

# **TA Start Up Guide for Teaching & Learning at York University**



## **Teaching Commons**

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# Welcome Teaching Assistants

I am delighted to welcome you to the Teaching Commons. As a TA at York University you have a vital role to play in the experience of undergraduate students. You are also embarking on a central element of scholarly life – the passing on of knowledge. Arguably more importantly you are joining in the scholarly activity of helping others to create their own knowledge.

As a TA you work with the course director to assist students in their studies, you may do this in a variety of ways, facilitating discussions, advising in labs, grading papers and giving feedback. In all of these endeavours you will be able to find support, resources and a community of peers in the Teaching Commons.

This manual is a starting point, not a comprehensive guide to all you need to know about teaching in university. We hope you will engage with the variety of opportunities on offer centrally, in Faculties and at a departmental level to support your journey as a teaching assistant. Please visit the Teaching Commons website regularly where you will be able to find resources and notices about forthcoming events. Those of you who take part in the TA orientation session will benefit from becoming part of a peer group supported by experienced TA mentors.

As you continue through your career, you may wish to engage with the Teaching Assistant Certificate in Teaching (TACT) which is available for TAs with at least one year's experience, and the Senior Teaching Assistant (STA) program, for those with even more experience who wish to help others develop their teaching knowledge. Please visit the Teaching Commons website for further information.

The ethos of the Teaching Commons is one of partnership, of collaborative collegial learning and of mutual support and respect. I welcome you as a member of this community and look forward to our shared learning experience.



Dr. Celia Popovic  
Director, Teaching Commons  
York University

## About the Teaching Commons

**Who are we?** The Teaching Commons brings together like minded individuals who are interested in exploring and sharing teaching and learning innovation at York University. We have a physical presence in TEL 1050, and a virtual presence via the web and Moodle courses - but we are more than that: We are network of colleagues, collaborations and projects, working across and within Faculties and support services.

**What do we do?** We seek to act as a catalyst for the enhancement of teaching and learning at York. We do this through projects with course teams, Faculties, individuals and external partners.

**What services do we offer?** We offer facilitation with groups such as program teams; schools and departments, externally validated courses such as eLearning at York and the Teaching Assistant and Senior Teaching Assistant programs, structured workshops such as the yearlong program for new faculty, and ad hoc events on request. We support and conduct pedagogical research and we share good practice from around the world.

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## About this Guide

This start up guide is meant to be a user friendly document that will enable you to begin your TAsip at York University on the right foot. This guide is not meant to be exhaustive of the “to do’s” and “not to do’s”, but rather its mission is to introduce you to some of the basics of teaching and learning.

Teaching and learning and the road to becoming better teachers and learners is an ongoing process. This being said, it is important to recognize that there are a number of things that you *can* and *should* do as you embark on this incredibly important work. This guide offers up a means whereby you can begin to think about some issues in teaching and learning that you will need to prepare for. For example, what are roles and responsibilities of a TA? Moreover, what are the roles and responsibilities of your particular TAsip? What will you do with your students on the first day of class? (It’s helpful to think beyond the first day too!) What kind of teaching strategies will you employ? How will you ensure consistency and fairness in marking assignments? How will you connect with your students?

Beyond the identification and brief overview of the highlighted issues within this guide, are links to additional educational resources. These are here in order to facilitate your teaching and learning needs as you continue to learn more about YOUR teaching assistantship. Because of the diversity of faculties, departments, student body, and teaching philosophies at York University, it becomes challenging to create a single, useful document that will be helpful to all. In wanting to avoid a “one size fits all” approach, these additional links and resources have been included to ensure that you have what you need to make your TAsip a success!

As stated, teaching and learning is an ongoing and continuous process. If you utilize any teaching strategy or resource on teaching and learning that you find particularly helpful, or should you come across a resource that you think is worthwhile, please do not hesitate to send us an email or give us a call and let us know! (Contact information listed above and online). We too are always looking to improve our own work and it our jobs to make your teaching work even better!



Dr. Mandy Frake-Mistak  
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# **Being a TA at York University**

(Tutorial Leader, Seminar Leader,  
Lab Demonstrator, or Marker and Grader)

One of the many purposes of a seminar is to allow participants to discuss, clarify, understand, and deepen their engagement with course content (e.g. lecture material, the textbook, assignments). In this space, students *become* participants in their own learning as you invite them into this process.

## **Teaching Assistant Roles and Responsibilities**

The Teaching Assistant (TA) has the distinct responsibility of working with students within a small classroom environment whether that is in a seminar or lab based environment. Within this small space and the right kind of structure, relationships may be developed and learning can be made more personal and meaningful to students. Furthermore, it allows any issues or feedback regarding classroom challenges and questions to be openly discussed respectfully and honestly. The TA can then be the conduit for sharing this information with the professor and further dialogue can ensue. Information may also be disseminated via the professor to the TA and then to the students. For example, the professor presents information to students in lecture. This lecture material and curriculum is summarized, discussed, debated, analyzed and synthesized through the teaching assistant with students in a small group environment (Frake-Mistak, M. *Walking a fine line: Negotiating between faculty and students*. Paper presented at AERA, 2008).

Your role is critical to student learning and the overall student experience at York University. Think back to what made your teaching and learning experiences positive, unique, meaningful, miserable, memorable, etc. This should translate into the work that you will do as a teaching assistant. It is your job to take course content (lecture material, hot topics, assignments, readings) and synthesize it into a lesson. It should also be noted that not all TAs share the same set of responsibilities in that while some are actually responsible for supplementing student learning via tutorial or seminar setting, others are mainly responsible for invigilating and marking examinations.

York University is made up of 11 faculties who are responsible for teaching over 55,000 students. Your teaching will be representative of York – you are a frontline representative!

## Your Roles and Responsibilities can be thought of this way:

<b>To the Students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-To set the tone of the lab/seminar</li><li>-To be on time</li><li>-To establish a positive working relationship in your class</li><li>-To evaluate student work fairly and in a timely manner</li><li>-To be prepared</li><li>-To communicate clearly</li><li>-To establish clear expectations</li><li>-To challenge learning</li><li>-To be approachable</li><li>-To address quickly and professionally issues of sexism, ageism, racism, harassment (should these issues arise)</li></ul>
<b>To the Professor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- To be professional and conduct TA responsibilities as set out</li><li>-To meet deadlines</li><li>-To fulfill the duties set out in TA contract</li><li>-To relay feedback and issues from students</li><li>-To be reliable</li></ul>
<b>To the University</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-To familiarize self with university resources and policies.</li><li>-To maintain university policies throughout contract.</li><li>-To fulfill the duties set out in TA contract.</li></ul>

### Do's

- Begin your preparation work well in advance
- Be organized
- Arrive early for class
- Be conscious of time – yours and your students!
- Welcome students as they enter the class/lab
- Learn your student's names!!!
- Check that equipment is functioning properly
- Arrange chairs (if necessary) for your particular needs
- Empathize with your students
- Use a variety of teaching strategies and aids
- Establish some ground rules for code of conduct
- Grade with care

### Don'ts

- Be late
- Wait until the end of term/year to give feedback
- Give up on students
- Be disrespectful to your students
- Dismiss course content/material
- Be sarcastic or condescending
- Make assumptions or judgments

## Connecting with your Course Director

Your Course Director has invested a great deal of time envisioning and planning this course (as you will the tutorials/seminars/labs). Open communication should be maintained to ensure that you are fulfilling your roles and responsibilities as they see fit. It is essential to recognize however, that these responsibilities will vary from one department to another, from course to course, and from one CD to another, so it is helpful to take time at the beginning of the term to get a clear idea of what will be expected of you throughout the term.

Here are some questions you might want to discuss with your Course Director early in the term:

- What are the objectives of the course and what is to be accomplished in the tutorials/labs?
- What is my role? What are my priorities? What is my position *vis à vis* the course director?
- How can I contribute to the course more generally (e.g., through assignment design, preparing written or web-based resources, guest lecturing, etc.)?
- If there are other TAs in the course, how is consistency maintained among tutorials?
- Do I structure my own classes/tutorials/labs, or are there outlines I should stick to? Should I stay close to the text or lectures?
- When conducting labs, what is the scope of my responsibilities? Do I keep track of supplies and materials? Do I design or revise experiments? Do I give demonstrations? What do I do in the case of emergency or accident?
- How much responsibility for grading will I have?
- How many office hours should I hold and when? How do they fit in with my overall workload?

*Adapted from TRACE Tip Sheets, [www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infotrac/tips/tachecklist.pdf](http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infotrac/tips/tachecklist.pdf), & Langan (2008)*

As a TA, you too are a student and have numerous conflicting priorities. In order to effectively manage your TAship, it is critical that you and your Course Director have an understanding of where your time will be spent. To fulfill your workload requirements of 135 hours (half TAship) or 270 hours (full TAship), you may be asked to lead/facilitate tutorials or labs, attend lectures, mark assignments, invigilate and mark examinations, hold office hours, attend course meetings, or time online.

## **Establishing a Classroom Code of Conduct**

You might consider establishing some ground rules on the very first day of class. This is the code of conduct by which you will run your class. It is important to recognize that these rules extend to both sides of the desk!

### **Some Examples:**

1. You have the right to respect.
2. You have the right to listen.
3. You have the right to be listened to and be taken seriously.
4. Everyone is expected to participate.
5. No one will be judged by their gender, race, religion, age, or sexual orientation.
6. You have the right to ask questions

## **Developing a Positive Classroom Environment**

Consider for a moment in what kind of environment you learn best. A positive classroom environment is conducive to learning as students are more likely to attend, listen, and participate. Now think about what you can do to create this safe space. Here are some ideas:

1. Establish and build a relationship with your students. (Get to know them, their names. Try to connect with them on a personal level). Use their names when you speak to them and as you give written feedback.
2. Introduce yourself on the first day of class. Include some details about yourself – what do you like? Why are you a TA for this particular course? What do you hope this experience will offer?
3. Ask students to introduce themselves (to another student, in a small group, or to the class as a whole).
4. Integrate an ice-breaker activity that launches the students into learning and content.
5. Be personable and approachable. Smile!
6. Do your best to be enthusiastic about the subject area. Don't be afraid to acknowledge areas that are challenging.
7. Be clear about your expectations of students (the way in which they conduct themselves in the class, how they interact with one another, what they need to do to be successful).
8. Offer encouraging words to validate student learning and experiences.
9. Provide lots of feedback.
10. Ask questions.

# Your *Teaching* Assistantship

## Planning and Prepping for your Course

While seemingly overwhelming, the work of planning and mapping out what you will do with your students is really a balancing act. You will find yourself negotiating many roles – often simultaneously. The following information is to give you a general sense of what you should be doing as you get ready for your first day of teaching and beyond.

*Adapted from the University of Oklahoma TA Handbook 2002:*

1. Involve students quickly
2. Identify the value and importance of the subject
3. Set expectations
4. Establish rapport
5. Reveal something about yourself
6. Establish your own credibility
7. Establish the 'climate' for the class
8. Provide administrative information
9. Introduce the subject matter

Visit the online guide for additional resources and strategies on:

- What to do on the first day of class
- Planning your course (beyond the first day)
- Instructional styles
- Planning for lab demonstrations
- On reflection
- Types of learners
- Holding and setting up office hours

Comfortable with the subject and course content but now sure how to deliver it? Check out the website for a comprehensive list of teaching strategies and activities that you can employ in your teaching environment. Consider building in an ice-breaker to help students focus on the material at hand and engage them in the learning process.

## Managing Conflict in the Classroom

Handling conflict and tension can be a challenge for even the most seasoned teaching assistant. Although you can do your best to establish and maintain a positive classroom space for all of your students, conflicts may arise. Here are some behaviours to be aware of and some suggestions how to deal with the behaviour. Additional information is available on the website.

### Here are some additional tips for diffusing conflict:

- Clearly state course objectives and grading criteria.
- Give students fair warning and do follow through if warning is not sufficient.
- Create a united front (with CD, other TAs in the course, etc).
- Be confident!
- Don't take it personally.
- Be firm in your approach.
- Be direct with the student(s) whose behaviour is inappropriate.

## Marking and Grading

Consider the following citations...

“For a teacher who wants his or her students to learn big ideas and gain long-term understanding, assessment means being keenly aware of what students know and understand, having sufficient evidence of this understanding, and offering a grade that accurately reflects this...We need to communicate to students that their goal should be knowing more when they walk out of a class than when they walked in it” (*From Craig Huhn’s ‘How Many Points is This Worth?’ in Educational Leadership, 200, p. 825*).

“When grades are not deliberately connected to learning, they provide little valuable feedback regarding students’ academic strengths and weaknesses, and can even be counterproductive” (*From Tony Winger’s ‘Grading to Communicate’ in Educational Leadership, 2005, p. 61*).

Marking and grading is one of the most difficult aspects of teaching work that you will encounter and much of the literature on assessment and evaluation can be just as difficult to understand. Many of your marking and grading experiences will differ from one another depending on the discipline you are TAing, the number of students enrolled in the course, the CD’s approach to teaching and learning, and so on. Below is a small list to get you thinking about your work as a marker/grader.

**Eight essential characteristics of effective assessment:**

1. Assesses what is actually taught
2. Provide information for improving student learning
3. Focuses on the process as well as on the products of instruction
4. Actively involves both teachers and students
5. Uses multiple and varied measures
6. Is carried out at various points during the term of instruction
7. Provides useful, timely feedback to those being assessed and those most affected – the students and teachers
8. Is an intrinsically educational activity – one that reinforces and furthers the teaching and learning goals it focuses on

*Reproduced with permission from Thomas A. Angelo, workshop handout on Classroom Research and Classroom Assessment (University of California, Berkeley, August 1991).*

You can find additional resources on the website to assist you as you move through this process:

- Debunking York University's grading system
- Providing helpful feedback on student work
- Preparing students for exams
- Invigilating/Proctoring student examinations

## References

Angelo, T. Classroom Research and Classroom Assessment. Workshop handout.

University of California, Berkeley, August 1991.

Frake-Mistak, M. *Walking a fine line: Negotiating between faculty and students*. Paper presented at AERA, 2008

Huhn, C. (2005) How Many Points is This Worth?'. *Educational Leadership*, p. 825.

Langan, D. *Establishing Effective Working Relationships Between Teaching Assistants (TAs) and Course Directors (CDs)*. Presented at TA Day, York University, 2008.

TA Handbook 2002, University of Oklahoma

*TRACE Tip Sheets*, [www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infotrac/tips/tachecklist.pdf](http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infotrac/tips/tachecklist.pdf)