

Teaching-Assistant Handbook



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Table of Contents

- Introduction.....2**
 - The purpose of discussion section.....2
 - Typical roles and responsibilities of Teaching Assistants3
- Advice and tips for effective teaching6**
 - Preparing for discussion class6
 - Designing discussion questions and tasks.....7
 - Presenting material in class7
 - Ways to begin discussion class7
 - Engaging students and facilitating learning.....8
 - Evaluating students’ work8
 - Facilitating student feedback8
 - Effective use of office hours.....9
- Evaluating Teaching Assistants 10**
 - Observing Teaching Assistants in class..... 11
 - Time and time-logs 11
- Resources for Teaching Assistants 12**
 - Training opportunities 12
 - Language skills..... 12
 - Grievances procedure 12

- Appendices**
 - Sample Teaching Assistant evaluation form 15
 - Sample Teaching Assistant observation form 16
 - Sample time-log for Teaching Assistant activities 18

Introduction

This handbook was designed to provide information and advice for teaching assistants. It provides a framework to structure the role and responsibilities of the job and we hope it will ensure that TAs, together with the team they are working with, can deliver an effective teaching and learning experience for geography students at UWM.

Definition: a Teaching Assistant is usually a graduate student who assists an instructor to deliver a course. Their main role is to reinforce key concepts from lectures to small groups of students through active learning techniques such as lively discussion. They also assist with grading and may act as a liaison between students and the instructor.

Teaching Assistants (TAs) play a pivotal role in our Department as many courses require their assistance and they help deliver our mission to impart a high level of geographical knowledge to all students. TAs are thus valued members of the geography community. Holding a TA position provides financial assistance towards graduate School, helps gain valuable teaching experience and offers an opportunity to be part of the Geography department community. Teaching experience not only provides you with practical skills such as public speaking, communicating and preparing clear presentations, but it also demonstrates a high degree of responsibility, an ability to condense and convey complex issues and a capacity to manage and organize. Thus, it is a valuable entry to have on a CV. However, there are also down sides to this appointment, in particular, in relation to time management. Preparing for class is extremely time consuming and should not be underestimated nor should it be rushed. Advising students also takes time and some students will require more guidance than others. Therefore, finding the right balance between going to class, performing TA duties and conducting research requires considerable planning on the part of TAs. The information and advice presented in this handbook should help TAs to be effective and efficient in their role.

The purpose of discussion section

The function of the discussion section is to provide an opportunity for students to become actively involved in learning and become familiar with a specific topic related to the course. Students are subdivided into small groups and tutored in a more relaxed atmosphere than a lecture. They are encouraged to participate in lively discussion, to ask questions and stimulate conversation. The discussion section should not be a summary or a repeat of the lecture material but instead should focus on a specific topic of particular relevance or interest.

The role of the TA is to guide discussion by providing some relevant material and putting forward leading questions which provoke critical thinking and participation. *The idea of discussion is to 'ask' not 'tell'*. This handbook aims to prepare TAs for their role.

Typical roles and responsibilities for Teaching Assistants

The main role of a teaching assistant is engaging with the course instructor. The frequency and manner of the interaction will vary depending on the instructor and the course in question. Regular meetings throughout the semester to discuss class materials and duties are encouraged.

- Attend all classes unless an emergency arises
 - Attend all team meetings, in particular, prior to discussion or lab sections
 - Attend exam sessions
 - Carry out other work according to the course requirements, such as: collecting and recording note cards (110, 125), attending the Service Learning Orientation and Workshop (125), grading labs (120, 125), etc.
- Hold office hours
 - Work with students one-on-one; learn about problems they are having with the course material
- Lead discussion sections
 - Identify critical information from lectures or readings and then elaborate on it to help students understand the material; attend class lectures so you understand what the students need to know; be responsible for grading exit assignments
 - Take attendance
 - Prepare clear and informative power-point presentation for each discussion class
 - include any important announcements such as approaching deadlines
 - include clear aims of the discussion session
 - include clear instructions for the exit assignment
- Log hours spent on each task
 - Attending class, office hours and meetings
 - Preparing discussion or lab presentation and lesson plan
 - Grading journals, grading mapping exercise, labs etc.
 - Uploading results to Canvas
 - Any other activities related to the course
- Follow the timetable provided and perform tasks in a timely manner
 - Make sure discussion section material is circulated to the team one week in advance of the class
 - If D2L is used, help ensure the discussion or lab materials are posted on D2L, in cooperation with the instructor and possibly other TAs

- Be responsible for your duties
 - If there is something you are unsure of ask
 - Confirm your particular tasks for the week, or your particular needs from the instructor –by e-mail, if necessary: It is not sufficient to say ‘I thought I understood’ or ‘I thought you knew
 - Primary responsibilities are running the discussion sections and grading the exit assignments; guiding the students through each SL journal and grading the journals; guiding the students through the mapping exercise and grading the assessments associated with it
- Communicate with the course instructor, your supervisor, and fellow TAs
 - Ask questions
 - Ask instructor for clarification regarding course matters
 - Respond promptly to course-related e-mails
 - Discuss your teaching assignment with your adviser
 - If you have to miss something due to an emergency, e-mail or call the course instructor and/or fellow TAs immediately
 - If you have to miss a discussion or lab, either plan coverage ahead of time (in the case of a conference, for example), or communicate with the instructor to enable coverage in the case of an emergency
- Learn about teaching and pedagogy
 - Write notes to yourself (journal) about lessons that go well, or go poorly
 - Seek advice from experienced TAs
 - Observe other instructors and TAs
 - Read the literature on teaching the kind of course you are working on
 - Reflect on pedagogy, in terms of your philosophy of teaching and actual practice
 - Attend Geography brown bags on teaching and pedagogy
- Consider your TA assignment as part of your professional development
 - Draft a teaching philosophy statement

- Ask your adviser to observe your teaching and meet to discuss it, and to discuss the role of teaching in your future job application process
- Take workshops through the UWM Center for Excellent in Teaching and Learning (CETL) and list them on your CV

Advice and tips for effective teaching

Preparing for discussion class

The purpose of the discussion section is to reinforce some of the key concepts from lectures and to give students the opportunity to experience a more interactive learning environment. With this in mind, you should be familiar with the lecture material and its salient points prior to the discussion section. This will involve attending lectures and discussing the concepts to be explored in discussion with the team, usually the instructor and other TAs.

Prepare a clear and informative power-point presentation for each discussion section. Each presentation should follow the same format and include (i) any important announcements such as approaching deadlines, (ii) key aims of the discussion and address how it relates to the material in lectures, (iii) clear slides relating to the topic being presented, making sure you are familiar with the information on each slide, (iv) clear instructions for the exit assignment and deadline, and (v) ask if there are any final questions or clarifications.

Designing discussion questions and tasks

Discussion questions should be well thought out and it should be clear what you are asking. A question should provoke critical thinking and require interpretation and analysis. The subject of the question should require the student to reflect on the material being conveyed in the lecture/video, etc. Ideally the question should have a range of answers. By answering the questions yourself you can judge the clarity of what is being asked and whether it is reasonable. Below are some examples of useful phrases and questions to avoid, and ones to use, when designing discussion questions. Questions to avoid relate to those that encourage one word answers, those that are ambiguous or vague, and those that tend to steer the conversation in a particular direction.

Table 1 Examples of useful phrases and questions to avoid when designing discussion questions.
Adapted from Stanford University – Designing Effective Discussion Questions

Useful phrases	Questions to avoid and ones to use
Compare and/or contrast	Anything that results in a 'yes' or 'no'. Is the Earth overpopulated? This does not promote much discussion. How might we determine whether or not the Earth is overpopulated?
Why?	
What is the meaning of...	Avoid vague questions. Is poverty a problem? There is not enough information in this question to give a meaningful answer. What causes poverty to be a problem in the US today?
How might you explain....	
What is meant by.....	Avoid leading questions, encourage students to express their own view. What makes
What are the causes of.....	

What might the result be.....	'Gone with the wind' such an amazing movie?
Does anyone disagree?	

When designing tasks to compliment a discussion it is important to keep in mind the following;

- The time available to complete the task. Keep in mind whether the task should be completed in-class or as a homework exercise and tailor the task accordingly.
- Give clear instructions as to what the students are expected to achieve within the timeframe. Completing the exercise yourself will not only ensure the task instructions are clear but that the timeframe is also reasonable.
- Provide a deadline for submission of the assignment.

Presenting material in class

The power-point presentation should be your prompt and help to guide the discussion. You should be familiar with all the material on the slides and know exactly why it is relevant to the discussion. Go through the information slowly to give the students time to absorb and reflect on the topic. Speak clearly and slowly and refer to information from the relevant lecture. Incorporating group discussion and tasks in the classroom can enhance the students learning experience and build their confidence provided the topic chosen is conducive to this. Use the guide above to help formulate discussion questions and tasks.

Ways to begin discussion class

There are many possible ways to begin a discussion that will depend on the subject matter, the TA and the students. Below is a short list of things to try.

- **Pairs or small groups** Subdivide the class into pairs or small groups and give them time to go through the assigned question/scenario/topic. This works even if students have no prior knowledge of the subject.
- **Student questions I** Ask the students to write a question on a card and bring it to class. Compile the cards, pick a few interesting ones, read them out (or write them on the board) and answer them collectively as a class.
- **Student questions II** Ask the students if there was anything they want you to go over. Write the topic on the board and ask if other students can answer the query before answering it yourself.

Engaging students and facilitating learning

Students often want to be told the facts about a topic and do not want to have to participate in the discussion. It is often difficult to get students to ask questions or to answer yours. But in a friendly relaxed atmosphere this should eventually become easier. Try to get students 'active' from the beginning otherwise it will be more difficult to change their pattern. Some tips to encourage students to participate are as follows;

- **Learn their names**
- **Wait time** – give students a chance to respond to a question. Allow them to collect their thoughts, look through their notes and formulate an answer. If by then, the student is still struggling rephrase the question but do not give in.
- **Before discussion** - Give students the opportunity to discuss or write about a topic in smaller groups before calling on individuals or asking for volunteers.
- **Student questions** – encourage students to ask questions of each other before putting it to the entire class.
- **Student presenters** – later in the semester have students explain a topic to the class.
- **Over/under participation** – some students talk too much while others do not participate enough or not at all. This situation may be dealt with by waiting until a few hands are up before calling on anyone. If the same students continuously provide answers you may say something like 'let's hear from someone who has not yet answered'. Let the volunteers speak and then say 'does anyone have anything to add?'

Evaluating students' work

Evaluating students work is pivotal to judging if they understand the material, it provides feedback to the student so they can assess their own progress and it provides an opportunity to communicate with the students directly. The key to effective evaluation is in the design of the assignment. Make sure you as the TA know exactly what you are expecting from the student. For example, if you ask 'What is climate change?' one student may respond by talking about how climate has changed over millennia while another may talk exclusively about recent anthropogenic climate change. Both of these answers are correct but if you wanted the students to talk about recent climate change caused by human activity you need to be more specific with the assignment question and perhaps ask 'What is considered to be the main cause of climate change in recent time?' The students cannot read our minds so is it really fair to give the student who wrote about climate change over millennia a low grade? Design exit assignments with a grading scheme in mind.

Facilitating student feedback

Feedback should be a two-way process. It is just as important to receive feedback from students as it is to provide it to them. A TA will provide feedback mainly through grading exit assignments and during class discussion. It may also be useful for the TA to seek anonymous feedback by conducting an end of semester survey (in addition to the course evaluations). This may be

accomplished as part of an end of semester survey for the entire course, by for example, having a separate section on the discussion sections.

Effective use of office hours

Office hours are designed to allow TAs to interact with students individually or in small groups. They provide an opportunity to work with students one-on-one and learn about problems they are having with the course material. This allows the student to provide feedback which may be of use to the overall delivery of discussion sections. Engaging students individually can often help encourage critical thinking and foster a positive working relationship. It may also provide an opportunity to direct students to other campus resources such as the writing center, counselling, etc.

Evaluating Teaching Assistants

Evaluating, observing and tracking the amount of time a TA spends on different activities is intended to make life easier not harder! The information in this section is designed to improve TA performance by identifying and addressing any issues as early as possible and implementing focused training strategies.

Evaluation leads to improved performance by identifying areas that are working well and those where improvement is needed. These factors should feed into a tailored training programme, which in turn should result in an improvement in teaching performance and ultimately to a more effective means of presenting and communicating the material in discussion section (Figure 1). The mid-term evaluation is critically important, particularly for early-stage Teaching Assistants, and designed to identify areas where improvements and training are needed during the semester. The effectiveness of the training strategies can be assessed at the end of term evaluation, where further training needs may be identified.

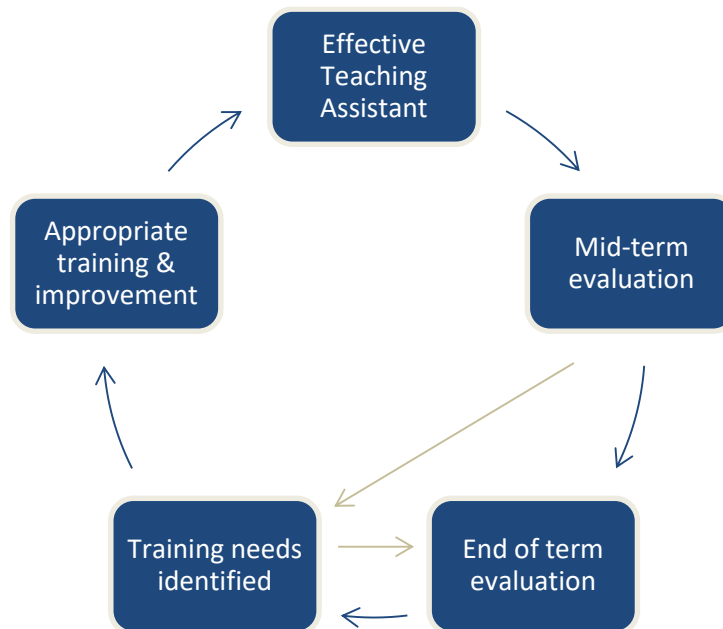


Figure 1 Schematic diagram representing the process of Teaching Assistant evaluation leading to improved performance and greater effectiveness.

We have designed an evaluation form (Appendix 1) to facilitate the process. The form can be modified and tailored to meet the needs of any course that involves Teaching Assistants. The form we use consists of 3 core categories (Professionalism, Teaching skills and learning environment, and Additional Categories) which should be used to evaluate the overall performance of all Teaching Assistants within the same department to allow cross-comparison.

These categories set out the requirements considered to be indicative of the role of a Teaching Assistant and should guide the overall evaluation process.

Observing Teaching Assistants in class

Observation by peers or instructors is intended to be beneficial and can help improve performance for both the TA and the students. The observation form (Appendix 2) we propose is designed to provide feedback on the content of the discussion section and how the TA delivers the information. In addition, it covers interaction with students and communication methods. The final sections focus on strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for improvement. This form can be used midway through the semester for early-stage TAs and again at the end of the semester in order to track their progress.

Time and Time-logs

Teaching Assistants often want to know exactly how much time they should spend on a particular activity. But this varies so much depending on the nature of the activity, how familiar the TA is with the material and their level of experience. More experienced TAs will undoubtedly spend less time preparing a discussion they have already given and less time grading. As a general rule the following has been taken from the Graduate School website regarding time allocation for TAs (<http://uwm.edu/graduateschool/graduate-assistant-policies-procedures/>). The workload of a Teaching Assistant ordinarily requires an effort between 360-380 hours per semester (23 hrs per week) (fall/spring) for a half-time (50%) academic year pay basis appointment and 240-254 hours per semester (16 hrs per week) for a one-third (33%) academic year pay basis appointment. A proportional number of hours will be calculated for other durations.

It can be useful to track the amount of time a TA spends on their duties to ensure the TA is not spending too much time on any one task, to demonstrate to the instructor they are working and as a guide for future TAs. It should help in time management. Tracking the amount of time spent on different activities can be carried out at the beginning of the semester and once a suitable pattern arises it may be dropped.

We have designed a time-sheet which may be used in order to track the amount of time being spent on a range of TA activities (Appendix 3).

Resources for Teaching Assistants

Teaching Assistants require a range of training along the lines of professional development. The nature of the training will depend on the level of experience of the TA and the course they are assisting with. Furthermore, if the language used in class is not the first language you may want to seek to improve your language skills.

Training opportunities

- Workshops offered in the Geography Colloquium Series:
 - Delivering an effective discussion class. This workshop will be provided by the Geography Department once a year.
 - Other workshops as identified by the graduate students during the year.
- Professional development calendar for graduate students (<https://uwm.edu/graduateschool/professional-development/>)
- New Graduate Students orientation specifically for Teaching Assistants (<https://uwm.edu/cetl/programs/orientations/2022-graduate-teaching-assistant-orientation/>)
- Workshops at UWMs Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (<http://uwm.edu/cetl/>)

Language skills

- Graduate School
- (<https://uwm.edu/graduateschool/english-proficiency/>)

Grievances procedure

As a TA you are entitled to raise concerns or make a complaint about any issue relating to your job or the course instructor. It is important to facilitate this process and ensure it is as transparent as possible. Equally, the instructor has the right to raise concerns or make a complaint relating to a TAs performance. If you feel that the particular grievance can be addressed within the department, follow the steps set out in this document. If you feel that the particular grievance cannot be addressed within the department follow the steps set out in this document (<https://uwm.edu/graduateschool/graduate-assistant-employment-grievance-procedure/>).

All graduate school policies on graduate assistantships are listed at this site (<https://uwm.edu/graduateschool/academic-policies-procedures/>). Including, application for an Academic Leave of Absence (ALA) (https://uwm.edu/graduateschool/wp-content/uploads/sites/519/2020/08/UWM-Graduate-Academic-Leave-of-Absence-Emergency-Accommodation_2020-05-05.pdf).

UWM Graduate Assistant Handbook

The Graduate Schools Assistant Handbook is a wealth of information and provides information for all kinds of graduate assistants (<https://uwm.edu/graduate-assistants/>).

Appendices

Score on a scale from one to five, poor, satisfactory, good, very good, excellent. NA – not applicable.

Sample Teaching Assistant Observation form

TA Observed _____

Course _____

Observed by: _____ Date of Observation _____

CONTENT

Key concepts are clear and specific	1	2	3	4	5
Clear link with lecture material	1	2	3	4	5
Critical order thinking was encouraged	1	2	3	4	5
TA related ideas to prior knowledge.	1	2	3	4	5
Definitions were provided for key vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5
Reviewed material by connecting to previous classes	1	2	3	4	5
Previewed material by connecting to future classes	1	2	3	4	5

ORGANIZATION

Introduction captured attention	1	2	3	4	5
Introduction stated lesson plan for dis/lab	1	2	3	4	5
Clear transition when changing topic	1	2	3	4	5
Lesson plan was followed	1	2	3	4	5
Concluded by summarizing main ideas	1	2	3	4	5

INTERACTION

TA questions to check concepts	1	2	3	4	5
TA questions to elicit critical thinking	1	2	3	4	5
Sufficient wait time	1	2	3	4	5
Students engaged in discussion	1	2	3	4	5
Students asked questions	1	2	3	4	5
TA feedback was informative	1	2	3	4	5
TA incorporated student responses	1	2	3	4	5
Good rapport with students	1	2	3	4	5

VERBAL/NON-VERBAL

Language was understandable & clear	1	2	3	4	5
Minimal use of verbalized pauses (er, ah, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
TA spoke articulately	1	2	3	4	5
Volume sufficient to be heard	1	2	3	4	5
Rate of delivery was appropriate	1	2	3	4	5
Effective body movement and gestures	1	2	3	4	5
Eye contact with students	1	2	3	4	5
Confident & enthusiastic	1	2	3	4	5

USE OF MEDIA

Visuals (slides, board) content clear & well organized	1	2	3	4	5
Effective use of the various media	1	2	3	4	5

Rating scale (1 = very poor, 2 = weak, 3 = average, 4 = good, 5 = excellent, NA = not applicable)
NOTES:

STRENGTHS:

WEAKNESSES:

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS RATING

1 2 3 4 5

Date of observation _____

Observer signature _____

TA signature _____

Sample time-log for Teaching Assistant activities

Week 1	Activity	Start time	End time	Total time	Notes
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					
Sunday					