

Northwestern University
Department of English

Teaching Assistant Handbook

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In the 1950s, what is now the TA Office used to be the Geology Library. The whale skeleton, a vestige of the natural history museum that first occupied the fourth floor in the nineteenth century, became the stuff of tradition. Students would toss coins into the skeleton during finals week. If the coin stayed, the student would do well. If it fell, the student needed to return to the books.

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Teaching Assistant Handbook

Introduction

This handbook is meant as a guide for Teaching Assistants in the Department of English at Northwestern University. It was written with the understanding that the Teaching Assistantship is a professional apprenticeship. Being a TA forms an integral part of the training that you receive in preparation for the Ph.D. From the Graduate Student's perspective, the Teaching Assistantship should be much more than merely a source of funding; from the Department's perspective, Teaching Assistants should be much more than a convenient (and in some sense, exploited) source of academic labor.

A Word to New Teaching Assistants

Most new Teaching Assistants in English, unless they have taught before at the college level, have incomplete notions of what to expect from their students and what their students expect from them. Those of us who are now graduate students were usually the best prepared, most responsive, and most motivated participants in our undergraduate English classes. If we took large lecture courses, it was generally only in our first years, and some of us may have attended small colleges where the 200-student lecture was nonexistent. Much of our college experience of the English class was in advanced seminars where we had more personal contact with the professors.

Thus, as new TAs we find ourselves confronted with a kind of class and a kind of student that may be totally unfamiliar. The large, introductory lecture classes to which most new TAs find themselves assigned are for the most part meant as general education or distribution requirements. Some students enroll in them because they are genuinely interested in the subject, or are considering the English major, but many are there to fulfill a "distro." While we may see the study of Literature as inherently valuable, many of our students see it as functional; for them, it is just another part of the college experience, just another grade on the transcript. Thus, in adjusting our expectations of the course's learning objectives from our own developing critical perspectives to the needs of the general education student, we need to draw upon past educational experiences that few of us may have, let alone recall.

Added to this confusion is the wide range in goals and objectives that we find among professors. Some focus their careers on undergraduate education, while others teach the large lecture as a "service course" to be balanced with more central research commitments. Faculty expectations of teaching assistants also vary widely. Some see the teaching assistantship as a professional apprenticeship and will mentor TAs accordingly, involving them in the design and implementation of courses, while others view their TAs as "staff" who function to distribute handouts and to proctor and grade exams. As so many English departments cannot agree on the methods and objectives of studying literature, it is no surprise that they cannot agree on the methods and objectives of teaching it at the undergraduate level.

You can best prepare yourself for these multiple and conflicting demands by remaining serious, committed, and open-minded about the responsibilities and rewards of teaching. If an academic career is your goal, it is likely that you will be balancing teaching with research, publishing, and academic service throughout your professional life. So much of our work as academics is done in solitude; teaching offers us opportunities to interact in dialogue with students and colleagues about the ideas that inspire and motivate our research.



General Information

Courses offered at Northwestern

Teaching assistants in English are generally, but not exclusively, assigned to these courses:

ENG 210-1,2: English Literary Traditions

ENG 211: Introduction to Poetry

ENG 212: Introduction to Drama

ENG 213: Introduction to Fiction

ENG 234: Introduction to Shakespeare

ENG 260: Introduction to 20th-Century British Literature

ENG 270-1,2: American Literary Traditions

ENG 273: Introduction to 20th-Century American Literature

CLS 210: The Bible as Literature

Typically, these courses enroll anywhere from 80 to 200 students, with each TA assigned up to 50 students. Lectures are given two or three times a week, with discussion sections meeting once a week.

Graduate School Policies and Procedures

Information and advice on regulations pertaining to the appointment, remuneration, tax status, and academic standing of teaching assistants can be found on the Graduate School's web page, at: <http://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/financialaid/>

Department Policies and Procedures

Appointments

As a Graduate Assistant you hold an appointment in the Graduate School with duties assigned by the Department. Awarded by the Graduate School on nomination by the Department, appointments are not confirmed until the end of the spring quarter.

As a recipient of a Graduate Assistantship in the Department of English you may be assigned to a Comparative Literature, Gender Studies, or other interdepartmental course taught by a faculty member from another department as a Teaching Assistant. The regulations of the English Department apply in that case, and you may not be asked to teach more students than you would in an English course. You may also be assigned other duties (in which case you are classified more broadly as a Graduate Assistant), including editorial work for the *TriQuarterly* on Renaissance Drama journals.

490 Registrations

In order to ease your work load as a graduate student and teaching assistant, you may register for one unit of English 490 in every quarter in which you hold a Graduate Assistantship. Thus your normal course load as a second-year Graduate Assistant will consist of two seminars and/or independent study courses.

Responsibilities

As a Teaching Assistant you will support instructors, typically in large undergraduate courses, though sometimes in smaller seminars. In either case, your duties include:

1. Reading all the books in the course;
2. Attending all lectures;



3. Leading two discussion sections with no more than 50 students in total;
4. Grading the papers and examinations of all your students according to the professor's standards;
5. Holding conferences with students and maintaining two regularly scheduled office hours per week;
6. Returning the papers and examinations of students in your section;
7. Assisting the instructor in other tasks involved in running a lecture course;
8. Giving one of the lectures in the course, if the instructor so desires.

The assignment of Teaching Assistants to particular courses is responsibility of both the Chair and the Director of Graduate Studies, and depends ultimately on undergraduate enrollment. The Chair and Director of Graduate Studies shall make every attempt to give you assignments that either fit your interests or fill gaps in your coverage of literary periods, but the needs of the undergraduate curriculum must take precedence over other considerations (as it does for professors).

Practical Matters

TA Offices

All teaching assistants in the Department of English receive desk space in the TA Office, 420–424 University Hall. The phone extensions of the TA Office suite are 1-4991, 1-5034, 1-5138, and 1-5646. While efforts are made to group TAs in offices according to program year, no policies are in effect concerning specific desk assignments. English TAs teaching all three quarters receive priority over Theater TAs, University College teachers, and English TAs teaching less than three quarters, who usually share desks. The TA Office also functions as an informal lunchroom and meeting room for English graduate students. One suite of rooms has been set aside as a lounge and computer room, with an informal library, comfortable chair, and bulletin board space. The computer room has dual boot Macintosh/Windows PCs with internet connections. A microwave is available for general department use, as is a refrigerator and another microwave located in the mail room on the second floor of University Hall.

The TA Office has simultaneous professional and social functions: it is a space for private conferences with students and it is a lounge. As well, at midterms, at the end of the quarter, and before major assignments are due, many undergraduates wait in the Office to see their respective TAs. Thus, the TA Office can often become crowded and noisy (the acoustics are terrible), with no guarantee of privacy. Although there have been no major noise problems in the past, you should certainly continue to be sensitive to the multiple functions of the office. As well, be aware of security precautions and remember to keep the main TA Office door locked if no one else is around.

Your students may mistake the TA Office for the Department of English office on the second floor. The gravest consequence of such confusion is that students will sometimes try to submit papers or other assignments by leaving them in the TA Office. Emphasize to your students the insecure nature of the TA Office, and tell them that the proper way to submit a paper is to sign it in on the register in University Hall 215 for the Department staff to place in your mailbox.

Copying

The Departmental copy machine, located in the mail room on the second floor of University Hall, is available for use by TAs. Your five-digit copy code is 1 plus the last four digits of your social security number (i.e. 1XXXX). According to the Department of English's "Guidelines for Copying of Classroom Materials," "The Department pays for incidental copying such as syllabi, examinations, and occasional handouts. When duplicated materials are 'like textbooks,' their cost should be charged to the student." This should cover most, if not all, of the material that you will distribute as a Teaching Assistant; if you anticipate that your teaching responsibilities will require additional copying needs, you should discuss the issue with the professor of the course, and bring the issue to the attention of the Department Assistant.



Keys

Every graduate student should receive a key that opens the mailroom/copying room on the second floor, as well as all the doors in the TA Office suite, 420–424 University Hall. Keys are available from the Graduate Program Assistant. Keys are considered University property and must be returned when graduate students are no longer in the program.

Discussion Sections

Professors

The relationship of TA to professor is a complex, multi-faceted one. Three distinct, even antithetical, principles overlap and need to be balanced: (1) the importance of intellectual and pedagogic autonomy on the part of TAs; (2) the importance of meaningful collaboration and mutual consultation between TAs and professor; (3) the importance of having a single final authority responsible for what is, in the end, a single course. This means that some decisions will be made by individual TAs, some collectively, and some unilaterally by the professor. Most important, of course, is that lines of communication between TA and professor be open and productive.

As soon as you know your TA assignment, you should contact the course professor to arrange a meeting to discuss the course, the readings, and general administrative duties. Most professors will continue to hold weekly meetings with the course's teaching staff throughout the quarter to discuss readings, lecture material, upcoming papers or exams, grading policies, and generally how the course is going. It is a rare professor who does not welcome feedback and suggestions from his or her Teaching Assistants. Remember that the best pedagogy comes from participating in running a large lecture course as a collaborative, rather than top-down, effort.

First Meeting

The first section meeting is probably the most important, for it is where you establish precedent as a teacher for the rest of the quarter. Be sure that you introduce yourself clearly (during the first meeting or two, it's a good idea to write your name, e-mail, and office hours on the board). You might also want explain to your students the purposes of the discussion section. Depending on their backgrounds, your students may have never participated in discussions at the level of engagement that we expect from them. They may also be unsure of how to connect the intellectual work that goes on in discussion sections with the material from lecture. For resources in thinking critically about the learning objectives of the discussion section, see the Resources chapter of this Handbook.

Discussion Formats

Research and experience have shown that students benefit most (and learn more effectively) from varied discussion formats, including small-group work, role-playing, and activities such as "Think-Pair-Share." For more information on varying the format of your classroom, see Appendix A, Peter Frederick's article "The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start."

Section Syllabi

Many TAs prepare a "Section Syllabus" that includes such information as: contact information (e-mail and phone number); office hours; attendance policies; expectations about participation; procedures for submitting papers, etc. The Section Syllabus is an excellent way to provide your students with a centralized source for practical information about the class and about you as their teaching assistant. For samples, see Appendices B and C.

Communication

The most important thing you can do as a teaching assistant is communicate clearly and effectively. This means that not only should you speak clearly and enunciate, but you should try to remain aware of your



students' level of understanding and establish an atmosphere in which they feel comfortable approaching you with questions and problems. Also, do not close yourself off from your colleagues. If the professor is reticent about meeting weekly (or ever), get together with the other TAs for your own meetings.

Grading

Grading, and all policies regarding grading (e.g., extensions, deadlines, drafts, re-writes, etc.) have to balance the importance of TA autonomy (both intellectual and administrative) against the professor's obligation to ensure equity and uniformity of grading in the overall class. Students can expect the professor leading the class to make clear to TAs exactly which grading policies and procedures will have to be coordinated within the course and which can be individualized by the TAs. A professor may or may not have a grading curve or set of grade-range quotas; a professor may or may not require a uniform policy on extensions, etc. These need to be communicated clearly in advance by the professor. Professors should realize that their TAs are not simply graders, and that sections are not simply informational sessions in which the professor's lectures are to be clarified. The richest courses take advantage of a TA's intellectual independence and creativity. At the same time, no one benefits when undergraduate students have the perception that policies regarding grading vary internally within a course. TAs should expect to work closely with the professor in clarifying and articulating all policies regarding grading.

Preparation

Preparation for grading begins before the assignments or exams are even distributed: the professor and TAs should meet to discuss the format and expectations of the assignment. Successful assignments are clearly explained and written out for the student. Often students (especially first-years and sophomores in 200-level lecture courses) have only a vague sense of what kind of intellectual work we expect from them on their papers. Some professors schedule an entire lecture on paper-writing skills early in the quarter, and some TAs distribute handouts that address close reading and revising (see Appendices D and E). In any case, the teaching staff should try to be fully aware of students' skill levels in formulating assignments and in establishing general grading guidelines.

Fairness and Consistency

There are several approaches that you can take to maintain fairness and consistency in your grading. Some suggestions:

- Read quickly through the entire stack of papers before grading or commenting on any individual paper;
- Use Post-It™ notes to assign provisional letter grades to each paper until you've read the whole lot;
- Meet with the professor and other TAs to exchange representative papers. Decide together on the general characteristics of an 'A,' a 'B+,' a 'D,' etc.;
- Ask students to submit the papers anonymously, with their ID numbers as the only identification, or with their names on the back of the paper (the idea being that you read and grade the paper without your previous knowledge of the student's work influencing your evaluation of the specific assignment);
- Write comments and provisional grades in pencil, but write final grades in pen.

Drafts and Rewrites

Students may ask you to read drafts of their papers before they submit them for a grade. Presumably there will be an overall course policy in place on this topic. If you are authorized, and choose, to read drafts (and your availability to do so can often assuage the fears of apprehensive students), it is a good idea to set a policy in advance. For instance, you could include information on your Section Syllabus about a schedule that the students should follow in submitting drafts (e.g. no less than a week before the due date; only if they make an appointment to discuss the draft, etc.). You can also direct students to the Writing Place, information about which can be found at: <http://www.writing.northwestern.edu>



Rewrites, on the other hand, present a different set of issues. Once again, it is essential that you work within general guidelines agreed upon by the professor and the other TAs. Policies can vary: some instructors decide that they will only accept rewrites if the original paper received a grade of 'B-' or lower; some require a conference to discuss the rewrite; some decide that the paper's final grade will be an average of the rewrite and the original. Very occasionally, a student will go over your head to approach the professor for a regrade. Most, if not all, professors will uphold your authority.

Returning Papers and Exams

Return graded papers and exams either in lecture, in section, or during office hours. For final papers and exams, you can either ask students to turn in a self-addressed, stamped envelope with their work, or you can return materials during office hours the following quarter. Some professors prefer that their TAs return graded work to students, while others hold on to final exams themselves. **However, during all quarter breaks, you must ensure that both the students' unclaimed work and copies of all grade sheets and grading worksheets remain in the professor's possession. Access to this material becomes vital in cases of missing or inaccurate grades.** Under no circumstances should you leave graded student work in a public location, return work to absent students' "friends," or ask the staff of the English Department to hold papers for students to retrieve. Contrary to popular belief, the TA Office falls under the rubric of "public location." Try not to leave student work from previous quarters in boxes or folders on your desk or elsewhere in the TA Office; this presents obvious security problems.

Late Papers and Incompletes

No doubt you will encounter students asking for extensions on papers. Again, there may be a uniform course policy constraining whether you accept such papers, and what penalty, if any, to apply to them. If you are authorized to grant extensions, you should state your policy clearly at the first section meeting and/or in your section syllabus..

Office Hours

Department of English policy requires TAs to hold regular office hours on two separate days for at least two hours per week. The College of Arts and Sciences also prefers that office hours be held at different times each day (e.g. at 10:00 am on Monday and at noon on Wednesday). If you must hold both of your office hours on the same day, or at the same time on different days, you should specify that you are also available "by appointment" for students who may have other commitments during your scheduled hours. While TAs are free to hold their office hours anywhere (i.e. at Norris, in the Unicorn Café), it is generally understood that conferences with undergraduates will be held in the TA Office. In any case, let your students know (at the first section or in your Section Syllabus) where you will be holding your office hours. Also, be sure to announce in lecture, in section, or by e-mail if you need to cancel or change your office hours. Note that you are **required** to hold office hours during Reading Week.

Lecturing

If the course to which you are assigned is in your field, and perhaps even if it is not, you may be asked to give a lecture. It is in your best interest to take advantage of every opportunity to lecture that is offered to you. Most of the teaching that you will do in graduate school will consist of discussion sections, writing seminars, or small classes such as freshman seminars and University College classes. It is entirely possible that if and when you take your first full-time teaching job, you will be asked to teach a large lecture course. This is your chance to develop a variety of teaching styles.



Academic Dishonesty

You may one day have to confront the unfortunate problem of academic dishonesty. If you suspect a student of plagiarism or cheating on an exam, go to the professor first, before you say anything to the student. More information can be found in Appendix F, “Cases of Plagiarism and Academic Integrity,” and on the web page Academic Integrity at NU, located at <http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/>.

Evaluations

By Students

At the end of each quarter, students will be given access to fill out an online CTEC (Course and Teacher Evaluation Council) form. There are special sections of this form for the students to evaluate discussion sections. Each TA is assigned a code that the students enter on the form. Sometime during the next quarter, professors receive both a numerical analysis of the ratings section of the forms, and a summary of the essays (these are also published on the web), as well as the essay forms themselves. If your professor does not circulate these evaluations to you to keep or to copy, be sure to remind him or her.

By Faculty

Professors are required by the Graduate Program to visit one of your section meetings during the quarter, and to write for your file a teaching evaluation based on this visit. Be sure to remind them of this requirement.

Your Teaching File

As teaching evaluations have become more and more important in the hiring process, you will want to keep a file of your evaluations for future reference. The Department keeps a separate section of teaching materials in your permanent file. However, you must be sure that this file is up-to-date by submitting CTEC forms, comments from your professors, syllabi, and lecture notes to the Graduate Program Assistant. The Department Chair and Director of Graduate Studies use this file in writing teaching evaluations and in recommending candidates to teach freshman seminars and University College courses.

Resources

Your Most Important Resource

You are a professional, or at the very least a professional-in-training; your fellow graduate students are your colleagues. They are your most important resource for support and ideas in situations both formal (i.e. workshops, meetings) and informal (i.e. at lunch, out for coffee, sitting around the TA Office). Above all, don't isolate yourself. If you're having a difficult time with teaching, talk to your colleagues or seek out a Department Teacher-Mentor. To admit a problem is not to admit weakness; most likely, some of your fellow TAs had or are having the same problem, and can help you work through it.

English Graduate Student Organization

<http://www.english.northwestern.edu/graduate/egso.html>

Searle Center for Teaching Excellence

<http://teach.northwestern.edu>

Preparing Future Faculty

<http://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/research/futurefaculty/>