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Teaching assistants are essential to undergraduate education at Simon Fraser University. Working as a teaching assistant also offers you unique opportunities and experiences.

As a teaching assistant at Simon Fraser University, you fill a number of important roles. You may lead class discussions; supervise a lab group; mark assignments; meet and correspond with students; or facilitate help sessions. Whatever role you fill, your work is very important to the success of the students and instructors you work with. To help you confidently fill your role, this guide provides you with strategies for fostering an inclusive and dynamic teaching environment and familiarizes you with SFU policies.

The opportunities and experiences that come from being a teaching assistant are also very valuable for you. Whether you plan to pursue an academic career or not, the skills you acquire as a teaching assistant will benefit you: facilitating and leading discussions; planning and delivering oral presentations; evaluating the work of others and offering constructive feedback; and designing and assigning projects.

Of course, you have many other responsibilities in addition to your work as a TA, not the least of which is your role as a student. This guide therefore aims to provide suggestions that will make your role as a teaching assistant easier and more efficient, thus allowing you to succeed as both a student and as a TA.

This is an introductory guide and is not intended to be comprehensive; rather, it provides suggestions and ideas for you to test out and refine in ways that respond to your students and satisfy your expectations as a teacher. We hope that you will take advantage of the resources and professional development opportunities of the Teaching and Learning Centre. The TLC offers a range of workshops designed to enrich your teaching experience.

We hope that you will find your teaching experience engaging and rewarding and look forward to seeing you at the Teaching and Learning Centre.
This section explains what a teaching assistant is and what a teaching assistant does.

Teaching assistants are typically graduate students, sometimes undergraduate students or individuals who apply to specific departments. The duties assigned to teaching assistants vary depending on the course and the instructor. For instance, teaching assistants may lead weekly tutorial groups, grade essays or assignments, supervise laboratories, or work as a “head tutor.”

Before your teaching assistantship begins, you will meet with the course instructor to discuss and agree upon your duties. Together with the instructor you will complete a TUG (time use guideline) form that specifically details your duties. This form not only specifies what tasks you will perform, but also how many hours you will devote to each task. It can help you ensure that you devote the appropriate amount of time to your teaching responsibilities – neither too much nor too little.

**Possible duties**

**Tutorial leader**

Tutorial leaders regularly meet with a group of students. The number of students will depend on the department and the nature of the activities to be conducted. Tutorial leaders may attend lectures; read the assigned material; take attendance; lead student field trips; evaluate student participation; lead discussions; review course concepts in a mini-lecture or question-and-answer session; administer tutorial assignments (presentations, quizzes, etc.); present assignment solutions or work through them with the students; respond to student correspondence; hold office hours; grade assignments, tests or exams; and meet with the course instructor to report on tutorial activities.

**Laboratory teaching assistant**

Laboratory TAs attend and supervise student laboratory sessions. They may attend lectures; complete the pre-lab activities or reference material; grade laboratory assignments; review and enforce safety regulations; demonstrate laboratory techniques; respond to student correspondence; hold office hours; and meet with the course instructor to report on laboratory activities.
Marking assistant

Marking assistants, or “markers,” are principally responsible for grading of assignments, tests, and/or exams. Marking may be distributed throughout the term or may fall in clusters, depending on when assignments are due. Markers may develop a marking rubric; provide written and/or oral feedback; respond to student correspondence; hold office hours; give presentations on expectations for assignments; and meet with the course instructor to discuss the grades or the grading process.

Head TA

The duties of the “head TA” will differ depending on the course and the instructor. Some instructors may ask that these TAs offer guidance to other TAs in the course section or hold workshops on a particular topic for other TAs. The head TA may hold sessions for all students on a particular topic (e.g., writing essays or preparing a lab report) or hold additional office hours to meet with students. The head TA might also be required to mark assignments, attend lectures, or deliver a lecture. Because the duties of this position tend to vary a great deal, be sure to clarify with the course instructor what will be expected of you and check in regularly to ensure that you are comfortable completing the duties you have been assigned.

Other duties not specified

The positions and duties specified above may be included in your TUG form, but other duties, not specified here, may also be included. If you have any questions or concerns about the duties you are being asked to perform, do not hesitate to contact your TSSU representative or TSSU directly.

Training opportunities

You have several opportunities to receive job training before and during your teaching assistantship. A TA/TM day is held in Burnaby, and TA orientations are held in Surrey and Vancouver, at the beginning of each semester in September and January. These free, one-day events include information sessions as well as a range of workshops that offer tips and strategies to improve your teaching.

A second opportunity is the Certificate Program in University Teaching and learning. This graduate program helps prepare students for an academic teaching career by offering an introduction to research and theories on teaching and learning in universities and by allowing students to practice relevant skills (e.g. lecturing, leading discussions, active learning techniques). Students also have the chance to prepare a teaching philosophy and a course design.

The Teaching and Learning Centre runs a variety of workshops throughout the year that may be of interest to you. Keep a close eye on [www.sfu.ca/tlcentre](http://www.sfu.ca/tlcentre) for announcements about these workshops.
Chapter 2 | TEACHING IN LABS

This section considers skills and strategies for teaching assistants who work in a lab setting. It will describe a typical lab session, strategies for preparing and leading a lab, and responses to common lab questions and situations.

A typical laboratory session

Before the lab: Students
Before a lab takes place, students often complete a pre-lab exercise or read a lab manual (a booklet or a PDF file that details the theories and procedures necessary to complete the lab). Some departments now use videos to teach lab procedures. Check with your supervisor to clarify the expectations related to lab procedures: Should you assume that your students have read their lab manuals without checking? Do you need to administer – and grade – a pre-lab quiz? Do you need to administer a brief oral exam?

At the lab

Before students begin work on the lab, you may have to give a pre-lab talk. This talk might remind students of the steps of the lab and/or procedures they need to follow (e.g., where to dispose of waste). You may want to make your marking expectations clear by telling the students what kinds of results you want them to record in their lab reports and how to record them. This is also a good opportunity to remind students of safety expectations and procedures and to answer questions. The pre-lab talk should be short and concise.

Students may then watch a video demonstration or watch you demonstrate any important laboratory skills they may be unfamiliar with (e.g., titration or palpating).

Students may then complete the lab. During this time you will supervise their activities and answer any questions that may arise. If possible, try to circulate through the whole lab, speaking to each small group, possibly even to each individual student. This will help build a collegial environment and may invite questions that a student was hesitant to raise with the whole class.
After the lab
When the lab is finished, students will usually complete a report or an assignment in order to demonstrate the knowledge they have gained by completing the lab. You may be responsible for collecting these labs and marking them, or this marking may fall to another TA. Be sure to find out the procedures for marking before the lab so that you can clearly communicate to the students the expectations for the lab report/assignment.

Strategies for preparing for and leading a lab
Follow these five steps to prepare effectively for your lab:

1. Read the lab manual and relevant sections of the course textbook.
2. If possible, complete the lab yourself and note any difficult (technically or conceptually) parts in your pre-lab talk. You should keep these notes for a later conversation with your supervisor, to update or improve the lab if necessary.
3. Prepare your pre-lab talk, if one is required. Be sure to include safety reminders and necessary definitions or calculations.
4. Distribute a marking rubric for lab reports or assignments to your students.
5. Arrive at your lab early to make sure the necessary equipment is available. Keep in mind that your students will want to start their work on time to give themselves the best chance of getting full marks.

Follow these five steps to lead your lab effectively:

1. Start your lab on time and keep your pre-lab talk concise and ideally under ten minutes.
2. Circulate throughout the lab addressing – and asking! – individual questions, correcting lab procedures and monitoring lab safety.
3. Ask questions like “What do you predict will happen?” or “Why did this happen this way?” to stimulate further thinking.
4. Try to talk to every individual and/or group at least once.
5. If more than one group is having difficulty with a particular aspect of the lab, clarify the problem for the whole class.

Responses to common lab questions and situations
Lab equipment: How do you make it work? Is this right?
Check to ensure that the student has consulted the lab manual for directions or a diagram. Ask the student to clarify which parts of the equipment or equipment setup do not work or what specific aspect he or she is concerned about. Try to guide the student towards determining whether the equipment is actually broken or has simply been set up incorrectly. This is more instructive than simply showing students what is wrong right away. In the case of a difficult problem, this approach also gives you time to think about possible sources of error. If you and the student cannot find the problem, consult the lab technician responsible for your lab.
Lab procedure: What should I do? Is this right?
Ensure that the student has read the lab manual. Suggest that the student confer with his or her lab partner. If the difficulties persist, encourage the student to consult the lab manual and to predict appropriate responses. If you suggested outcomes or highlighted important procedures during your pre-lab talk, remind the student of what you said previously. Keep in mind that students might ask you for help to save time – but that such “helpfulness” will actually cause them to learn less.

Lab results: Why did it do that? Is this right?
Ask the student whether the results are what she or he expected. If not, ask the student to suggest at what point during the lab the results could have been compromised. Encourage your student to consider each part of the lab and its contribution to the final result. Quite often, obtaining a wrong result and reflecting on it will actually be more instructive for students than simply obtaining an expected result; therefore, encourage your students not to be shy about showing you their unexpected results.

Lab data and calculations: Is it okay to be off? Is this right?
It is not okay to be “off” in the calculations. Some variation in data is to be expected, but calculations based on the data need to be accurate. Ask your students where they are having difficulty with the calculations. Suggest that your student check with his or her lab partner or perform the calculations again. Take the opportunity to teach your students about using orders of magnitude to estimate the likely correctness of a result, and about checking their units as another way to find mistakes in their calculations. Do not accept results with incorrect units or without units.

Discuss with your course instructor and fellow TAs what the procedures you will use to deal with students who do not read the lab manual before class, who request extensions, or whom you suspect of academic dishonesty.

Try to avoid answering the question “Is this result right?” directly. Instead, encourage your students to consider why and how something in the lab has happened or should happen and to assess whether their results or calculations align with their predictions. Remind them to collaborate with colleagues and to refer to their lab manuals. In response to “Am I doing this right?” you may assure students that they are performing the lab procedure correctly.
Chapter 3 | TEACHING IN TUTORIALS

This section explains a typical tutorial session, suggests how to prepare for and lead an effective tutorial, and suggests some responses to common questions and problems in tutorials.

A typical tutorial session

It is actually misleading to say there is a “typical” tutorial session. What happens in your tutorial will depend on the kinds of activities the course instructor would like you to carry out or supervise. Below are some common procedures and activities for a tutorial, but you may find that your tutorial runs differently.

Before the tutorial: Students

Before the tutorial, students will be expected to read the assigned material for the week. This material may be the same as that for the lecture or it may be unique to the tutorial. If your tutorials involve student-led presentations, demonstrations, or discussions, the students may have met with you to discuss their activity. If your tutorial includes a discussion of solutions to assignments, make sure you have done the assignments yourself or at least read – and understood! - the solutions. If creating the solutions is part of your duties as a TA, that will be an advantage: Not only will you be more familiar with the material, but you will also have a better idea of what problems the students will have with it.

During the tutorial

At the beginning of the tutorial session you may wish to make any important announcements and then introduce the tutorial agenda (i.e., what the class will cover in that session). Depending on the tutorial, you may then lead the class through an instructional activity (see “Chapter 7: Instructional Strategies”) in order to clarify or introduce course material. This activity might include, but is not limited to, a lecture, a large group discussion, a video clip, guided reading, small group discussions, a debate, individual writing assignments, a student presentation, or a question/answer session.
After the tutorial

Students may have written assignments or reading to complete before the next tutorial. They may contact you by email or visit you during your office hours to discuss questions or concerns they have with the material or with an assignment. You may be responsible for collecting and grading student assignments.

Strategies for preparing for and leading a tutorial

Follow these five steps to effectively prepare for your tutorial:

1. Read the assigned material and make note of any difficult passages or concepts. Clarify with the instructor, if necessary.
2. Determine what the key concepts or skills are that you will teach or discuss in the tutorial.
3. Prepare an explanation of difficult ideas or write down a question or a problem that relates to key concepts that you could use to start a discussion.
4. If applicable, write a lesson plan that includes the instructional activities you will use in the tutorial and how long each activity will take.
5. Arrive to your tutorial early and make sure you have all necessary materials ready.

Follow these five steps to effectively lead your tutorial:

1. Learn student names and use them to invite students to join the discussion or to respond to a question.
2. If possible, arrange the classroom furniture in a way that helps facilitate a discussion (e.g., a circle of chairs is more conducive to conversation than rows).
3. Begin each tutorial with a brief outline of what you will cover in that particular session. If you let students know what to expect, they will be more likely to relax and participate freely.
4. If students give an incorrect answer to a question, don’t just tell them they are “wrong.” Instead, advise them that the answer they have given is incorrect, but that you are interested in finding out how they arrived at that answer. This will encourage students to participate even if they are not sure whether their answer is “right” or not, because they will know that you are interested in their thought processes and not just the end result.
5. Begin and end your tutorial on time.

Responses to common tutorial situations

Students are not participating in the discussion

There are many reasons why students do not participate in discussions: they may not have read the assigned material; they may be unclear about what the question is asking and so are unsure of how to respond; they may be intimidated speaking in front of other students; or they may simply be distracted.
If a question arises during the tutorial for which you do not know the answer, you can respond, “Great question! I don’t have the answer right now, but I will find out and email you by Monday,” or “What have you tried already to find the answer?” It is perfectly acceptable not to immediately know an answer, but it is important to find and discuss the answer in a timely manner.

You can check at the beginning of the class to find out how many students have read the assigned reading by asking for a show of hands (if you are prepared to guarantee that you will not penalize students if they have not read the material). If most students have not read what you expected them to read, you may want to read a selection as a class, or have one student summarize the key ideas for the others. You may also wish to review the expectations for the course in a discussion with students.

If the question you ask is unclear, students will have difficulty responding (see “Chapter 7: Instructional Strategies” for tips on asking a good question). If you feel you have written a clear question, ask your students whether they simply need more time to think about their response, or whether they would like you to rephrase the question.

Students who are intimidated by speaking in front of large groups may feel more comfortable speaking in a small group. You can have your class break into smaller groups for a short discussion and then regather as a large group with one student from each small group “reporting” their findings. This gives shy students the opportunity to express their ideas in a more comfortable setting, but still allows all students the benefit of the generated ideas.

One student dominates the discussion; or, the same student always answers the questions

The first way to approach this situation is to directly call on other students: the other students are likely interested in hearing from someone else, too. If this does not work, you can talk to the dominating student after class. Let the student know that you appreciate his or her contributions, but that you would like to hear what other students think about the topic, or that you need to assess the other students’ knowledge.

Students are not prepared for the tutorial

Remind students of the expectations for the tutorial and the penalties for coming unprepared. If necessary, speak to the course instructor about the possibility of introducing pop quizzes or an in-class assignment to check that students have read the material.
Chapter 4 | TEACHING IN AN INCLUSIVE AND CIVIL CLASSROOM

This chapter introduces strategies and resources for creating and maintaining an inclusive and civil classroom. It explores the definition of an “inclusive classroom” and the steps you can take to create an inclusive classroom. It addresses the definition of a “civil classroom,” how to prevent conflicts, and how to deal with them if they do arise.

The inclusive classroom

What is an inclusive community?

An inclusive community is “one in which there is real, visible and meaningful representation of the diversity evident in the wider community at all levels and in all constituencies on campus (faculty, staff, students, administration), one in which all members feel safe and empowered, valued and respected for their contributions to the shared purposes of the University: research and educational excellence. It is a community where the rights of all individuals and groups are protected. Inclusion occurs when an organization provides equitable access to its services, benefits and opportunities, when systems and structures facilitate full participation by all members and when members are treated equitably and recognized for their contributions. The key ingredients are equitable access, participation (especially in the decision-making processes) and equal attention to the needs and aspirations of all” (Human Rights and Equity Services, McMaster University).

What is an inclusive classroom?

An inclusive classroom is a classroom in which all students and instructors feel safe – physically and emotionally – and welcome to contribute ideas, views, and concerns. In an inclusive classroom, content is selected from a broad range of sources and is presented through a variety of teaching methods. Everyone in the class is responsible for contributing to the inclusive classroom by asking questions, challenging assumptions, and allowing for mistakes to be made.
How do I create an inclusive classroom?

It may feel like a lot of work to create an inclusive classroom, especially if you are new to teaching and are already worried about creating a classroom at all. Fortunately, the steps to creating an inclusive classroom are not difficult and consist of things you should be doing while you teach anyway. Simply put, teaching in a classroom should always be teaching in an inclusive classroom.

Suggestions for creating an inclusive classroom

1. Recognize any barriers that might keep a student from fully participating in your class and work to remove them. Barriers can be found in attitudes; in the architecture of a classroom; in the way communication is carried out; in the use made of technology; and in the “system” itself. To learn more about these barriers, go to http://students.sfu.ca/disabilityaccess.html.

2. Get to know your students! Tell them about yourself and give them the chance to tell you something about themselves. You can do this by inviting each of them to visit you during office hours or to send you an email or voice message. You can also chat with them before and after class. Encourage your students to get to know one another as well. You can do this by having the students meet in small groups; participate in roundtable discussions; or work with partners.

3. Set up classroom guidelines with your tutorial or lab group during the first class of the year. Specify your expectations for participation, attendance, deadlines, and classroom behaviour. Allow students the opportunity to respond to these expectations and to contribute their own. Be prepared to challenge students (or yourself) when they (or you) fail to meet these expectations.

4. When you set your attendance policy and record attendance, be aware of religious holidays that may prevent some students from attending a particular class. You can check here http://www.sfu.ca/humanrights/guides-protocols/interfaith-calendars.html to find out when particular holidays fall in a given year. Take attendance systematically and do not rely on your memory to note how often particular students have missed classes. Sometimes a student’s appearance will make it more or less likely that you will remember whether they have missed a class.

5. Clearly explain your grading criteria to your students and give them an opportunity to express any concerns they might have about the criteria. Make sure you clearly communicate (in writing and orally) what modes of evaluation you will be using.

6. In class discussions, strive for variety in your cultural reference points or ask for examples from your students in order to maintain diversity in the kinds of examples that circulate.

7. Your instructional strategies should likewise be varied. If you prefer one instructional strategy to another (e.g., lecturing over discussions), consider including a handout, video link, chart, or group follow-up discussion to allow students of all learning styles to be included.

8. Give students frequent opportunities to provide you with anonymous feedback about both the course content and how the class is run. Be prepared to respond to
the feedback either by making changes or by explaining to your students why you cannot make a particular change.

For more information on “inclusive classrooms,” check out the following links:

- www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/inclusiveclass: a list of over thirty articles/web resources on inclusivity in the classroom with web links
- www.sfu.ca/humanrights.html: Human Rights and Equity Services at Simon Fraser, an office that responds to inquiries and concerns about discrimination on campus

The civil classroom

What is a “civil classroom”?

A civil classroom is one in which students and instructors strive to respectfully respond to sensitive subject matter and charged conversations. It is a classroom in which students and instructors aim to minimize disruptive behaviour and to respond appropriately to disruptive behaviour when it does occur.

Preventing conflict

Have a discussion or distribute a handout in the first class that covers expectations for the following:

- **Attendance**: May students arrive late or leave early?
- **Participation**: Do students need to participate orally? Is there a limit on the number of times one student may respond during a tutorial? Is there a limit on the length of a student response? Who sets the agenda for the class?
- **Deadlines**: What will happen if a student paper is received late?
- **Technology**: What are your guidelines for appropriate use of laptops? What should students do if they are expecting/receive an important phone call? What is your policy on headphones in the classroom? What are the guidelines for online discussions and message boards?
- **Formality**: Should students address you as “madam” or “sir” or by your name? Do students need to put up their hands to contribute a response? Are students permitted to wear hats in the classroom? May students eat snacks (or meals) during class time?
- **Feedback**: When will students receive feedback from you? How can they give you feedback? What will you do with that feedback?

When you are setting these expectations, speak to the course instructor if you have any questions or if you believe that a particular policy needs to apply to the whole course (e.g., treatment of late papers). You need to be comfortable with the expectations you have set, with explaining why you have set them, and with enforcing them once you have set them. If you encounter a conflict, contact the course instructor to let her or him know and to ask for support.

It is also important to allow students the opportunity to provide feedback about the expectations you have set and to contribute additional ideas. You can encourage them to provide this feedback by leading a discussion about the expectations, by inviting students to email you with comments or suggestions, or by giving them time in class to (anonymously) write
down their feedback. Including students in this process is essential to ensure that they feel accountable and to demonstrate that you appreciate their expectations for the class.

**Potential conflicts**

Review these examples of difficult situations and consider what you might do in each situation. If you are unsure of what an appropriate response might be, check with your course instructor or another TA, or contact the Teaching and Learning Centre for suggestions.

- A student answers a question incorrectly.
- During a discussion, a student makes a comment that you perceive to be inappropriate.
- A student comes to your office to discuss a grade he or she feels is unfair or unjustified.
- You suspect a student has plagiarized an assignment.
- Your course instructor has requested you mark an additional 25 papers, but if you do so you will exceed your allotted hours for the term.
- One student in your class consistently makes inappropriate jokes before and after class time.
- A student invites you out on a date.

If in doubt, seek help.

**Special cases**

The following examples of possible difficult situations require specific responses. Review the situations and the suggested response. If you have any questions or concerns about either the situation or the response, please contact the Teaching and Learning Centre.

- A student comes to you in emotional distress, or you suspect that he or she is in emotional distress.

Pay attention to warning signs that a student might be in difficulty (e.g., depression, withdrawn behaviour, repeated sleeping in class, a marked change in appearance, uncharacteristic changes in academic performance, uncharacteristic changes in class attendance, unusual or exaggerated emotional responses).

If you feel it is appropriate and you feel comfortable, talk to the student in private when you are not rushed. If you do not feel comfortable, contact Health and Counselling Services at students.sfu.ca/health.html for suggestions. You may also want to refer the student to one of these services.

- You feel harassed or intimidated by a student.

In any potentially dangerous situation (e.g., a student is behaving violently, threatening a member of the class, or carrying a weapon) immediately contact Campus Security at www.sfu.ca/srs/security.html. You may also ask a student from the class to make this call if it is not possible for you to do so.

If a student is harassing you or another student or if you feel discrimination is taking place, contact Human Rights and Equity Services at www.sfu.ca/humanrights.html.

Harassing emails should likewise be referred to Human Rights and Equity Services.
Chapter 5 | BEYOND THE LAB OR TUTORIAL: OFFICE HOURS, EMAILS, LESSON PLANS

Strategies for managing office hours, the volume of emails, and preparation of an effective lesson plan.

As a teaching assistant, you will find it important to manage your time effectively. Your duties will often include activities like holding office hours, answering emails, or preparing lesson plans. These activities are more difficult to schedule than class time and can consume a great deal of your allotted TUG time. Monitor these hours closely by keeping a logbook – for example, to note how much time you spend answering emails – and, if necessary, adjust your TUG form with your course instructor to accurately reflect the time you spend on each task. The simple strategies listed here will help you succeed in effectively managing these activities.

Office hours

When you complete your TUG form you will determine, along with your course instructor, whether and how often you will hold office hours. The instructor may determine the time and location of your office hours, or you may decide for yourself.

Once you have determined where and when your office hours will be held, announce your office hours to your class, distribute a handout with your office location and hours, post them on your office door, post them with the department office, and send the hours out to your students by email (see the “Emails” section below). You may need to occasionally adjust your hours or agree to meet students “by appointment” if there are students who cannot attend your scheduled hours. Remind students of your office hours, especially in the first few weeks when new students may be joining the class.

Many students, especially in their first year, are not sure what office hours are or why they might want to attend. Let students know that they do not need to have a “problem” in order to come to office hours, but may simply want to come to talk one-on-one about an idea or course concept. Remind them that you want to meet with them and that office hours are one of the few opportunities at the university level to have a one-on-one conversation; and let them know that if they do have a “problem,” you are interested in working together to reach a solution.
You may notice a sharp increase in office-hour attendance immediately before and after an assignment is due. Advise students whether or not your office hours will be extended during these busier periods. Extend your office hours only if you have allotted the time to do so in your TUG form.

During office hours, keep your office door open. When students arrive, greet them warmly and invite them to sit down. Once they are comfortable, ask them what brings them to your office. Listen carefully to their concern or question and respond appropriately. If you do not know the answer to a question, advise the student that you will find out and let them know.

Schedule your office hours in a location with frequent foot traffic and be sure to set your office hours during normal business hours.

If you feel uncomfortable during your office hours for any reason, you may ask the student – politely – to leave and then schedule a meeting with the student, the course instructor, and yourself at a later date. If you feel threatened, call Campus Security.

Here are some topics you may cover during your office hours:

- Explanation of an assignment grade or grading criteria
- Clarification of a course concept or research method
- Discussion of professional development in your field (e.g., how can the student become a biologist?)
- Discussion of the teaching methods used in tutorials
- Conversations about the structure and format of an assignment
- Discussion of thesis statements and essay outlines

Here are some topics that are inappropriate for discussion during office hours:

- Other students’ work or behaviour
- The course instructor or his/her teaching style or his/her organization of the course or his/her assignment schedule
- The content/format of the exam (unless specifically directed by the course instructor)
- Editing or proofreading of upcoming assignments

Here are some topics that are discretionary:

- Your personal experiences, related or unrelated to the subject matter
- The student’s personal experiences

**Emails**

Emailing students can take a lot of time. To save time and frustration, set an email policy before the term begins. If you are unsure about your policy, check with the course instructor. Advise students of your email policy in the first class and distribute this policy as a handout.
Your email policy might cover the following information:

- **When you will respond to emails**: Let students know when you will check course-related email (e.g., on Tuesdays and Thursdays) and how soon they can expect a response from that point (e.g., within two business days).

- **When you will not respond to emails**: You may decide not to respond to emails 24 hours before an assignment is due or 24 hours after an assignment is due in order to avoid last-minute or emotional emails. You must tell your students if this is your policy, and remind them well before the assignment is due and when the assignment is handed back.

- **What kinds of questions you will respond to by email**: You may advise students that you will only answer “yes or no” questions by email and that they should meet with you during your office hours if they require a detailed response or discussion. Or you can include a “five-sentence rule” which states that you will only answer emails that can be responded to in under five sentences.

- **How you will protect the privacy of student email addresses**: Assure your students that you will use the “blind carbon copy” (BCC) function when sending group emails. This function ensures that only you see individual student email addresses.

**Lesson plans**

A lesson plan will boost your confidence that you “know what you’re doing” before a class and can help you stay organized and focused during the session.

A lesson plan can include the following information: the objectives for your session; the teaching strategies you will use; the order in which you will cover the topics; the ways in which you will assess whether students have learned what you wanted them to learn.

A great way to save time is to use the same lesson-plan format for each session you teach. This can be fairly straightforward if you teach in a lab setting. Your lesson plan might then look something like this:

**Lab Session #3 – Titration**

9:30 – Welcome and pre-lab talk: mention office hours and upcoming quiz

9:40 – Video demonstration of titration

9:45 – Students complete lab assignment

11:00 – Collect student lab reports and remind students of upcoming quiz

If you teach a discussion-based tutorial group, your lesson plan might look more like this:

**Objective for tutorial:**

Ways to engage students:

How will I know if they “got it”?
9:30 – Welcome, attendance, and reminder of upcoming assignment deadline

9:35 – Small group discussions: distribute questions to each group (use chart paper and markers)

9:50 – Large group discussion: each group reports on their question and discussion (record answers on board)

10:15 – Writing activity: Students write down the three most important ideas from the day’s session and one thing they are still unsure about

10:20 – Answer unresolved questions, collect written responses, remind students of upcoming assignment

If you lead a problem-solving tutorial group, your lesson plan might look something like this:

**Problems to be covered:**
Ways to engage students:

9:30 – Welcome, attendance, reminder of email policy and office hours

9:35 – Post problem #1 on overhead. Brainstorm possible solutions

9:45 – Ask students to write down the solution they think works best and to explain why they chose the one they did

9:50-10:20 – Repeat with problems #2 and #3

10:20 – Collect problems and remind students of what problems will be covered next week

These lesson plans are intended as models. The way you structure your class and the activities you include will depend on the course, on the expectations of the instructor, and on the expectations of your students. Develop a plan that works well for you, but be prepared to modify it to meet student needs and learning styles. Remember that a lesson plan is only a guide and that productive conversations or engaging topics may sometimes warrant deviation from your plan.
Chapter 6 | EVALUATING STUDENT LEARNING AND OFFERING EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

This chapter explores the qualities of effective feedback and offers suggestions for quickly and fairly evaluating essays, presentations, labs, and assignments.

Most teaching assistants are also students. As students, you have likely experienced the aggravation of receiving an assignment back weeks (or even months) after you handed it in, or the frustration of not understanding the comments on your assignment, or worse still, finding no comments at all. This chapter considers some ways of avoiding these situations as well as how you can provide your students with quality feedback that will help them achieve better results on their next assignment.

SFU grading scale

Simon Fraser University commonly operates under a five-point grade scale. You may be required to give grades as a percentage out of 100 or as a letter grade. Check with your course instructor before you begin grading to ensure that you are using the preferred method. Use this chart if you need to convert percentage grades to letter grades (or to check how the percentage or letter converts to a grade point):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Grade Point</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>92–100</td>
<td>Excellent performance</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>88–91.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>85–87.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>82–84.5</td>
<td>Good performance</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>78–81.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>75–77.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>72–74.5</td>
<td>Satisfactory performance</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>68–71.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>65–67.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>55–64.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0–54.5</td>
<td>Unsatisfactory performance (fail)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The qualities of effective feedback

Effective feedback is …

- **Prompt**: If you want your feedback to feel relevant to your students, you will need to provide it as soon as possible. Ideally, an assignment should be handed back within two weeks of the date on which the student turned it in. Providing students with quick feedback gives them time to think about your suggestions and talk to you about them before they begin working on their next assignment; it also gives you ample opportunity to teach skills or techniques that you notice everyone seems to have had trouble with.

- **Specific**: Whether you praise or criticize a student’s work, your feedback should be specific. If you tell students that something is “good” or “bad,” they will likely be unsure about what exactly they have done well or poorly. By noting what specifically you are referring to, you can help the student understand what to correct or repeat for next time.

- **Constructive (or future-oriented)**: There is nothing wrong with advising students that they have completed an assignment incorrectly or misused a formula or theory. However, when you alert students to a mistake, it is important to let them know what they should do differently to achieve a better result next time.

- **Objective**: To ensure that you are not biased when marking assignments, it is a good idea to ask students to use their student numbers to identify their work. You can also ask them to write their names on the back of the assignment (this will save you the trouble of looking up student numbers and names). Addressing what was done (or not done) rather than why the student did it is another important aspect of objectivity. Similarly, using language such as “the assignment did” or “the essay did not do” rather than “you did” will minimize defensive reactions when students read your feedback.

- **Relevant**: Some assignments you mark will have dozens of things “wrong.” It is important to focus on one or two aspects of the assignment that you think the student needs to work on immediately, rather than cataloguing all of the errors. This is important both because you do not have time when marking to give detailed and comprehensive feedback on all errors, and because your student may feel overwhelmed by suggestions if you list everything. Similarly, make sure you are evaluating the aspects of the assignment that you told students you would be marking. If you told your students you would not be marking their use of citations, then feedback on their citations is irrelevant (for that assignment).

Grading quickly and fairly

Now that you know what qualities make feedback effective, it is worth considering how to give this feedback quickly and fairly.

- **Use a rubric or sample assignment**: If possible (i.e., if your instructor does not object), set up a rubric for marking assignments. A rubric breaks down the different components of the assignment and details what percentage of the overall grade each component is worth (see “Appendix A” for a sample rubric for an essay).
Distribute the rubric or sample assignment to your students before the assignment is due so they know your expectations. Work through the rubric as you mark, and total the marks to determine the overall grade. By using a rubric you will have an easier time explaining to students why they received the mark they did, as you can clearly show them the parts of the assignment they had trouble with or did well on. Finally, using a rubric will help ensure that you mark consistently.

- **Part marks**: Your rubric or sample assignment may detail what you will give marks for, but it may not clearly explain under what conditions you will give “part marks.” Consider this before you begin marking and assign “part marks” consistently.

- **Group assignments or questions**: If you are marking essays, group the essays according to topic. Mark all essays on one topic at one time. While you may get bored after reading your twentieth paper on the French Revolution, you will mark more consistently if you read them all at the same time. Likewise, if you are grading a problem set, group assignments by how the student solved the problem. This will help save you time and will also ensure that you grade the problems fairly as you will more likely remember under what conditions you gave out part marks or deducted marks. You may also be more likely to detect academic dishonesty by grouping assignments and problem sets. If you are marking exams with a large number of problems, don’t mark one student’s paper from beginning to end and then move on to the next student. Instead, mark problem 1 for all the students, then move on to problem 2, and so on. This will help ensure consistency and fairness in your marking.

- **Class feedback**: If you notice that more than three students have made the same error or the same kind of error, you might want to stop writing specific and constructive feedback and simply note that you will discuss the particular problem with the class. When you address the class, point out the common error and then give detailed instructions on how to improve for next time.

- **Use a timer**: As a teaching assistant you work a specific number of hours a term, as defined in your TUG. Depending on how much of this time has been allotted to marking, you may find you need to mark very quickly. If you use an egg timer (or the timer on a microwave or a stopwatch), you can ensure that you give each student as much time as you can, while adhering to your hours. If the timer goes off and you have not reached the end of the assignment, you might want to stop writing feedback and work as quickly as you can to reach the end of the assignment and assign a grade.

- **Practice**: You will become more comfortable with marking and giving feedback as you do more marking. If you are nervous or unsure about your first round of marking – and most teaching assistants are! – ask your course instructor or head TA to look over your assignments and offer you some feedback. Many course instructors require their TAs to hand in a sample of their marking so that they can ensure consistency in the way the TAs mark. This is normal practice and will help you feel more confident that you have graded fairly when you hand back assignments. If you are a first-time TA, you may want to mark with a partner for the first round of assignments. This will give you the chance to ask questions and seek advice. Be sure not to spend your time complaining about the poor quality of student work: this is unprofessional and inappropriate.
Chapter 7 | INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

This chapter lists common instructional strategies and how to use them in your tutorial or lab. You may incorporate one or all of these instructional strategies in your teaching or you may find one or two strategies that work well for you. Don’t be afraid to take a chance and try a new technique!

Discussions

There are many ways to hold a discussion and many reasons for wanting to do so. Discussions generate more ideas than one person alone could come up with, and they offer students the chance to test out new ideas in a more informal setting. Discussions have also been shown to help students retain information and ideas far better than either lectures or demonstrations because they require students to analyze ideas and phrase them in their own words.

Small group discussions

The size of a “small group” may vary, but it generally consists of between three and eight people. You can do a variety of things with a small group discussion: have each small group working on a different problem/question with a chance for each group to report its findings; have all of the small groups working on the same problem/question with no chance to report back, but the opportunity to talk about the ideas with one another; or have each small group generate a list of questions/problems for the large group to solve together. You can also ask students to elect a “recorder” who will write down the key points of their discussion and a “speaker” who will report findings (if necessary) to the class. You may also want to appoint a “time keeper” to be in charge of making sure the group completes its task in the given time.

Think-pair-share

This technique has three steps, but they can be used alone or all together. The first step is to present students with a question or problem and let them think independently about the question/problem for a set period of time (say 2 minutes). The next step is to have the students pair up by turning to the person beside them and discussing their ideas about the
question/problem with their partner for a set period of time (say 3 minutes). The final step is to return to the large group to share responses – this can be an informal discussion where students volunteer ideas, or you can ask each student pair to give its response.

**Large group discussions**

You can have a discussion with your whole tutorial or lab group. There are many ways to start a large group discussion. You could show a video clip, read a passage from the assigned text, present a problem, share a newspaper clipping, or do a demonstration and then have your students discuss the significance of what you showed or read, or you could ask questions about what you showed or read. You could also start the discussion by asking (and writing down on the board) a question that you came up or you could have students generate questions to share with the whole group. (Note that you could use any of these techniques to begin a small group discussion, too.)

**Questions**

Asking a good question can start a great discussion with a large group, a small group, or a think-pair-share group. A good question has four qualities: it is high-level, divergent, structured, and single.

- **High-level** questions require analysis, synthesis, or evaluation, whereas “low-level” questions require only rote memory. **Divergent** questions have more than one right answer, so that students feel safer offering a response. Divergent questions also lead to more interesting discussions. **Structured** questions give students a clear sense of how to answer the question. For instance, a structured question asks students to think about a specific section of the text, or to answer with specific information. This helps student focus and arrive at an answer quickly. **Single** questions are questions that focus on one issue. Often teachers will ask a string of questions. This practice makes it difficult for students to decide which question to answer first. When you ask one question at a time, students will know exactly what they should be responding to. See “Appendix B” for examples of high-level, divergent, structured, and single questions.

**Brainstorming**

Present a problem or questions to a group of students (either a large or small group). Have them generate as many ideas as they can in a set period of time (say 5 minutes) and list these ideas on a sheet of paper or on the board. After they have “brainstormed” answers, have them evaluate which answers are most likely correct and ask them to explain why.

**Common concerns about using discussions**

Common concerns about using discussions include fears of silence, of having the discussion drift from the topic, of one student dominating, of inappropriate or incorrect responses, and of not having enough time to cover the material. To prevent and deal with these concerns, keep in mind these three words: question, direction, rephrase. If you ask a good question, you are less likely to encounter silence. If students do not respond to a good question, ask if they need it rephrased and be sure to give them enough time to think about their answer. Provide direction in the discussion by telling students why you are having the discussion, and feel free to stop the discussion at any point if you need to redirect the focus of the conversation. If students give an incorrect or partial response, you can rephrase what they have
said more clearly/accurately. If a student dominates the conversation, you can rephrase what they have said and ask for another student to comment on the idea.

**Top three tips for using discussions**

- After asking a question, wait at least 30 seconds – in silence – for students to respond. Students will need time to think about your question and to generate an answer.

- Advise students the week before what question or topic you will be discussing the next week. This will give them the chance to think about the topic ahead of time. You can also ask students to write their own questions about the topic and use these student-generated questions to get the discussion going.

- Set up ground rules for the discussion before you begin: What does a respectful discussion involve? What will happen if someone makes an inappropriate comment? How do students indicate they have a comment? Can you call on your students individually?

**Lectures**

If you need to prepare a short lecture or explanation of a topic for your tutorial or lab group (e.g., a pre-lab talk or a summary of course material), begin by deciding what specifically you want to explain. To figure out the key idea that you want to get across, ask yourself, “What is the one thing I want my students to understand about this topic?” Then decide what points you will need to explain for students to understand your key idea.

To structure your lecture, try using these three sections: an introduction, key points, and a summary.

Your introduction should grab the attention of your class: Why is this topic important for them to understand? How will they use what they learn in the lecture?

To explain your key points, begin with one sentence that encapsulates that point (e.g., “The essential point is …” or “Put simply, …”). Then choose one or two examples or illustrations of the point you are addressing. Explain the examples and elaborate on their significance. Summarize the key point.

Your summary should bring together the points you have made and should allow you to address the key question or point you identified for the lecture. Do not skip the summary!

**Feedback:** Give students the chance to respond before, during, and after your lecture. Let students know whether you welcome questions during the lecture or whether they should save their questions until the end. At the end of the lecture, have students write their own summaries of what you discussed or ask them to think of a question they still have about the material. Collect these responses or questions and read them to determine whether your students understood your key message or whether you need to repeat the information in the next class.
Reflection and student response

Student response and reflection is a great instructional technique because it requires little preparation and because it gives you an opportunity to evaluate your students’ understanding of the material.

Here are some activities that allow for student response and reflection:

- **Response cards**: Have students write answers to questions or their own questions on index cards. The cards require concise answers and the chance for students to respond anonymously.

- **One-minute paper**: Have students spend one minute writing down the key idea of the discussion or lecture or writing a question they still have about the material.

- **Sample test or exam question**: Prepare a question that might be on a test or exam. Explain to students that this is only a sample question and that it is a chance for them to practice writing under pressure. Collect their answers and either mark them yourself or redistribute them and take up the answers as a group.

Participatory learning

The following techniques invite student participation. You do not need to use a “game” to actively involve students (though games can work well). Research suggests that when students “actively” participate in the tutorial or lab, they are more likely to retain the information and to synthesize the information in a personally meaningful way.

- **Panels**: Invite several students to present their views on a topic to the class as “expert panelists.” Give these students time to prepare for their panel appearance and invite the class to prepare questions to ask the experts.

- **Debates**: Select a controversial topic in your field and write a debate question. Assign students to defend one side of the debate. Give students time to work together to prepare their defense. Moderate the debate. You might want to have students write a response following the debate about which side persuaded them and why.

- **Games**: You can model games on popular television programs (like Jeopardy or Family Feud) as a way of stimulating participation. These games work well as reviews for tests or exams. Be sure to prepare students by explaining what they will do during the game and why you are using it.

- **Learning partners**: Set students up at the beginning of the year with a “learning partner,” or change learning partners throughout the term. Partners can work together to complete various tasks, including critiquing and editing written work; discussing a text; interviewing one another on their reactions to a lecture or reading; asking and answering questions about the assigned material; recapping lessons together; testing one another; comparing notes; and responding to questions (think-pair-share).

- **Case studies**: Present a real-life example of a problem or issue in the course material. Write questions about the case study and have students answer them, or
have students “solve” the case study. Case studies can be tackled individually or in groups.

- **Problem sets**: Post several problems from the lecture or from an assignment on the board. Solve the problems yourself or ask students to suggest ways to answer the questions. Discuss other ways to solve the problems and ask students to evaluate which approach is best and why.

- **Questions and answers**: Ask students to write down one or two questions they have about the course material or a particular topic. Collect their written responses and drop them into a bag or hat. Randomly select a question, pose it to the class, and discuss an answer as a group.

- **Shared experiences**: Read an excerpt from the course readings, show a video clip, post an article from a popular media or academic source, perform a demonstration, or have students carry out the same demonstration. Use the shared experience to generate discussion and stimulate questions, or have students write a response. Shared experiences are terrific if you find students often come to class unprepared, since they make it possible for everyone to participate.

These are just some of the instructional strategies you can use in your tutorial or lab. If you are a new TA, find one or two strategies that you are comfortable with and use them frequently. If you have used the same few techniques all term, try a new technique and see what happens. If you are an experienced TA, you may want to try new techniques to keep yourself interested in the material and to generate new ideas from your students.

**Instructional aids**

There are many instructional aids you can use, including blackboards, whiteboards, SmartBoards, DVD or VCR players, overhead transparencies, PowerPoint presentations, and data projection equipment (for Internet video clips or websites).

For any instructional aid, you will want to practice using the equipment before your class. If you have never used a data projector before, or would like practice, contact the audiovisual department (see “Chapter 10: Resources”).

Check to make sure that your handwriting is clear by writing something on the board and then walking to the back of the room to see if you can read it. It is always a good idea to provide any important information that you write on the board on a handout as well.

Ask students to tell you if they are having difficulty reading any of the information you present.

If your course uses WebCT or another learning management system, put a copy of any transparencies or slides that you use online for students to access.

**Working with technology**

Many of your students will bring laptops to class, and all of your students will have access to computers either at home or on campus. Use these resources to your advantage! Here are some ideas for incorporating technology into your teaching:

- Show a relevant website or video clip to start a discussion
• Create a YouTube video related to a course topic as a class activity
• Suggest that students tweet their responses to course readings
• Moderate discussion groups on WebCT or another learning management system
• Have students create a Facebook profile for an important theorist or author in your field
• Introduce students to document sharing and collaborating tools (e.g., Google docs), invite them to collaborate on an assignment, and moderate how their collaboration works
• Discuss plagiarism and show examples of how to properly cite information gathered from online sources

Technology in the classroom: In your first tutorial or lab, explain your policies on cell phones, MP3 players, laptops, and other technology. Explain that “laptop courtesy” means using laptops for note taking and not for entertainment. You can ask students to close their laptops during class discussions or student presentations. You can ask students to set their cell phones to vibrate and to remove headphones before coming to class.
Chapter 8 | EVALUATING YOUR TEACHING

This chapter gives you some ideas for getting feedback from your students about your teaching style and techniques. It also suggests what to do with the feedback when you get it and how to introduce changes to your teaching mid-course.

Feedback from students

Getting feedback from your students is the best way to find out whether your teaching approach is working in your classroom. You can use feedback to adjust your teaching methods, or you can respond to feedback by explaining to students why you will not be making any changes (perhaps your students suggested “no more take-home assignments” and you need to explain why take-home assignments are necessary). Asking students to respond to your teaching methods and style at several different points during the term is terrific for your students because it allows you to make changes if necessary in response to their problems or concerns. It is also great for you as a teacher because when students feel that you are listening and responding to their concerns, you will likely have an easier time engaging them in the material.

There are many ways to solicit feedback that take under five minutes of class time (and then one or two minutes to explain your response to the feedback the next week).

One-minute paper

Students respond in “one minute” to these two questions:

1. What was the most important thing you learned during this class?
2. What important question remains unanswered?

When you read the answers students provide to these questions, you will know whether students understood the “main idea” you were trying to teach in that session or whether you need to review the concept again in the next class.

There are several variations on the “one-minute paper.” You could, for instance, ask a question like “What idea do you still want to discuss?” or “What activity did you like best today?”
You do not necessarily need to respond directly to the responses in the “one-minute paper” except to say “A number of students had questions about X – I will take a few minutes now to go over that topic.”

**Critical incident questionnaire**

This set of five questions is slightly more involved than the “one-minute paper,” but should still take just three or four minutes for students to complete.

Here are the questions:

1. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful?
4. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about the class this week surprised you the most?

For students, every class has moments that feel significant. These questions help you find out what students felt to be significant and what actions contributed to students feeling engaged or disengaged. You can then repeat actions that led to engagement and discontinue actions that led to disengagement.

This set of questions is also helpful in identifying potential conflicts. If a student notes that their lab partner keeps doing things that disrupt their learning, or that the group they worked with did not focus on the assigned question, you can intervene early to prevent a larger problem.

**Mid-term questionnaires**

You can submit a short questionnaire that includes questions about both your teaching activities and style as well as the course content at the halfway point of the term. You can develop this questionnaire yourself, or ask your course instructor for a questionnaire to use. Questionnaires are valuable because they allow students to give anonymous feedback. You can then follow up with responses in class.

**Self and peer evaluation**

You know yourself best. Take a few minutes after each tutorial to ask yourself what you think the best part of the tutorial or lab was, and what part you felt least comfortable with. Spend a few minutes with a colleague or by yourself brainstorming ways to improve or alter the parts of your class that did not go as well as you would have liked.

You can also ask colleagues or an educational consultant from the Teaching and Learning Centre to come and observe one of your classes. Such an informal assessment can be a terrific way to get a sense of what is working well in your class and what could be improved. Asking a colleague or an expert from the TLC (and not, for instance, the course instructor) may help you feel less intimidated or nervous, while still providing you with the feedback you need.
Changing techniques mid-course

If you receive feedback from students, or you notice yourself that a particular teaching technique is not working, you can change what you do and how you do it.

Let your students know you will be making a change and why you are making it.

If you would like to change a course assignment (e.g., if the student-led presentations are not working out), meet with the course instructor to discuss how you can acknowledge the work already done by some students, while addressing the reality that the assignment is not leading to student engagement or learning. You may have to continue with the course assignment if the instructor is not willing to adjust the assignments. If this is the case, let your students know why you are continuing with an unpopular assignment and then invite them to brainstorm ways to make the assignment more meaningful.
Chapter 9 | THE FIRST TUTORIAL OR LAB

This chapter considers the first tutorial of the semester specifically. If you are a new teaching assistant (or a returning teaching assistant!), you may have concerns or anxieties about your first tutorial. Read this chapter for tips on how to prepare for and run a successful first tutorial.

Preparing for your first tutorial or lab

Meet with the course instructor
Before your first tutorial or lab you will meet with your course instructor to complete your TUG form. At this meeting you may also want to ask some of the following questions:

• What kinds of students take this class (background with subject, level, etc.)?
• What are the course goals/objectives?
• Will the course use WebCT or another learning management system? Who will maintain this?
• What should I do if I suspect a student has committed academic dishonesty?
• Do I structure my own labs/tutorials or are there outlines I should stick to?
• What should I do if I am unable to attend a class/lab/tutorial?
• Is student attendance in tutorials/labs mandatory? What are the penalties for late assignments?
• Am I permitted to grant students extensions?
• How do I get audiovisual equipment if I need to use it?
• Will you be evaluating my teaching? When?
• How do I get in contact with you if I have a question or concern?
Prepare a tutorial or lab syllabus/handout

This handout does not need to be long, but it should provide students with important information like your contact information and your tutorial policies.

You should include the following information on your handout:

- The name and date of the course
- Your office number, office hours, and email address
- The location and hours of the tutorial or lab

You may want to include the following additional information:

- Tutorial/lab assignments, due dates, and grade distributions
- Required tutorial/lab materials (books, lab jacket, calculator, etc.)
- Your email policy
- Your late-assignment policy
- Your attendance and participation expectations

Other materials to collect/prepare

Pick up your class attendance sheets from your department administrator.

Collect the course materials (textbooks, lab manuals, etc.) from your department administrator or the bookstore.

Prepare a lesson plan for the first tutorial.

Other suggestions

Find your classroom before the day of your tutorial. Measure the time it takes you to get to the classroom from your home/office.

Preparing a lesson plan for your first tutorial or lab

Some TAs decide to have a “short” first tutorial or lab. It is recommended that you use all of your class time during the first session. It is important to show your students that you are excited about the material and that when they come to the tutorial or lab they will be expected to work. There are a few things you may want to do during your first tutorial or lab. You can decide for yourself which things to include.

Introduce yourself

How do you want students to address you? What is your background in the course material? What section of the course are you most excited about? How can students get in contact with you?

It is a great idea to arrive early for your first tutorial to give yourself time to write any important information on the board or to post an overhead. It can also be helpful to arrive early so that you can spend some time speaking with your students informally. Ask them about their weekend or summer, or find out what movies they like to watch. This informal time
before class begins lets students know that you are approachable and interested in them as people. It can also be very helpful in learning their names.

**Introduce the course and lab/tutorial**

Why is the course topic relevant to the whole discipline? How will this course help the students? What will students be expected to do in the tutorial or lab? What will you as a TA be doing in the tutorial or lab?

**Introduce the students**

How many students are in their first year? How many students have taken a course in this subject before? What are the students’ goals for the course? If you do not want to have each student respond individually, you could ask students to fill out a brief questionnaire to help you understand their expectations and their prior experience with the material.

It is very important to learn student names. You may want to include a short activity that helps you learn the names of your students (e.g., have your students introduce themselves and tell you something interesting and memorable about themselves).

**Introduce classroom etiquette**

Discuss the guidelines for class behaviour (see “Chapter 4: Teaching in an Inclusive and Civil Classroom”) and review any important tutorial or lab policies (safety, attendance, etc.).

**Complete an activity or introduce a topic**

- Bring a short, relevant reading that students can read in class and discuss it as a group
- Demonstrate one of the skills the students will learn during the course
- Review important concepts that students will need to know for the next lecture
- Brainstorm reasons why this course is important

**Clothing:** What you wear to your tutorial or lab is your decision, but you should be aware that how you dress will contribute to the tone you set. If you want a more formal class, you may want to dress more formally. Likewise, a more casual class can be signalled by what you wear. Ultimately you should feel comfortable.
Chapter 10 | RESOURCES

Campus resources

The Teaching and Learning Centre (www.sfu.ca/tlcentre)
The Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) offers assistance to enhance your teaching. You can meet with an educational consultant to discuss ideas to improve your teaching, or you can consult the extensive library of books, articles, and videos on teaching and learning. The TLC also offers the Certificate Program in University Teaching and Learning (see “Chapter 1: Teaching assistants at SFU”). The Teaching and Learning Centre is located in the Education Building (EDB) 7560 in Burnaby and also has an office in Room 2706, Podium 2, in Surrey. You can contact the TLC by phone at 778.782.3910 or by email at tlcentre@sfu.ca.

TSSU (www.cupe3906.org)
The Teaching Support Staff Union is the union representing TAs and sessional instructors from all SFU campuses. You can contact their office by phone at 778.782.4735, by email at tssu@tssu.ca, or in person in AQ5129/5130.

Graduate Students Society (sfugradsociety.ca/)
The Graduate Students Society offers tools, resources, and other types of assistance to its members. You can visit the society in the Maggie Benston Centre, Room 2205, call them at 778.782.3899, or send them an email at info@sfugradsociety.ca.

Student Learning Commons (learningcommons.sfu.ca/)
The Student Learning Commons assists with a wide range of academic writing, learning, and study strategies, which may be useful for you or for your students. The Research Commons www.lib.sfu.ca/research-commons offers support specifically for graduate students.

International Services for students (www.sfu.ca/international.html)
The International Services for Students office provides support and services such as advising, international orientation, assistance with medical insurance and visas, and much more.
English as an additional language ([learningcommons.sfu.ca/services/eal](http://learningcommons.sfu.ca/services/eal))

The Student Learning Commons offers a number of services for students who wish to improve their English language skills. You can find many useful links on the website, join the English conversation group, or sign up for conversation partners.

**Health and Counselling Services ([students.sfu.ca/health](http://students.sfu.ca/health))**

Health and Counselling Services operates two health clinics, one on the Burnaby campus and one at Harbour Centre (walk-in and appointment), and offers vaccinations, physiotherapy, and chiropractic services.

**Audio/Visual Services ([www.sfu.ca/itservices/technical/av_services](http://www.sfu.ca/itservices/technical/av_services))**

If you need to book a data projector or need help using the equipment in your classroom, you can contact Audio/Visual Services. The Audio/Visual website provides contact information for all three campuses as well as links for booking requests, etc. You can also contact Technical Services at [www.sfu.ca/itservices/technical](http://www.sfu.ca/itservices/technical) for help with computer labs or wireless service.

**Ombudsperson ([www.sfu.ca/ombudsperson](http://www.sfu.ca/ombudsperson))**

The Office of the Ombudsperson provides confidential, informal, independent, and neutral dispute-resolution advice and assistance to all members of the SFU community. The website provides an informative list of issues with which the office can and cannot help. It also links to a website with useful tips specifically for grad students: [www.sfu.ca/ombudsperson/tips_for_graduate_students.html](http://www.sfu.ca/ombudsperson/tips_for_graduate_students.html).

**Human Rights and Equity ([www.sfu.ca/humanrights](http://www.sfu.ca/humanrights))**

The Human Rights Office is located in AQ 3045 and can also be reached by phone at 778.782.4446 and by email at betaylor@sfu.ca. The Human Rights website provides links to FAQs, guides, and protocols, for example for disability accommodation.

Simon Fraser Library ([www.lib.sfu.ca/](http://www.lib.sfu.ca/))

**Career Services ([www.sfu.ca/career](http://www.sfu.ca/career))**

**Campus Bookstore ([sfu.collegestoreonline.com/](http://sfu.collegestoreonline.com/))**

**Online teaching resources**

**University of Western Ontario Handbook for Teaching Assistants ([www.uwo.ca/tsc/resources/resources_graduate_students/ta_handbook/index.html](http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/resources/resources_graduate_students/ta_handbook/index.html))**

This online handbook covers a range of topics of interest to new and experienced TAs, including marking, feedback, diversity in the classroom, and dealing with ethical issues.


This extensive manual includes checklists for the first class, quick tips, and instructional strategies.
Checklist of questions to ask your instructor (University of Waterloo) (cte.uwaterloo.ca/teaching_resources/tips/teaching_assistant_checklist.html)

A list of questions you may want to ask during your initial meeting with the course instructor.
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The University of Western Ontario Teaching Support Centre: *Handbook for Teaching Assistants*.

York University Centre for the Support of Teaching: *Handbook on Teaching and Learning*.

The University of Northern British Columbia: *Teaching Assistant Manual*.


Warren, Lee, and Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. “Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom.” *Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning*, Harvard University. isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html

This guide has been adapted for use at Simon Fraser University by Daria Ahrensmeier and edited and formatted by Mark Bachmann.

We hope that you find the information and resources in this guide useful. If you have a question that you think should be addressed in future editions, if you notice a link that has expired, or if you have any other feedback, please let us know. We look forward to hearing from you.

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