

January 2008

UVic TA Manual

Goal

The aim of this manual is to offer some teaching advice to help you along the path to a successful experience as a Teaching Assistant (TA). It is not meant to replace discipline-specific training or orientations, but to provide some of the general and sometimes assumed responsibilities of the TA position. For instance, did you know that you might be expected to act as a mentor, a counselor, a mediator, an advisor, a motivator? In most cases, you will only be expected to identify the needs of the student and pass them on to the specialist on campus but some of those labels definitely do go with the job.

What It Means to Be a TA at UVic

It has been said that one does not really understand a concept until one has to teach it, and by doing so, one has the chance to learn it a second time. Perhaps this maxim is why those who are pursuing postgraduate studies are often employed as apprentices to the professoriate.

A higher degree is often thought of as a qualification to teach at the post-secondary level. Although it is typically necessary, it is fast becoming only one of several qualifications required when considering a career in a college or university setting. Previous teaching experience and training is definitely an asset in the job market. A graduate student's life as a TA can be the start of that experience.

Traditionally at UVic, graduate students have been employed as teaching assistants in part-time instructional positions. However, not all graduate students can take this opportunity and frequently, not all TAs are graduate students. It must also be said that quite often there is no "assistantship" necessarily involved. Frequently, the TA is the only instructor in the room, although one can generally expect that there is an overall coordinator for the course to provide guidance. Typical TA positions involve grading, lab instructing, tutoring, facilitating discussion groups, invigilating exams and chairing seminars.

Responsibilities

In accepting a teaching assistant role, graduate students additionally become employees, with new responsibilities and rights. The specific responsibilities of teaching assistants vary between departments. Many departments and schools provide an orientation for teaching assistants giving guidelines on being a TA in that department. The Learning and Teaching Centre offers TA conferences early in September and January (check the website for the Learning and Teaching Centre, <http://www.ltc.uvic.ca>).

- Two weeks before the start of classes, email the course director/coordinator/professor to set up a time to meet and discuss responsibilities.
- Bring the TA checklist with you (this is available from all departments and the Human Resources website).
- Ask if your name and contact information is on the syllabus and if so, clarify what types of queries you will need to attend to.
- If you are responsible for make-up exams, find out if your department has a regular make-up session and the protocol you must follow .
- If you will be grading assignments or exams that are in need of marking rubrics, make sure that you set aside time with your course coordinator to discuss grading expectations.
- During this initial meeting, clarify any questions that you have about ANY of your responsibilities, and find out what is the preferred plan of action should you need to communicate further with the course coordinator during the semester.
- If you find that you are working more or fewer hours than you are being paid for, approach the course coordinator. At this point expectations may be altered or responsibilities changed.
- If you are forced to miss a class due to illness or other reasons, notify your course coordinator or the department secretary as early as possible. In some cases another TA can be found as a substitute. If not, it is usually your responsibility to make up the classes at a time that is convenient to the students. Some departments have specific policies regarding sick leave or cancellation of class due to adverse weather conditions, labour disputes and so on; ask about these.

TA as a Teacher

As a teacher you have the moral and legal responsibility to treat all your students fairly without favouritism or prejudice. Ensure that your language and examples are free of prejudice towards or against gender, race, religion, or ethnic group. This responsibility also implies that all students, not just the aggressive ones, should be given a chance to speak in seminars or to ask questions. Your most important responsibility is to create the right environment for your students to learn the required skills and knowledge. If you care about your students as learners and can relax and make your classes an enjoyable place to be, the rest will take care of itself. It is essential to be clear and specific about the requirements for the classes and the essays. What will be graded and how will it be evaluated? Obtain a copy of the university plagiarism policy (and your department's rules and regulations if they have them) and give your students a definition of plagiarism. Explain other places where breaches of academic honesty may occur unknowingly.

In addition, if it comes to your attention that you are responsible for marking papers, assignments or exams for a student, with whom you have a conflict of interest (perceived or not), discuss the situation with the course professor. It might be inappropriate for you to assign grades in this situation.

Record Keeping

It is important to keep accurate and complete records of any data that are relevant to your course: attendance, participation in seminars, quiz, mid-term, essay and final marks. It is also necessary to be able to substantiate grades when challenged, and this is where a marking rubric would come in handy. Whether you keep your grades in a book or on a computer make sure that a duplicate exists in a safe place.

Records of any email correspondence between you and your students or between you and the professors should be kept for the duration of the term.

Grading and Grade Disputes

It is important to document all conversations and discussions if you become involved in a grading dispute. This can take the form of notes to yourself including: who was present, date, time, topic of conversation, and what was resolved. Do this as soon as possible to avoid forgetting any details. Only discuss a student's grades in private. Be prepared to explain your grades by showing the student your criteria and keys in the following examples.

- If a student wishes to appeal a grade, ask the student to return the paper/exam in question so that you can review it.
- If the concern is a miscalculation of marks, recalculate and make changes if necessary.
- If the student convinces you that their answer is acceptable, acknowledge that you had not thought of that possibility and alter the marks accordingly.
- If the student has not convinced you that a grade change is in order and is not satisfied with your explanation, advise him/her of the proper procedure for appealing grades. Normally the first level of appeal will be to the course coordinator.
- In the event of an appeal, meet with the coordinator without the student present. Explain what happened and provide a written list of events with dates/times. Thereafter, the responsibility for the outcome lies with the course coordinator.
- In cases where you suspect academic dishonesty on assignments, essays or exams, retain possession of the material in question and contact the course coordinator immediately. Academic dishonesty is a serious infraction with serious penalties and sometimes ends up in the law courts. The course coordinator has the responsibility for continuing the investigation. You can return your attention to teaching your students. The University of Victoria's definition of cheating appears in the UVic Calendar. Policies on Evaluation of Student Achievement, including duplicate essays, and review of an assigned grade are also included.

TA as an Employee

As an employee, your rights are defined in the CUPE 4163 Collective Agreement. Please review your contract thoroughly. You will find useful information about work scheduling in Article 14, sick leave in Article 17 and Letter #7, and appointment procedures in Article 13. CUPE 4163 is the University of Victoria's Education Employees Union. <http://web.uvic.ca/~cupe4163/>

TA as Student Advisor

In the first few years of an undergraduate student's life on campus, TAs will play a very important role. This may be the only personalized instructor-student contact that a student experiences and the TA's actions can be very influential. Most teaching assistants are paid to allocate a certain number of hours to office time where students can drop in during scheduled hours, as well as make appointments at other times. One of the advantages teaching assistants have as student advisors/liasons is that they are often close to the students in age and experience. Most TAs deal with introductory classes full of new students who may bring a range of problems/confusions to the office. New students may find TAs intimidating and may often feel that they are intruding by visiting you during office hours. With a bit of care, undivided attention, and some friendly questions you can set the tone for a productive interaction. It is important to keep in mind professional boundaries while working with students. You are in a position of power and therefore have a responsibility to take the initiative to avoid conflicts of interest.

TA as Instructor – Student Liaison

- The TA is an intermediary between instructor and students and can assist the learning process and flow of information both ways.
- TAs can assist the instructor by ensuring that students understand course organization and requirements
- TAs can assist instructors by passing on general comments about difficulties students might have in understanding the lectures (too fast, outline unclear etc...).

TA Union

CUPE 4163

The term 'TA' is used throughout this manual as the abbreviation for Teaching Assistants, which may or may not include graduate students. All TAs are hired as "Specialist Instructors" and are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 4163.

As members of CUPE 4163, TAs are covered by a collective agreement, which defines the terms and conditions of employment. Each TA will receive a copy of this agreement when they are hired, or whenever a new collective agreement has been reached.

Each department will arrange a time and place for your union representative to address the members each year. If you have questions about your rights or obligations under the contract, please ask your position supervisor or your union representative at 472-4778, or contact Human Resources at 721-8085 (see Appendix).

The roles and responsibilities of TAs differ between departments and a list of potential TA activities is outlined on the next page. This checklist can act as a guide for you and your TA supervisor to clarify the duties and expectations of hours to be worked. If the work is not expected to be evenly distributed throughout the term, establish a timetable for the heavy periods. Make sure that you revisit this checklist of expectations with the TA supervisor at the mid-point of the appointment period because it is always easier to budget time in advance rather than in retrospect. Most departments do not have money readily available to compensate for extra hours unexpectedly worked.

International TAs

International students may have the opportunity to teach during their graduate study period. This role may present additional challenges. In addition to possible language differences, there are often differences in the educational systems, teaching methods and conduct for students and teachers in various countries.

Useful Strategies

KNOW what material is to be covered

Write the material out in outline form or in detail for in-class reference and provide your own examples and comments

Know roughly how long the material will take to cover.

Always prepare more than what you think will be needed. Prepare handouts, or write technical or complex terms or issues on the blackboard ahead of time.

BE PREPARED

Initially, you may feel uneasy about going into a class whose students speak another language and have a different culture. If you know your material, understand what you want your students to learn, and have prepared yourself before class, you will be less anxious. Good preparation and practice can solve many problems.

REHEARSE, especially for the first class.

You may not need to practice after this. Be particularly careful about your pronunciation, enunciation and rapidity of speech. Avoid using words or terms that you find hard to pronounce. If you are unsure of pronunciation, check with a peer before class.

FAMILIARISE YOURSELF with Canadian classroom culture as much as possible. The teacher and student behavior in the classroom is culturally influenced; be aware of your posture and body movements, make eye contact, smile, gesture. Treat your students with respect. These are important aspects of teaching and influence the way students learn and how they think of you.

BE YOURSELF

If you feel comfortable, you may want to tell your class something about yourself and ask them to talk for a minute about themselves: what year they are in, what their major is, and what they hope to get out of this class.

BE PATIENT

Although your oral language proficiency may not be the same as your Canadian counterpart, this disadvantage can be overcome or compensated for by good preparation and practices that are the best and most important confidence builders. There will occasionally be misunderstandings with professors and undergraduate students. Don't take these problems as personal failures but as part of the culture-learning process.

ENCOURAGE FEEDBACK

To check on your progress, you may want to ask one or two thoughtful members of your class for feedback. Ask whether your instruction was clear and comprehensible. Ask what you could have done differently.

Also, you can stay for a few minutes after class and invite students to talk to you about any problems they encountered.

Finally, encourage your students to contact you if they have questions. Email can be the easiest method for both parties, as it does not require a time constraint. It can also keep the student-instructor relationship at an appropriate distance outside of the classroom. Sometimes, a face-to-face meeting is far more effective. Email can help you schedule a mutually suitable appointment.

Non-verbal Communication

These tips are adapted (with permission) from Connie Van Zelm's essay "Communicating without Words" in *The Foreign TA: A Guide to Teaching Effectiveness*, Handbook of State University of New York at Buffalo, 1988.

1. Become an actor. Great skill is not necessary, just a little boldness. If there's a key word you don't know in English, use your hands, body and facial expressions to act it out. Don't be afraid of acting silly or looking funny. Do whatever you need to do to get your point across and learn to laugh with the students. For example, try using your hands to demonstrate the difference between "fission" and "fusion." Your students will appreciate your efforts and enthusiasm.

2. Use a chalkboard (or a piece of paper) continually whether you are dealing with one student or a whole class. Write down the key words you use as you talk about them, and draw a simple picture, map, or diagram of what you are talking about. You can usually

sketch examples of what you mean.

3. If you are afraid that someone misunderstands you, draw a picture of what you don't want the students to do or think, and then draw a big "X" through it to show that's not what you're talking about.
4. When you give instructions for a lab, go through the motions of the lab while you are explaining it and then do it again, more quickly, to make sure everyone understands.
5. If you don't know the English word for something, but you manage to get the idea across and the students don't know the English word either, teach them the word in your language. Afterwards, pause whenever you use it, to make sure they remember what it means. Learning a few words in another language never hurt anybody, right? Tell them the correct English word in the next class.
6. Instead of explaining a formula or an equation, **SHOW** how it works, and if the students don't understand the first time, show them again in a slightly different way. If confusion persists, ask one of the students to paraphrase the explanation. This may help the rest of the students and will help you to identify further points in need of clarity. Remember, teaching takes patience.
7. Be creative. Visual aids aren't just for children; good language teachers use them all the time, and if you're trying to explain chemistry or physics, you are teaching another language! Have models available whenever you can, and consider using the students themselves to model how something works.
8. As a TA, don't think of yourself as a person with authority over your students even if you have some. Try to think of yourself as a helper and friend. If you are willing to step out of your shyness and do all you can do to communicate with them, they will really appreciate it, no matter how good or bad your English is.

A good philosophy to remember: who cares how you say it, as long as you communicate.

Before the First Class

Logistics

When you are appointed as a teaching assistant you become part of a team that includes a course supervisor (usually a faculty or staff member) and often several other teaching assistants. Before your first class, meet with the course supervisor to discuss the following issues.

- What duties will you perform?
- Must you attend the lectures?
- Who generates the marking guides?
- What deadlines exist and which ones are fixed or idealised?

- Do you have access to photocopiers, audio-visual material, or computer facilities?
- Get a copy of the course outline and the assigned reading material.
- Get a list of students' names of your class (you can get them with email addresses included) and arrange for updates at appropriate times.
- Find out if you will have an office, a desk, a phone or a mailbox – particularly if you are not working elsewhere in the department in another capacity.
- When do you teach? When are the office hours? Who sets them?
- Where is the classroom? Does it have a clock? Do you need chalk or white board pens and erasers?
- How/where do you get keys for the room, building or other required facilities?
- Whom should you contact if you have any questions (e.g., department secretaries and administrative assistants)?

Syllabus

Some teaching assistants will be asked to prepare their own syllabus. This is a description of your course and the requirements for completion of studies. The syllabus should be passed out at the beginning of your first class, and be available to individuals seeking information prior to registration. The syllabus generally does not exceed two or three pages. The following information should be conveyed on your first page:

- your name
- course title
- course number
- the semester and year of the course
- the location of the class
- the class time and days
- the credit hours awarded for completion of the course
- how the student can contact you (your office or department phone number)
- your office location and hours
- email policy: set boundaries on when you will be responding to email and what are reasonable expectations for the volume of questions etc.

Information regarding the content and requirements of the course can then be listed. It will probably include:

- a list of required texts and where to obtain them. Find out if the course books are in the McPherson library, or whether you will need to place them on reserve.
- a list of required examinations, dates, and duration (mid-terms, finals, if there will be spot tests).
- an explanation of how grades will be earned (e.g. 20% class participation, 50% examination, 30% paper).
- the relationship between marks and letter grades.
- an explanation of your views on make-up tests, and the acceptable reasons for not taking the exam at the same time as the rest of the class.
- a description of your policy on late submissions.

- the university's policy on plagiarism and provide a link to it.

Finally, each individual class can be described with a short title of the topic, the aim of the lecture or discussion, and the required reading for that day.

You will appear much more human to your students if you add some information about yourself. If you feel comfortable doing this, you could give them some information about where you are from, what you are currently working on (Master's or Ph.D. dissertation topic), and what outside interests and activities you enjoy.

Lesson Plan

You can begin with an overall unit plan that is broken down into lessons. You should have a plan for every lesson whether it is a seminar, lab, lecture or even a class devoted to student presentations. Preparation time for each class will vary depending on the activity and your familiarity with the material. The syllabus will act as an overall guide for your lesson planning. Your plan should include a consideration of the following:

- Rationale: why is it important to know this?
- What are the objectives for the class? Which concepts, skills, or knowledge do you want to convey, evaluate or consolidate? What will you be doing and what will they be doing and when? Do you need any materials, props, A/V equipment?
- How will you accomplish your objectives eg small group discussion, debate, short lecture etc? How will you check for understanding throughout the lesson?
- List the strategies you will use to keep the learners involved.
- How will you conclude the class? What is the meaningful application of the knowledge? How did it connect to the readings or the professor's lecture? What are future implications or research? You may even just want to review the key points.
- Self-evaluation: have a place to jot down what worked/did not work and any reflections or other notes.

Usually the department will allocate you so many hours for preparation time and this should be your guide. Including doing the assigned reading many teaching assistants find three hours to be a minimum preparation time for a one hour seminar. Preparing lectures takes much longer. Five hours might be considered an absolute minimum. If you have taught the course before it should be easier and faster to update your notes than to prepare from scratch. See if former TAs have kept their class notes and if you can borrow them.

Class List or Register

Students will have registered for the class several months in advance of the first meeting. You can get a class list from the person in the department with access to the on-line registration system (ISIS) which includes their UVic (only) email addresses. This list can be downloaded into a spreadsheet program.

- Prepare a class register at this time, but be aware that students may withdraw from or be added to the list during the first few weeks.
- It is good idea to mark attendance for each class even if attendance and class participation are not part of the grade; knowing who attended and how often might explain why grades are the way they are. You may also need to know if the student has ever attended the class, so that students on the waiting list can be accommodated.
- Leave a column in your register for notes on behaviour such as "led discussion", "interpreted problems well", "handed in late". This helps if there are any problems with grades.
- Obviously you will need columns for grades for papers, mid-terms, and finals.

Conveying the Information

Some TAs will be asked to lecture occasionally or regularly. The fine art of lecture writing takes some time to develop but here are a few guidelines.

Construct a simple outline for the lecture. Put this agenda in point form on the board. Remember that an hour is a very short time in which to introduce a topic, convey the concepts and to illustrate them with examples. It is an excellent idea to provide continuity between lectures by illustrating how this lecture connects to the previous one and by introducing the topic of your next lecture at the end of the current one.

To wrap up at the end of the class, you will need to present a short summary or conclusion to draw everything to a close. Repeating the main points of your lecture on the blackboard and in your conclusion will be useful.

Some pointers that you might consider:

- It is unwise to get too complicated. KIS – keep it simple.
- Details should only be introduced if they are essential in illustrating themes, trends or concepts.
- Refer to the texts you expect your students to read, but do not repeat everything written as this will devalue the time they have already spent .
- Get your students to read; don't do it for them.
- Expand upon the readings; introduce recent discoveries and discuss their meaning.
- Where relevant, introduce your own research and ideas or discuss linkages between the lesson and contemporary events.
- Talk rather than read. Students will be trying to take notes and it is difficult to do this even at a normal conversational speed.
- Watch your students while you talk. Their body language will let you know if you are making contact with them.
- If you ask a question, give the students time to think and answer before you ask another or provide the answer. Count out the time under your breath!

- Reframe questions differently if the response is not forthcoming. Give students time to process the question and respond.
- Break students into small groups and have them present their findings to the class after a few minutes.
- Encourage questions but if the answer is not really related to your topic be ready to ask the student to wait until the end of the presentation for an answer.
- Depending on the material you teach and the teaching techniques that you wish to employ, you might have students sitting in a circle to facilitate discussion, or at least to bring students closer to the front of the class so that you don't have to shout.
- Position the AV equipment so that you are not physically separated from your class, or so that you block the projected image.

This old adage still has some relevance:

Tell them first what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you just told them.

In other words, advertise what will happen in class today. Research has shown that learning is more effective if the information is used or discussed in an active form. Creating that environment will be the bulk of the lesson where most of the learning and teaching takes place. Conclude the lesson with an effective summary.

The First Class

First Impressions

Students do a lot of intense processing of the instructor and his/her skills in the first class. They are paying more attention to you at this time than at any other comparable time in the course, except possibly when you are discussing the content of an upcoming exam. Their attention is focused at least as much on the manner in which you present the material as it is on the material itself.

The first meeting of a class, therefore, is an important vehicle for getting students on the right track and for establishing your role as a TA beyond merely transmitting information. It is also critical for calling attention to the structure and content of the course. This is particularly important for first-year students, who are attempting to deal with all of the new experiences associated with their first taste of university life.

Pre-class Jitters

It is not uncommon for instructors to be nervous or anxious prior to teaching their first class, or each class for that matter! Remember that you know more about your subject than do your students so do not doubt your abilities! Nervousness may result in accelerated speech and disorganization so make a conscious effort to speak at a moderate pace and maintain your focus.

Your Grand Entrance!

It is important that you have a well-kept appearance so as to project the attitude of care for yourself and respect for your students. Introduce yourself and the course you are teaching. You may want to mention that your job is to assist them and that you are available for consultation if they are having problems. Tell them how you wish to be addressed. Most TAs are only a few years older than students in their class and prefer to be called by their first name while others prefer to be addressed more formally (i.e. Mr., Ms.). Your students may not have met a TA before so you may want to explain your role and what parts of the course and for which grades you are responsible. You may want to mention why you are teaching the course and/or why you are interested in that particular field of study to break the ice and convey your enthusiasm for the subject.

Confirming the Register

Check the names on your class list at the commencement of your first class. Add new names and delete those who are transferring out of your section and make sure that new students have registered properly with the administration. Either read the list, or perhaps get the students to introduce themselves or each other. Check how they wish to be addressed, for example, “Bill” or “William”. If there are unusual or difficult-to-pronounce names ask the student to say the name and make a note so that you will remember next time.

Creating a Learning Atmosphere

Undergraduates, particularly in large classes, want to feel that they are human beings and not simply names and ID numbers on class rosters. There is a strong correlation between positive evaluation of the TA and student perceptions that the TA cares about them as individuals. This perception also motivates students to work harder and achieve more. Therefore, show students from the very beginning that you view them as individuals and care about them as people. The first and one of the easiest ways to accomplish this is to learn their names as quickly as possible.

Aside from these benefits, there are other reasons to learn students' names. Calling on them by name helps create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in the classroom and enables you to stimulate class discussion by asking students personally to express their points of view. Also, it may transform a group of isolated and anonymous individuals into a community of people who cooperatively engage in the exploration of ideas and knowledge. Moreover, it tells students that attendance is important and that you will know if they are not there.

It is important for the TA to assist in the building of a “safe” learning atmosphere and one way to do this is to help the students get to know one another. Warm-up activities are one way to do this.

Suggestions:

1. A standard technique is to have students pair-up and have one introduce the other to the class.
2. Another is to go around the class with each person introducing all the other members in the class that have already been introduced. The first person introduces her or him. The second introduces the first and him or herself. Each subsequent person introduces all the previously introduced students and themselves.
3. You might want to know more about your class:
 - where are they from?
 - what languages do they speak?
 - have they studied this subject before?
 - have they written essays or reports?
 - what would they like to get out of this course?

Other (first) Class Activities

- Pass out the syllabus and go over the highlights with the students. Have more copies of the syllabus than you have students, as you may get transfers or have students who forget their syllabus the following class.
- Explain what your goals and expectations are and what you expect from your students.
- Detail the course requirements and how the grades will be calculated.
- This may be an appropriate time to state any guidelines you have regarding racist and sexist language, latecomers, late assignments, etc.
- Use this class to state the department policy towards cheating and plagiarism. This is required to be discussed as well as be clearly written on the syllabus and/or course website.
- Emphasize that your job is to assist them and that you are available for consultation if they are having problems.

Give Them a Taste of the Course

Provide an overview of the course- it can help students decide quickly if they are in the right place for their interests.

State a question or area of interest, which you intend to cover during this session or pose a problem to be resolved and give an example of the phenomenon to be discussed.

Demonstrate your point by telling a personal anecdote or by discussing a contemporary event.

What If You Run Out of Material Early?

If you reach the end of your material or the discussion sputters to an end before the end of a class period, there are alternatives. You can:

- restate the main points of the class and introduce what you will talk about the following week
- take questions about the class or the course
- briefly talk about exams, paper or report writing
- give the students a quick quiz to be marked by their neighbour without grading them
- let them go early if you think that is the only alternative – many students will think you are doing them a favour.

After Class

Finish on time so students will not be late for their next class. Be available for questions; however, do not linger in the classroom as another class may be waiting. Hold after-class discussions and arrange student appointments outside the classroom so as to take time away from the next class.

Re-evaluate Today's Class:

- Did you get your points across?
- Do you need to find out anything before next class?
- Have you noted when your next student appointments are?
- It would be helpful to consult your fellow TAs in your own course to see if your classes are at the same point in the syllabus and to discuss problems.
- What can you do to improve this presentation next time you give it?

In the Laboratory

When you teach in the laboratory program, you have additional responsibilities beyond the course content. You will be required to manage the laboratory setting (both students and experiments) and ensure student safety. Remember that the students will look to you for guidance and leadership in the event of an emergency. Make sure that you know how to respond in an earthquake, evacuation, fire or other emergencies (<http://www.uvic.ca/emergency/index.html>). Incidentally, this is true for whatever room you teach in.

Most lab classes meet once on a weekly basis for the duration of an academic term. As a TA you may be required to:

- present short pre-laboratory talks.
- give demonstrations on theoretical and practical aspects of experiments.
- coach the students one-on-one while they are performing their experiments.
- help trouble-shoot experimental problems.
- give quizzes and tests.
- mark quizzes, laboratory assignments and reports.
- meet with students during office hours, and attend meetings with the course supervisor and other TAs.

Getting Ready

You will usually meet before the first laboratory with your fellow TAs to:

- Discuss the nature of your laboratory teaching responsibilities (i.e. are you responsible for pre-lab talks, are you there to answer questions, etc.).
- Confirm the dates and times you are expected to be teaching or demonstrating in the lab. Do you have to be there early? Do you clean up at the end? Do you have to set anything up for the next section?
- Find out details of marking assignments and departmental policies on cheating, non-attendance, and reports not handed in. Refer to your department's policy book, or ask your course coordinator.
- If you are to lead field trips, ask what transportation arrangements are in place:
 - will you be expected to drive students?
 - what is the insurance arrangement?
 - must you use your own vehicle? If so, how will you be compensated?
 - do you need a special license?

Contact your department for more specific information.

- Familiarise yourself with emergency and safety procedures in your department, including emergency phone numbers, location of safety equipment, first-aid facilities, how to keep lab areas clean, procedures for handling chemicals, and disposing of waste.

Information for Your Students

Inform your students about lab safety rules (e.g. lab coats, closed-toe shoes, etc.) during the very first class. If there is a departmental or course hand-out on lab safety, make sure every student receives a copy.

Tour the lab with your students making sure they know the location of first-aid kits and safety equipment.

Student Performance

- Explain how lab performance is to be marked and how the labs tie in with other parts of the course.
- Talk about attendance at labs and the policy for make-up labs if any.
- Explain what kind of reports are expected and in what format; explain the marking scheme, due dates and penalties for late reports. The above information should also be given to students as a handout.
- Explain exactly what advance preparation you expect from your students before the lab, e.g. reading the lab manual.
- Talk about what is and what is not acceptable, i.e. collaboration, acknowledgement, plagiarism, etc. Ideally, give some examples specific to your course or discipline.

Before the Lab

- Understand the purpose and objectives of the experiment so you know what your students are supposed to learn.
- If you are unfamiliar with a lab exercise or procedure, try it out before the class.
- Make sure you have analyzed the data or performed the experiment so you are able to check student answers.
- Plan your lab. Write an introduction, prepare handouts and background material.
- Examine all samples and specimens making sure to locate key structures. Remember that diagrams and pictures often look very different from actual samples so know what you are looking at.
- Be prepared if the experiments don't work. Brainstorm possible reasons why it may not work so you are prepared for the worst.

During the Lab

- Begin with a review of last week's lab and connect with this week's lab. Explain where the links to lecture material occur. There may not be any, but this is also worth explaining - emphasizing why the material is included in the lab program.
- Give a short pre-lab talk to explain the lab organization, timing management issues, safety precautions, relevance, etc. Pre-lab talks are not meant to be a lecture (i.e. give new material) but can highlight important concepts on a practical basis.
- Create a "To Do" list where you highlight important items for the students to cover in the lab.
- Check to see if there are any questions from your students.
- Think about working with students in small groups rather than addressing the whole class.
- Circulate and check on your students frequently. If results are not as expected, encourage students to speculate about reasons why.
- Finish with a post-lab talk to summarize the important results of any experiments.
- Make sure students leave the lab clean and the equipment is put away properly.
- Do a routine check at the end of the lab: turn off lights, lock equipment cabinets; check air, gas, and steam taps. Lock up the laboratory. Does the department/course have a checklist for ending labs?

Interaction with Students

- Circulate among students during the lab to answer questions or give assistance. Don't wait for students' questions, ask "What stage are you at?" or ask how things are going. Try not to hover.
- Don't be quick to solve students' problems. Ask probing questions to help them think it through.
- Rather than answering the same individual questions repeatedly, address the class (or small group) as a whole. The frequency of the question probably means that everyone is confused at that point.

- If you don't know or are unsure of an answer to a student's question, say you will find out for them. Don't bluff.
- Never let students think they asked a stupid question.
- Treat your students with respect and be approachable.
- Work hard at creating an environment in which the students feel comfortable in learning from you.
- Be approachable. Find the answers together.

Teaching with Audiovisual Aids

If you are planning on using audiovisual equipment, it is important that you familiarize yourself with the classroom and its facilities. It is always wise to practice first, so find a time that the classroom is empty and make sure you know how to operate everything. Always arrive early to class for the extra time needed to set things up for the day.

Why Use AV?

Films and videos are generally more successful in conveying concepts, background, and mood than specific information. When using visual aids such as videos or films, explain the content of the tape/film and its relevance to your discussion prior to screening rather than after. This ensures that the students are looking for the right thing (perhaps even create a form outline of items to observe). After screening you could help the students fit the film into the context of the course and underscore the lesson with an outline on the blackboard.

Arranging AV Aids

Make sure the correct equipment on which to play the film/video is in the classroom and that you have the keys to access it. Your department should have appropriate keys for you to borrow. If necessary, order equipment from Network and Technical Services. The keys can be obtained from Room Scheduling (721 7587).

Check with the Film Centre (Main Library) or your department for any copyright restrictions on showing in class the films or videos you have chosen. Complete the appropriate rental forms prior to picking up the material from the Film Centre in the Library (your departmental office will likely have a copy of these forms).

Check the classroom prior to the class for location of plugs, etc. and to determine whether you need extension cords or other special equipment. Does it have a data projector/screen? If you plan to use a laptop, check its continued availability and whether it is compatible with the software and hardware connections to the data projector. It is always easier to play with unfamiliar equipment prior to the class, so that you are not pressured by time or an increasingly impatient audience. Will you need a set of overhead transparencies in case the computer plan fails? Do a practice run of your presentation in the classroom that you will be using.

Solicit assistance from a class member who can control lights, close screens, and operate the focus for projectors. If the bulb blows on a projector there is usually a spare. There will be a knob in a slot at the side of the projector to switch the active bulbs.

If you wish to hold your class in the computer labs, call ahead for information and for details of teaching software available. Make sure that you have been taught how to operate the hardware within the lab.

Sometimes, rearranging the furniture in the classroom can be effective in emphasizing the importance of contribution in a discussion. However as a courtesy to the next user, it is important to return the classroom back to its original condition upon completion of your class.

Leading a Seminar Discussion

This section is intended to provide you with an understanding of the role you play as a seminar leader. It will provide you with information on how to use questions to offer the richest learning experience; it will also discuss some potential problems and how to deal with them.

Attitude

One of the most important elements in running a successful seminar is the personal approach of the leader; the leader's attitude can affect the dynamics of the group and both the level and quality of participation. A good leader's attitude includes excitement, enthusiasm, confidence, respect and efficiency.

Trust

To make a seminar work you must create an atmosphere of trust between you and the students and among the students themselves. Encouraging the students to get to know and use each others' names also helps. A good leader must :

- be open to the students' ideas.
- listen carefully and actively.
- be sensitive to students' feelings.
- encourage and direct students' input.

Preparation

A good discussion needs planning - don't try to 'wing it.' Start the class by reviewing the material to be discussed. Inform your students in advance of the focus of the session – perhaps even recommend references to be read beforehand. You need to remind yourself of the points and questions you wanted to discuss to better keep the discussion on track.

Be knowledgeable about the material and expect to answer factual questions. During your preparation consider:

- which points are useful to the class.
- what information is needed for the course.
- which perspectives are useful to increase the students' awareness of the material.
- the goal of each session.

Goals

Keeping the goals of the group in mind is essential to maintaining the direction and content of the discussion. Seminar groups are typically organized to either review the material covered in the lectures or to extend or enhance the lecture material. In either case, it is important that the students do most of the talking. The leader should facilitate the discussion so that everyone has an equal chance to be heard and the topic stays on track; factual errors are not left uncorrected.

Structure

The structure of the seminar can vary according to the needs of the group. In the case of a session that covers a lot of material, or the members of the group need to develop the necessary skills, it would probably be an advantage to provide a defined structure at the beginning. On the other hand, operating a seminar with a loose and less visible structure encourages the group to select the important ideas and develop more complex thoughts. It should be noted that even a highly structured plan should leave room for discussion and feedback. Remember that the least visible and most powerful structure may be by direction through questions.

To decide the appropriate structure:

- you may want to offer some structure options to the group and let them choose the most comfortable format.
- keep in mind that the needs of the group may change as the course progresses and the skills and confidence of the students increase.
- you might consider the needs and interests of both the students and the goals of the seminar.
- try to provide a good selection of topics so the students can work on something which interests them.

Arrangement of Furniture

An important and often forgotten aspect of successful seminars is the arrangement of furniture in the classroom.

Recommended arrangements:

- Allow the possibility of breaking up into smaller groups.
- Give small groups a physical identity by having them sit together.
- Arranging chairs in a circle will encourage everyone to participate, and to direct the discussion to each other, rather than to only the instructor.

Arrangements not recommended:

- Students sitting in rows face the TA so they cannot see each other's faces. This will automatically channel all communication through the TA.
- Great distances between the participants make it difficult to communicate and easier to avoid contributing.
- Avoid the 'head-of-the-table' implication. If the TA sits at one end of a long, rectangular table, the attention tends to focus on that end; often the other end of the table starts their own discussion.

Participation Problems

In every group there are individuals who are willing to speak out and others who are quiet. It is easy to overlook the silence of some students when there is an abundance of contributions by others.

The quiet student

- Getting a quiet student to speak out takes patience and understanding.
- Do not attempt to force a shy student to speak by putting him or her on the spot.
- Instead try to encourage a contribution as part of a group activity.
- Try to give the quiet student an opportunity to speak out.
- Look for non-verbal clues that the shy student is willing to answer.
- Breaking the class up into smaller groups will provide a more comfortable situation for her or him to speak in front of fewer people.

The domineering student

The opposite of the quiet student is the one who likes to dominate the discussion. Without being rude, a facilitator can still ask for those students who have already contributed to hold back until others have had a chance.

When the flow of discussion stops

There will be lulls in the discussion. Wait a few minutes and allow the students to process the information. If the material is covered before the class-time ends, ask the students if there is anything they want to discuss. Use the time to discuss problems with reading material or papers.

Some students come to the seminars having not read the material to be discussed. If several students are unprepared, the discussion is severely hampered. This may be an

appropriate point to note the consequences of how being unprepared diminishes the learning experience. One suggestion to ensure preparation is to provide questions on the materials in advance of the seminar and let the group know you will be asking members to answer the questions in class.

If you find that students are always speaking to you instead of each other, they are probably seeking the authority to speak. Whenever someone asks for your opinion or asks a question of you, turn it back to the group and ask for their opinions or comments. Use eye-contact to include others when a student is speaking to you.

If the discussion is so far off to make that technique difficult, make a break in the discussion, summarize the relevant comments to that point and ask a question which will bring discussion back to the topic.

Evaluating Student Performance

Frequently the TA is called upon to give a grade for students' performances in a seminar session. Typically, a new TA spends his or her time discussing such evaluations with other TAs. If you are basing the mark entirely on the oral contribution in the seminars you should consider the points which contribute to that mark.

- Do not make the mistake of giving too much credit to the student who spoke a great deal but contributed nothing of substance to the discussion. The policy of giving high marks for merely making a large quantitative contribution, as opposed to a qualitative contribution, punishes those students who are less talkative or shy.
- A possible scale for grading participation might be to give 1 point for showing up and allow the students to earn the other 4 points in participation contributions. If the 5-point scale is too restrictive, expand it.
- Keep good notes between sessions. Your memory may distort the relative worth of contributions over time. You may also be asked to justify your marking at a much later date. Try to do this recording straight after class using subtle notes made during class.

Summary:

It is important to summarize the ideas that were raised throughout the discussion at the end of the class. This will help the students organize the issues raised and to create a perspective. Remember the goal of the seminar. The nature of a good seminar discussion is interaction between the members of the group. Make sure everyone understands the goals of the class, what is expected of the student, and what the students can expect of you. If communication exists and the students understand the expectations and are confident they can meet those expectations, the sessions will be far more relaxed and will invite discussion of interesting ideas.

The Role of Questions

Questions can be seen as a tool in the hands of the leader. Questions can be used to generate discussion, breathe new life into a discussion, or increase the intensity by focusing on specific issues. Questions can be used to encourage students who are less aggressive in responding and thus spread the level of participation amongst the group. Used by a skilled leader, they can exploit the full potential of the learning experience and make seminars enjoyable.

First, keep the skill and intellectual level of the group in mind when asking questions. The quality of the questions determines the level of discussion and you should try to raise that standard as far as you can comfortably to challenge the students' intellect. It is helpful to vary the types of questions to match the variety of personalities within the group. You may want to deal with students by asking them basic factual questions until they become more comfortable participating in the discussion.

Second is wait for answers. Periods of silence can be the most difficult aspect of seminars for some leaders. Some leaders and students alike become very uncomfortable with them, but the students need the time to think before they answer and you should allow them to do so. Waiting also provides time for some of the more reticent students to get up the courage to contribute.

Useful Questioning Strategies:

- Ask only one question at a time.
- When student questions are desired, request them explicitly, wait, and then acknowledge student contributions.
- Change your questioning style. Instead of always asking if there are any questions, rephrase it as "If I were to ask you to summarize the main points, what would they be?" Use a variety of probing and explaining questions:

- Factual questions (specific information, who, when, where, what?)
- Divergent questions (no right or wrong answers necessarily)
- Probing questions (build on student's response)
- Higher order questions (more analysis from the student).
- Consider Bloom's taxonomy:

1. **Knowledge**: arrange, define, duplicate, label, list, memorize, name, order, recognize, relate, recall, repeat, reproduce, state.
2. **Comprehension**: classify, describe, discuss, explain, express, identify, indicate, locate, recognize, report, restate, review, select, translate.
3. **Application**: apply, choose, demonstrate, dramatize, employ, illustrate, interpret, operate, practice, schedule, sketch, solve, use, write.
4. **Analysis**: analyze, appraise, calculate, categorize, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test.
5. **Synthesis**: arrange, assemble, collect, compose, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, manage, organize, plan, prepare, propose, set up, write.

6. **Evaluation:** appraise, argue, assess, attach, choose, compare, defend, estimate, judge, predict, rate, select, support, value, evaluate.

Starting a Seminar by...:

- asking a provocative question – perhaps based on a short description of a theory.
- posing a question that is based on a common experience of the group.
- "brainstorming" an issue, i.e. ask the students for ideas to be discussed.
- dividing the group into subgroups and organizing a debate over issues of concern to the class. As the session progresses, narrow the general questions to more specific ones. Encourage all answers and remain open-minded, but try to keep the discussion within the context of your goals for the session. You do not want the students to look to your authority to speak, so keep out of the discussion as much as possible; invite and allow the students to interact with each other.

Problem Questions

Dr. Maryellen Weimer, Editor of *The Teaching Professor*, suggests the following techniques for fielding problem questions from students:

The question you can't understand

Ask the student to repeat or rephrase the question. Don't imply that you think it's a silly or stupid question. If you continue not to comprehend, enlist the aid of the class, or apologize to the student and suggest you need to tackle the question after class.

The question that is irrelevant

Recognize the intrinsic value of the question when responding to the student, but don't get the class off track by answering it now. If you can legitimately consider it later in the course, tell the student when to expect an answer. You get even more points on that day if you can look at the student and say, "Remember that question you asked about heat transfer in cast iron?"

The question you can't answer

It's tempting to fake it to satisfy the student with fine-sounding terms and vocal authority. You set an example when you return to class with reference materials that contain the answer.

The question that is obvious

Take, for example, the student who asks a question you spent fifteen minutes answering in class yesterday and the student was in class. Is it right to take valuable class time to answer for one person in class what 86% of everybody else present already knows? Consider alternative ways in which you might address this but recognizing that it is still a

valid question. Ridicule only discourages others from asking more relevant questions.

Questions that challenge your authority

- Stay calm! Give the student as honest and reasoned an answer to the question as you can.
- Frequently such questions reflect a much deeper opinion of the way things happen in the academic world.
- Politely decline the opportunity to debate.
- Reschedule the discussion outside of class time.
- Playing out teacher-student altercations in public should be avoided.
- Assert your authority in a calm and respectful way. Restate your position and the policy or rationale that supports it. Tell the student that there are alternative avenues to explore (eg ombudsperson, professor or chair) but you will not be using class time to discuss it further.

Grading

Grading is a very important communication tool between the students and the instructor. To the student, grades communicate how he or she is doing in accordance with the standards expected in the course. To the instructor, grades provide the reference for improving the teaching method for assisting students' understanding. In addition, they communicate similar information to others who need to make an evaluation of the student. For example, good grades are expected of students trying to get into honours or graduate programs or compete for scholarships. On the other hand, low grades can be grounds for dismissing a student from academic programs.

Although the marking of papers and essay questions share a great deal, there are some differences. This section focuses mainly on the marking of papers, but much of the information can be applied to essay questions. Where there is a difference it will be noted.

Setting Standards

Because grades are so important, you should make every effort to be fair and consistent. You can begin by talking with the course coordinator because it is he or she who is ultimately responsible for setting the marking standards in the course. After you are aware of the marking guidelines you should communicate with other TAs in the same course on a regular basis to ensure your marking is consistent. If you are marking large numbers of exams, you can achieve common grading standards among graders by dividing up the questions so that each TA marks certain questions on all the exams. If you have doubts about the standard with which you are working, ask your course coordinator to review the first few you marked.

The course director should also let you know the form of the grades. Most will ask for a

percentage mark, some will ask for a letter grade. The conversion scale from percentage to letter grades varies between departments so be sure you know your department's scale.

Preparation

Preparation for marking begins early in the course by communicating expectations to the students. If you are leading a seminar you have a good opportunity to stress those expectations, but make sure that the whole population has the chance to hear them – not just one section. . If not, ask the course coordinator to tell the students in lectures, or post it to a readily accessible web site.

Explain the format that you wish:

- Do papers have to be double-spaced or typed?
- Should they have special cover pages? Some teachers prefer to mark 'blind' not knowing who wrote the paper until after the mark is assigned to avoid unconscious favoritism. For this purpose, students can be asked to hand in a title page with their name on it separate from the paper itself which is identified by the title only. Another strategy is to have someone in the departmental office assign code names to each student, and the student then writes this code name and their student number on their paper.
- How many references should the paper have?
- What referencing format should be followed?

Also explain what you are expecting in terms of content and how much emphasis you are placing on writing style and content:

- Critical review of a controversial topic
- A summary of current literature on a certain issue

Students should be encouraged to consult you for information on approaches to a thesis, sources and resources. Let them know you are available in office hours for advice on the progress of papers. Many problems can be avoided if caught in time. Of course, many will not take advantage of the opportunity, but it is wise to be available to those who will.

When the papers begin to show up, or the exam is finished and you are sitting there looking at an immense pile awaiting you, there are still some things to do before you go at it. Begin by reading a writing guide. Most departments make one available to the students to assist them in writing papers. Reviewing the guide will refresh your own vocabulary for comments, and allow you to refer the student to the guide for further information rather than try to explain everything in your comments.

The color of the ink you use would seem to be a contentious issue. Some feel that red should be used because it makes the marking more noticeable. Others feel that red is overly intimidating to students, especially when there is a lot of marking done.

Mark one question at a time. For example mark question A for all papers, then all question B's. This allows for consistent marking.

Marking rubrics:

Rubrics are very useful tools to help maintain consistency and fairness in your grading. They can be made available to students prior to the assignment so that they know what an "A" paper looks like, what a "B" paper looks like etc. You may choose to design a rubric with the students - this gives them a personal ownership and a deeper understanding of the expectations. Using a rubric is an easy way to clarify to a student why they received the grade they did. Rubrics make marking papers efficient as you spend less time debating whether a paper is an A or A- because the criteria can be made very specific. Rubrics can be shared for all sections.

How to Begin

When you begin grading papers or exams, make a note of those you receive and put them away in a drawer or file. Disputes occasionally arise when students claim to have handed in papers and the teacher has no record of them and cannot locate them. One way to ensure that this does not happen is only to accept assignments that are handed to you personally, before or after class, or in office hours, and asking the student to witness that you have marked 'received' in your record book (eg have them initial your record book).

Begin by previewing the papers, that is, read a few quickly without marking - just to become familiar with the standard you can expect of them. Be prepared to adjust your marking guide at this stage, in case you have made a mistake. As you begin to mark be prepared to take frequent breaks from the task in the interest of fairness. It is likely that you will become tired or bored as you progress through the pile and your standards will change as a result. Taking breaks provides some protection against the differing standards.

There are three methods of reading and marking which you may want to consider:

- The first method which is typically used for marking exam essay questions is based on a model answer to the question. Make a list of points which should be made in answering each question and attach values to each point.
- The second approach is more holistic and is typical of marking research papers. The paper is read completely and a grade is assigned according to the success of the student at addressing the significant points.
- The third and more structured approach is to mark according to a formula based on certain specified percentages for content, style, presentation etc....

It is advisable to separate the papers by topic or question to be answered and mark the common themes together. This method assures more reliability or consistency in judgment, better enables you to keep the important points in mind, and make a comparison of sources.

Rather than burdening yourself with extra work and filling the pages of the papers with redundant remarks, it is advisable to pick one or two pages in which you mark everything in great detail and write a note that you have done so. Most repeated spelling and grammatical errors will be caught and the point will be made about the need for proper style. It saves you work and the student the ego-deflating experience of looking at a paper filled with criticisms. You should put the grade on the last page of the paper or add a separate page of comments. A student's grade is not for public consumption.

What to Look for – the Holistic Approach

When using even the most holistic approach to marking, you need to have something in particular to which you can attend - and you may ask - what am I looking for? Of course, you can begin by checking with the course coordinator; he or she may have particular points of interest to be noted. Essentially, however, one should examine style (how it is said) and content (what is said).

Points in style include basic grammar and spelling. Although most graduate students are good writers, it is also true that many cannot remember why they write as they do, thus it cannot hurt to review a writing manual to refresh oneself of the rules. Style also includes sentence and paragraph structure, vocabulary, and organization. Organization includes a strong thesis, the introduction, conclusion, and a logical organization of the points to be argued.

Points in content include a familiarity with the material, the incorporation of examples to illustrate or support the argument, and identification and analysis of the issues. A good paper should be strong in all points, but exam essay questions are often marked with a degree of leniency in the style. No doubt, your course coordinator will clarify any confusion about the standards expected of the students.

Feedback Comments

Comments provide the necessary feedback for learning. The comments should be plentiful, but not repetitive. They should address the strengths and weaknesses of the paper and offer suggestions for improvement. The criticism should be constructive and accompanied by positive feedback. Avoid at all costs the use of sarcasm or humor. The humor will likely be misunderstood in the context and, like the sarcasm, be taken as hurtful and the result will be alienation, not a learning experience.

Many standard problems can be identified with short appropriate phrases which refer to the writing guide, eg: "run-on sentence". Many others can be common abbreviations such as "sp" for a spelling error. Allow the student to seek out the proper form of the identified problems of style.

Many new markers have a tendency to edit everything in the paper. Seek out the best and worst aspects of the paper for extensive comments and use shorter remarks for lesser notable aspects.

There is no point in grading a paper with a lot of effort if you return it too late for the student to benefit from the feedback. Set yourself a deadline that is realistic for both you and your students – and stick to it!

Assigning Grades

After you have assigned a mark, you may want to pile the papers according to the A's, B's, etc. and quickly review each pile. This will assure you that you have been consistent with the grade assigned to a particular quality.

[What does each grade mean?](#) Keep in mind that what is considered 'mastery' or 'acceptable' in a first year course is different from a second, third or fourth year class.

One pattern among first time markers is that they tend to mark too harshly. This may be the result of using their own expectations of themselves as their standards. In a large class it would be unusual if there were not some A students, even the occasional A+, just as it would be unusual not to have any Ds.

Returning Papers

Normally, all written work is to be returned to students with the exception of final exams. It should be returned in such a fashion that does not allow another student access to the comments or marks. This means that you are not allowed to leave a pile unattended for the students to pick up at random.

Posting Grades

Grades may not be posted against a student's name. Typically, student registration numbers are used as identifiers. If you have students with a number that is easily identifiable (eg only one transfer student in a senior class or a mature student with an early registration number) it might be appropriate to discard the first two digits of the seven digit id number. Note that a student can request (in writing) to not have a grade posted.

Time Management

Consider these comments:

“I'm going to have to put my thesis on the back burner this semester”,

“I never seem to have enough time to fit everything into my week”,

“My family must wait until the semester break”,

“There's no use making comments on the students' work since they don't read it anyway”,

“I work under pressure”

If you are a TA doing course or thesis work, and trying to live a life outside the university, then these statements probably sound familiar.

Many TAs report that time management is a major source of problems in graduate school, and it is easy to understand why.

1. You are faced with a wide diversity of complex tasks (preparation, instructing, tutoring, marking, and possibly counseling in your role as a TA ; planning, creating, studying, analyzing and writing in your role as a student, and you are expected to switch frequently among them.
2. There is often a noticeable lack of imposed structure in the day to day life of a graduate student. Ask yourself how many of the 168 hours in a typical week are “preplanned” and “required” as it might be on a regular job. For many graduate students, the vast majority of the week is variable and “open”. This openness and freedom make the management of how you use your time especially critical to your success.

The typical way of trying to deal with time management problems is to focus on setting priorities and goals, and to plan thoroughly.

Setting Priorities

One way to plan and hopefully achieve your goals is to establish your priorities ahead of time. What is really important to you? That way, you’ll know where you will want to invest your time and effort.

Goal Setting

You may want to develop goals for specific activities (e.g. teaching, research, volunteering, etc.) It is useful to force yourself to evaluate your situation and verbalize your goals. Take a few moments to think about:

Where do you expect to be in terms of your goals a year from now?

A month from now?

A day from now?

Planning

It may be useful to make these goals as explicit as possible; write them in terms of specific tasks to be done and estimates of the time it will take to do each task. Composing and seeing written goals (e.g. “To Do List”) help one to give proper consideration to all goals, and to be more realistic.

Often, the best plans go awry. And since following a well-constructed plan to achieve specified goals is rational and reasonable, the failure to follow through on the plans may foster frustration, guilt, and a tendency to procrastinate. Acknowledge that this may happen and re-evaluate your goals to see where you can improve on your planning for the

future. Just as money management requires record keeping and periodic assessment of goal attainment and methods, time management requires record keeping and reflection on attainment of personal goals. Some people find it helpful to keep a simple list of their accomplishments, and then to review the list at the end of the day to assess progress and to fine tune strategies for the next day.

In particular, watch out for less important but straightforward tasks taking priority over more important, complex or difficult tasks. Some graduate students keep track of the minutes spent reading or the number of words written which provides them with objective feedback to gauge their progress.

Plan time in a setting that will be free from distractions and interruptions. One hour of uninterrupted work time can be more productive than several hours of interrupted work time.

Teaching Assistant Evaluation

Being a teaching assistant is a learning experience. In some cases, it is as though you are an apprentice to the instructor. In other cases, the job functions might be quite unrelated. In any event, you will want to hear what people have to say of your efforts. No one source is accurate, so look for feedback from as many sources as possible – supervisors, course coordinators, peers and students. You may also consider inviting others unrelated to the course to come along and comment on your efforts that day.

You should be doing a regular self-evaluation. Ideally this might be a written log of your teaching times, but it might also just be a thoughtful period of reflection.

Self Evaluation

Are you achieving the goals set out in your course outline, syllabus or lesson plans? Are you finding that you are running out of time? Do you think that your students understand your lectures? Are you more self-assured with the passage of time? Perhaps you could consider video-taping your class performance, or voice-tape yourself. The Learning and Teaching Centre can help to arrange this (phone 8571).

One way to see if you are making yourself clear to students is by asking some of them for copies of their notes. Are your main points coming across or just details? Is there evidence of boredom? Are you talking so fast that the notes are hasty and sketchy?

Student Evaluation

You can judge your own performance by gathering "mid-term formative feedback" by distributing a short questionnaire which you have compiled. Much of this can be done electronically (ask at the LTC). Make sure the questionnaires are anonymous and cannot affect student grades so that you get honest feedback. State your purpose: to evaluate your own performance so that you may improve in the rest of the semester. Make sure the

questions that you ask agree with this statement! What do your students like or dislike about your course? How can you improve? Ask three or four brief questions. You do not have to submit these questionnaires to your course coordinator, but you might wish to notify him or her you are asking your students for comments on your performance.

Many departments have a summative course-end student evaluation. There is an intention to have at least some questions standardized in all such surveys. There is a pool of suggested optional questions that you might also want to use. They have been edited so that much of the ambiguity has already been removed. Check with your department or the LTC.

The formal summative evaluations have a protocol for administering. They should be given out by someone not involved in the course, if they are to be completed in class (usually a better way to get a good rate of response). Adequate time must be allocated to allow considered replies. They should be returned anonymously and retyped if there is a chance that a student can be identified by handwriting. The replies should not be read until the final grades have been released.

Peer Evaluation

Often it is less nerve-racking to ask a friend or fellow student rather than the course director to sit in on your class, and to give you feedback on your presentation. Ask for comments on your appearance, posture, command of the subject, teaching style and ability to communicate.

Evaluation by the Teaching Supervisor

It is helpful for future employment prospects if your course coordinator can evaluate your performance. Two visits are better than one, because improvement can only be noted if the professor returns to your class later in term. What they should be evaluating should be mutually agreed upon ahead of time. The professor should look at your teaching style, the accuracy of your lecture, the student response and the overall performance. These evaluations can be informal and not part of anything kept on file, or, you can ask for a formal evaluation to be kept on file for future reference. If your department keeps records on your teaching performance they will be kept completely separate from your own academic file and strictly confidential. You may have access to your personnel file by contacting the Chair of your Department.

Evaluation as an Employee

For information on performance review as an employee, see the latest version of the CUPE 4163 Collective Agreement.

Using Feedback from Student Evaluations

If the mid-session evaluations prompted you to change something about your teaching, tell your professor or the students who have helped evaluate you. This will communicate that you have read or listened to comments, are working on improvement and appreciate their help. To have these changes documented might be useful when you construct a teaching dossier. If the evaluations suggest an aspect of your teaching needs to be improved, contact the Learning and Teaching Centre for advice.

Teaching Dossier

A useful addition to one's curriculum vitae is a Teaching Dossier. It is a compilation of thoughts and achievements related specifically to your teaching. By writing such a log, one can spot recurring patterns, check for improvements, and record which workshops have stimulated new ideas. Copies of a Guide to the Teaching Dossier are available from the Learning and Teaching Centre.

Getting the Most Out of Your Teaching Assistantship

If you plan on becoming a teacher there are several ways to increase what you can learn from being a teaching assistant. One is by observing your course director and other teachers. Make note of those techniques that work and avoid those that do not. If you are sitting in on a lecture course that you think you might end up teaching, use it as an opportunity to build an outline for your course.

You may want to enlist your course coordinator or even the department to become actively involved. Are you getting tips on teaching? Are experienced instructors helping you with suggestions? Have they evaluated your performance? Invite your course coordinator to one of your classes. You may have to be the initiator of a discussion, not just with your students, but also with your colleagues. All faculty development programs and workshops are also open to TAs. If you are not routinely made aware of these programs, contact the Learning and Teaching Centre and asked to be put on the electronic mailing list. Check the website of the LTC – particularly the section on TA activities.

Appendix of TA Resources

Learning Skills

The UVic Learning Skills Program, housed within Counselling Services, assists UVic students in the development and practice of efficient study techniques, effective learning methods, and high-level thinking skills that are important for success in university. We also provide consultation for faculty with regard to issues of learning and student success. <http://www.coun.uvic.ca/>

The Writing Centre

The Writing Centre (TWC) provides one-to-one writing support for students of all levels of writing. Students are encouraged to see a tutor while an assignment is in process, and after an assignment is graded in order to review the TA's or instructor's feedback. TWC's goal is to help students improve their writing skills not on any one piece of writing, but in general. Workshops on common writing difficulties are held periodically. Consult the TWC pages available on the LTC's website <http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/>.

ESL Courses and English Language Centre

The University of Victoria's English Language Centre (ELC), offers a unique opportunity for international students to:

- improve their English for work, travel, or further study
- experience West Coast Canadian culture

phone: 721-8469, email: elc@uvcs.uvic.ca <http://continuingstudies.uvic.ca/elc/>

Grading

UVic calendar for rules on grading is posted on the web. The url changes each year in the form http://web.uvic.ca/calendar****/ where **** is the year.

UVIC Graduate Students' Society

The Society is an autonomous, not-for-profit body that strives to promote the interests, and represent the views of graduate students at the University of Victoria. All of our services and programs are outlined in the annual GSS Handbook & Daily Planner available at the end of August in the Grad Centre. phone: 472-4778. 721-8816 or 472-4543 or email gss@uvic.ca website: <http://gss.uvic.ca/>

CUPE 4163

This is the University of Victoria's Education Employees Union. It is made up of sessional instructors, teaching assistants and many other specialists.
<http://web.uvic.ca/~cupe4163/> Address: Sedgwick Bldg. C129 Phone: (250) 472-4778
Fax: (250) 472-4806 Email: cupe4163@uvic.ca

Counselling Services

The mission of the Counseling Services is to help students, faculty and staff gain all they can from their experience at UVic. This may involve helping with personal, learning, and career concerns, and promoting success and wellness. They offer confidential, individual counseling. It also offers courses, groups and workshops designed to foster the development and practice of useful skills. A broad range of resources and materials are

provided. Except for a nominal charge for some tests and courses, the services are free of charge. <http://www.coun.uvic.ca/>

Mental Health Needs/Student Health

This is a drop-in clinic. Appointments are required for specialists only. Patients are seen on a first-come, first-serve basis. Of course, emergencies will take priority. Most of the time patients do not wait longer than 20 minutes but, just in case, bring a book or something to help pass the time. Student medical records are confidential and are not released to anyone without the written consent of the student unless otherwise required by law and in matters of public health. University Health Services invites suggestions for change, growth or improvement from all students. Address: The Jack Petersen Health Centre 3800 Finnerty Rd. Victoria, BC V8P 5C2 <http://health.uvic.ca/>

Resource Centre for Students with a Disability

Their web site has been designed to acquaint you with the services and facilities available to students with a disability at the University of Victoria. All students with a disability are encouraged to make themselves familiar with this office at the beginning of their studies. <http://rcsd.uvic.ca/>

Learning & Teaching Centre

The role of The Learning and Teaching Centre is to support and enhance the teaching improvement efforts of faculty and teaching assistants and to increase awareness of current research and strategies related to teaching and learning in higher education. The goal is to offer resources, consultation, and a forum for discussion to help instructors provide a valuable learning experience to all students. You are welcome and encouraged to make use of the LTC and its facilities. Contact information: Phone: (250) 721-8571, Email: lrc@uvic.ca

UVic's International & Exchange Student Services

[\(http://iess.uvic.ca/\)](http://iess.uvic.ca/) Offers a wide range of programs and support for international students. Their website is a valuable source of information on adjusting to life in Victoria and at the university. The Learning and Teaching Centre and the Faculty of Graduate Studies offer a TA training day early in September and January. It provides peer-oriented and peer-led workshops to learn various skills including: how to start your first class, generating discussion, marking, etc. Please check with the Learning and Teaching Centre [\(http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/\)](http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/) for registration details and dates.

Useful Telephone Numbers

24 Hours Services

Ambulance, Fire, Police: 911

Campus Security, Safe Walk Program: 721-7599 (Emergency) or 721-6683 (non-emergency)

Need Crisis Line: 386-6323

Poison Control Center: 1-800-567-8911

Victoria Woman's Sexual Assault Center: 383-3232

UVic Services, Regular Office Hours

Career services 721-8421

Counseling services 721-8341

Faculty of graduate studies 721-7970

Graduate studies' society 721-8816

Health Services: 721-8492

Harrassment/Discrimination: 721-7007

Interfaith Chaplaincy: 721-8338

Occupational Health and Safety: 721-8971

Ombudsperson: 721-8357

Peer Helping: 721-8343

Teaching and Learning Centre 721-8571

University health services 721-8492

Woman's Center: 721-8353

Non-emergency Numbers

Fire Department Sannich: 475-6111

Fire Department Oak Bay: 592-9121

Fire Department Victoria: 384-1122

Police Sannich: 475-4321

Police Oak Bay: 592-2424

Police Victoria: 995-7654