effective lesson plan

As a teaching assistant it is important to manage your time effectively. Your duties will often include activities like holding office hours, answering emails or preparing lessons plans. These activities are more difficult to schedule than class time, and can consume a great deal of your allotted 130 hours of work time. Monitor these hours closely by keeping a logbook – i.e. note how long you spend answering emails – and, if necessary, adjust your hours of work form with your course instructor to accurately reflect the time you spend on each task. The simple strategies here will help you succeed in effectively managing these activities.

Office Hours

When you complete your “Hours of Work: form you will determine, along with your course instructor, whether and how often you will hold office hours. The instructor may determine the time and location of your office hours, or you may decide for yourself.

Once you have determined where and when your office hours will be held announce your office hours to your class, distribute a handout with your office location and hours, post them on your office door, post them with the Department office and send the hours out to your students by email (see Emails). You may need to occasionally adjust your hours or agree to meet students “by appointment” if there are students who cannot attend your scheduled hours. Remind students of your office hours, especially in the first few weeks when new students may be joining the class.

Many students, especially in their first year, are not sure what office hours are, or why they might want to attend. Let students know that they do not need to have a “problem” in order to come to office hours, but may simply want to come to talk one-on-one about an idea or course concept. Remind them that you want to meet with them and that office hours are one of the few opportunities at the university level to have a one-on-one conversation and that if they do have a “problem” you are interested in working together to reach a solution.

You may notice a sharp increase in office hour attendance immediately before and after an assignment is due. Advise students whether or not your office hours will be extended during these busier periods. Only extend your office hours if you have allotted the time to do so in your Hours of Work form.

During your office hours keep your office door open. When a student arrives greet them warmly and invite them to sit down. Once they are comfortable, ask them what brings them to your office. Listen carefully to their concern or question and respond appropriately. If you do not know an answer to a question advise the student that you will find out and let them know.

Schedule your office hours in a location with frequent foot traffic and be sure to set your office hours during normal business hours.

If you feel uncomfortable during your office hours for any reason, you may ask the student – politely – to leave and schedule a meeting with the student, the course instructor, and yourself at a later date. If you feel threatened, call **Campus Security 905-525-9140 x24281** or dial **88** from a university phone.

These are some topics you may cover during your office hours:

- Explanation of an assignment grade or grading criteria
- Clarification of a course concept or research method
- Discussion of professional development in your field (i.e. how can the student become a biologist?)
- Discussion of the teaching methods used in tutorials
- Conversations about the structure and format of an assignment
- Discussion of thesis statements and essay outlines.

These are some topics that are inappropriate for discussion in office hours:

- Other students' work or behaviour
- The course instructor or his/her teaching style or his/her organization of the course or his/her assignment schedule
- The content/format of the exam (unless specifically directed by the course instructor)
- Editing or proof-reading of upcoming assignments

These are some topics that are discretionary:

- Your personal experiences related, or unrelated, to the subject matter
- The student's personal experiences

Emails

Emailing students can take a lot of time. To save time and frustration set an email policy before the term begins. If you are unsure about your policy, check with the course instructor. Advise students of your email policy in the first class and distribute this policy on a handout.

Your email policy might include:

- When you will respond to emails: Advise students when you will check the course email (e.g. Tuesday and Thursday) and that they can expect a response from that point within two business days.
- When you will **not** respond to emails: You may decide not to respond to emails 24 hours *before* an assignment is due or 24 hours *after* an assignment is due in order to avoid last-minute or emotional emails. You **must** tell your students if this is your policy, and remind them well before the assignment is due and when the assignment is handed back.
- What kinds of questions you will respond to by email: You may advise students that you will only answer “yes or no” questions by email and that if they require a detailed response or discussion they should come meet with you during your office hours. Or you can include a “five sentence rule” which states that you will only answer emails that can be responded to in under five sentences.
- How you will protect the privacy of student email address: Assure your students that you will use the “Blind Carbon Copy” (BCC) function when sending group emails. This function ensures that only you see individual student email addresses.
- McMaster Addresses: McMaster University’s communication policy stipulates that all academic correspondence must originate from a McMaster email account. Advise students that you will not respond to emails that originate from non-McMaster addresses (e.g. butterfly_friend@hotmail.com).

Lesson Plans

As a teaching assistant, a lesson plan will help build your confidence before a class that you “know what you’re doing,” and can help you stay organized and focused during the session.

A lesson plan could have the following information: what the objectives are for your session; what teaching strategies you will use; what order you will cover the topics; how you will assess whether students have learned what you wanted them to learn.

A great way to save time is to use the same lesson plan format for each session you teach. This can be fairly straightforward if you teach in a lab setting. Your lesson plan might then look something like this:

Lab Session #3 – Titration

9:30 – Welcome and Pre-lab talk: mention office hours and upcoming quiz.

9:40 – Video demonstration of titration

9:45 – Students complete lab assignment

11:00 – Collect student lab reports and remind students of upcoming quiz.

If you teach a discussion-based tutorial group, your lesson plan might look more like this:

Objective for tutorial:

Ways to engage students:

How will I know if they “got it”?

9:30 – Welcome, attendance and reminder of upcoming assignment deadline

9:35 – Small group discussions: distribute questions to each group (use chart paper and markers)

9:50 – Large group discussion: each group reports on their question and discussion (record answers on board)

10:15 – Writing Activity: Students write down the three most important ideas from the day’s session and one thing they are still unsure about.

10:15 – Answer unresolved questions, collect written responses, remind students of upcoming assignment.

If you lead a problem-solving tutorial group, your lesson plan might look something like this:

Problems to be covered:

Ways to engage students:

9:30 – Welcome, attendance, reminder of email policy and office hours

9:35 – Post problem #1 on overhead. Brainstorm possible solutions.

9:45 – Ask students to write down the solution they think works best and to explain why they chose the one they did.

9:50-10:20 – Repeat with problem #2, #3

10:20 – Collect problems and remind students of what problems will be covered next week.

These lesson plans are intended as **models**. The way you structure your class and the activities you include will depend on the course, on the expectations of the instructor, and on the expectations of your students. Develop a plan that works well for you, but be prepared to modify it to meet student needs and learning styles. Remember that a lesson plan is only a guide and that productive conversations or engaging topics may sometimes warrant deviation from your plan.

Evaluating Student Learning and Offering Effective Feedback

This chapter explores what qualities make feedback effective and it offers suggestions for how to quickly and fairly evaluate essays, presentations, labs and assignments.

Most teaching assistants are also students and as students you have likely experienced the aggravation of receiving an assignment back weeks (or even months) after you handed it in or the frustration of not understanding the comments on your assignment, or worse still, finding no comments at all. This chapter will consider some of the ways you can avoid repeating these mistakes and, moreover, how you can provide your students with quality feedback that will help them achieve better results on their next assignment.

McMaster Grading Scale

McMaster University operates under a 12-point grade scale. You may be required to give grades as a percentage out of 100 or as a letter grade. Check with your course instructor before you begin grading to ensure that you are using the preferred method. Use this chart if you need to convert percentage grades to letter grades (or to check how the percentage or letter converts to a grade point):

Grade	Equivalent Grade Point	Equivalent Percentages
A+	12	90-100
A	11	85-89
A-	10	80-84
B+	9	77-79
B	8	73-76
B-	7	70-72
C+	6	67-69
C	5	63-66
C-	4	60-62
D+	3	57-59
D	2	53-56
D-	1	50-52
F	0	0-49 -- Failure

Effective Feedback is . . .

1. **Prompt:** If you want your feedback to feel relevant to your students you will need to provide them with it as soon as possible. Ideally an assignment should be handed back within two weeks of when the student turned it in. Providing students with quick feedback gives them time to think about your suggestions and talk to you about them before they begin working on their next assignment; it also gives you ample opportunity to teach skills or techniques you noticed everyone seemed to have trouble with.
2. **Specific:** When suggesting something a student should work on and when praising, feedback should be specific. If you tell a student that something is “good” or “bad” they will likely be unsure about what exactly they have done well or poorly. In contrast, by specifying what *specifically* they have done the student will either know what to correct or repeat for next time.
3. **Constructive (or Future Oriented):** There is nothing wrong with advising students that they have completed an assignment incorrectly or misused a formula or theory. However, when you alert students to a mistake it is important to let them know what they should do differently next time, or what steps they can take between this assignment and the next one, if they want to achieve a better result.
4. **Objective:** To ensure that you are not biased one way or the other when marking a student assignment it is a good idea to ask students to use their student number to identify their work. You can also ask students to write their name on the *back* of the assignment (this will save you the time of looking up student numbers and names). Describing what was done (or not done) rather than *why* the student did it is another important aspect of objectivity. Likewise feedback that focuses on what the “assignment did” or the “essay did not do” rather than what “you did” or what “the student did not do” will help prevent defensive reactions when students read your feedback.
5. **Relevant:** Some assignments you mark will have dozens of things “wrong”. It is important to focus on one or two aspects of the assignment that you think the student needs to work on immediately, rather than cataloguing all of the errors. This is important both because you do not have time when marking to give detailed and constructive feedback on all the errors, and because your student may feel overwhelmed by suggestions if you list everything. Similarly, make sure you are evaluating the aspects of the assignment that you told students you would be marking. If you told your students you would not be marking their use of citations, then feedback on their citations is irrelevant (for that assignment).

Grading Quickly and Fairly

Now that you know what qualities make feedback effective it is worth considering *how* to give this feedback quickly and fairly.

1. **Use a rubric or sample assignment:** If possible (i.e. if your instructor does not object) set up a rubric for marking assignments. A rubric breaks down the different components of the assignment and details what percentage of the overall grade each component is worth. (see **Appendix A** for a sample rubric for an essay). Distribute the rubric or sample assignment to your students *before* the assignment is due so they know your expectations. Work through the rubric as you mark and total

the marks to determine the overall grade. By using a rubric you will have an easier time explaining to students why they received the mark they did as you can clearly show them the parts of the assignment they had trouble with or did well on. Finally, using a rubric will help ensure that you mark consistently.

2. **Part Marks:** Your rubric or sample assignment may detail what you will give marks for, but it may not clearly explain under what conditions you will give “part marks.” Consider this before you begin marking and assign “part marks” consistently.
3. **Group Assignments or Questions:** If you are marking essays, group essays according to topic. Mark all of one topic at one time. While you may get bored after reading your 20th paper on the French Revolution, you will mark more consistently if you read all of the papers on a given topic at the same time. Likewise, if you are grading a problem set, group assignments by *how* the student solved the problem. This will help save you time and will also ensure that you grade the problems fairly as you will more likely remember under what conditions you gave out part marks or deducted marks. You may also be more likely to detect academic dishonesty by grouping assignments and problem sets.
4. **Class Feedback:** If you notice that more than three students have made the same error or the same kind of error, you might stop writing specific and constructive feedback and simply note that you will discuss the particular problem with the class. When you address the class point out the error was common and then given detailed instructions on how to improve for next time.
5. **Use a timer:** As a teaching assistant you work 130 hours a term, depending on how much of this time has been allotted to marking you may find you need to mark very quickly. If you use an egg timer (or the timer on a microwave or a stopwatch) you can ensure that you give each student as much time as you can, while adhering to your 130 hours. If the timer goes off and you have not reached the end of the assignment you might stop writing feedback and work as quickly as you can to reach the end of the assignment and assign a grade.
6. **Practice:** You will become more comfortable marking and giving feedback the more marking you do. If you are nervous or unsure about your first round of marking – and most teaching assistants are! – ask your course instructor or head TA to look over your assignments and offer *you* some feedback. Many course instructors require that you hand in a sample of your marking so they can ensure that all of the TAs mark consistently. This is normal practice and will help make you feel more confident when you hand back the assignments that you have graded fairly. If you are a first time TA you may want to mark with a partner for the first round of assignments. This will give you the chance to ask questions and seek advice. Be sure that you do not spend your time complaining about the poor quality of student work: this is unprofessional and inappropriate.

Instructional Strategies

This chapter lists common instructional strategies and how to use them in your tutorial or lab. You may incorporate one or all of these instructional strategies in your teaching or may find one or two strategies that work well for you. Don't be afraid to take a chance and try a new technique!

Discussions

There are many ways to hold a discussion and many reasons for wanting to do so. Discussions generate more ideas than one person alone could come up with and they offer students the chance to test out new ideas in a more informal setting. Discussions have also been shown to help students *retain* information and ideas far better than either lectures or demonstrations because they require students to analyze ideas and phrase them in their own words.

Small Group Discussions

The size of a “small group” may vary, but there are generally between three and eight people. There are a variety of things you can do with a small group discussion, you can: have each small group working on a different problem/question with a chance for each small group to report their findings; have all of the small groups working on the same problem/question with no chance to report back, but the opportunity to talk about the ideas with one another; or have each small group generate a list of questions/problems for the large group to solve together. You can also ask students to elect a “recorder” who will write down the key points of their discussion and a “speaker” who will report findings (if necessary) to the class. You may also want to appoint a “time keeper” to be in charge of making sure the group completes its task in the given time.

Think-Pair-Share

This technique has three steps, but they can be used alone or all together. The first step is to present students with a question or problem and let them **think** independently about the question/problem for a set period of time (say 2 minutes). The next step is to have the student **pair** up by turning to the person beside them and discuss with their partner their ideas about the question/problem for a set period of time (say 3 minutes). The final step is to return to the large group to **share** responses – this can be an informal discussion where students volunteer ideas or you can ask each partnership to give their response.

Large Group Discussions

You can have a discussion with your whole tutorial or lab group. There are many ways to start a large group discussion. You could show a video clip, read a passage from the assigned text, present a problem, share a

newspaper clipping, or do a demonstration and then have your students discuss the significance of what you showed or read, or you could ask questions about what you showed or read. You could also start the discussion by asking (and writing down on the board) a question that you came up or you could have students generate questions to share with the whole group. ***Note:** You could use any of these techniques for beginning a small group discussion, too.

Questions

Asking a good question can start a great discussion with a large group, a small group, or a think-pair-share group. There are four qualities of a good question. A good question should be **high level, divergent, structured, and single.**

High Level questions require analysis, synthesis or evaluation, whereas “low level” questions require only rote memory. **Divergent** questions have more than one right answer and so students feel safer offering a response. **Structured** questions give students a clear sense of how to answer the question. For instance a structured question asks students to think about a specific section of the text, or to answer with specific information. This helps student focus and arrive at an answer quickly. **Single** questions are questions that ask one question. Often teachers will ask a string of questions in a row and this makes it difficult for students to decide what question to answer first. By asking one question at a time students will know exactly what they should be responding to. See **Appendix B** for examples of high level, divergent, structured and single questions.

Brainstorming

Present a problem or questions to a group of students (either a large or small group). Have them generate as many ideas as they can in a set period of time (say 5 minutes) and list these ideas on a sheet of paper or on the board. After they have “brainstormed” answers have students evaluate which answers are most likely correct and ask them to explain why.

Common Concerns About Using Discussions

Common concerns about using discussions include: silence; the discussion drifting from the topic; one student dominating; inappropriate or incorrect responses; not having enough time to cover the material. To prevent and deal with these concerns keep in mind these three words: **question, direction, rephrase.** If you ask a good **question** you are less likely to encounter silence. If students do not respond to a good question, ask if they need it rephrased and be sure to give them enough time to think about their answer. Provide **direction** in the discussion by telling students why you are having the discussion and feel free to stop the discussion at any point if you need to **redirect** the focus of the conversation. If students give an incorrect or partial response you can **rephrase** what they have said more clearly/accurately. If a student dominates the conversation you can **rephrase** what they have said and ask for another student to comment on the idea

Top Three Tips for Using Discussions

1. After asking a question wait at least 30 seconds – in silence – for students to respond. Students will need time to think about your question and to generate an answer.
2. Advise students the week before what question or topic you will be discussing the next week. This will give them the chance to think about the topic ahead of time. You can also ask for students to write their own question about the topic and use these student-generated questions to get the discussion going.
3. Set up ground-rules for the discussion before you begin: what does a respectful discussion involve? What will happen if someone makes an inappropriate comment? How do students indicate they have a comment? Can you call on your students individually?

Lectures

If you need to prepare a short lecture or explanation of a topic for your tutorial or lab group (i.e. a pre-lab talk or a summary of course material) begin by deciding what specifically you want to explain. To figure out what the key idea is that you want to get across ask yourself “What is the one thing I want my students to understand about this topic?” Then decide what the points are that you need to explain before students will understand your key idea.

To structure your lecture try using these three sections: an introduction, key points and a summary.

Your introduction should get the attention of your class: why is this topic important for them to understand? How will they use what they learn in the lecture?

To explain your key points begin with one sentence that encapsulates that point (i.e. “The essential point it...” or “Put simply...”). Then choose one or two examples or illustrations of the point you are addressing. Explain the example and elaborate on its significance. Summarize the key point.

Your summary should bring together the points you have made and should allow you to address the key question or point you identified for the lecture. Do not skip the summary!

Feedback: Give students the chance to respond before, during and after your lecture. Let students know if you welcome questions during the lecture or whether they should save their questions until the end. At the end of the lecture have students write their own summary of what you discussed or a question they still have about the material. Collect these responses or questions and read them to determine whether your students understood your key message or whether you need to repeat the information in the next class.

Reflection and Student Response

Student response and reflection is a great instructional technique because it requires little preparation and because it gives you an opportunity to evaluate your students’ understanding of the material.

Activities that allow for student response and reflection include:

- **Response Cards:** Have students write answers to questions or their own questions on index cards. The cards require concise answers and the chance for students to respond anonymously.
- **One Minute Paper:** Students spend one minute writing the key idea of the discussion or lecture or writing a question they still have about the material.
- **Sample test or exam question:** Prepare a question that might be on a test or exam. Explain to students that it is only a sample question and that it is a chance for them to practice writing under pressure. Collect their answers and either mark them yourself or redistribute them and take up the answers as a group.

Participatory Learning

The following techniques invite student participation. You do not need to use a “game” to actively involve students (though games can work well). Research suggests that when students “actively” participate in the tutorial or lab they are more likely to retain the information and to synthesize the information in a personally meaningful way.

- **Panels:** Invite several students to present their views on a topic to the class as “expert panelists.” Give these students time to prepare for their panel appearance and invite the class to prepare questions to ask the experts.
- **Debates:** Select a controversial topic in your field and write a debate question. Assign students to defend one side of the debate. Give students time to work together to prepare their defense. Moderate the debate. You might want to have students write a response following the debate about which side of persuaded them and why.
- **Games:** You can model games on popular television programs (like Jeopardy or Family Feud) as a way of stimulating participation. These games work well as test or exam review. Be sure to prepare students if you are going to use a game by explaining what they will have to do during the game and why you are using the game.
- **Learning Partners:** Set students up at the beginning of the year with a “learning partner” or change learning partners throughout the term. Students can work with their partner on a number of tasks including: critiquing and editing written work; discussing a text; interviewing one another on their reaction to a lecture/reading; asking and answering questions about the assigned material; recapping lessons together; test one another; comparing notes; responding to question (think-pair-share).
- **Case Study:** Present a real-life example of one of the problems or issues in the course material. Write questions about the case study and have students answer them, or have students “solve” the case study. Case studies can be solved or responded to individually or in groups.
- **Problem Sets:** Post on the board several problems from the lecture or from an assignment. Solve the problem yourself or ask students to suggest ways to answer the question. Discuss other ways to solve the problem and ask student to evaluate which approach to solving the problem is best and why.
- **Question and Answer:** Ask students to write down one or two questions they have about the course material or a particular topic. Collect their written responses and then drop them into a bag or hat. Randomly select a question, pose it to the class, and discuss an answer as a group.
- **Shared Experience:** Read an excerpt from the course readings, show a video clip, post an article from a popular media source or from an academic source, perform a demonstration or have student complete the same activity. Use the shared experience to generate discussion, stimulate questions or have students write a response. Shared experiences are terrific if you find students often come to class unprepared as everyone can participate.

These are just some of the instructional strategies you can use in your tutorial or lab. If you are a new TA find one or two strategies that you are comfortable with and use them frequently. If you have used the same couple of techniques all term, try a new technique and see what happens. If you are an experienced TA you may want to try new techniques to keep yourself interested in the material and to generate new ideas from your students.

Instructional Aids

You may want to use any number of instructional aids, including but not limited to: blackboards, whiteboards, SmartBoards, DVD or VCR players, overhead transparencies, PowerPoint presentations, data projection (internet video clips or websites).

With any instructional aid you will want to practice using the equipment before your class. If you have never used a data projector before, or would like practice, contact the audio-visual department (see Chapter 10: Resources).

Check to make sure your writing is clear by writing something on the board and then walking to the back of the room to see if you can read it. It is always a good idea to provide any important information that you write on the board on a handout as well.

Ask students to tell you if they are having difficulty reading any of the information you present.

If your course uses Avenue to Learn, put a copy of any transparencies or slides that you use online for students to access.

Working With Technology

Many of your students will bring laptops to class, and all of your students will have access to computers either at home or at the campus library. Use these resources to your advantage! Here are some ideas for ways to incorporate technology into your teaching:

- Show a relevant website or video clip to start a discussion;
- Create a YouTube video as a class related to a course topic;
- Suggest students to Twitter responses to course readings;
- Moderate discussion groups on Avenue to Learn;
- Have students create a Facebook profile for an important theorist or author in your field;
- Introduce students to document sharing and collaborating tools (i.e. Google docs); invite them to collaborate on an assignment and moderate how their collaboration works.
- Discuss plagiarism and show examples of how to properly cite information gathered from online sources.

Note on Technology in the Classroom

In your first tutorial or lab explain to students your policies on cell-phones, mp3 players, laptops and other technology. Explain “laptop courtesy” means using laptops for note-taking, and not for entertainment. You can ask students to close their laptops during class discussions or student presentations. You can ask students to set their cell-phones to vibrate and to take out headphones before coming to class.

Evaluating Your Teaching

This chapter gives you some ideas for how to get feedback from your students about your teaching style and techniques. It also suggests what to do with the feedback when you get it and how to introduce changes to your teaching mid-course.

Feedback from Students

Getting feedback from your students is the best way to find out if how you are teaching is working in your classroom. You can use feedback to adjust your teaching methods, or you can respond to feedback by explaining to students why you will **not** be making any changes (perhaps your students suggested “no more take-home assignments” and you need to explain why take-home assignments are necessary). Asking for students to respond to your teaching methods and style at a couple of different points in the term is terrific for your students because if they have a problem or concern you can actually make changes to help them, rather than finding out at the end of the term when it is too late. It is also great for you as a teacher. When students feel that you are listening and responding to their concerns you will likely have an easier time engaging them in the material.

There are a variety of ways that you can solicit feedback that will take up under five minutes of class time (and then one or two minutes to explain your response to the feedback in the next week).

One Minute Paper

Students respond in “one minute” to these two questions:

1. What was the most important thing you learned during this class?
2. What important question remains unanswered?

When you read the answers students provide to these questions you will know whether students understood the “main idea” you tried to teach in that session or whether you need to review the concept again in the next class.

There are a couple of variations on the “One Minute Paper.” You could, for instance, ask a question like “What idea do you still want to discuss?” or “What activity did you like best today?”

You do not necessarily need to respond directly to the responses to the “One Minute Paper” except to say “A number of students had questions about X – I will take a few minutes now to go over that topic.”

Critical Incident Questionnaire

This set of five questions is slightly more involved than the “one minute paper”, but should still only take three or four minutes for students to complete.

The questions are:

1. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful?
4. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about the class this week surprised you the most?

For students every class has moments that feel significant. These questions help you find out what students felt to be significant, and what actions contributed to students feeling engaged or disengaged. You can then repeat actions that led to engagement and discontinue actions that led to disengagement.

This set of questions is also helpful in identifying potential conflicts. If a student notes that their lab partner keeps doing things that disrupt their learning, or that the group they worked with did not focus on the assigned question, you can intervene early to prevent a larger problem.

Mid-Term Questionnaires

You can submit a short questionnaire that includes questions both about your teaching activities and style as well as the course content at the half-way point of the term. You can develop a questionnaire yourself, or ask your course instructor for a questionnaire to use. Questionnaires are good to use because they allow students to give anonymous feedback. You can then follow up with responses in class.

Self and Peer Evaluation

You know yourself best. Take a few minutes after each tutorial to ask yourself what you think the best part of the tutorial or lab was, and what part you felt least comfortable with. Spend a few minutes with a colleague or by yourself brainstorming ways to improve or alter the parts of your class that did not go as well as you may have liked.

You can also ask colleagues, or a member of the **Teaching Assistant Network** (tanet@mcmaster.ca) to come and observe one of your classes. This *informal* assessment can be a terrific way to get a sense of what is working well in your class and what you could improve. By asking a colleague (and not, for instance, the course instructor) you may feel less intimidated or nervous, but still receive the feedback you need.

Changing Techniques Mid-Course

If you received feedback from students, or you notice yourself, that a particular teaching technique is not working you **can change** what you do and how you do it.

Let your students know you will be making a change and why you are making it.

If you would like to change a course assignment (i.e. the student led presentations are not working out) meet with the course instructor to discuss how you can acknowledge the work already done by some students, while addressing the reality that the assignment is not leading to student engagement or learning. You may have to continue with the course assignment if the instructor is not willing to adjust the assignments. If this is the case, let your students know why you are continuing with an unpopular assignment and then brainstorm as a class ways to make the assignment more meaningful.

The First Tutorial or Lab

This chapter considers the first tutorial of the semester specifically. If you are a new teaching assistant (or a returning teaching assistant!) you may have concerns or anxieties about your first tutorial. Read this chapter for tips on how to prepare for and run a terrific first tutorial.

Preparing for your first tutorial or lab

Meet with Course Instructor

Before your first tutorial or lab you will meet with your course instructor to complete your Hours of Work form. At this meeting you may also want to ask some of the following questions:

- What kinds of students take this class (background with subject, level, etc.)?
- What are the course goals/objectives?
- Will the course be using Avenue to Learn? Who will maintain this?
- What should I do if I suspect a student has committed academic dishonesty?
- Do I structure my own labs/tutorials or are there outlines I should stick to?
- What should I do if I am unable to attend a class/lab/tutorial?
- Is student attendance in tutorials/labs mandatory? What are the penalties for late assignments?
- Am I permitted to grant students extensions?
- How do I get audiovisual equipment if I need to use it?
- Will you be evaluating my teaching? When?
- How do I get in contact with you if I have a question or concern?

Prepare a Tutorial or Lab Syllabus/Handout

This handout does not need to be long, but it should provide students with important information like how to contact you and what your tutorial policies include.

You should include on your handout:

- The name and date of the course;
- Your office number, office hours, and email address;
- The location and hours of the tutorial or lab.

You may want to include:

- Tutorial/lab assignments, due dates and grade distribution;
- Tutorial/lab materials (books, lab jacket, calculator, etc.);
- Your email policy;
- Your late assignment policy;
- Your attendance and participation expectations.

Other Materials to Collect/Prepare

Pick up your class **attendance sheets** from your Department administrator.

Collect the course materials (textbooks, lab manuals) from your Department administrator or the bookstore.

Prepare a lesson plan for the first tutorial.

Other Suggestions

Find your classroom before the day of your tutorial. Time how long it takes you to get to the classroom from your home/office.

Checklist of things to bring to your First Tutorial

- The course syllabus and your tutorial syllabus/handout
- Lesson plan for first tutorial
- Class list/attendance sheets
- The course textbook
- Pen/pencil/overhead pen/chalk; a bottle of water

Preparing a Lesson Plan for Your First Tutorial or Lab

Some TAs decide to have a “short” first tutorial or lab. It is recommended that you use all of your class time during the first session. It is important to show your students that you are excited about the material and that when they come to the tutorial or lab that they will be expected to work. There are a few things you may want to *do* during your first tutorial or lab. You can decide for yourself which activities to include.

Introduce Yourself

How do you want students to address you? What is your background in the course material? What section of the course are you most excited about? How can students get in contact with you?

It is a great idea to arrive early to your first tutorial to give yourself time to write any important information on the board/post an overhead. It can also be helpful to arrive early so that you can spend some time speaking with your students informally: ask them about their weekend or summer; find out what movies they like to watch. This informal time before class begins lets students know that you are approachable and interested in them as people. It can also be very helpful in learning their names.

Introduce the Course and Lab/Tutorial

Why is the course topic relevant to the whole discipline? How will this course help the students? What will students be expected to do in the tutorial or lab? What will you as a TA be doing in the tutorial or lab?

Introduce the Students

How many students are in their first year? How many students have taken a course in this subject before? What are the students’ goals for the course?

If you do not want to have each student respond individually you could ask students to fill out a brief questionnaire that answers these questions so that you know what kind of experiences your students have had with the material and what their expectations are for the course. It is very important to **learn student names**. You may want to include a short activity that helps you learn the names of your students (i.e. have your students introduce themselves and tell you something interesting and memorable about themselves).

Introduce Classroom Etiquette

Discuss as a group the guidelines for class behaviour (see: Chapter 4: Teaching in an Inclusive and Civil Classroom) and review any important tutorial or lab policies (safety, attendance, etc.)

Complete an Activity or Introduce a Topic

- Bring a short, relevant reading that students can read in class and discuss it as a group;
- Demonstrate one of the skills the students will learn during the course;
- Review important concepts that students will need to know for the next lecture;
- Brainstorm answers to why this course is important.

Clothing Note

What you wear to your tutorial or lab is your decision. How you dress will contribute to the tone you set. If you want a more formal class, you may want to dress more formally. Likewise, a more casual class can be signaled by what you wear. Ultimately you should feel comfortable.

Resources and Acknowledgements

Campus Resources

The Centre for Leadership in Learning <http://cli.mcmaster.ca>

The Centre for Leadership in Learning offers assistance to enhance your teaching. You can meet with an Educational Consultant or the Graduate Network Coordinator to discuss ideas to improve your teaching or you can consult the extensive library of books, articles and newsletters on teaching and learning. The Centre for Leadership in Learning also runs **Education 750: Principles and Practices of Higher Education**, which is a graduate level course that will introduce you to the practices and scholarship of teaching in higher education. The Centre for Leadership in Learning is located in Temporary Building 13 (T-13), Room 124 or you can call 905 525 9140 x24540.

The Teaching Assistant Network <http://wiki.mcmaster.ca/TAN> or email tanet@mcmaster.ca

You can be a member of the Teaching Assistant Network! The TA Network (or TAN) is made up of interested teaching assistants from all Departments on campus. You can get involved or find out more information by contacting the Teaching Assistant Coordinator at tanet@mcmaster.ca

CUPE 3906 <http://www.cupe3906.org>

CUPE 3906 is the union representing McMaster teaching and research assistants (both graduate and undergraduate). You receive benefits from CUPE 3906 and can contact their office if you have questions about your workplace conditions. You can also get involved with CUPE 3906 by contacting their office at 905 525 9140 x24003 or email cupe3906@mcmaster.ca or dropping by Wentworth House B108.

Graduate Students Association <http://www.mcmaster.ca/gsa>

The Graduate Students Association represents graduate students on campus. They administer health benefits and organize events for graduate students. You can get involved with the GSA by contacting their office at 905 525 9140 x22043 or dropping by Wentworth House 109A.

Accessibility at McMaster <http://www.mcmaster.ca/accessibility>

The Accessibility at McMaster page can provide you with online training in building an inclusive classroom and campus community.

Centre for Student Development <http://csd.mcmaster.ca>

The Centre for Student Development offers services that support academic and personal success. They provide personal counseling; academic skills counseling; writing and learning peer mentorship; and services for students with disabilities. CSD is located in the Student Centre and can be reached by calling 905 525 9140 x24711

International Student Services <http://oisa.mcmaster.ca>

The International Student Services Office provides services and programs for international students, visiting scholars, post-doctoral fellows and faculty and their families. The Office is located in Gilmour Hall, Room 104 or you can email iss@mcmaster.ca or call 905 525 9140 x 24748

English as a Second Language Support <http://csd.mcmaster.ca>

Offered through the Centre for Student Development, evening ESL classes offer a chance to practice conversational English, learn idioms, vocabulary and about Canadian culture. The classes are free and have continuous enrollment.

Campus Health Centre <http://www.mcmaster.ca/health>

The Campus Health Centre is the medical clinic on campus. The Centre is staffed by family physicians, nurses and support staff. The Centre is located in the basement of the Student Centre and can be reached by calling 905 525 9140 x27700

Classroom Audio Visual Services <http://library.mcmaster.ca/cavs>

If you need to book a data projector or need help using the equipment in your classroom you can contact Classroom Audio Visual Services for help. They are located in Mills Memorial Library, L118 or you can email equipbkg@mcmaster.ca or call 905 525 9140 x 22761

University Technology Services <http://www.mcmaster.ca/uts> UTS administers campus emails, wireless, MUGSI, SOLAR, student technology labs and technology help desks. You can contact them at uts@mcmaster.ca or by calling 905 525 9140 x 24357 (2HELP).

Ombuds Office <http://www.mcmaster.ca/ombuds>

The Ombuds Office provides impartial, independent and informal dispute-resolution advice and assistance to all members of the McMaster community. The Ombuds Office is located in the Student Centre Room 210 or you can email ombuds@mcmaster.ca or call 905 525 9140 x 24151

Human Rights and Equity Services <http://www.mcmaster.ca/hres>

Human Rights and Equity Services promotes an environment free from sexism, racism, heterosexism, discrimination against people with disabilities and all other forms of harassment and discrimination. The office receives enquiries and complaints concerning any form of harassment or discrimination and attempts confidential resolution. Their office is located in the Student Centre Room 212 and can be reached by emailing hres@mcmaster.ca or calling 905 525 9140 x 27581

McMaster Libraries <http://library.mcmaster.ca>

Career Services <http://careers.mcmaster.ca>

Campus Bookstore: <http://titles.mcmaster.ca>

Queer Students Community Centre <https://www.msumcmaster.ca/servicesandbusiness/qsc>

Online Teaching Resources

University of Western Ontario Handbook for Teaching Assistants

<http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/tahandbook/index.html>

This online Handbook covers a range of topics of interest to new and experienced TAs including marking, feedback, diversity in the classroom and dealing with ethical issues.

York University Handbook on Teaching & Learning <http://www.yorku.ca/cst/grads/tahandbook/index.html>

This is another online Handbook that covers a range of topics including marking, critical skills, helping students with specific needs and international TAs.

Queens University Handbook for Teaching Assistants

http://www.queensu.ca/ctl/resources/files/pdf/TA_Handbook_2007.pdf

Includes sections on advising students, creating a safe learning environment and tutorials/labs.

University of Northern British Columbia TA Manual http://www.unbc.ca/assets/ctl/2009_unbc_ta_manual.pdf

Extensive manual that includes checklists for the first class, quick tips and instructional strategies.

The Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry Teaching Assistant Handbook

http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/id.ta/chem_ta.pdf

A department specific guide for TAs in Chemistry and Biochemistry with additional information about running labs and grading lab assignments.

Teaching Tips <http://ctl.stanford.edu/handouts>

A collection of handouts on teaching topics, including: designing effective writing assignments; designing problem sets; tips for discussions; facilitating small groups; things to do early in the course; sample small group exercises; teaching portfolios; grading papers.

University of Toronto Teaching Assistant Training Program: Teaching Tips

http://www.utoronto.ca/tatp/resources/teaching_tips.html

Tip sheets on: facilitation, marking, pre-lab talks, leading discussions, teaching problem solving and lecturing.

Checklist for Instructor Meeting (University of Waterloo)

http://cte.uwaterloo.ca/teaching_resources/tips/teaching_assistant_checklist.html

A list of questions you may want to ask during your initial meeting with the course instructor.

On-Line Faculty Development Associates <http://www.developfaculty.com/online/index.html>

Over 80 topics, organizations, conferences, etc. Information on active learning, classroom assessment, classroom management, grading and more.

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The University of Western Ontario Teaching Support Centre: Handbook for Teaching Assistants

York University Centre for the Support of Teaching: Handbook on Teaching and Learning

The University of Northern British Columbia Teaching Assistant Manual

Sorcinelli, Mary Deane. "Encouraging Civil Behaviour in Large Classes." *Towards the Best in the Academy* 15.8 (2004): 1-4.

Warren, Lee and Derek Bok Center. "Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom." *Center for Teaching and Learning – Harvard University*.

<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>

Appendix A

Student Name:

Title of Essay:

Essay Content: 50%	F: Very Poor	D: Poor	C: Fair to Good	B: Good to Very Good	A: Excellent
Thesis: intelligible, engaging articulation of main argument (Approx 15%)					
Analysis/Development of Ideas: accurate and detailed close reading of chosen topic/text(s); thoughtful elaboration of main and supporting arguments (Approx 20%)					
Textual Support: clear, properly incorporated quotations in direct support of argument; proper use of secondary/research materials; correct documentation (MLA style) (Approx 15%)					
Essay Structure & Writing: 50%	F: Very Poor	D: Poor	C: Fair to Good	B: Good to Very Good	A: Excellent
Sentence Structure/ Grammar & Spelling: grammatically correct and stylistically varied sentence structure; correct use of verbs, prepositions, agreement, parallelism, modifiers, etc.; correct spelling (Approx 10%)					
Paragraph Structure: clear topic sentences; unified paragraph content (Approx 10%)					
Logical Organization: transitions between paragraphs; logical ordering (Approx 10%)					
Writing Clarity: unambiguous, intelligible word choice; use of varied diction (Approx 10%)					
MLA format: correct use of MLA format in paper, works cited, and quotations, (Approx 5%)					
Punctuation: correct use of comma, colon, semi-colon, period, apostrophe, dash, etc. (Approx 5%)					

Additional Comments:

Deductions:

FINAL GRADE:

Appendix B: Good Questions

"What's in a question, you ask? Everything. It is a way of evoking stimulating response or stultifying inquiry. It is, in essence, the very core of teaching." (John Dewey, 1933)

Research on questioning behavior in university classrooms by Barnes (1980) reveals some surprising facts. First, a very small portion of most classes is spent in instructor questioning (3.7 %). Second, the great majority (82%) of those questions are at the lowest cognitive level (rote memory). Third, almost a third (32 %) of those questions that are asked elicit no learner response. In short, whether the class is called a seminar or a lecture, the main activity is the instructor lecturing with learners passively listening. Good questions engage students in thinking about or discussing course issues.

In asking good questions, we aim to:
 a) Increase student engagement, and
 b) Develop higher-order cognitive skills

Good questions are: High-level, Divergent, Structured and Straightforward. There are times and places for other types of questions, but questions of this type produce two to three times more responses (Andrews 1980) *and* help develop cognitive skills.

To encourage the greatest student engagement:

- a) Try to incorporate **all four engaging categories** in each question.
- b) **Display the question** on a blackboard, by overhead or data projector.

Not Engaging

Low Level Questions

Require only rote memorization and content paraphrasing. evaluation (Bloom

For example:

- *Who are the main characters in Hamlet?*
- *What proportion of offspring will demonstrate a dominant heritable trait if both parents are heterozygous for the dominant allele?*

Engaging

High Level Questions

Require application, analysis, synthesis, or

1956) (elicits higher-order thinking). For example:

- If Laertes was left out of the play would it still be Hamlet? Why?*
- Characterize the evidence required to establish the heritability of a behavioral trait.*

Convergent Questions

Imply a single right answer to a question (riskier to answer). answer).

For example:

- *What is Hemmingway's main theme in "A Farewell to Arms?"*

Divergent Questions

Suggest many possible correct responses (safer to

For example:

- What are some of the themes in "A Farewell to Arms?"*

Unstructured Questions

Vague, non-specific, wide open; requires time to organize a good response (difficult to know what is required; risky to answer). For example:

- *What should a doctor do?*
- *How do you characterize a population?*

Structured Questions

Direct the learner to specific approaches, specific areas of the subject matter or frameworks to arrive at an answer. For example:

- *What could a general practitioner prescribe for these unusual symptoms?*
- *In what ways could you use 'mark and recapture' to estimate flock size in a population of birds?*

Multiple Questions

Contains several questions or is interspersed with background information. For example:

- What are some of the reasons Tolstoy is condemning I mean... what is the main problem? At the end of the story, we have a religious solution. Some of you said you didn't think that fit with the rest of the story.*
- *How do bacterial resistance genes, such as those in the blue part of your text, contribute to cell type selection after genetic manipulation?*

Straightforward Questions

Clear; addresses one issue at a time. For example:

- What are some of the reasons Tolstoy is him? condemning him?*
- *What are some ways to select for successful Transformation in bacteria?*

Adapted from Ray V. Rasmussen, AACE Journal, 1984, 12(2), pp. 38-47.