

Resources for new Teaching Assistants
Tobin LeBlanc Haley
Senior Teaching Assistant Program
York Teaching Commons

Sections

1. Holding Tutorials
2. Office hours
3. Accessibility, Disability, and Anti-Oppression
4. Marking
5. Critical Reading
6. Critical Writing
7. Appendices

Introduction:

The purpose of this manual is to provide first-year teaching assistants with pedagogical tools for holding inclusive and supportive tutorials and providing students with support for critical reading and writing.

1. Holding Tutorials

Setting the tone

While this is not your only chance to make a first impression on your students, it is an important moment. Make sure you think through what you want to accomplish on your first day. You are the marker, point of contact for your students and they look to you for guidance, respect that and be prepared. Don't be afraid to look silly, if you do they will and it breaks the ice.

Introduce yourself and your credentials. Get students to do the same. Maybe do ice breaker. LEARN NAMES. Make them use place cards.

Writing a syllabus (see appendix 1.0)

A tutorial syllabus is a very useful tool. It sets the guidelines for the tutorial and lets students know what to expect from you. By setting the guidelines you can avoid students claiming you are unfair because rules have been applied equally across the class. When a student becomes concerned about an extension you won't grant or a participation mark you can gently point to the syllabus and remind them that they knew the conditions for submitting work and participating well ahead of time. This makes any contact you have with students about the guidelines and not personal. It will allow students to manage their time and to know when you are available for them. It will keep you organized.

Consider including the following:

- Office Hours
- Email Response Time
- Conduct
- Attendance policies
- Participation
- Use of cell phones, computers and other electronics
- Late penalties and extension requests

Boundaries

You students will like and respect you and want to be your friend. This is great. A time for them to come and talk about their research interests is during your office hours, so long as you don't have administrative work to do (going over papers etc). Lots of TAs use office hours as a way to encourage students interests and share their own.

How much you share about your personal life is up to you. But avoid adding students on facebook, hanging out or dating students. Don't be afraid to let them know that you are not their friend but their teacher. If a student becomes overly familiar then you can gently remind them that while you enjoy having them in your class, your relationship is one of TA student and you want to be there for them as a teacher not a friend. If a student is inappropriate go to the professor and always leave your door open. If you have concerns about a student who might act in a manner inappropriate to the teacher-student dynamic or who you think might not completely understand your dynamic, or who is very upset with you then ask a friend (another TA), to sit in on the meeting. If you are male identified and the student is female identified it can be useful to ask a female identified person to sit in. If you feel unsafe with a bring in a professor. Don't be afraid to tell them when your office hours are over and that they can contact the professor with any concerns. This doesn't happen often, but it can happen. These are just some techniques. In the 4 years I have been teaching at York and the 6 years I have been teaching I have only had one problem.

Filling the time/lesson planning /getting students to read and participate

Two hours can be very scary. How will you fill the time? Over prepare. Have lots of activities. Do not spend 2 hours lecturing. Your students already get the benefits of lecturing from the professor. Instead, make tutorial fun. Switch around from active (them doing) to passive (them listening) activities. Students will get bored if always listening and tune out. If you are always lecturing or if whole class is just a presentation and you asking questions then no one will pay attention. Every 20 minutes mix it up, same topics different approach. Switch from visual, to aural to written to ensure tutorials are accessible and engaging. OVERPLAN and always have a spare activity in your back pocket just in case.

Facilitating vs. lecturing

What is the difference between facilitating vs. lecturing?

Facilitating is keep discussion moving, on track and respectful. It is about getting quiet students to engage, directing engaged students' energies, asking insightful questions and highlighting important points. The goal is getting students to engage and analyze

Lecturing is explaining information and tools needed to participate in facilitated discussion.

What makes a good lesson plan?

A good tutorial is in the preparation. Take time before each tutorial to sketch out the learning objectives for that week and the activities (passive and active) you want to use. Make sure to tell students what they will take away from the tutorial before you even begin teaching.

Suggested activities.

- i. Submitting critical questions.
- ii. Group work and sharing
- iii. Quizzes or individual summary writing
- iv. Presentations
- v. Exit activities

Getting students to write down and hand in one thing they learned and one question they still have is a great way to assess the efficacy of your teaching. Addressing remaining questions is a good way to start the next tutorial.

Also provide students with a brief overview of next week's class.

2. Office hours

Purpose of office hours

Office hours are a chance for you to offer extra help and guidance for students. It is a time to review grades and offer input on up-coming assignments. You can also use this time for marking and planning tutorials.

Using office hours effectively

Always be there and ask students to make an appointment and let you know what they want to discuss. Be prepared and leave the door open. Keep student assignments in your office or bring them with you. Students may come to you if they miss a tutorial in order to find out what they missed. If it is an occasional absence you can help them out but, do not "reteach" the material. It is their responsibility to contact other students and get notes.

Dealing with grade appeals and upset students

Sometimes students will come to you upset about at grade or upcoming deadline. Listen and then, if they have extenuating circumstances (death in family etc.), use your judgment. It is up to you, but for grade appeals it is often useful to get another TA in the course to reread and see what they would give the assignment. You can then regrade it yourself and decide if the student merits a higher mark. We are all human and when you have 50 papers to grade you are not infallible. Let the student know they have a right to appeal grade to professor and make sure you email professor to let them know about your interaction with student. Do not take it personally. It happens.

York's Policy and Procedures regarding grade appeals

<http://www.registrar.yorku.ca/grades/reappraisal/>

3. Accessibility, disability and anti-oppression/anti-racism

What is disability and how does it manifest in the classroom?

There are many models of disability and many ways in which disability is understood. The most common understanding is the social model of disability which views the body as impaired or different and the society as disabling. For example, a person using a wheelchair has a different bodily experience than others, but inaccessibly constructed buildings and transit systems are the barriers.

There are lots of different kinds of disability; learning disability, physical disability, psychiatric disability, intellectual disability and sensory disabilities. Don't assume that someone with a disability identifies as a person with a disability, is registered as having a disability or wants to disclose.

Many people do not see their disability as impairment. For example, people with psychiatric disabilities do not always understand themselves as sick, Don't assume. Ask questions if you have any and encourage students to seek support from disability counseling services. Always maintain confidentiality. Furthermore, you don't need to know what their disability is, only the accommodation required.

If you suspect a student has a disability that might require accommodation within the context of the classroom then talk to professor or encourage the student to visit a writing centre or disability services. Don't say, "I think you are disabled". Do say, "I think you might need some extra resources/support and here are some options". It is then up to the student to decide.

York's disability policies, procedures and resources for students

http://www.yorku.ca/cds/cds_p_and_p.html/

In education, someone with a disability may require accommodation to remove the disabling features of the university experience (i.e. short test taking time). York strives to accommodate disabilities as much as possible through disability and counseling services. This center provides assessment that allows students to register as having a disability. Disability services will issue you, the student, or the professor, a letter that outlines accommodations a student requires. For example, a student may take an exam in the alternative exam centre. If a student lets you know about a disability then check with professor and student to make sure accommodations are being made and everyone is aware of the necessary procedures.

What can you do about disability in the classroom?

Not all students with disabilities will disclose or register. Making students aware of options is all you can do in terms of the disability centre. Having a wide variety of teaching methods and participation mechanisms will make your tutorial as accessible as possible. You can also tailor your class to someone's disability. For example, if you have a student who struggles with anxiety and/or is not accommodated by short test taking time, consider omitting pop quizzes. If you have a student who has vision loss then make sure to read aloud what you write on the board.

What is anti-oppression?

What is oppression?

We recognize that in our society there are social relations of power related to gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, religion, age, ability, ethnicity, language skills, class, citizenship etc. The result is that some groups and individuals have greater access to participation, wealth, health, recognition, employment and education while others are marginalized. Some voices are seen as legitimate while others are silenced. Certain discourses fail to recognize oppression, thereby reinforcing it, while others actively reproduce it. Depending on where you are located in these social relations you may experience multiple forms of interlocking oppression and/or you may have privilege.

While we would like to understand the classroom as existing outside of these social relations it does not. In society, and therefore in the classroom, we might experience/observe ableism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, classism etc. So how do we deal with this in the classroom?.

What is an anti-oppression, anti-racist framework for teaching?

It is two pronged.

The most obvious is to teach anti-oppression and anti-racism in the class room through leaning materials. Feminists, Queer theorists, critical race, critical disability and political economists have long studied the roots of oppression and advocated change to eliminate oppression in society. Providing these tools for our students is one important way to advance anti-oppression and anti-racism.

Day to day interaction in the classroom

The first way to advance an anti-oppression, anti-racist framework is to recognize that we exist in and participate in a society that is oppressive. We can then think about how we perpetuate these oppressions in our day to day life and try to unlearn these ways of thinking/acting by understanding hierarchies to be the result of social constructs not given truths. Do we use language that reproduces oppressive categories? Do we laugh at or tell sexist or racist jokes? Do we presume someone's gender identity or sexuality based on how they dress or act? Do we stare at someone with a visible disability? Do we think that people who don't speak English as their

first language are less intelligent or capable? Do we get frustrated? Do we judge people based on their job or academic performance? Do we think people who are unemployed should get a job? Do we promote anti-immigration sentiment and/or anti-sex worker sentiment? Do we consider someone with a disability to be lazy? Do we think women who dress a certain way are oppressed or promiscuous? Do we hear some voices as more legitimate as others?

Whether we like to admit it or not, we are all socialized to have biases and we bring these into the classroom. But we can foster and participate in creating an anti-oppressive, anti-racist framework in the classroom.

The most obvious way is to eliminate the use of oppressive language and demand the same of our students. The syllabus is a useful way of doing this. Don't assume everyone is heterosexual, able bodied, Canadian etc. and make clear from the beginning the value of different perspectives and social locations. We can also foster inclusive dynamics by making sure that everyone gets a chance to participate and treat all contributions with equal respect and consideration. Making space for students who don't talk much and having lots of ways to participate is one way to accomplish these goals.

We can also identify the use of problematic language and theories. Gently reminding students when they use inappropriate language and taking the time to explain why it is problematic is useful. Take about social construct and the roots of oppression using the incident as a case study. Don't talk about the student, but the word/action/theory. Steer the discussion away from individual students and instead talk about the word, action or theory. Don't do it in an angry way, but in a firm way that lets them know the implications of what they are saying. That said, if someone is using overtly problematic language don't be afraid to remind them it is unacceptable.

Make sure you can explain ideas associated with anti-oppression/anti-racism to the students.

4. Marking

When grading it is useful to sometimes use a rubric handed out prior to assignment. You can also grade holistically but focus on a few things, too many comments and the student feels overwhelmed and discouraged. Too few and the student won't understand your problems with the assignment. It is up to you, but make sure to include a few nice comments. (see appendix 3)

Before an assignment is due, give students examples of what constitutes an A paper, a C paper and a D paper.

5. Critical reading

Critical reading is about getting students to understand not only the author's main argument but how the author supports main arguments, the framework the author is using, how this text speaks to others and the debates being set out and the implications of author's text. See appendix 3 as a tool to get students thinking about critical reading.

6. Critical Writing

So often our students will get B on their paper and come to us and ask "Why wasn't my mark higher?" Too often we have to them is that while it was a good paper either the writing, the analysis and/or the citations were not sufficient to make it an A.

Other times we get papers that have lots of facts about the subject matter and it is clear the students have done a lot of research, but there is no coherent argument no matter how hard we try to find one or how many times we read the paper.

As teachers we want our students to do well, but so many arrive at university not know what it means to write an academic paper. Writing, for our students, is often an arduous process that seems mystified.

The thing we *must* communicate to our students is that writing, like any learned skill, takes patience and practice. While of course there are a (very) few people who can sit down and hammer out an A+ paper in a night, the vast majority of us cannot. Just like learning to play the piano, of course there are a few people who just sit down and know how to play (think Mozart) but most of us, including graduate students, are constantly engaged in the process of learning how to write.

So how do we coach students in writing? How do we provide them with the tools they need to constructively practice writing and to get better each time?

In what follows I present you with a series of steps that you can go through with your students that will provide them with some of the necessary information to become better writers.

So what makes a good paper? Students hear all the time that a good paper has an introduction, a thesis, a main body of argumentation and analysis and a conclusion. It is well cited and well researched. A good paper does more than simply reproduce information, but instead constructs an argument about the information they have encountered in class and through research. But what constitutes a good introduction, thesis statement and argument? How do we teach students how to write well?

Probably the biggest mistake that we make as educators is trying to teach students to write in one tutorial/seminar. This can't work. We need to do a little each week to allow students time to adjust, absorb and practice the skills we have provided. Too much information all at once will

overwhelm them and they will forget/get discouraged. I recommend building 15 minutes into each class 7 weeks before an assignment is due to spend time teaching writing. Appendices 4 & 5 lay out the steps I recommend. These can be changed and/or condensed into a shorter period if need be. I am presenting one way of doing this, take what is useful for you and leave the rest. (see appendices 4 & 5)

7. Appendices

Appendix 1

Sample Syllabus

POLS 2910 Section B
Canadian Democracy in a North American Context
Tutorial 2 @ 10:30
Tutorial Instructor: Tobin LeBlanc Haley
Office: South Ross Building, Anne Stretch Wing # 603
Office Hours: Thursday 12:30pm-1:30pm
tobinh@yorku.ca (**Expect a 48hr response time**)

Conduct

Please treat each other (and me) with respect. **Racist, sexist, ableist, classist, homophobic, trans-phobic and other derogatory language and/or conduct will not be tolerated.** Laptops are not to be used in tutorials unless you are completing an in-class assignment or taking notes. Use of laptops for non-course related purposes will result in loss of participation marks. The use of cell phones, pagers, and/or iPods/Pads will not be tolerated and will result in the loss of participation marks. You also may be asked to leave the tutorial should your conduct cause disruptions.

Tutorial Participation: 20% (10% per semester). Tutorial mark graded on following:

Attendance and Participation- 10% (5% per semester): To receive the full 5 percent you must attend all tutorials on time, have the **readings completed** and participate thoughtfully and respectfully in class discussions. You are permitted one undocumented absence per semester.

Assignments-10% (5% per semester): Throughout the your you will be given small assignments. These may be in the form of a pop-quiz, critical question submissions, summaries or presentations. Any written material must be submitted at the beginning of the tutorial by you, a colleague may not hand it in for you. If you fail to complete more than 1 of these assignments the full 5% will be deducted from your final grade.

Papers and other course work

For information about course work, the remaining 80% of your grade and late penalties please see course syllabus. **I will not give extensions the day before an assignment is due (or the day an assignment is due)** so please make sure to come and see me well ahead of time if you want

me to consider a request for an extension. Re-writes are not permitted but I am happy to look at outlines in advance. I require you to submit an electronic and hard-copy of your papers and assignments. However, it is only when the hard-copy is submitted that your assignment or paper is time-stamped. All work must be handed in at the beginning of the tutorial by you, a colleague may not hand it in for you. If you do not hand in a hard copy of assignments at the beginning of tutorial on the day it is due your work will be counted as one day late.

Appendix 2

Sample Rubric

This rubric was use to grade major research papers at the 2000 level in the Social Sciences

Component & Percentage	Description	Percentage
Thesis statement 10%	Clear articulation of purpose/goal of paper	0-1%- no thesis: 2-3%- thesis difficult to identify: 4, 5, 6% - thesis identifiable but unclear: 7-8% clear thesis: 9-10% very clear and identifiable thesis
Grammar 10%	Good use of punctuation, good sentence structure, clear voice	0-1%- no attention to grammar: 2-3%-poor use of grammar: 4,5,6%-some use of proper grammar: 7-8% good use of grammar with minimal mistakes: 9-10% excellent use of grammar with little to no mistakes
Argument 40%	Well laid out argument that accomplishes goals/purpose set out by the thesis statement	0-10% ___unclear, poorly organized argument: 11-20% __somewhat organized argument, unsubstantiated: 21-30% ___organized and substantiated argument: 31-40% ___ well organized and well substantiated argument.
Citations/References 15%	Assertions are well and properly cited	0-5% __ poorly cited: 6-10% __ moderately cited: 11-15% ___well cited
Conclusion 10%	A clear end to the paper, clear demonstration of how goals/purpose were/was achieved	0-3% __ no or unclear conclusion: 4-7% __ conclusion included but truncated: 8-10% ___strong conclusion, rearticulates thesis
Bibliography 15%	All works used in the paper are properly cited in the	0-5% __ poorly organized, incomplete, little attention to

Evidence:	
Conclusions:	
Implications:	
Useful bibliographic resources:	
Relationship to other texts:	

Appendix 4:

Adapted from Essay Writing. *OWL Purdue Online Writing Lab*. Available at:
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/685/01>

Types of academic writing:

Summary:

(A skeleton of a written work)

Short (1-2 pages)

Provides a concise overview of author's thesis, theoretical approach, main points, evidence presented and conclusions
Details about case studies, author's summaries of reports or interview data is referenced but not summarized in detail
Involves no/minimal use of quotes
Requires no additional research

Article analysis:

(Provides evaluation of a written work)

Short (1-3 pages)

Provides a concise overview of author's thesis, theoretical approach, main points, evidence presented and conclusions
Situates work in larger debates/scholarship
Considers author's success in proving thesis
Evaluates implications of authors theoretical approach and conclusions
Considers relevance of main points and quality of evidence presented
Raises counter-points unaddressed by author
Requires minimal, if any, additional research

Argumentative Essay:

(Makes a case, takes a positions, requires analysis and synthesis)

Can be a short or long paper

Writer evaluates research on the topic and takes a position (thesis) that is supported by scholarly research
Presents brief overview of debates/scholarship related to topic
Presents a clear theoretical approach and situates approach within wider scholarship
Presents a clear thesis (main point/argument)
Makes series of sub-arguments that demonstrate to reader the appropriateness/correctness of thesis
Supports sub-argument through use of extensive scholarly research and (in some cases) data gathering
Evaluates counter-arguments
Presents clear conclusion that involves restatement of thesis with attention draw to sub-arguments and evidence
Bibliography
Requires extensive research

Expository Essay:

(A written consideration of an idea)

Medium length

Evaluates and provides argument about an idea

Less synthesis than an argumentative essay but still contains thesis, main body with sub-arguments, evidence and conclusion)

Presents elements (history, scholarly context) of an idea

Evaluates evidence provided about an idea

Considers implications of idea

Makes argument related to idea

Points to future considerations regarding idea

Requires research

Bibliography

Descriptive Essay:

(Paints picture for reader)

Short-medium length

Explains event, experience, object, place etc.

Requires minimal synthesis

Requires research

Bibliography

Narrative Essay:

(Tells a story)

Often uses first person

Creative

Account of personal experience, a story, a feeling etc

Requires good organization and clear voice

Minimal external research

Ex: Book report

Appendix 5

Critical Writing

Week 1: Explaining writing and distributing the assignment:

Before handing out an assignment I start by asking students why we write in a particular academic setting and to think about all the different kinds of writing they engage in (appendix 4).

Are they writing to demonstrate creativity, to demonstrate understanding (summarize), to show understanding of and engaged with the complexities of a particular debate (analyze) or to make an argument (synthesize). Give examples of different kinds of writing and get them, in groups, to identify which kind of writing each sample constitutes.

Carefully go over the assignment. Give examples of what good writing is and the difference between an excellent, good and insufficient paper.

Students often go wrong on assignments because they don't fully read or understand the assignment. This may seem very basic and you may resistant to what appears like hand-holding but, taking the time to carefully go over an assignment really eliminates early mistakes/misunderstandings and saves everyone time.

Once the assignment has been explained I ask students what kinds of writing the assignment requires. Is it a creativity exercise, a summary, a consideration of debates or is an argument required? Often academic writing involves a little of each of these.

Spend (significant) time going over the difference between stating facts and making an argument. Get them to refer back to the types of writing handout so they fully understand the difference.

Week 2: Good research practices:

Once students have clearly understood the parameters of the assignment, move to a discussion of how to approach the paper. Before I even begin to get into the elements of a paper, I go over how to approach research within the given confines of an assignment. Ask them where they will look for information and maybe even give them a library assignment to jump start their research. This is especially important if students are unclear about how to find good academic sources.

Talk about the difference between media sources and scholarly articles and knowledge that is in the public domain. Make sure they know that Wikipedia, while useful for gaining general information, is not a scholarly source and should not be cited as such. Caution them about Google scholar, while useful in gathering initial information, is not comprehensive and the most popular (not necessarily the best) articles/books are the ones that show up first in a search. I recommend showing them how to use the library.

Move on to the need to carefully read the material they have gathered. The need to engage in critical reading is paramount. Hand out reading organizational tools (e.g. appendix 3) and encourage students to use these to organize research notes.

Remind students that sometimes they will get half-way through an article and find it is not useful for their paper. This is normal and part of the research process. Also remind students that once they think their research is finished, chances are they will have to go back and do some more.

Week 3: Preliminary research and citation.

Ask students to come to class with the topic they think they might be working on and the preliminary research they have conducted. Get them to discuss successes, frustrations and concerns and share resources. Answer any questions they might have and help students who might need to change topic.

Spend some time on how to cite properly and academic honesty. Get them to do that academic honesty tutorial and, if you have time, a citation practice.

Week 4: Preliminary bibliography and outlining research. This will likely take the entire class.

Once students have conducted their research, get them to bring it to class and discuss it. Get them to have conversations about what they have read, which pieces they like, which ideas they like, how they think authors arguments relate to each other, to course material and to research questions. Once they have firm grasp on the material it is time to start outlining an argument.

If the course is a social science course remind students about the importance constructing and making an argument. Here is where the intro, thesis, synthesis and conclusion come in. Go through each element and explain it in detail.

Week 5: Bring in outlines

Have students bring in their outlines and share with each other. Go around the room and look to see what is going well and what people are struggling with. When common themes emerge (like how to write a thesis statement and the difference between opinion and scholarly argument)? Spend time reminding students how to write a thesis and make an argument that is grounded in research. Remind of the importance of a well organized essay and, if there is time, go through parts of an essay a second time.

Week 6: Writing is in the rewriting

By this stage your students should be engaged in writing their essays. It is good to spend a few minutes going over the process of how to edit a paper. Give them techniques like reading aloud, reading to a friend, have someone read over your paper and/or taking the critical writing forms

and applying them to your paper. Is there a cohesive argument, what are your main points and are they well supported by evidence and is it cited? Do you have run on sentences? If there is time have them use the note taking for essay research handout to assess their papers for structure and clarity. It may also be useful to have them hand in a critical reading assessment of their paper using the note taking for essay research tool. One option is to ask them to attach it to their assignment when they hand it in.

Remind students to go over the assignment requirements and make sure paper conforms. Are there a certain number of external sources required? Is the bibliography alphabetized? Did they use the right citation method? Is it well spaced and are there page numbers? Seems simple but how often is the difference between 78 and 82 the difference in organization and presentation. For first and second year students I recommend preparing a check-list.

Then tell students to put the paper away for a week and give it a rest. Go back and read though for editing at least twice (more if possible) to clean up language and grammar.

Handing back assignments

After handing back assignments go over the principles of a good paper once more (a quick summary of what you did weeks 1-6) and get them to reflect on their process and product. This will help students fully understand where they did well and where they struggled.