



# Guide for New Teaching Assistants

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The Office of Teaching & Learning

UNIVERSITY  
of GUELPH

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TEACHING AND LEARNING

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# Guide for New Teaching Assistants

Welcome to the Guide for New Teaching Assistants! We have created this short collection of resources to give new teaching assistants (TAs) the basic tools to start on their teaching journey.

## What is in the Guide for New TAs?

The Guide for New TAs is divided into three main sections: *Before Your First Day*, *Introduction to Teaching and Learning Strategies*, and *Reflecting on Your First Semester*. Each section is divided into smaller topics, which will introduce you to some fundamental ideas you may need for a successful first semester. You can use this PDF version of the guide, or navigate through the content on the Office of Teaching and Learning website.

## Complementary Activities

We have also created complementary activities that you will find throughout the guide. These are designed to help you understand and apply the material presented in the guide. There is nothing major – it's not extra homework – just a few things we thought may help you feel more confident as a new TA.



**The lightbulb means it's your turn!** We use this symbol at the end of each section in the Guide for New TAs when there is a complementary activity for the section you are reading. The lightbulb will be filled with the icon for that specific section.

## How should I use the Guide for New TAs?

We understand being a new graduate student can be exceptionally busy, which is why the guide is divided into three sections. Each is designed to give you what you need at different points in the semester, so you don't need to go through everything at once.

1. The section *Before Your First Day* will provide you with a short introduction to teaching at U of G, introduce you to some important resources at the University, and help you prepare for your very first class. **We recommend reading this section before you begin work as a TA.**
2. The section about *Teaching and Learning Strategies* is a great way to add some new tools to your repertoire or when you need to grade your first assignment. **We recommend reading this section during the first few weeks of the semester.**
3. The section *Reflecting on Your First Semester* is for exactly that, a thoughtful opportunity to stop and look back at your first semester of teaching to reflect on what went well and what you would like to change for the future. **We recommend reading this section towards the end of your first semester.**

However, this is all just a suggestion, and you can read whatever is most helpful for you throughout the semester. The guide is meant to be flexible!

## What Comes Next?

In addition to the Guide for New TAs, the Office of Teaching and Learning offers a range of programming for graduate students. This includes the annual Graduate Student University Teaching Days and ongoing programming through the University Teaching Foundations program. Both provide opportunities to learn about teaching through workshops, networking events, and guest speakers. Visit the [Graduate Student Programming Overview](#) for more information.



## References

The *Guide for New Teaching Assistants* is partly adapted from the *University of Guelph's TA Survival Guide, 12<sup>th</sup> Edition* (2013).

The previous *TA Survival Guide* drew from a number of resources, and where possible, we have included these references throughout the guide. However, for some resources that are no longer available, we have simply included them in the list below.

- *A Handbook for Teaching Assistants*. (2007). Queen's University
- Benoit. (1997). *First Day Issues GTA Workshop Handout*. Virginia Tech University.
- Bixler. (1997). *Leading Discussions GTA Workshop Handout*. Virginia Tech University.
- Christensen Hughes, J. and Hendry, J. (1998). *TA Handbook, 1998-1999*. University of Guelph.
- Dayman, J. (2000). *Collecting and Using Mid-semester Feedback*. University of Guelph.
- *Graduate Students' Day Package*. (1995). University of Guelph.
- *Instructional Resource Guide for New Faculty & Graduate Teaching Assistants*. (1999-2000). University of South Florida.
- Naeth. *Teaching Resource Manual*. (1993). University of Alberta.

## Section 1

# Before Your First Day



It's the first day of class and you're wondering how to begin? We're here to help!

It can seem a little overwhelming as a new teaching assistant (TA), but with just a little preparation beforehand, you can help ensure your first teaching experience will start off on the right foot. This section of the guide will prepare you for your first day, discussing what to expect and things to consider before meeting students for the first time.

Students are often overwhelmed with information on the first day of class. As a result, they may not recall all the details. What they will remember is what actually transpires. What impressions did you make? Did you let them know why the course is interesting, why you are pleased to teach it, and what topics will be covered?

We recommend reading the six topics in this section to get started on your teaching journey. There's a lot more to learn, but we think these are a great start!

### **In this section:**

- Campus Resources to Support Students and TAs
- Questions to Ask Your TA Supervisor
- Preparing Your Introduction
- Planning Your First Day
- Managing Your Nerves
- Making Teaching Goals and the Importance of Self-Reflection

# Campus Resources to Support Students and TAs



Before your first day, it can be helpful to take some time to familiarize yourself with campus resources available to support you and your students. The sections below provide more information and links to campus resources.

## **Mental Health Resources**

University can be a challenging time for everyone: undergraduate students, graduate students, and even faculty. It is essential that you are taking care of yourself and your mental wellbeing. This will allow you to be more successful as a teaching assistant and in all your pursuits as a graduate student.

In your role as a teaching assistant, you may also have students approach you who are struggling with mental health challenges or are in crisis. You may feel unsure what to do, but rest assured that support and resources are available. The University of Guelph has many people who work in the areas of student wellness who have created a wealth of resources you can access for yourself or share with your students.

We have collected a range of wellness and mental health resources below. As a U of G student, almost everything offered by Student Wellness is *completely free*. They also offer resources designed specifically for students coming from a range of diverse backgrounds, including BIPOC students, LGBTQ2IA+ students, or international students. We encourage you to browse through these options, so you know what is available. If you are unsure of what resource is most appropriate, Wellness Navigators are available to help find you the appropriate resources or services. Call **519-824-4120 x52131** to book an appointment with a Wellness Navigator.

Mental Health and Wellness Resources:

- Here 24/7 Mental Health and Crisis Line: 1 (844) 437-3247 (HERE247)
- [Mental Health Support](#): overview of mental health resources from Student Wellness
- [Student Wellness Resource Lists](#): links to additional resources related to student counselling and similar services
- [Connect to a Community](#): list of resources from Student Wellness for students LGBTQ2IA+ students
- [Health and Wellness Resources](#): overview of health and wellness resources from Student Wellness

- [More Feet on the Ground](#): course recommended by Student Wellness, which teaches you how to recognize, respond and refer students experiencing mental health issues on campus
- [Stress Management and High Performance Clinic](#): resource recommended by Student Wellness, which helps you learn how to deal with difficult situations or mental health challenges
- [U of G Library Guide about Stress](#): collection of websites, videos, and eBooks about stress and stress management
- [Wellness Resources from Wellness@Work](#): list of campus, community, and online resources on a variety of topics

### **Indigenization and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)**

The following links are to resources on campus to learn more about Indigenization and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI).

- [Inclusive Teaching Resources](#) from the Office of Teaching and Learning
- [Indigenous Initiatives](#)
  - Includes the Pedagogy and Curriculum report on the [Indigenous Initiatives Strategy](#) page
- [Indigenous Student Centre](#)
- [Office of Diversity and Human Rights](#)
- [Principles of Belonging](#) anti-oppression and anti-racism training module

### **Student Accessibility Services (SAS)**

Student Accessibility Services (SAS) helps students who experience disabilities to achieve full and equitable participation in academic life. Their main goal is to help create a barrier free environment so all students can succeed and reach their goals. You can learn more about SAS and the services they offer on the [SAS website](#).

Some accommodations you may encounter in a course you are TAing include:

- Additional time to write timed assessments
- Memory aids
- Use of Computer in class/exams
- Notetaking
- Alternative format course materials
- Assistance with deadlines/extensions

If you feel unsure how to proceed, talk with the course instructor or ask SAS for clarification about accommodations for your students. Students themselves *never* need to disclose the reason for their accommodations, and you cannot ask. Instead, keep the conversation focused on what you can provide to help them succeed.

## Library Resources

The library at U of G has a number of resources, workshops, and services that you may find useful as a graduate student or that you can share with students:

- [Writing Resources and Workshops](#)
- [Studying Resources and Workshops](#)
- [Research Assistance](#)
- [English Language Support](#)

## Applying for TA Positions and Understanding Your Contract

The links below provide information about applying for TA positions and the union for TAs at U of G:

- Search and apply for available TA positions on the [Academic Staff Work Assignments](#) site.
- Find answers to frequently asked questions about applying for TA positions and TA Work Agreements on the [FAQ](#) page.
- Learn more about CUPE 3913 and access resources and support from the [union](#).



**Now it's your turn!** Make a list of resources you want to share with students and a plan for how and when you will share them.

What resources do you want to share with students this semester? When and how will you share these resources (e.g., discuss in class, post on CourseLink, handout)?



# Questions to Ask Your TA Supervisor



When you meet with your supervisor (e.g., course instructor, lab coordinator, course coordinator) at the beginning of the semester, consider asking them some of the questions below to help ensure you're ready for the first day.

- What are the terms of my teaching assistant position? What are my duties and how much time should I spend on each (e.g., facilitating seminars, lab demonstrations, review sessions, office hours, field trip supervision, lecturing, grading, exam invigilation, answering student e-mails)?
  - If you are teaching labs, ask about equipment, emergency and safety procedures, and preparation/clean up
- What technology or audiovisual equipment do I need to know how to use?
- Do I have access to the CourseLink site for the course and what will I be using it for (e.g., inputting grades, monitoring discussion boards, marking assignments, posting recorded videos)?
- If my duties include meetings, what should I come prepared to discuss?
- Are there other TAs involved with this course? How will we ensure consistency of information taught and consistency of grading for students? Will we meet as a group?
- How much of my teaching involves reinforcing lecture material and how much involves introducing new material and concepts?
- How much autonomy will I have to present new ideas, use different teaching methods, or present perspectives different from the instructor's? How much supervision will I have?
- What can you tell me about the course (e.g., course syllabus, learning objectives, demographics, history, learning activities and my place in their design, implementation, or assessment)?
- What are the course policies with regard to late assignments, missed classes, plagiarism, cheating, and re-grades? Are there other policies I should be aware of?
- If I am unable to attend a class/lab/tutorial, what should I do and/or who should I contact?



**Now it's your turn!** Which of the questions above do you need to ask your TA supervisor? Check all the ones you want to make sure to ask. Below, we've also provided a box where you can brainstorm any other questions you might want to ask.

Other questions for your supervisor or course instructor:

**Adapted From:**

- [Teaching Assistant Checklist: Questions to Ask](#). Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo.



# Preparing Your Introduction

Your introduction may be the most important part of your first interaction with students. It helps introduce yourself (of course), but it also serves many other functions, such as:

- Making a great first impression
- Establishing norms and expectations
- Breaking down some instructor-student barriers
- Reducing your nerves when interacting with your new students
- Alleviating students' worries and concerns
- Setting the tone of the class and introducing your teaching style
- Helping to create a sense of community within your learning environment

There are many things you can include in your introduction. Some are more formal or about the course, but you may also want to include some informal topics so students get to know you more as a person. In the table below, we have compiled a short list of things you could consider including in your introduction. Which ones would you include in your introduction? Are there other components missing?

Once you've reviewed the provided ideas and brainstormed your own, mark the components you plan to include in your introduction.

What to Include in Your Introduction	
About the Course	About You
<input type="checkbox"/> Goals for the semester	<input type="checkbox"/> Your Name
<input type="checkbox"/> Expectations for your students (more details in the next section)	<input type="checkbox"/> Your Pronouns*
<input type="checkbox"/> What your students can expect of you (more details in the next section)	<input type="checkbox"/> Your Research
<input type="checkbox"/> Social norms for the classroom	<input type="checkbox"/> Teaching philosophy or teaching style
	<input type="checkbox"/> Your education and background (e.g., What experiences do you bring to the course? What interests you about the topic of the course?)
	<input type="checkbox"/> A fun fact about yourself so your students get to know you as a person

\*If you're comfortable, sharing your pronouns is one way to help establish an inclusive learning environment and model for your students that you cannot and should not assume someone's pronouns. If you are curious, you can read more in this [University of Waterloo resource](#).

In your introduction, it's usually a good idea to include a discussion about the norms and expectations for your seminar, tutorial, or lab. It is even better if you explicitly record this and share a copy with the students so it can be referred to later. We have again compiled a short list to get you started and you can mark the ones you plan to include.

<b>Setting Expectations</b>	
<b>Expectations for Students</b>	<b>What Students Can Expect From You</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The structure of the course – what will you and the students be doing when you meet?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Policy for late assignments, extensions, attendance, grades etc.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Expectations for student-student and student-instructor interactions</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Online etiquette (e.g., for CourseLink discussion boards or online video/chat platforms)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Co-create a classroom contract</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> How/when students can ask questions (e.g., do you have office hours?)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Set boundaries for yourself as a TA (e.g., when will you respond to emails?)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> How fast can students expect to receive their grades?</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> How and when can students ask you for a re-grade? (e.g., do they have to ask in writing? Do they have to wait a day or two after receiving feedback?)</li> </ul>

### **Sample Introductions**

If you would like to see how this may all come together, here are a few sample introductions to get you started. Two are examples of pre-recorded videos that were shared online with students, and one is a screenshot of a CourseLink announcement. These sample introductions could also have been delivered 'live' in front of students (in person or online).

[Video with PowerPoint](#)

[Video without PowerPoint](#)

## CourseLink Announcement

[Course Home](#) [Content](#) [Groups](#) [Discussions](#) [Dropbox](#) [Course Admin](#) [CourseLink Help](#)

Announcements ▾

### TA Introduction - Mara Goodyear ▾ ×

Posted Aug 19, 2020 7:09 PM

Hi everyone and welcome to Introduction to Microbiology!

My name is Mara and I'm one of the teaching assistants (TAs) for the course. I use she/her/hers pronouns and you can address me as Mara during video calls or in your e-mails. I did my undergrad in microbiology at Guelph and am now doing my PhD studying antibiotic resistance in the bacterium *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. I'm always happy to answer any question you might have about research or grad school at Guelph.

My role this semester will be to facilitate the online labs. I'm excited that you will get to virtually learn microbiology lab techniques and analyze real data this semester. The labs have activities and readings that need to be done in advance of our bi-weekly video calls. Throughout the semester you can contact me via e-mail and I will be holding virtual office hours every Friday from 10-11am. I'll monitor my e-mail between 9am-5pm, Monday-Friday. You can join the office hours in groups or on your own. My goal for the semester is to make the virtual labs a fun learning experience and for us to apply microbiology concepts to real world problems.

I'm looking forward to meeting you all!



**Now it's your turn!** Once you have marked the components in the tables that you want to include in your introduction, take a moment to brainstorm your own ideas and then try writing a draft of your introduction.

What else would you like to discuss with your students during your introduction?

Your Introduction



# Planning Your First Day

## The benefits of being prepared

Being adequately prepared does take additional time, but it is worthwhile because you will be:

- more effective when explaining difficult concepts.
- more organized – you will have a game plan.
- able to focus more on students and their understanding of the material.
- better able to respond quickly and confidently to both questions and the unexpected.
- more confident and increase the confidence that students have in you.

## Before your first day checklist

- **Teaching remotely:** Test the software you will be using (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom) and become familiar with the functions and tools available in the software (e.g., breakout rooms, screen sharing, chat).
- **Teaching in person:** Visit the room to check the furniture arrangement and availability of chalkboards, whiteboards and audiovisual (AV) equipment, such as a projector or document camera. Ensure you know how to operate the AV equipment, you have the access code for the AV panel if required, and determine if you need any adaptors to connect your device. You can search [classroom profiles online](#) to learn what equipment is available and contact [Classroom Technical Support](#) for help or ask your TA supervisor.
- **Teaching a lab:** Find out where the supplies are, how to get equipment, and any safety procedures. Do you know how to work all the equipment? Have you thought about how to explain it to students?
- **Be inquiring and critical:** Do not assume that everything in the lab manual or seminar package is necessarily correct or explained in the best possible way. Take the opportunity to perform the experiment, if possible, or do the exercises prior to the session. This will help to identify any areas where there is potential for difficulty with procedures or concepts and increase your ability to successfully troubleshoot.
- **Do you understand what you are teaching?** You may want to read some resources, attend some lectures in the course and/or attend a lab/seminar which is given by a senior TA in advance of your own.

## Preparing to Teach

When preparing to teach, it is helpful to consider the goal/purpose of the lesson, content, activities, timing, materials, and how you will wrap-up the lesson. Consider the questions below to help plan the logistics of your first day and future sessions throughout the semester. These questions are also organized into a Preparing to Teach Template on the next page.

- **Goal or Purpose:** What is the goal/purpose of the lesson, lab, seminar, tutorial etc. and how will I communicate this goal/purpose to students?
- **Content or Activity:** What content will I be covering and what activities will I be facilitating (e.g., an experiment or small group discussions)?
- **Timing:** How much time do I have for each activity?
- **Materials to Prepare or Access:** What materials do I need to prepare or access in advance (e.g., a problem set on CourseLink, PowerPoint slides, or whiteboard markers)?
- **Wrap-Up:** How will I wrap up the session (e.g., revisit the purpose/goal of the lesson, verbally summarize the lesson, or have students write down a key takeaway)? Are there any reminders I need to communicate to students (e.g., upcoming due dates for assignments)?

Here are a few additional questions you may consider as you plan your labs/tutorials/seminars etc. throughout the semester:

- How will I introduce the content and activities?
- How will I transition between topics and/or activities? Are there times when I can plan a short summary?
- What questions can I prepare in advance to prompt students' thinking on a topic or to check if students understand a concept?
- What possible questions or challenges may arise?



**Now it's your turn!** Use the Preparing to Teach Template to plan out your first class.



### Preparing to Teach Template

<b>Goal or Purpose:</b> What is the goal/purpose of the lesson, lab, seminar, tutorial etc. and how will I communicate this goal/purpose to students?		
<b>Timing</b> How much time do I have for each activity?	<b>Content or Activity</b> What content will I be covering and what activities will I be facilitating (e.g., an experiment or small group discussions)?	<b>Materials to Prepare or Access</b> What materials do I need to prepare or access in advance (e.g., a problem set on CourseLink, PowerPoint slides, or whiteboard markers)?
<b>Wrap Up:</b> How will I wrap up the session (e.g., revisit the purpose/goal of the lesson, verbally summarize the lesson, or have students write down a key takeaway)? Are there any reminders I need to communicate to students (e.g., upcoming due dates for assignments)?		



# Managing Your Nerves

New TAs are often concerned about nervousness. Consider using some of the following ideas to help manage your concerns and be proactive in your new role:

- **Accept that it is okay** and normal to feel nervous. Your students may also be nervous.
- **Arrive early** for class and chat with the students as they come in.
- **Breathe deeply**, using your diaphragm, and speak slowly.
- **Rehearse your first session** by visualizing how it will go or try out your opening introduction on a friend or TA colleague. Identify those parts of your body where you feel tense (neck, jaw, etc.) and try to relax them.
- **Make a strong start by preparing thoroughly.** Be confident of your competence! Outline the points you need to get through and focus on these main points. Be sure to prepare more material than you think you will need.
- **You can't know everything!** Don't feel that you have to know all the answers. If you don't know, don't make up your response; it's usually obvious when you don't know what you're talking about. Admit you are unsure. Tell them you will find out the answer, suggest a reference, refer the question back to the class, or ask a student to find out and report back the next week.
- **Focus on your material!** Concentrate your attention on the information that you want and need to cover, not on your own nervousness.
- **Have a backup plan.** Anticipate what may go wrong and have a plan for what you will do to keep going. For example, if your laptop dies, printing out a hard copy may save your day.
- **Acknowledge impostor syndrome**, which is the feeling that you are not competent, deserving, or capable of succeeding in your chosen position despite your actual abilities, achievements, and qualifications. These feelings may come and go many times throughout your life, and it is important to recognize that it is normal and common to feel this way, especially when transitioning to a new role. If you would like support in navigating and processing these feelings, consider reaching out to the variety of mental health and wellness [supports](#) on and off campus.



**Now it's your turn!** Brainstorm different tips you want to try to help ensure you feel confident on your first day. Record your ideas in the box on .

What are some things you plan to do to help feel confident and prepared for your first day?

**Adapted From:**

- Marincovich, M. (1998). *Teaching at Stanford: An Introductory Handbook for Faculty, Academic Staff, and Teaching Assistants*. Center for Teaching and Learning, Stanford University.

# Making Teaching Goals and the Importance of Self-Reflection



As you get ready to teach this semester, consider taking some time now to create teaching goals! You may want to use the S.M.A.R.T framework when creating your goals. A goal that is S.M.A.R.T. is Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Reflecting on your goal progress at regular intervals throughout the semester can help ensure that your actions are aligning with your goals and that you are on-track to achieving them. Tip: you can set reminders for yourself in your calendar to check-in on your goals every couple of weeks.



**Now it's your turn!** The questions below can help get you started on setting teaching goals for this semester. Give them a try! This also lets you save your goals to revisit them at a later date.

1. What would the best first day of class look and feel like for you as the teaching assistant and for your students?

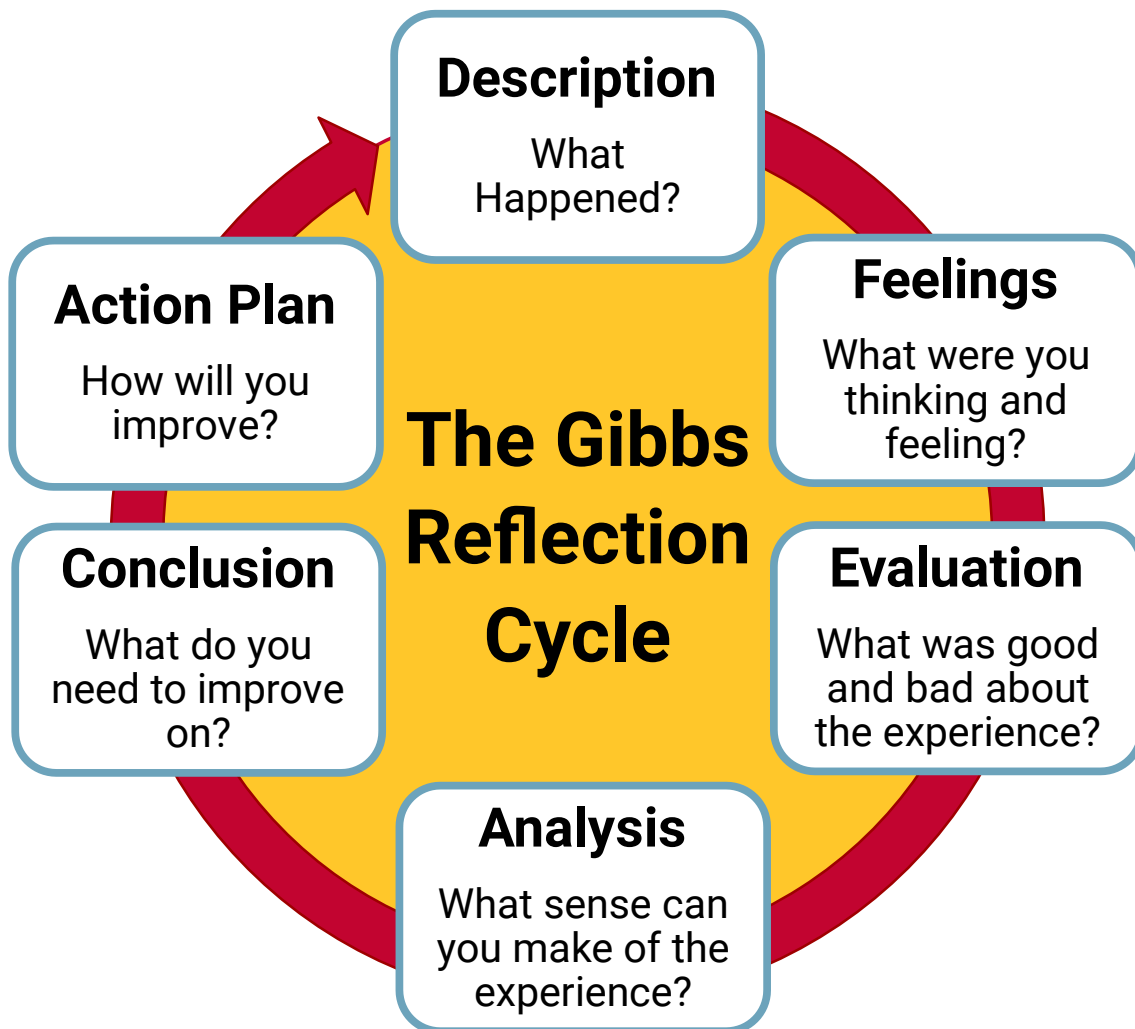
2. What steps can/will you take now to better your chances of having the best first day?

3. By the end of this semester, what do you hope to be able to say about yourself as a teacher? What are your goals for yourself as a TA for the semester, and how can you support yourself in reaching these goals (e.g., reaching out to teaching colleagues for support and accountability, locating resources, attending workshops)?

4. What are your goals for your students for the semester, and how can you support them in reaching these goals?

## The Importance of Self-Reflection

Self-reflection is an important component to being an effective TA. This involves critically reflecting on what is successful and what needs refinement in your teaching practice. Self-reflection could take the form of a personal teaching log that records your observations over the semester, or could be prompted by feedback received from students or peers. The Gibbs Reflection Cycle (below), is one of many useful frameworks for guiding self-reflection. Try using the Gibbs Reflections Cycle to reflect early in the semester – maybe after your first day, week, or month – then continue to reflect on your teaching throughout the semester.





**Now it's your turn!** Use the steps of the Gibbs Reflection Cycle to reflect early in the semester.

**Description:** What happened?

**Feelings:** What were you thinking and feeling?

**Evaluation:** What was good and bad about the experience?

**Analysis:** What sense can you make of the experience?

**Conclusion:** What do you need to improve on?

**Action Plan:** How will you improve?

**Additional Resources:**

- Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. London: Further Education Unit.

# Introduction to Teaching and Learning Strategies



This section of the guide will provide you with some new tools for your teaching toolbox, including evidenced-informed strategies for keeping students engaged and learning, advice on facilitating meaningful and productive discussions, good practices for grading and feedback, and advice on how to collect feedback from students so you can continue to grow and improve as a TA.

**In this section:**

- Introduction to Active Learning
- Introduction to Facilitating Discussions
- Introduction to Grading and Feedback
- Introduction to Collecting Feedback from Students



# Introduction to Active Learning



## What is active learning?

Active learning is one way to engage students and foster deeper learning. Two definitions of active learning are:

- “The intentional inclusion of teaching strategies within a classroom setting that generate student activity and engagement in the learning process” (OpenEd Guelph)
- “Instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (Bonwell and Eison, 1991).

## Why incorporate active learning?

Research has shown that when active learning strategies are used, as opposed to only using passive lecturing, it improves students’ learning. More specifically, active learning strategies can (Prince, 2004):

- Enhance student retention of course material
- Improve thinking and writing abilities
- Enhance student attitudes towards learning
- Increase motivation for further study
- Help students to develop awareness of their approach to learning

## How can you incorporate active learning?

There are many different active learning strategies that you can try incorporating in your teaching, some may take only a few minutes of class time, while others may be longer. Some examples of active learning strategies are described on the next pages and links to other resources are provided for more ideas!

Whichever strategies you end up trying, consider asking students for feedback to understand how they are being received and what students find useful. For ideas on how to get feedback see the section [Introduction to Collecting Feedback from Students](#).

## Think-Pair-Share

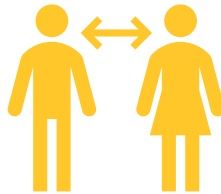
Ask students a question that requires higher order thinking (i.e., a question that requires students to go beyond recalling facts and may require application, analysis, or evaluation).

### Think



Ask students to think or write about an answer on their own first.

### Pair



Students turn to a peer to discuss their responses.

### Share



Ask pairs to share responses with the entire group.

By asking students to explain their answer to a neighbour and to critically consider their neighbour's responses, this approach helps students articulate newly formed mental connections. You can add variations to this strategy as well, for example think-group-share would ask students to discuss in small groups instead of with one neighbour.

## Group Discussions

Divide students into groups to share ideas, experiences, and knowledge around a specific discussion topic or prepared questions.

## Board Rotation

Divide a topic into sub-topics. Write these sub-topics on flip chart paper and post them at different "stations" around the room. Invite students to visit each station and leave some comments. Reconvene the group to discuss the results.

## Surveys, Polls, Quizzes, and Questionnaires

Surveys and polls have many different uses, such as brainstorming, practice questions/quizzes, and checking students' understanding of a topic. You can also use students' responses to questionnaires to generate discussion.

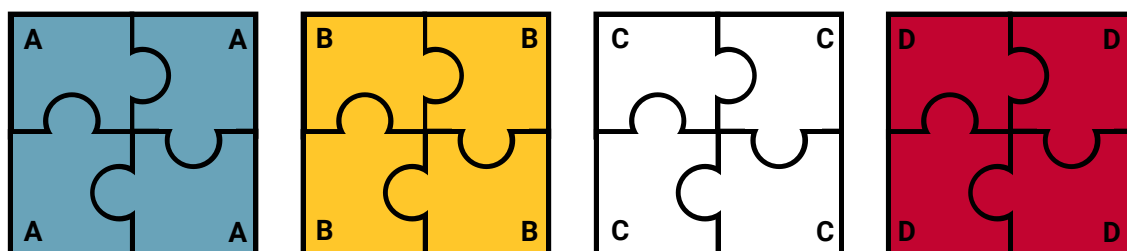
There are many different online tools you can use for polling, surveys, and quizzes, such as Zoom polls, [Menti](#), and [Kahoot!](#).

## Jigsaw (Group Experts)

Divide students into groups and give each group a different topic to discuss or a question to answer. After students have had time in the expert groups, re-mix the groups so that each new group has one “expert” from each topic who now teaches it to the new group or shares what their first group discussed.

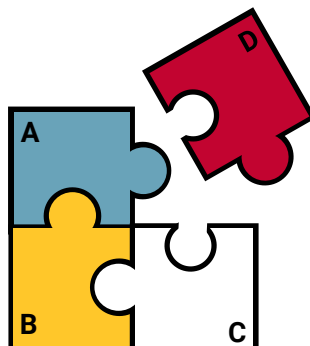
### Phase 1: Expert Groups

Each expert group has a different topic/question/idea they will work on together.



### Phase 2: Mixed Groups

Each expert from Phase 1 will teach the other members of their new group.



## Sticky Note Brainstorming (In-person or Online)

Sticky notes can be used to collect students’ answers or ideas/questions related to a topic. Students can organize sticky notes into categories, write on additional sticky notes to respond to other people’s ideas, or add checkmarks or other symbols to show which sticky notes have answers they think are correct or ideas they agree are important – you can be creative with how you structure this activity!

There are different tools that can help you facilitate similar activities online, such as [Padlet](#), [Google Jamboard App](#), and the annotation function in Zoom.

### Role Playing

With appropriate situations or problems, the class can define the characters or situation. Selected students then act out the scene. This activity is concluded with a discussion on the issues that were observed by the group.

### Games and Simulations

These experiential learning approaches encourage active learning and discussion. They are often collaborative and require higher order thinking skills. Students interact with course material in a fun and engaging manner. For example, a game like “Jeopardy” can be played during a review session to help students prepare for an upcoming exam. Simulations allow students to experiment and make predictions about real-life situations in a safe environment. Be sure to debrief after each activity or exercise to maximize their educational value.



**Now it's your turn!** Plan which active learning strategies you can apply to your own teaching this semester.

What active learning strategies do you want to try this semester? How will you incorporate them in your teaching?

**Adapted From:**

- [Active Learning Strategies OpenEd](#) University of Guelph.
- [Active Learning Strategies](#). Office of Teaching and Learning, University of Guelph.
- Bergquist, H. and Phillips, S. (1989). *Classroom Structures Which Encourage Student Participation*. In R. Neff and M. Weimer (Eds.). *Classroom Communication*. Madison, WI: Magna Publications, 19-23.

**Additional Resources:**

- Bonwell, C.C., and J.A. Eison, "Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom", ASHEERIC Higher Education Report No. 1, George Washington University, Washington, DC, 1991.
- Prince, M., "Does Active Learning Work? A Review of the Research", *Journal of Engineering Education*, Vol. 93, No. 3, 2004, pp223 – 231.
- For more research on the benefits of active learning, see the [Active Learning Resource](#) from the Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University.

# Introduction to Facilitating Discussions



The following points are things you can do as you are planning and facilitating a discussion.

- **Build community:** Use names and encourage everyone to become familiar with each other (using name cards can help if you are in person, and if you are teaching online, you can share instructions for how people can change their display names). What are their interests, why are they taking the course, do they have any experience relevant to the course? Allow for fun and creativity.
- **Collaboratively establish classroom discussion norms.** Ask your students “What are the characteristics of an effective discussion and how can we ensure that these characteristics exist within this seminar?”
- **Discuss the benefits of active listening.** Encourage students to give their full attention to the speaker, to avoid the temptation to interrupt, to paraphrase the comments of the speaker prior to adding their own comments and to take notes when appropriate.
- **Everyone should have the opportunity to participate.** Plan and design the first discussion to ensure that this is possible.
- **Seating arrangements:** If you have non-fixed seating, consider arranging the seating to promote discussion (e.g., semi-circle, round table). Be sure to restore the original seating configuration for the next class.
- **Breakout rooms** are helpful to allow for small group discussions when facilitating discussions online.
- **Review main points** related to the subject matter before you start a discussion on a certain topic.
- **Record key points and provide intermittent summaries** of the discussion, ideas, and concepts. Ask students to help record ideas (e.g., on the whiteboard) and to provide summaries so they can actively reflect on how the discussion relates to the course material and learning outcomes.
- **Clarify the learning outcomes and the format of the discussion** (e.g., open free-flowing, closed and structured), as some students may not have experience with seminar discussions.
- **Use a variety of active learning strategies and discussion formats** to encourage participation. For ideas, see the section [Introduction to Active Learning](#) or the [Facilitating In-Class Discussions](#) resource from the Office of Teaching and Learning.

- **State a goal for the discussion** at the beginning so that you can review and evaluate the effectiveness of the discussion at the end. Involve students in evaluating the discussion. What went well? Where can we improve?
- **Silence is OK.** After posing a question, give students a minute or two to synthesize and record some of their thoughts prior to opening the discussion.
- **Don't respond to every comment.** Encourage students to develop their own ideas and to respond to each other.
- **Open-ended, opinion-based questions** are useful to draw students into the discussion.
- **Allow time for a general wrap-up of the important points** that way everyone can synthesize the information discussed. For example, you could have the students develop an exam question related to the main topics of discussion, submit these at the end of the session, and use them to guide a short review at the beginning of the next class. Be sure to relate the wrap-up back to the initial goals of the discussion.

### **Facilitation Techniques for Different Scenarios**

Below are some facilitation techniques that can be used in scenarios commonly encountered during discussions.

#### **Over-enthusiastic students**

If one or two people consistently dominate the discussion, wait for other hands to go up before deciding who to call on. You can also speak to students who dominate discussion outside of class. Point out that you appreciate their enthusiasm and ask them to contribute by formulating good questions that draw other students into the discussion.

#### **Quiet Students**

Remember that if a student is quiet, it does not necessarily mean they aren't involved. Here are a few ideas you can try to encourage everyone to participate in discussions:

- At the beginning of the semester, address the whole class and let them know that you are committed to hearing every voice and that you understand that not everyone feels comfortable speaking publicly.
- Provide multiple ways to participate in discussions other than speaking in front of the whole group, e.g., allow students to submit ideas in an online poll or on a sticky note, use the chat function when facilitating online, use chart paper or collaborative documents to allow students to record their ideas.
- Provide opportunities for students to discuss their ideas in small groups or with a partner.
- Reach out to quiet students to ask what you can do to help them participate and make sure their ideas are included.

### **Lack of Preparedness**

To encourage preparation, ensure students make use of the assigned class readings from the outset of the semester. By setting these expectations for preparedness from the beginning, a productive classroom culture can be created. Help students read with a purpose. Provide guiding questions, ask them for a summary of the article or ask them to develop questions of their own related to the material. Share discussion questions prior to the seminar to encourage preparation.

### **Addressing Conflict and Disagreement**

It's important that you, as the TA, make the classroom an environment for effective learning, where students do not feel intimidated or attacked. When sensitively handled, conflict can help students to understand other people's perspectives and why issues themselves are so controversial. Consider the following points when facilitating discussions and addressing conflict and disagreement:

- When sensitive issues arise, make sure that all sides of an issue are presented and that students discuss the subject in a respectful way. If an argument ensues, try to figure out what the disagreement is. Is it over a definition? A factual matter? An issue of interpretation? Make sure students define their terms.
- Model the way by staying calm. If the discussion gets off-track or too heated, pause and take some time to reflect and restate the issue. "Let's take some time to slow down and focus the discussion."
- Pause and review the main points of agreement/disagreement in two separate columns on the board to initiate a democratic review of the issue, have a formal debate, ask students to argue against their position, assign students to research and present position papers, or have students collaborate in pairs or small groups and refer to the course material to resolve disagreements based on specific content.

### **Responding to Feelings**

Feelings can impact the tone and success of a discussion so, when appropriate, you can acknowledge and discuss students' feelings. Use phrases that start with "I" when giving opinions or when responding to feelings and encourage your students to do the same. For example:

- I noticed you were quiet in today's discussion.
- When we discuss morality in this text, I feel upset because I do not agree with the position in the article.





**Now it's your turn!** Plan which strategies for facilitating discussions you would like to implement in your own teaching.

What strategies do you want to use to facilitate effective discussions?

**Adapted From:**

- Davison, C.I. and Ambrose, S.A. (1994). *The New Professor's Handbook: A Guide to Teaching and Research in Engineering and Science*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company.
- Davis, B.G. (1993). *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- McKeachie, W.J. and Svinicki, M. (2006). *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. Mifflin Company, NY.
- Marincovich, M. (1998). *Teaching at Stanford: An Introductory Handbook for Faculty, Academic Staff, and Teaching Assistants*. Center for Teaching and Learning, Stanford University.
- [Facilitating In-Class Discussions](#) Office of Teaching and Learning, University of Guelph.

# Introduction to Grading and Feedback



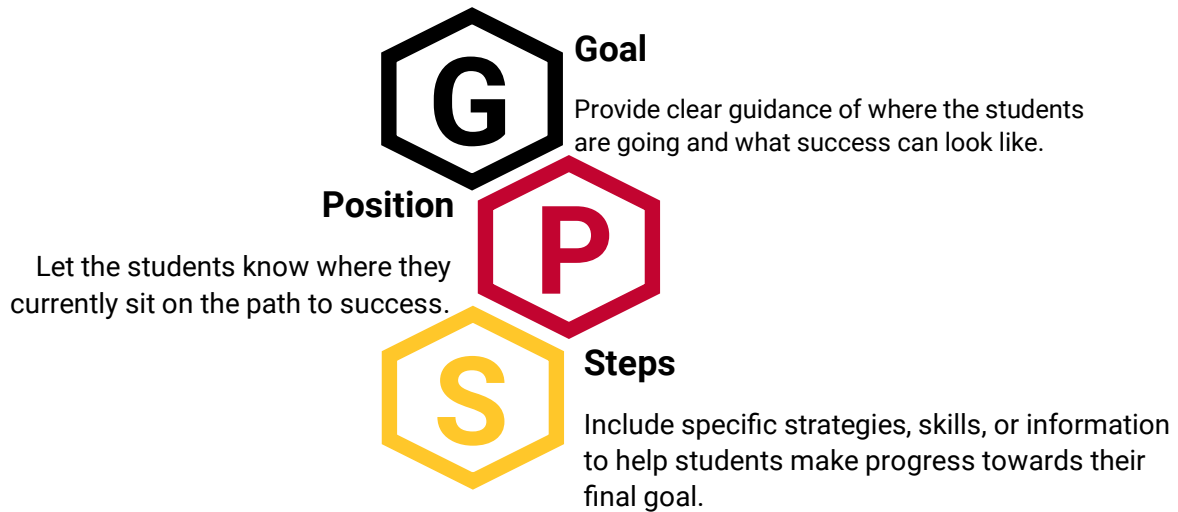
One of the most common tasks for a TA is to evaluate students' work and provide feedback. There is no single correct system for grading and providing feedback for your students. There are, however, a few key principles you may want to keep in mind while grading and providing feedback.

- **Great expectations:** Provide your students with clear expectations and a grading scheme or rubric *before* they begin working on their assignments, labs, essays, quizzes, etc. Using a grading scheme also helps to ensure consistency between different students and different graders.
- **Feedback for the future:** Try to provide clear feedback for your students, not just assigning a grade. Tell them what they did well and what they can improve for the future. Ongoing feedback is important for effective learning.
- **Question by question:** When grading an exam or assignment, it is best to grade the same question on all exams/assignments before moving on to the next. If you are splitting the work between TAs, consider dividing the grading by question instead of students to ensure consistency.
- **Range finding:** Review the work of a few students before you begin grading to help establish what each grade level looks like.
- **Avoid bias:** Consider hiding students' names when grading and assigning marks. When providing more detailed feedback, however, it can then be helpful to look at their name so you can connect to previous work and the student's development.
- **Take a break:** Take regular breaks while grading to ensure you don't get burnt out. Being tired can lead to unfair grading practices for some students but not others.
- **Learning together:** Discuss common errors with the entire class. This saves time, emphasizes important points, and shows that everyone needs feedback to learn.
- **Consider your tone:** You want to ensure you are helping students learn and not just criticizing or being hurtful. Provide feedback that you would want to receive which is encouraging and constructive.
- **Comment banks save time:** Keep a list of common feedback and comments you can copy and paste from.

- **Focus your feedback:** You may not have time to provide feedback on everything you would like to. Select the most important points and focus on these. You can also refer students to [resources](#) from the library for help.
- **Streamline spelling and grammar suggestions:** Circle repeated errors only once, providing detailed feedback, and then instruct the students to look for this error throughout their work instead of circling mistakes each time.

### Effective feedback is like a GPS for your students.

Receiving an assignment back with little feedback can be frustrating for all students, including those that did very well on the assignments. When giving feedback, the acronym GPS can be a helpful guide:





**Now it's your turn!** Reflect on how you can provide effective feedback for your students this semester.

What types of assignments will you be grading this semester? What strategies will you use to help grade and provide feedback?

**Adapted From:**

- [GPS](#): Learn This Simple Acronym to Help Give Students Better Feedback.

**Additional Resources:**

- [5 Research-Based Tips for Providing Students with Meaningful Feedback](#)
- [Receiving and Giving Effective Feedback](#). Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo.
- [Growing Success](#): Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools. (2010). Government of Ontario.

# Introduction to Collecting Feedback from Students



Gathering and responding to student feedback is important; it allows us to continually enhance our teaching related skills and behaviours. It provides insight into what is being learned in the classroom and highlights areas for improvement. Responding effectively to students' input demonstrates your commitment to the learning process and to building a sense of learner-TA community.

## Guidelines for Collecting Student Feedback

Consider the following points when collecting student feedback to help obtain meaningful results:

- **Anonymity:** Encourages students to be honest and reduces anxiety.
- **Explain why:** Students appreciate being included in the discussion and will be more likely to respond when they see its value to them.
- **General to specific:** Begin with simple questions and move to more difficult ones.
- **Ask open-ended questions:** Ask questions that provoke elaboration as opposed to “yes” or “no” questions.
- **Report back:** Acknowledge all the feedback students gave, summarize the results with a chance to clarify the feedback and address what you can and cannot change.
- **Change:** Implement changes in your teaching for those aspects you have control over.
- **Observation:** Use what is happening in your class to determine how it is going.
- **Timing:** Feedback can be gathered in the first class, mid semester, end of semester, or whenever it's most appropriate.

## Interpreting Feedback

When receiving feedback, ensure that you take the time to fully examine it and devise an action plan to use it effectively. This is an important opportunity for growth and learning. Identify major themes in the feedback and remember not to focus too much on individual responses. Discussing feedback with colleagues can help put the results in perspective and they may be able to provide ideas for implementing change. Try the following prompts to help you summarize feedback:

1. As a result of this feedback, I have learned that...
2. In the future I will improve by...

## Methods for Collecting Feedback

Below are two examples of methods that you can use to collect feedback from students. Both methods require little preparation and can quickly be done during class on paper or using online survey tools.

### The Exit Ticket



A question is posed to all students prior to class ending.



Students write their answer on a card, piece of paper, or using online software and hand it in before leaving.

This assessment technique engages all students and you can use it to ask questions about students' understanding or your teaching methods.

### Start-Stop-Continue

Ask your students, what would they like you to...



**START**



**STOP**



**CONTINUE**

e.g., **Start** encouraging group learning, **Stop** allowing some students to dominate discussions, and/or **Continue** being enthusiastic about the course material.

Make sure you describe the nature of the feedback you require so you can use this information to develop your teaching approaches and support your students' learning.



**Now it's your turn!** Plan how and when you will be collecting feedback from your students this semester.

Make a plan for collecting feedback. How and when will you collect feedback from students this semester? How will you share the results of the feedback with students?

**Adapted From:**

- Allen, R.R. and Rueter, T. (1990). *Teaching Assistant Strategies: An Introduction to College Teaching*. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.
- Davis, B.G. (1993). *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Race, P. and Brown, S. (1999). *500 Tips for Tutors*. London: Kogan Page Limited.
- [TA Feedback Guide](#). (2014). Teaching Commons, York University.

**Additional Resources:**

- [Mid-Semester Feedback](#), Office of Teaching and Learning, University of Guelph

# Reflecting on Your First Semester



As you are getting to the end of your first semester as a TA, it's good to take a moment to stop and reflect on what has happened. What parts of your teaching were you most proud of? What parts would you like to improve? This section provides some ways to reflect on your teaching practice. Self-reflection is a great way to grow and learn as an educator and we encourage you to engage in self-reflection frequently.

This section also introduces teaching dossiers, which are quite common for anyone who wishes to pursue a job with an education component (including university faculty positions). We recommend reading through this section before the end of your first semester so you can save materials for your dossier.

## **In this section:**

- Revisiting Your Teaching Goals
- Skills Developed Through Teaching Assistantships
- Reflecting On and Documenting Your Teaching Experiences





# Revisiting Your Teaching Goals

Now that you have reached the end of your first semester as a TA at U of G, it is a good time to once again reflect on the goals you set before your first day and to think about your successes and challenges over the past semester.



**Now it's your turn!** The questions below can help you reflect on your TA experience (the first three questions below relate to questions #3 and #4 from [Making Teaching Goals](#)).

1. How would you describe yourself as a teacher and your approaches to teaching? Does your answer match what you wrote at the beginning of the semester? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. What were your goals for yourself as a TA for the semester? Were you successful in reaching these goals, why or why not? Did your goals change throughout the semester? What are your future teaching goals?

3. What were your goals for your students for the semester? Did your students reach these goals? How do you know?

4. Thinking about the past semester, what things would you stop doing or do differently? What would you like to start doing in future teaching roles? What worked well that you will continue to do?

# Skills Developed Through Teaching Assistantships



In addition to having an impact on students at the University of Guelph, your experience as a TA also contributes to your professional development and you can develop skills that are useful in many different careers. Below is a list of some skills that you may develop as a TA. It may be helpful to make a list of skills you have personally developed this semester and to reflect on how you developed these skills and which skills you would like to continue developing as a TA. [Co-operative Education & Career Services](#) at U of G has resources about preparing a resume or curriculum vitae (CV), and you may find these resources helpful for writing statements to include your TA experiences on a resume/CV.

Skills that you may develop as a TA are varied and valuable, such as:

- Presentation and communication skills (e.g., through facilitating discussions, giving lab talks)
- Leadership skills (e.g., through facilitating seminar activities, leading lab exercises)
- Technical skills (e.g., through teaching with technology, using lab equipment)
- Management skills (e.g., managing a group of students and classroom activities, time-management)
- Planning skills (e.g., planning lessons or activities)
- Interpersonal skills (e.g., through working with students, other TAs, TA supervisor)
- Problem solving skills (e.g., by thinking through issues creatively and by anticipating and reacting to situations)
- Student support skills (e.g., assistance with course/program selection, sharing career advice, referring to campus resources)
- Evaluation and feedback skills (e.g., providing feedback on students' assignments, evaluating and reflecting on your teaching approaches)



**Now it's your turn!** Reflect on and record what professional skills you have been able to develop this semester as a TA.

What skills did you develop as a TA this semester?

How did you develop these skills? Which skills would you like to continue developing as a TA?

**Adapted From:**

- Reis, R.M. (1997). *Tomorrow's Professor: Preparing for Academic Careers in Science and Engineering*. Wiley-IEEE Press.
- Smith, K. S. (Fall, 2001). *The Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press

# Reflecting On and Documenting Your Teaching Experiences



One of the ways you can document your teaching experiences and reflections on your teaching is to develop a *Teaching Dossier* (also called a teaching portfolio).

## What is a Teaching Dossier?

A teaching dossier is a catalogue of your teaching experiences that demonstrates your thoughtful, reflective, and successful approach to teaching through a statement of your overall beliefs about teaching, linked to specific practices, and evidence that these practices are successful.

## Why Develop a Teaching Dossier?

You may choose to develop a teaching dossier to reflect on your teaching experiences or to record information that you might include in future job applications. If you are thinking of applying to faculty or other teaching-related positions, you may be required to include a full or partial teaching dossier in your application. Starting to compile information and draft sections of your teaching dossier early on will make preparing applications easier and can be a good way to reflect on your practice.

## Components of a Teaching Dossier

The following list is a brief introduction to the sections of a teaching dossier with examples of information and materials you may want to start saving while you are a TA to include in your dossier. For more information, the Office of Teaching and Learning offers workshops for graduate students about teaching dossiers and teaching philosophy statements as part of the [University Teaching Foundations](#) program. Components of a teaching dossier include:

- **Statement of Teaching Philosophy:** a statement of what you believe and value about teaching as demonstrated through specific practices, which are supported by evidence and demonstrated effectiveness.
- **Teaching Experience:** facts of what you taught (e.g., number of students, type of course, responsibilities)
- **Teaching Strategies:** when you taught, how did you do it? (e.g., active learning strategies, approaches to feedback)
- **Evaluation of Teaching:** how do you know your teaching has been effective? (e.g., student evaluations, informal student feedback, peer or supervisor evaluations)

- **Professional Development:** what opportunities have you participated in to learn more about teaching and develop your teaching approaches? (e.g., workshops, conferences)
- **Future Goals:** what are your short or long-term goals for yourself or for your students?
- **Appendices:** evidence of your teaching approaches that support the claims made in other sections of the dossier (e.g., lesson plans or activities you designed, feedback)

### **What is a Teaching Philosophy Statement?**

Schonwetter et al. (2002, p. 84) define a teaching philosophy statement as, “a systematic and critical rationale that focuses on the important components defining effective teaching and learning in a particular discipline and/or institutional context.” A teaching philosophy statement clearly and logically communicates *what* your fundamental values and beliefs are about teaching and learning, *why* you hold these values and beliefs, and *how* you translate these values and beliefs into your everyday teaching and learning experiences.

Teaching philosophy statements evolve over time; communicate personal philosophical beliefs of teaching and learning; demonstrate a strong connection to scholarly research and literature in higher education; and show a clear commitment to continual improvement.

### **Why Write a Teaching Philosophy Statement?**

Developing a teaching philosophy statement is often a challenging and rewarding experience that requires time, research, and personal reflection. No matter what your experience in higher education, preparing a teaching philosophy statement can be an enlightening experience, which provides direction, meaning and purpose to your teaching and learning experiences.

Based on your role as a TA, you can prepare a teaching philosophy statement built upon your fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning in higher education, with a clear focus on your future teaching goals. Although teaching philosophy statements take time, start with key words, ideas and phrases that describe your approaches to teaching and build from there.

## **Structure of a Teaching Philosophy Statement**

A teaching philosophy statement is typically 1-2 pages in length (although this guideline may vary with context). It outlines your three or four beliefs/values about teaching and learning, describes 1-2 examples of how you put each belief into practice, explains how you know these practices work, and often includes evidence from scholarly research and literature in higher education. A teaching philosophy statement is often organized into the following sections:

1. Introduction: introduce/state your three beliefs
2. Belief 1
3. Belief 2
4. Belief 3
5. Belief 4 (if needed)
6. Conclusion or concluding sentence

## **Additional Questions for Reflection**

The following are additional questions that you can use to reflect on your first semester and/or to help develop a teaching philosophy statement and dossier:

1. What is your approach to teaching? What teaching strategies do you most often rely upon? Why?
2. What characteristics describe an ideal university learning environment?
3. What are your strengths and skills as a teacher? What strategies have been particularly effective in terms of student learning and engagement?
4. What areas of your teaching require improvement? Why? How do you intend to improve?
5. What strategies have you used to evaluate and gather feedback on the effectiveness of your teaching?
6. What have you learned about yourself as a teacher? Have your students, peers, or the instructor provided direct feedback? What have you discovered about your teaching based on this feedback?
7. What teaching tasks do you find the most rewarding? Which teaching tasks do you find the most challenging?
8. What is the most significant thing that has happened to you as a TA?
9. What is your proudest teaching moment? Why?
10. What teaching moment do you feel most dissatisfied about? How can you improve upon this?
11. What are your future teaching goals?



**Now it's your turn!** Use the table below to start keeping track of information related to your teaching experience that can help with developing a teaching dossier. There is also space to record your answers to some of the additional questions for reflection.

	<b>Notes</b>
<b>Position</b> (e.g., TA, sessional lecturer)	
<b>Course name</b>	
<b>Year and semester</b>	
<b>Course format and days</b> (e.g., weekly 3-hour lab)	
<b>Program level</b> (e.g., first year course)	
<b>Number of students</b>	
<b>Responsibilities</b> (e.g., grading written reports, facilitating seminar discussions)	
<b>Reflections</b> (e.g., what did you learn while teaching this course, what worked well, what would you change, how did this teaching experience affect your practices?)	
<b>Evidence</b> What evidence related to this course have you collected to possibly include in a teaching dossier (e.g., TA evaluation, informal student survey, lesson plan)	



Answers to additional reflection questions:

**Adapted From:**

- Schonwetter, D.J., Sokal, L., Friesen, M., and Taylor, K.L. (2002). *Teaching philosophies reconsidered: a conceptual model for the development and evaluation of teaching philosophy statements*. *The International Journal for Academic Development*. 7: 83-97.