

HANDBOOK FOR GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

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INTRODUCTION:

This handbook is meant as a general reference for teaching assistants. It is probably most helpful to new teaching assistants. It gives you some idea of the responsibilities and duties of a teaching assistant, explains some of the administrative elements of teaching, includes suggestions about teaching practices, provides some guidance about difficult situations that might arise, and introduces you to teacher training programs and resources at the university.

THE PURPOSE OF A TUTORIAL:

Tutorials are fundamental to the success of a course and to the education of undergraduate students. Tutorials usually meet one hour/week in first and second year level classes. They provide an opportunity for students to actively engage in the study of history. In tutorials, students will grapple with information and interpretations presented in lectures, textbooks and assigned readings. Students should be asking questions, challenging interpretations, debating and discussing the meaning and significance of the past, and thinking independently about how to make sense of the past. Students are not only mastering the content of a particular subject – such as the industrial revolution, Marxism, or the impact of the First World War on Canadian society – they are also coming to grips with history as a discipline. Students develop and refine skills necessary for the study of history, such as reading primary sources, developing research skills, understanding historiographical traditions, developing the ability to reason historically and write effectively. The graduate teaching assistant (GTA) is the person who facilitates, guides and oversees all of this.

The course coordinators and lecturers design the overall course, including tutorials. The study plan is laid out in the syllabus. Some tutorials might be dedicated to the analysis of primary documents; another might focus on a writing assignment; others might concentrate on a particular subject or era. GTAs execute a crucial component of that plan of study. Ideally you do this in a constructive, stimulating and enjoyable manner. The variety of material and assignments covered in tutorial will tax GTAs to stretch their knowledge, refine their own skills, articulate their own understanding of the study of history, and develop their skills as teachers. It is a tall order. How do you do all of this?

RUNNING A TUTORIAL:

Tutorials are not supposed to be substitute lectures. Students might have questions about the material covered in the lecture and those can be taken up in tutorial. But most of the time should be devoted to active learning that complements and builds on the lectures. Your role is to organize your tutorials so that this happens. You must spark discussion, steer it in certain directions, and help to draw out the significance of ideas, events and analyses. At times there may be awkward silences. Avoid the temptation to fill them by lecturing. It is fine to give students time to think over a question or to piece together their thoughts before they speak up. You will also find that not all tutorial groups are alike. Invariably, teaching assistants have one group that works well - discussion is lively, thoughtful and easy – and another group where it is much more difficult to get students to take responsibility for the discussion. You will need to develop strategies to ensure that students do most of the talking and that discussion is focused and constructive.

It is not easy to get all of the students to participate. Some students are shy, for a variety of reasons including fear of public speaking or because English is not their first language. Students who are keen to participate can also be problematic. They can dominate discussion and their confidence can intimidate others. Some students will talk without having done any work for the tutorial. Others will take discussion on a tangent. You might have to rein in the more loquacious students. There are many strategies that you can employ to encourage all students to participate in a collective learning process, including asking individual or pairs of students to summarize readings to kick off discussion (ensuring that you get every student to give a presentation over the course of the year); asking a student to think up a few questions around which the discussion will be organized; organizing a debate among the students (leaving time for other students to participate); or dividing the class into smaller groups to discuss particular issues. Putting students on the spot does not usually work well.

Ensuring that students know one another's names also helps the class dynamic. The set-up of the room can impede discussion; move chairs and tables so that the set-up encourages discussion. You will have to try out a number of tactics to see what works best. If after several attempts a tutorial group does not improve, be sure to speak to the professor about it. S/he might have ideas about how to organize a group more effectively. You might also want the course coordinator to visit a tutorial to see what's going on. It might just be the case that it is a group with a flat dynamic or a group whose dynamic took shape early on and cannot be easily altered.

The Professional Development Seminar (PDS) addresses some of the challenges in teaching. On 20 September 2012, the PDS will discuss effective teaching strategies in tutorials and seminars.

Tutorials will also function differently from one course to another. Students in first year courses (1401E, 1601E, 1803E, 1810E) require a lot of guidance about university expectations as well as the challenges of studying history. Most of these

students will be recent high school graduates and will have a difficult time adjusting to university standards and expectations. Few of these students will have studied much history before. Thus the demands placed on you will be quite high, although the intensity will vary over the course of the year. You should expect that students will be especially keen to come to your office hours or make an appointment to see you in the two or three weeks leading up to an assignment or test.

In upper level courses (2201E, 2301E, 2401E, 2403E), you will find that students are beginning to come to terms with, and challenge, historical interpretations. Their research skills will have developed, in some cases leading them to use primary sources and other more sophisticated sources. They will test your knowledge of the particular subject more rigorously. They too will require guidance and advice in dealing with the challenges of research, writing and analysis.

Some courses have marking TAs. There is minimal contact with students in this case, but you are still an essential part of the course. Marking assignments is a form of instruction, highlighting what students have done well, pointing out where there are problems, and suggesting ways in which they can improve. Your comments, criticisms and suggestions will play a part in shaping the way students think about history. Because you are less visible to students, there are usually more student challenges to grades. This does not mean that the grades are inappropriate. It does suggest that students are more likely to accept the judgment of someone they know. You might want to attend a few lectures, especially around the time that assignments are due, and be introduced to the class by the professor. You might want to ask the professor to announce that you will be holding office hours. The course coordinator will likely have a few other suggestions.

The meeting of the PDS on 01 November takes up the issue of marking assignments.

GTAs are a crucial part of the teaching team. In large lecture courses, teaching assistants usually know individual students better than lecturers. Professors rely on the judgment of teaching assistants to assess each student's abilities and for assistance in the event of appeals, students experiencing personal difficulties, or appraisals if a student requests a letter of reference. Your feedback is also invaluable to the lecturers in cases where there are problems with the course. The types of problems can vary greatly – from students not being able to read an overhead, to reading assignments for a tutorial that do not adequately engage the subject, to concerns about a lecturer who speaks too quickly. In some cases, the problems can be more serious. The teaching assistant is the first point of contact and can be a helpful conduit of information to lecturers and course coordinators that will ensure the course runs as smoothly as possible.

PRIVACY LAWS AND CONTACT INFORMATION:

You should give your students a way to contact you above and beyond your office hours. This is helpful if a student cannot attend a tutorial or has to back out of a presentation at the last minute. You should only provide your students with contact information that you are comfortable disclosing. It is fairly standard practice to give out

your email address. Some teaching assistants might be comfortable giving out their home phone number, others not. Do not feel obliged to do so. It is helpful for you to have contact information for the students.

In the past many GTAs have put together a class list with contact information. New privacy regulations make that practice less straight-forward. You can consult Western's Information & Privacy Office at <http://www.uwo.ca/privacy/contact.html> for more information. If you ask everyone in the tutorial for their permission to put together and distribute such a list, you are adhering to the requirements of the new privacy law. However, the university seems to prefer that you err on the side of caution. Students can freely exchange contact information with one another or you can act as an intermediary. If your tutorial is functioning well and the students are developing a good rapport, they will exchange contact information themselves.

GRADING TUTORIAL PARTICIPATION:

Tutorial participation is generally worth a significant percentage of the final mark, ranging from 10-20%. The tutorial mark can do a lot to boost or lower a student's final grade in the course. Keep weekly attendance sheets. It is also a good idea to write down some thoughts on each student's contribution every week since the final grade will reflect the quality of student participation and not just the fact that s/he showed up for tutorial. In the event of an appeal, these notes can be very helpful to the course coordinator.

Grades are recorded on the Marks Management system (MMS). It is still *imperative* that you keep complete and well-organized grades. If there is a mistake putting the information into MMS, this can easily be checked against your records. Your course coordinator might give you a template of a marks sheet – consistency across tutorial groups also makes it easier to identify grades and prevent errors. It is helpful to organize your tutorial lists in alphabetical order, particularly for the larger lectures. Attached is a sample copy of a basic attendance sheet: it does not need to be more complicated than this.

Some students will request a mid-term mark for tutorials. Some course coordinators will want mid-term grades issued, others will not. Check with the course coordinator about the practice in your class. If one GTA gives out this information and another does not, it can create bad feelings amongst the students which has an unfortunate impact on the class. The GTAs must also consult with the course coordinator about how to grade tutorial participation. In the past, some students get 10/10 whereas other students receive 8.5/10: the two students might have the same attendance record and participate actively. Harmonizing expectations is something professors and teaching assistants need to establish early on.

GRADING ASSIGNMENTS:

Grading assignments is hard work. Each essay, book review, or exam will have different strengths and weaknesses. You must weigh a multitude of factors when determining the appropriate grade for a written assignment. In a class with multiple markers, it is also important to have uniform standards and expectations. It often happens

in a class with multiple markers that students will come to believe that one teaching assistant is especially severe (usually their own) and another teaching assistant is more lenient (with the complaint that everyone in the lenient marker's class is getting an A). In general, the discrepancy in final grades between tutorial groups is minimal. Nonetheless, the complaint highlights a real problem about the subjectivity of marking.

New teaching assistant should ask the course coordinator to review and comment their grades. Consider marking a few essays and then get feedback before you tackle the rest. Once you have finished marking all of the assignments, you can then review, and easily modify, grades to ensure you've been consistent with yourself. Teaching assistants with several years experience will have more confidence in their judgment, but it is still advisable to discuss your standards and expectations with the course coordinator to ensure you are on the same page.

The following descriptions might help give you some idea of how to determine if a paper deserves an A, a B etc.

An A paper is well-written and presents a clearly articulated, well-reasoned and persuasive argument. The reader is left with the impression of having learned something new and interesting about the paper topic, often something unexpected. The A paper uses sources effectively, (often primary sources in upper year courses), to bolster the author's points, and is able to consider rival positions, anticipating potential criticisms of the arguments presented, and demonstrating why the author's position is superior to rival interpretations and points of view. It should also connect ideas and arguments to larger historical periods and issues; in other words it generalizes beyond the parameters of the particular case study. The A paper is well researched, with very few technical problems, free of spelling and grammatical errors, and properly documented with footnotes and bibliography in a consistent style.

A B paper is very good. B papers share some of the characteristics of A papers, but are often reports of research without sufficient analysis. They are competently written, but may rehash things the student has read. B papers present an argument which is supported by evidence, but the author does not consider some important ramifications and does not anticipate objections. The argument might also be obvious, simplistic or uninteresting. The B paper usually has minor technical errors (spelling, grammar, documentation, etc).

A C paper is an average work. It may have an argument or thesis, but often just presents material that was covered in class without adding anything new. Sometimes the argument itself is interesting and innovative, but it is poorly presented and argued. C papers commonly have many technical errors (dangling modifiers, conjunctions at the end of sentences, missing transitions, poor writing style), and often the evidence used to support the argument is insufficient or inappropriate. There might be conceptual or organizational problems that undermine otherwise sound arguments, and sometimes important objections are overlooked. C papers commonly begin by stating several

possible theses in the introduction and fail to identify which is the main point of the paper.

A D paper is poorly argued and inadequately researched. The D paper does not support an argument adequately or does not explain the main theme of the paper. D papers often have some good sections, but lack coherence. The author might state an argument and fail to establish it or might present evidence without clearly identifying the main point. A paper which relies heavily on textbooks is often a D paper. A D paper is also usually poorly written, badly organized and contains many technical errors.

An F paper is one that falls below the standards of university-level work. It does not present a clearly articulated argument, or fails to support one. It is generally badly written and often incoherent. It usually requires significant reworking and rethinking. A D paper might slip into the F range if it has serious technical problems. Any paper without footnotes or bibliography is an F paper – it is frequently insufficiently researched or consists entirely of common knowledge.

Your comments on the assignment give the student a clear idea of where s/he went right and wrong, as well as how to improve for the next assignment. Your comments influence the way students think about and “do” history. This applies to students who get As as well as students who get Ds, or worse. When writing comments, you should adopt a professional tone, be clear, and choose your words so that they are encouraging and constructive. On a few occasions, there might seem to be little to praise in a paper. You can always find something, if only to praise the subject under study. For example: ‘Napoleon is a fascinating figure in European history. However there are problems with the research, interpretation and organization of your essay....’ or ‘You have obviously read Montaigne thoroughly and enjoyed it a great deal. However...’.

Writing comments is time consuming and tricky. You have to identify precisely the strengths and weaknesses of the assignment. This is not easy to do. There will be recurring problems (such as poor writing, not expressing the argument clearly, inadequate research) and you can re-use comments or standard phrases to help save time. But ultimately every paper requires an individual comment. Comments that are too brief or vague send a signal to students that their work is not being taken seriously. It is **unacceptable** to write comments such as the following:

A- well done

B - good effort

C- need to make more effective use of all the sources listed in your bibliography

In a class where students believe that no one is putting time into grading their work, there tend to be more problems with cheating. Even students who are getting low grades will be less likely to buy, download or recycle essays if they believe their teaching assistants and professors take their written work seriously.

You will find that some students write badly. Your comments should help to identify problems and suggest ways to improve their writing styles. The history department also has a writing coach: this is a graduate student position. The writing coach holds weekly office hours and s/he can devote more time to working on written expression. You can also refer students to the Writing Support Centre. Students can make one hour appointments or drop in for half hour appointments, Monday-Friday 5-7 and Saturday 12-3 at Quotes Café in Weldon Library. The WSC also holds a seminar every year on how to write history essays. They are also happy to meet with GTAs to discuss writing issues, including teaching you how to teach others to write more effectively. They can be contacted at 661-3031 or at www.sdc.uwo.ca/writing and are located in Room 210, UCC but will soon move to the 4th floor of the Student Services Building.

Keep track of the grade as a number rather than give a letter grade. If at the end of the year you find you've recorded a grade as a B, you won't know whether the student earned a low, medium or high B, and the difference between a 70 and a 79 will have an impact on a student's final grade. Record the mark as a number out of 100: MMS converts all marks into the appropriate percentage.

You should organize your own workloads, as much as possible, to make sure that you will have time to grade essays as soon as they are turned in. Since you have a maximum of 40 students, two weeks is generally a reasonable amount of time to return papers. Consult with your professor about her/his expectations for returning assignments. You should also return late essays promptly, although you can give yourself a few extra days to get to them.

Exams

Exams require minimal written comment. If a student appeals a grade, then the subsequent grader should not be influenced by comments on the exam paper. However, the students should have some idea why they earned the grades they did. A couple of comments at the end of each answer will suffice. You should also indicate the grade (as a number) at the end of each question to ensure that there is no confusion about how the student has done on individual parts of the exam. You can calculate the final exam grade on the front cover of the exam booklet. Your course coordinator might give you specific directions for marking exams.

STUDENT APPEALS:

If a student does not believe her/his work has been graded fairly, the first thing s/he should do is to ask the teaching assistant who marked the assignment for clarification. In some cases students will be disappointed with a grade, but that does not mean the grade is inappropriate. Many first year students will not realize that the university marking system is dramatically different from that used in high school. Indeed, some will complain that the grade they received is not like the grades s/he earned in high school. You might want to address the differences between university and high school expectations and grades in one of your early tutorial sessions. Do not get

defensive if a student comes to complain about a grade. Assume that the student requires more explanation. Do not be surprised if you do decide to amend a grade - sometimes by a few percentages, in rare cases by a significant amount. Most of the time your initial judgment will be sound but there are occasions when we make mistakes or do not attach enough importance to what the student has done well in an assignment. Experienced markers know that no one's judgment is perfect. You will also find that if your comments on assignments are thorough and clear there will be fewer complaints.

It is a good practice to insist that no one can complain about a grade until 24 hours after an assignment has been returned. You can ask the student to write a brief note explaining why s/he believes the grade is inappropriate. You should then arrange a time to meet to discuss the assignment. Prepare for this meeting by reviewing the paper and your comments. If you cannot come to an understanding in this meeting (either the student understands why the grade stands or you decide to amend the grade), then the teaching assistant should re-read the paper. If you still do not believe the grade should be raised, return the paper to the student explaining why the grade stands and refer the student to the course coordinator. Do not get involved in an unconstructive argument with a student. If you send the student to the course coordinator, s/he will meet with the student and in many cases decide to read the essay. The grade might or might not be amended, but either way the student will get more feedback and better understand his/her grade.

Consulting with the GTA and course coordinator is the first and informal part of the appeal process. If the appeal moves to the next, and formal, stage the chair of the department is involved. For your general information, the steps of the formal appeal are outlined at: <http://www.uwo.ca/ombuds/appeals/gradeappeals.html>

Keep all of your correspondence with a student. It might be helpful in the event of an appeal.

RECORDING GRADES:

Every once in a while a GTA loses his/her record of grades, does not record the grades at all, or does not keep complete records. This creates big problems! Keep clear and complete records of all grades for the entire year. Do not delete your record even after the grades have been inputted into MMS. Your records reveal more information than the marks management system allows, such as late penalties. Below is an example of such a sheet. In the event of an appeal, the course coordinator will need to be able to see exactly how a student performed on every assignment, as well as in tutorial.

FINAL MARKS MEETING:

In large classes, there is usually a final marks meeting. Several things happen. There will be a review of the final exam. Failed exams are re-graded. Exams that differ substantially from the term work might be reviewed. Students who have a failing mark in the course will have their exam re-graded and their entire year's work reviewed. Finally, exams are put in alphabetical order and stored for one year.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS:

Students submit electronic copies to TURNITIN; that screen identifies most problematic papers. You might have concerns about papers that TURNITIN has not flagged. If you suspect a paper has been plagiarized, inform the course coordinator. It is not the responsibility of the teaching assistant to confront a student about a possible plagiarized paper. It is likely that the course coordinator will consult you because you know the student better than the s/he does. But the responsibility for dealing with such an issue rests with the course coordinator.

Unfortunately, some students experience stressful or distressing personal problems. They might turn to you for help. You should be sympathetic but you should not get involved in the personal lives of your students. Stop a student before s/he discloses personal information by assuring her/him that they are entitled to her/his privacy (which the student will often prefer) and that you will do all possible to help at the academic end. That way you define the parameters of your role and responsibility. Let the course coordinator know if a distressed student has approached you for help. You should also refer the student to the academic counselors. They can be found in SSC2105 in the Social Science Building, X82011. The counselors are experienced in dealing with the many and various stresses that can affect undergraduate students and it is the counselors who will consult with and advise the course coordinator/lecturers about an appropriate accommodation.

In cases of illness, the students are also entitled to their privacy. Refer them to academic counseling which explains university guidelines about what to do. Note: Course coordinators do not deal with individual students who have health problems. The students deal with academic counseling and the counselors in turn contact the faculty about accommodation. The details of the policy and procedure are at: <http://counselling.ssc.uwo.ca/procedures/medicalaccommodation.asp> This is a fairly new policy but most students know about it.

In the rare instance that you might feel threatened by a student, or worry that a student is becoming dependent on you in a way that oversteps the bounds of your professional relationship, consult with the course coordinator, undergraduate chair, or department chair. Keep copies of all correspondence, emails, as well as a record of any other contact. Remember that the undergraduate students have promised to adhere to a code of conduct which prohibits bullying, intimidation, and other forms of misconduct. The code of conduct can be found at: <http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/board/code.pdf>

PROFESSIONALISM:

In all of your dealings with students you will want to conduct yourself in a professional manner. That does not mean you have to be aloof, removed or formal. It is important to encourage students to contact you with academic questions, but not to confuse the nature of your relationships with them by being overly friendly. There are some fairly standard practices to help ensure that such confusion does not arise, including leaving the door open when meeting with students, not touching a student, not socializing

with students etc. You should also arrive punctually for class, be well prepared, and deal with all student questions in a timely manner.

In some cases you will want to consult with other GTAs about a specific student or assignment. Be discrete when you do this and make sure that your discussion is professional and private. For example, once a student went to see a GTA in office hours to ask about the grade on a paper. The GTA said s/he would re-read the paper and asked the student to come back in 10 minutes. The student stepped outside but stayed in the hall where s/he overheard the GTA make disparaging comments about him/her to another GTA the entire time. Not only was the GTA unprofessional, not to mention hurtful, s/he had not re-read the paper. The student complained – rightly so – and the GTA received a stern rebuke. The student was also moved to another tutorial group. What the GTA might not have realized was the degree to which his/her reputation amongst the faculty was damaged.

In addition to your teaching duties, GTAs are also involved in proctoring exams and conducting course evaluations. In recent years, some GTAs have sloughed off these duties. They have not shown up to hand out and collect course evaluations or have arrived late at exams. Evaluations are important for the students and the course instructor; they provide guidance for revising course content and they are used in assessing faculty performance in teaching. Showing up on time for exams is also essential to the smooth running of an exam. All of your duties as a GTA are serious commitments.

YOUR GRADUATE TRAINING:

Being a GTA is an important part of your graduate training. The course coordinators play an important role in your graduate training.

The Teaching Support Centre, located in Room 122 Weldon Library, also has various programs and resources for teacher training. They can be contacted at X84624 or you can get more information at http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/teaching_assistant.html. Below is a partial list of their programs.

- A Certificate in University Teaching and Learning. There are five components to this program. Please refer to their website for more information.
- Graduate Studies 9500: The Theory and Practice of University Teaching,
- The TA Training Program
- Future Professor Series
- TA Mentor Program

A last word: this handbook contains information about the problems that can arise. Keep in mind that these problems tend to be the exception. (OK: plagiarism and appeals are yearly occurrences.) But most of your time will be spent constructively: teaching is challenging, rewarding, and much of the time, fun.

