

## *A Guide to Being a History TA*

# 1. PREPARING FOR YOUR ROLE AS A GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT

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### **Introductory Remarks:**

Congratulations on being awarded a Graduate Teaching Assistantship! Whether you are an MA or a PhD, first year or fourth, or have tutorials or marking duties, you will be asked to strike a balance between multiple responsibilities, both personal and professional. Your GTAship is one part of that professional side of things, alongside your academic work. Having a healthy and professional approach toward being a GTA will make your life and your students' lives easier, and will result in a much better university experience for you and them.

A GTAship is a position of classroom authority and trust, and it is ultimately of vital importance to the university for its educational aims. We currently make up nearly half the academic workforce of the university. We serve as the first point of contact for most students entering the university and often have a far more personal relationship with those students as a result. Undoubtedly, ours is a position of high responsibility, but it can and should be an enjoyable and educational experience as well.

This, and the other GTA tips and advice on this website, are designed to ease your transition from student to professional educator. They are designed to help you think like a pro, prepare like a pro, and be a role model for your students. Along the way, you'll be supported not only by your department, which wants you to succeed for obvious reasons, but also by your union—PSAC Local 610—which is here to provide you with more tips and advice along the way. A little knowledge and preparation, coupled with valuing yourself and the work you do, will lead you to greater successes in the classroom and out!

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## THE YEAR BEGINS

### Before Your Class:

As a student, we are often led to believe that class starts with the first lecture. But our professors are preparing long before then, and so should we. Most TAs will be given a weekly time allotment for prep work; others may even include time built in for training or meetings at the start of the term. Please note that if training is *mandatory*, it must be included in your contract hours. The following advice is divided into one-time and repeat activities that are frequently part of your class prep. And of course, feel free to create your own checklist!

### Before the Course Begins

- Familiarize yourself with your rights and responsibilities, which are laid out in the TA Union (PSAC Local 610) and Western University's Collective Agreement. This is a binding piece of legislation, with obligations spelled out for both employer and employee. Anything not covered by the CA falls under the university's own employment policies.
  - o The Collective Agreement is: <http://www.pfac610.ca/documents/PSAC%20610%20Collective%20Agreement%202012%20-%202015.pdf>.
  - o Note that Union membership confers many benefits, including additional health coverage, scholarships and bursaries, employment opportunities and access to an emergency fund. See <http://www.pfac610.ca/> for more information.
- Meet your course professor personally for a brief meeting to introduce yourself.
  - o If available, this is a good time to get the course syllabus, text books or course packs in order to familiarize yourself with the course materials.
- Fill out the Duties Specification Agreement with your professor. This is a contract identifying your specific roles and the time you are expected to spend on each of them.
  - o It sometimes takes time to finalize the TA assignments, so DSAs are frequently distributed and signed shortly after your work assignment begins. Please allow for a reasonable amount of time to pass before inquiring about the DSA, but do ensure you sign one within a week or so of actually starting your TA assignment.
- Scan your course syllabus for busy weeks and compare them to your own classes. Mark all relevant dates on a calendar, and especially include heavy grading periods.
- Create a spreadsheet to track your grading and tutorial attendance. Some professors will provide you with this, so be sure to ask.
  - o Grading should include each of the grades identified on the course syllabus, their due dates, the assignment's value (ex. /30), and room for a final grade.
- Set your weekly office hours based on your schedule. Choose a date and time when it is certain you will be on campus and available.
- Create (or download) a weekly lesson template. This will keep you organized and also serve as a study guide for later classes to recall what was taught and how it was taught.
- During your first tutorial, establish ground rules for your classroom.
  - o Some important rules are prohibiting personal attacks, allowing everyone to participate, expecting students to have all their course materials with them, etc.
  - o Allow the students to come up with their own.

### Ongoing Weekly Duties:

Please note that these are all assumed duties, based on what TAs are typically responsible for. All professors have slightly different requirements of their TAs, and ultimately it will be your DSA (see above) that determines what your exact duties are.

- Attend class and take notes.
  - o From these notes, it is easy to craft simple discussion questions related to the lecture or readings for the week.
- Do the readings and take notes.
  - o In addition to being an important supplement to the lecture, the readings are material the TAs often are expected to cover in detail. You must be prepared.
- Use your lesson planning template to sketch out your tutorial for the week.
  - o Try to do this during the lecture to save time and energy, or at least do it shortly after so the materials are fresh.
  - o When planning a tutorial, try to use an “open-body-close” format. This means introducing the topic for the week, working through its biggest theme(s) in detail, and summarizing its importance for the course.
  - o In case any of the topics go over poorly—it happens!—think of one back-up activity you can do to regenerate student interest.
- In tutorial, do the following:
  - o Circulate an attendance sheet immediately.
  - o Use your students’ names constantly.
  - o Take notes during discussions. This will help you remember who said what, but will also help you draw connections between students’ respective ideas.
  - o Enter any notes about attendance or participation right after class so you don’t forget.
- Try to reserve one day a week for your TA duties, including office hours, tutorial planning, and ideally attending the lecture and doing the readings. Establish a good routine so that you can focus on your own academic work the rest of the week.

### Conclusion:

As you can see, there are a number of things you are responsible for as a TA. Your professor is counting on your diligence in carrying out your duties, and so are your students. This little inventory is designed to help you stay focused on the tasks you must perform. Print it, copy it, or create your own checklists—do what works for you. But do it. You’ll thank yourself later when your semester is ending and you can take comfort in a job well done – and in the knowledge you completed your own academic work, too. Establishing and sticking to a good routine will make grad studies that much more enjoyable and leave ample room for personal interests besides.

The next document covers two very important aspects of your duties: running an effective tutorial and grading student assignments. Both duties require you to interact with your students meaningfully and constructively. Good luck and continue reading!