A GUIDE FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS AT SFU

www.sfu.ca/tlcentre
## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION: TEACHING MATTERS ................................................................. 4

### 1. TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIPS AT SFU ..................................................... 5
   Possible duties • Training opportunities

### 2. TEACHING IN LABS .............................................................................. 7
   Before, during, and after the lab • Strategies for preparing and leading a lab •
   Responses to common lab questions and situations

### 3. TEACHING IN TUTORIALS ..................................................................... 10
   Before, during, and after the tutorial • Strategies for preparing for and leading a
   tutorial • Responses to common tutorial situations

### 4. FOSTERING AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM ............................................. 13
   The inclusive classroom • Creating an inclusive classroom • Civility in the
   classroom

### 5. OFFICE HOURS AND EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE ............................. 16
   Office hours • Email

### 6. EVALUATING LEARNING AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK ....................... 19
   SFU grading scale • Qualities of effective feedback • Grading quickly and fairly

### 7. INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES ............................................................... 22
   Lesson plans • Discussions • Lectures • Reflection and student response •
   Participatory learning • Instructional aids • Working with technology

### 8. EVALUATING YOUR TEACHING ............................................................. 28
   Feedback from students • Self and peer evaluation • Changing techniques mid-course

### 9. THE FIRST TUTORIAL OR LAB ............................................................... 30
   Preparing for your first tutorial or lab • Preparing a syllabus or handout • Lesson
   planning for your first tutorial or lab

### 10. RESOURCES .......................................................................................... 33
   Campus resources • Online teaching resources

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................. 35
TEACHING MATTERS

Teaching assistants are essential to undergraduate education at Simon Fraser University. As a teaching assistant you may lead class discussions, supervise a lab group, mark assignments, meet and correspond with students, or facilitate help sessions. These duties are very important to the success of the students and instructors with whom you work. To help you contribute with confidence, this guide will introduce some important policies at SFU and provide you with strategies for fostering an inclusive and dynamic teaching environment.

A teaching assistantship will also provide valuable professional development opportunities. Whether you plan to pursue an academic career or not, the skills you acquire as a teaching assistant will prove beneficial in the years to come. More specifically, you will gain practical expertise in facilitating and leading discussions, planning and delivering oral presentations, evaluating the work of others, offering constructive feedback, and project design. Of course, you have many other responsibilities in addition to your work as a TA, especially your own scholarship and curricula. Accordingly, this guide will provide suggestions for enhancing and easing your TA experience, in order to help you succeed as both a student and as a teaching assistant.

Please note that this introductory guide is not intended to be comprehensive; rather, it provides tips and ideas for you to test out and refine in ways that respond to your students and satisfy your expectations as a teacher. Throughout the guide, you will find advice for gathering additional information and support, including contacts here at the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC). We offer a range of workshops designed to enrich your teaching experience and we urge you to take advantage of our resources and professional development opportunities. We wish you the best of luck with your teaching and studies and we look forward to seeing you at the Teaching and Learning Centre!
Chapter 1
TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIPS AT SFU

This chapter explains what a teaching assistant is and what a teaching assistant does. It also describes several training opportunities.

Teaching assistants are primarily graduate students, although specific departments might seek undergraduate students or other individuals. 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. You and the course instructor will complete a Time Use Guideline (TUG) form to delineate your responsibilities (see appendices C and F of the SFU-TSSU Collective Agreement). This form lists both the tasks you will perform and the hours you will devote to each task. It can help ensure you devote the appropriate amount of time to your teaching responsibilities—neither too much nor too little. Additionally, it may be revised over the course of the semester to better reflect the needs of the course and the nature of your work.

Possible duties

Tutorial leader
Tutorial leaders regularly meet with groups 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 students, respond to student correspondence, hold office hours, meet with the course instructor to report on tutorial activities, or grade assignments, tests or exams.

Laboratory teaching assistant
Laboratory teaching assistants attend and supervise student laboratory sessions. They may attend lectures, complete 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 assignments, tests, and exams. Marking may be distributed throughout the term or may fall in clusters, depending on when assignments are due. Depending on the needs of the course, markers may develop a marking rubric, provide written and 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” depend on the course and the instructor. Some instructors may ask that these teaching assistants offer guidance to other teaching assistants or hold workshops on a particular topic for their peers. Additionally, a head TA might hold sessions for all students on a particular topic (e.g., writing essays or preparing a lab report), hold additional office hours to meet with students, be required to mark assignments, attend lectures, or deliver a lecture. Because the duties of this position tend to vary more than others, 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 may also be required. If you have any questions or concerns about what you are being asked to perform, do not hesitate to contact your course instructor.

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

Please note that you are entitled to six hours of professional development activities per contract held. These hours should be catalogued under “other” in your TUG form. They can be used for any initiative offered by the Teaching and Learning Centre, including the aforementioned TA/TM Day. In certain cases, they might be applied to programming offered beyond the SFU community, depending on pertinence and approval.

The Certificate Program in University Teaching and Learning (CPUTL) is another opportunity offered to you by the Teaching and Learning Centre. 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 develop their course
design expertise. The Teaching and Learning Centre also runs a variety of workshops throughout the year that may be of interest to you. Please visit www.sfu.ca/tlcentre for announcements regarding these workshops.

Chapter 2
TEACHING IN LABS

This chapter introduces 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.

Before the lab

Prior to a lab, students often complete a pre-lab exercise, watch a video, or read a lab manual (a booklet or a PDF file) that details the theories and procedures necessary to complete the lab. 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?

You should also discuss with your course instructor and fellow TAs the procedures you will use to deal with students who do not read the lab manual before class or give you cause to suspect academic dishonesty.

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 procedures they need to follow (e.g., where to dispose of waste). You may want to clarify your marking expectations 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 answer questions and remind students of safety expectations and procedures. The pre-lab talk should be short and concise.

Next, students might watch a video demonstration or watch you demonstrate any important laboratory skills (e.g., titration or palpating). Students may then complete the lab. During this time you should 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.
If a question arises during the lab for which you do not know the answer, you might respond by saying, “Great question—I don’t have the answer right now, but I will find out and email you by Monday,” or “That’s interesting. I hadn’t thought of that before.” It is acceptable not to know an answer, but it is important to address the question and find an answer in a timely manner.

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. You may be responsible for collecting and marking reports, or this marking may fall to another TA. Be sure to find out the procedures for marking before the lab and clearly communicate to the students your expectations for the lab report.

Follow these five steps to effectively prepare a lab

1. Read the lab manual and relevant sections of the course textbook.
2. If possible, complete the lab yourself and note any technically or conceptually difficult components 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. If required, prepare a pre-lab talk. Be sure to include safety reminders, necessary definitions, and formulae for calculations.
4. Distribute marking criteria or a rubric for lab reports or assignments.
5. Arrive at your lab early to make sure the necessary equipment is available. Keep in mind that your students will be eager to start their work on time.

Follow these five steps to lead a lab effectively

1. Start your lab on time and keep your pre-lab talk concise and brief (ideally under 10 minutes).
2. Circulate throughout the lab, addressing and asking questions, correcting lab procedures, and monitoring lab safety.
3. Prompt your students’ inquiry by asking questions like “What do you predict will happen?” or “Why did this happen this way?”
4. Try to talk to every individual 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?”

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 set-up do not work. Try to guide the student toward 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 procedures:** “What should I do?”

Ensure that the student has read the lab manual. Suggest that the student confer with his or her lab partner. If difficulties persist, encourage the student to consult the lab manual and remind the student of the important procedures you addressed in your pre-lab talk. Keep in mind that students might ask you for help to save time and that responding to such requests might diminish learning.

**Lab results:** “Why did it do that?”

Ask the student whether the results are what she or he expected. If not, ask the student to consider how the results might have been compromised. Encourage contemplation of each component and procedure and their respective contributions to the final result. Often a wrong result followed by reflection will prove more instructive for students than simply obtaining an expected result. Accordingly, remind your students that unexpected results are a normal part of the scientific process and that such outcomes are cause for inquiry and examination, not shame or shyness.

**Lab data and calculations:** “Is it okay to be off? Is this result right?”

Miscalculation is not okay. Some variation in data is to be expected, but calculations based on the data must be accurate. Ask your students to retrace their calculations and suggest they check with lab partners 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. Try to avoid direct response to the question “Is this result right?” 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 their fellow students and to refer to their lab manuals.
Chapter 3
TEACHING IN TUTORIALS

This chapter explains a typical tutorial session, provides suggestions on how to prepare for and lead an effective tutorial, and recommends potential responses to common questions and problems in tutorials.

Before the tutorial

Student attendance in tutorials may be optional or it may be required. Attendance may factor into participation grades. Be sure to check attendance policies and expectations with the course instructor. Help your students by making these policies and expectations explicit and consistent.

Students will be expected to read the assigned material beforehand. 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, students might wish to meet with you beforehand to discuss their plans. 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. Solving questions in advance will be an advantage: you will be more familiar with the material and you might be able to anticipate potential difficulties for your students.

During the tutorial

At the beginning of the tutorial session you may wish to share any important announcements before introducing the tutorial agenda (what the class will cover in that session plus a provisional timeline). 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 need not be 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 upcoming or past assignment. You may also be responsible for collecting and grading student assignments.
Follow these five steps to effectively prepare for a tutorial

1. Read the assigned material and note any difficult passages or concepts. Clarify with the instructor, if necessary.
2. Determine the key concepts or skills you will teach or discuss in the tutorial.
3. Prepare an explanation of difficult ideas or write down some questions that relate to key concepts and use them to generate discussion.
4. Write a lesson plan that includes the instructional activities you will use in the tutorial and how long each activity will take.
5. Arrive at the tutorial early and make sure you have all necessary materials ready.

Follow these five steps to effectively lead a tutorial

1. Begin and end the tutorial on time and minimize revisions to the outline or timeline.
2. If applicable, arrange the classroom furniture in a way that facilitates a discussion or group work (for instance, a circle of chairs is more conducive to conversation than rows facing the front).
3. Learn your students’ names and use them to encourage discussion and participation.
4. 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 might be more relaxed and willing to participate.
5. Avoid dismissive or discouraging responses when students give incorrect answers. Instead of using words like “wrong,” advise them that the answer they have given is incomplete and express your interest in learning how they arrived at that answer. This will encourage students to participate even if they are unsure of their response. They should know that you are interested in their thought processes and not just the end result.

Responses to common tutorial situations

Inadequate discussion participation
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; they may be intimidated or shy about speaking in front of other students; or they may simply be distracted.

You can check at the beginning of the class to find out how many students have read the assigned material by asking for a show of hands (in which case, assure students that they will not be penalized for falling behind in their readings). If most students have not read what you expected them to read, you may want to read a selection as a class, or have volunteers summarize the key ideas. You may also wish to review the expectations for the course.
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 composed 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 anxious about 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 return to the large group structure. At that point, you might ask one student from each small group to volunteer a brief summary of 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 generating and sharing ideas.

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

**A question is posed but you do not know how to respond**
It is impossible to anticipate every question with which your students might struggle. Even the most seasoned teachers encounter scenarios in which they find themselves unsure of their response. If such a situation occurs, don’t fret. You can ask for clarification and let the student know that she or he has posed an interesting or intriguing question. Tell the student that you will investigate and, ideally, provide a response at the following tutorial. You could also offer to email a response after you have had some time to inquire and collect your thoughts. Do be sure to follow through and try to resolve such questions in a timely manner.

**Students are unprepared**
Remind students of the expectations for the tutorial and of any penalties stipulated in the course documentation. If necessary, speak to the course instructor about the possibility of introducing pop quizzes or an in-class assignment to bolster reading and expectations.
Chapter 4
FOSTERING AN INCLUSIVE 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 one. It also addresses civility, the prevention of conflicts, and strategies for resolving conflicts.

The inclusive classroom

An inclusive classroom is a place where all students and instructors feel empowered, valued, respected, safe (both 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 being polite and empathetic, asking questions, challenging assumptions, and allowing for mistakes to be made.

Creating an inclusive classroom

Fostering inclusivity might seem a daunting task, especially if you are new to teaching. However, the steps to creating an inclusive space are not complicated and consist of things which most teachers practice intuitively. Simply put, all classroom teaching should be inclusive in nature. Here are some suggestions for fostering inclusivity:

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 use or choice of technologies, and even in the curriculum or “system” itself. To learn more about some of these barriers, please visit students.sfu.ca/disabilityaccess.html.

2. Get to know your students. Tell them about yourself and give them a chance to share something about themselves. You can do this by inviting them to visit you during office hours or to send you an email introducing themselves. 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. Define and clarify classroom guidelines with your tutorial or lab group during the first session. 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) if 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. To find out when particular holidays or religious observances occur in a particular calendar year, you can refer to this resource: www.sfu.ca/humanrights/guides-protocols/interfaith-calendars.html. Take attendance systematically and do not rely on your memory to note how often particular students have missed classes.

5. Clearly explain your grading criteria to your students and give them an opportunity to express any concerns. Make sure you clearly communicate how their work will be evaluated.

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 accommodate students with differing learning styles.

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 feedback either by making changes or by explaining to your students why you cannot make a particular change.

For more information on inclusive classrooms, please refer to the following link:

- www.sfu.ca/humanrights.html—Human Rights and Equity Services at SFU, an office that responds to inquiries and concerns about discrimination on campus.

**Civility in the classroom**

Students and instructors should respond to sensitive subject matter with sensitivity and compassion and refrain from disruptive behaviour. If disruptive behaviour occurs, students and staff should strive to respond appropriately. Often prevention is the best strategy for avoiding disruptive behaviour. By defining your expectations for classroom behaviour in the first class, you can prevent many problems before they occur.

**Preventing conflict**

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

**Attendance:** Is it permissible for students to 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?
**Deadlines:** What will happen if a student fails to meet a deadline?

**Technology:** What are your guidelines for appropriate use of laptops? What should students do if they receive an important telephone call? What is your policy regarding headphones in the classroom? What are the guidelines for online discussions and message boards?

**Formality:** Which prefix should students use when they address you? Or do you prefer they use your first name? Do students need to put up their hands to contribute a response? Are students permitted to wear hats in the classroom? Is it permissible to eat snacks (or meals) during class time?

**Feedback:** When will students receive feedback? How can they give you feedback? What will you do with that feedback?

**Email:** Will you respond to emails over the weekend or during holidays? When can students expect a response?

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 (for instance, submission of tardy papers). You need to be comfortable with the expectations you have set, with explaining why you have set them, and with enforcing them once they are established. If you encounter a conflict, contact the course instructor and ask for support.

It is 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 draft and submit anonymous comments. Including students in this process encourages accountability and demonstrates your appreciation of their perspectives and experience.

**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, a fellow TA, or contact the Teaching and Learning Centre.

- A student makes an inappropriate comment.
- 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.
- A student in your class consistently makes inappropriate jokes during, before, or after class.
- A student athlete asks for a deadline extension because of an upcoming competition.
- A student invites you out on a date.
Special cases

The following examples require specific responses. Review the situations and the suggested response. If you have any questions or concerns about either the situation or your response, please contact the course instructor or 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 (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 their services.

You feel harassed or intimidated by a student. In any potentially dangerous situation (a student is behaving violently, threatening a member of the class, or carrying a weapon), contact Campus Security immediately at www.sfu.ca/srs/security.html or via telephone at 778.782.4500. 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 the 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
OFFICE HOURS AND EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE

This chapter contains tips for managing your interactions with individual students efficiently and appropriately.

As a teaching assistant, it is important to manage your time effectively. Your duties will often include activities like holding office hours, answering emails, and preparing lesson plans. These activities are more difficult to schedule than class time and can consume a significant amount of your allotted TUG time. Monitor these hours closely by keeping a logbook to note how much time you spend on course-related activities. 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 effectively manage 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 Email Correspondence 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. Also 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 politely 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 politely ask the student 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 at 778.782.4500.

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
- 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, related or unrelated to the subject matter

**Email correspondence**

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 your policy as a handout.

Your email policy might cover the following information:

**When you will respond to emails:** Let students know when you will field emails pertaining to the course (for instance, only on Tuesdays and Thursdays) and how soon they can expect a response from that point (ideally 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 handed back, 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. You might also implement a similar policy for the return of assignments. Asking students to wait 24 hours before contacting you with marking concerns can mollify negative reactions to unsatisfactory grades and provide valuable time for reflection.

**What kinds of questions you will respond to by email:** You may advise students that you will answer only brief questions by email and that they should meet with you during your office hours if they require a detailed response or discussion. You might include a “five-sentence rule” which states that you will only answer emails to which you can respond in five sentences or fewer.

**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 will see individual student email addresses.
Chapter 6
EVALUATING LEARNING AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK

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

As a student, you may have had the unfortunate experience of receiving a graded assignment weeks (or even months) after you handed it in, or perhaps the frustration of not understanding the comments on your assignment, or worse still, finding no comments at all. This chapter will help you avoid these situations and will provide strategies for creating quality feedback that will help your students achieve better results on their future assignments.

SFU grading scale

SFU 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>Excellent performance</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A−</td>
<td>85–87.5</td>
<td>Excellent performance</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>Good performance</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B−</td>
<td>75–77.5</td>
<td>Good performance</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>Satisfactory performance</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C−</td>
<td>65–67.5</td>
<td>Marginal performance</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>55–64.5</td>
<td>Marginal performance</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0–54.5</td>
<td>Fail. Unsatisfactory performance</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualities of effective feedback

Promptness: Providing students with prompt feedback gives them time to think about your suggestions and perhaps meet with you before working towards their next assignment. It also gives you ample opportunity to revisit and address skills or techniques that proved problematic for many students.

Specificity: Whether you praise or criticize a student’s work, your feedback should be specific. If you tell students their work is “good” or “bad,” they will likely be unsure about what exactly they have done well or poorly. By noting specific points of success or difficulty, you can help your students understand what to correct or repeat in subsequent submissions.

Constructiveness: There is nothing wrong with advising students that they have made errors or completed work incorrectly. However, when you alert students to these mistakes, it is important to frame your critique as an opportunity for learning and improvement. Use decorous and supportive language, especially when addressing errors, to avoid discouragement.

Objectivity: To mitigate bias when marking assignments, it is a good idea to ask students to identify their submissions by student numbers in lieu of names. You should also address the work itself, not the student, in your critique (for instance, “the essay is lacking cohesion,” not “your writing is lacking cohesion”). If your lab or tutorial has multiple sections, or multiple teaching assistants are assigned to your section, try to schedule a grading meeting where you can work with your colleagues to calibrate your grades and procedures. This is especially important when grading essays or other assignments that are inherently subjective. One method of triangulating or calibrating marks is to provisionally grade one assignment and have your colleagues assess the same submission (without looking at your grade beforehand). Thereafter you can discuss discrepancies and your respective rationales. Repeat the process with a few more assignments until you are confident with your assessment procedures.

Relevance: Some submissions might have dozens of flaws. It is important to focus on major aspects of the assignment rather than cataloguing errors comprehensively. This is important because you do not have time when marking to give detailed explanations for all errors. Furthermore, a student may feel overwhelmed if you list every shortcoming. Similarly, make sure you are evaluating the aspects of the assignment that you told students you would be marking (for instance, if you said you would not be marking their use of citations, then feedback on citations is irrelevant in relation to that assignment).

Grading quickly and fairly

Here are some considerations regarding swift and fair feedback.

Use criteria or a sample assignment: If possible (and if your instructor does not object), set up criteria or a rubric for marking assignments. The criteria or rubric should delineate
and describe the different components of the assignment while providing details on weighting (as in, the percentage of the overall grade each component is worth). Distribute the rubric or sample assignment to your students before the assignment is due so they know your expectations. Work through the criteria or rubric as you mark and total the marks to determine the overall grade. Using a rubric or grading criteria might also help you address difficulties if a student wishes to discuss or contest a grade.

**Partial marks:** Your criteria, rubric, or sample assignment may detail what you will give marks for, but it may not clearly explain under what conditions you will give partial marks. Consider this before you begin marking and be sure to assign partial marks consistently.

**Sorting assignments and questions:** If you are marking essays, sort the essays according to topic. Mark all essays on each specific topic concurrently. While you may experience some tedium, you are more likely to mark consistently if you assess like assignments together. Similarly, if you are grading a problem set or marking examinations with a large number of problems, do not mark one student’s paper from beginning to end and then proceed with the next student’s work. Instead, mark the first problem for all submissions before proceeding with the next problem. This will save time and increase consistency, since you will be more likely to remember the conditions for which you applied deductions or gave partial marks. You may also be more likely to detect academic dishonesty.

**Feedback for the entire class:** If you notice that many students have made the same error or the same kind of error, you might want to stop writing specific or 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 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 form. Depending on how much of this time has been allotted to marking, you may find you need to mark quickly. If you use a timer or stopwatch, you can ensure that you give each student as much time as you can, while still adhering to your hours.

**Practice:** you will become more comfortable with marking and giving feedback as you gain experience. 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 ask their teaching assistants to submit a sample of their marking, so they can improve consistency across sections or courses. This is a common practice and it should help you feel more confident. 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. Lastly, avoid voicing general complaints about the poor quality of student work: this is unprofessional and inappropriate.
Chapter 7
INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

This chapter introduces some common instructional strategies for tutorial or laboratory teaching. 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 try new techniques.

Lesson plans

A lesson plan will increase your confidence and help you stay organized and focused throughout a session. A lesson plan might include the following information: objectives for the session; teaching strategies to be used; the sequencing and scheduling of topics; the ways through which you will assess student learning; and a space for observations and reflection.

The way you structure each session will depend on the course, the expectations of the instructor, and the expectations of your students. Styles and formats for lesson plans vary across disciplines and individuals, so be sure to experiment with different approaches until you find one that works for you and your curriculum. Be prepared to modify your format and individual plans in order to meet your students’ needs and learning styles. Remember that a lesson plan is only a guide and that productive conversations or engaging topics may sometimes warrant departures from your plan.

Discussions

There are many ways to hold a discussion and many reasons to do so. Discussions generate diverse and plentiful ideas and they offer students a chance to test new ideas in a classroom setting. Discussions have also been shown to help students retain information and ideas far better than lectures or demonstrations.

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. For instance, each group might work on a different problem before reporting their findings to the class in its entirety, or each group might generate a list of questions for the class to solve together, or each group might be responsible for contributing a response or solution to a sub-problem extracted from a larger problem or task. You might ask each group to elect a “recorder” in order to compile the key points of the discussion, and a “speaker” to report findings to the class. You may also want to appoint a “time keeper” to ensure the group completes its task according to schedule.
**Think-pair-share**

This technique has three steps. The first step is to present students with a question or problem and let them think independently for a set period of time (perhaps 2–3 minutes). Next, ask students to find a partner and share their ideas. Lastly, you might invite students to share their findings with the larger class, either informally or one pair at a time.

**Large group discussions**

There are many ways to engage your entire tutorial or lab in a group discussion. You could show a brief video clip, read a passage from the assigned text, present a problem, share a newspaper clipping, or do a demonstration and have your students discuss its significance, or you could start with a question or two, either of your own design or volunteered by students. Note that you can use any of these techniques to begin a small group discussion, too.

**Questions**

Great questions generate great discussions. Great questions often have four qualities: they are high-level, divergent, structured, and singular. High-level questions require analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, whereas low-level questions often rely on rote memory. Divergent questions have more than one right answer, so there are many intriguing directions to pursue (consequently, some students might also feel safer offering a response). Structured questions give students a clear sense of how to answer the question (for instance, a structured question might ask about a specific section of the text in relation to a particular theory). This helps student focus and arrive at an answer quickly. Meanwhile singular questions tend to focus on a single issue or tension. Occasionally teachers ask a string of questions, but this practice can make it difficult for students to decide which question to answer first. If you ask one question at a time, students might field your query with greater clarity and conviction.

**Brainstorming**

You might choose to present a problem or series of questions to a large or small group of students and have them generate as many ideas as they can in a set period of time (perhaps 4–6 minutes) and list these ideas on a sheet of paper or on the chalkboard. After the brainstorming session, you can ask that students evaluate or critique their ideas and responses, either as a group or as a whole class.

**Common discussion concerns**

Common concerns include a fear of silence or having the discussion drift or of one student dominating. Worries over inappropriate or incorrect responses and of not having enough time to cover the material are also common. To prevent and deal with these concerns, keep in mind these three words: question, rephrase, and direction. 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 or need more time to think about their answers. 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 a student gives an incorrect or partial response, you might respond by asking how she or he arrived at this answer. If a student dominates the conversation, you can rephrase what he or she has said and ask for another student to comment on the idea. If the same student habitually dominates discussion, you might need to intervene by addressing the issue with the student after class (letting them know that you value their contribution and that it’s important for all students to have opportunities to speak).

Advice on how to respond to inappropriate comments is difficult to provide. It depends entirely on the nature and severity of the indiscretion. If a student voices an opinion you deem hurtful, it is important to intervene, in the midst of the lesson or immediately thereafter. That said, it is also important not to shame students. When in doubt, seek help from your instructor, your colleagues, the Teaching and Learning Centre, or the Human Rights Office.

**Three tips for fostering discussion**

1. **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. It might be helpful to announce this practice, if only to avoid a sense of awkward silence.

2. **Advise students the week before what question or topic you plan to discuss.** This will provide an opportunity for them 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 stimulate discussion.

3. **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, 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 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 the point. Then choose one or two examples or illustrations of the point you are addressing (be sure to elaborate and explain their significance). Your summary should compile the arguments or examples and relate them to the key question or idea you identified at the outset. Do not skip the summary.
Before you begin, give students an opportunity to respond. 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**

Reflection and student response 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 for soliciting student response and reflection:

**Response cards:** Have students write answers to questions, or their own questions, on index cards. The cards encourage concise answers and provide opportunities 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 thus an opportunity to practice writing under pressure. Collect their answers and either evaluate them yourself or redistribute them and discuss 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 positions and arguments. Keep the debate civil by moderating conscientiously and intervening if necessary. You might want to have students write a response following the debate about which side persuaded them and why.

**Games:** You can model games from 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 might work together to critique and edit written work; discuss a text; interview one another on their reactions to a lecture or reading; review questions about the assigned material; test one another; or simply compare notes and prepare for examinations.

**Case studies:** Present an 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 experience:** Read an excerpt from the course materials aloud, 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 especially helpful if you find students often come to class unprepared.

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 before experimenting with new techniques. If you are an experienced TA, you may want to try new techniques in order to approach ideas from new perspectives while expanding your pedagogic repertoire and expertise.

**Instructional aids**

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

It is wise to test equipment and materials before your class. If you have never used a data projector before, or would like practice, contact Audio/Visual Services (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. Lastly, if your course uses Canvas or another learning management system, put a copy of any transparencies or slides that you use online for students to access.

**Working with technology**

**Support**
Technical support for classroom technology is primarily provided by Audio/Visual Services. If you are teaching in a large lecture theatre for the first time, you can ask Audio/Visual Services to give you an introduction to the technology in the room before the term starts.

If you would like some training to get started, or if you want to learn about innovative and effective practices, contact the Learning Technology team (778.782.9607, learntech@sfu.ca) at the Teaching and Learning Centre. Team members are available for consultations on all three campuses. At the Surrey campus, the Teaching and Learning Centre is staffed on Tuesdays by a learning technology specialist. Feel free to drop by and ask technology-related questions. On Burnaby or Vancouver campus, email the team to arrange for a meeting. You can also speak with your Faculty’s educational consultant about your ideas for incorporating technology into your classroom. As with all your teaching questions, it is always a good idea to ask your colleagues as well.

In some cases, there are policies that cover the use of a specific learning technology such as iClickers or software that checks for plagiarism. You should check with the learning technology specialists at the Teaching and Learning Centre to see whether there are any specific policies for the products that you want to use. The Learning Technology team is also available to design and offer custom workshops for your specific technology needs, for your work group, or to address a specific technology question or enhancement that you are working on. Contact learntech@sfu.ca for more information.

**Canvas**
SFU began using the Canvas learning management system in 2013. The Canvas support website at www.sfu.ca/canvas is an excellent starting point for information about Canvas. Although there is no requirement to use a learning management system, many instructors find it useful for posting course materials and lecture notes, presenting assignments and quizzes, and conducting online discussion forums.

The Teaching and Learning Centre offers Canvas workshops regularly. You can sign up for these workshops on the Teaching and Learning Centre website at www.sfu.ca/tlcentre. There are also Canvas user groups, and specialized expertise exists within a variety of departments and support units. Email learntech@sfu.ca if you would like to participate in these.

The TLC’s Learning Technology portal is the place to turn for personal responses to your Canvas questions. You can call the portal at 778.782.9607 to obtain a response within two
hours during business hours. You can also reach the portal by email at learntech@sfu.ca.

In addition, instructors can access support documentation by clicking on the Help button inside Canvas. Finally, a community-run Q & A section is available inside Canvas and at www.sfu.ca/techforum.

Student use
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. And you can ask students to set their cell phones to vibrate and to remove headphones before coming to class.

Lastly, 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.
• Ask students to tweet their favourite sentence from that week’s readings.
• Moderate discussion groups on Canvas 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 tools (e.g., Google Docs), invite them to collaborate on an assignment, and moderate their collaboration.

Chapter 8
EVALUATING YOUR TEACHING

This chapter provides tips on obtaining and utilizing feedback from your students about your teaching.

Feedback from students
Getting feedback from your students is the best way to find out whether your teaching approach is working for 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. Asking students to respond to your teaching methods and style at different points during the term allows you to make changes if necessary. Furthermore,
you will likely have an easier time engaging students if they feel that you are listening and responding to their concerns. There are many ways to solicit feedback that take under five minutes of class time (plus one or two minutes to explain your response to the feedback in the following class). Here are a few examples:

**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. Are there any important questions that remain unanswered?

Their responses might help you evaluate student learning in order to address any technical or conceptual difficulties during subsequent sessions. There are several variations on the “one-minute paper.” You could, for instance, ask a question like “Which ideas would you like to revisit?” or “Which activity did you like best?” You do not need to respond individually to the responses in the “one-minute paper.” Instead, you might say something like “A number of students had questions about [X], so I’d like to take a few minutes now to review 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.

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 removed or uninterested?
3. Of all that was covered this week, what did you find most interesting or helpful?
4. Of all that was covered this week, what did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. Which of the ideas presented this week did you find most surprising?

For students, every class has moments that feel significant. These questions help you find out what students felt to be significant and what 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 he or she 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 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 provide students with an opportunity to offer anonymous feedback.
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 felt least comfortable. 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. These informal assessments can be a terrific way to get a sense of what is working well in your class and what might be improved.

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.

Chapter 9
THE FIRST TUTORIAL OR LAB

This chapter considers the first tutorial or lab of the semester. Regardless of whether you’re a new or experienced 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

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

1. What kinds of students take this class (background with subject, level, etc.)?
2. What are the course goals/objectives?
3. Will the course use Canvas or another learning management system? Who will maintain this?
4. What should I do if I suspect a student has committed academic dishonesty?
5. Do I structure my own labs/tutorials or are there outlines I should use?
6. What should I do if I am unable to attend a class/lab/tutorial?
7. Is student attendance in tutorials/labs mandatory? What are the penalties for late assignments?
8. Am I permitted to grant students extensions?
9. How do I reserve audiovisual equipment?
10. Will you be evaluating my teaching? When?
11. How do I get in contact with you if I have a question or concern?

Here’s a checklist of things to bring to your first tutorial:

- The course syllabus and your tutorial syllabus/handout
- Lesson plan for first tutorial
- Class list/attendance sheets
- The course textbook
- Pen/pencil/overhead pen/chalk
- A bottle of water
- Smiles, cheer, and a sense of humour

**Preparing a tutorial or lab syllabus/handout**

This handout does not need to be long, but it should provide students with important information, including 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 also want to include the following 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

Be sure to 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, and prepare a lesson plan for the first tutorial or lab. Lastly, it might be helpful to find your classroom before the day of your tutorial, noting the time it takes you to get to the classroom from your home or office.
Preparing a lesson plan for your first tutorial or lab

Some teaching assistants 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. Here’s a list of things you may want to consider before your first tutorial or lab (please decide for yourself which pertain to your teaching context).

**Before class**

It is a good idea to arrive early for your first tutorial to give yourself time to write any important information on the board and prepare any technological resources. It can also be helpful to arrive early so that you can spend some time speaking with your students informally. Ask them about their interests, in the subject or otherwise. This informal time before class begins lets students know that you are approachable and interested in them as people. It can also help you remember names.

**Introduce yourself**

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

**Introduce the course and lab/tutorial**

Why is the course relevant to the discipline? How will this course benefit students? What are your expectations for the tutorial or lab? What will you, as a TA, be doing during the tutorial or lab sessions?

**Get to know your students**

Which year of study are they completing? How many students have taken a course in this subject before? What are their 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 also important to learn student names. You may want to include a short “ice-breaker” activity to help you and your students meet and learn names.

**Introduce classroom etiquette**

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

**Introductory activity**

You might choose to bring a short, relevant reading that students can read in class and then discuss it as a group, or demonstrate one of the skills the students will learn during the course, or review important concepts that students will need to know for the next lecture, or brainstorm reasons why this course is important. An introductory activity for the initial
session should foster engagement and connect with course themes or subjects, but it should not overwhelm students, especially if they have limited or no previous experience with the discipline.

Chapter 10
RESOURCES

This chapter lists sources of information, training and support.

Campus resources

Teaching and Learning Centre (www.sfu.ca/tlcentre)
The Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) can support and enhance your teaching in myriad ways. For instance, you can meet with an educational consultant to discuss your curricula, teaching strategies, or evaluations, or you can consult the Centre’s extensive collection of books, articles, videos, technologies and online resources on teaching and learning. The TLC also offers the Certificate Program in University Teaching and Learning (see Chapter 1: Teaching Assistantships at SFU). The TLC is located in the Education Building (EDB 7560) in Burnaby and in Room 2705 (Podium 2) in Surrey. You can also contact the TLC by telephone at 778.782.3910 or by email at tlcentre@sfu.ca.

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

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

International Services for Students (www.sfu.ca/international)
The office of International Services for Students (ISS) provides support and services such as advising, international orientation, assistance with medical insurance and visas, and much more.
English as an Additional Language ([www.lib.sfu.ca/about/branches-depts/slc/eal](www.lib.sfu.ca/about/branches-depts/slc/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 SLC website, join the English conversation group, or sign up for conversation partners.

Health and Counselling Services ([students.sfu.ca/health](students.sfu.ca/health))
Health and Counselling Services operates health clinics at the Burnaby campus and at Harbour Centre in Vancouver (walk-in and appointment) and offers vaccinations, physiotherapy, and chiropractic services.

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

Ombudsperson ([www.sfu.ca/ombudsperson](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](www.sfu.ca/ombudsperson/tips_for_graduate_students.html).

Human Rights and Equity ([www.sfu.ca/humanrights](www.sfu.ca/humanrights))
The Human Rights and Equity office is located in AQ 3045 (Burnaby campus) and can be reached by phone at 778.782.4446 or by email at betaylor@sfu.ca. The unit’s website provides links to FAQs, guides, and protocols, including disability accommodation.
Acknowledgements

This guide is based on an earlier document produced by Erin Aspenlieder. Much of the information in this guide was adapted from documents produced at other Canadian and American universities. We wish to acknowledge the contributions to this guide from the following sources:

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 Bok, D. “Managing hot moments in the classroom.” Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University. isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html.

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, or if you notice a link that has expired, or if you have any other feedback, please let us know, in person at the Teaching and Learning Centre or via email at tlcentre@sfu.ca. We look forward to hearing from you.