

# **A Handbook for Teaching Assistants**

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~ 1999 - 2000 ~

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Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, K7L 3N6**

# INTRODUCTION

Queen's has almost 2,000 teaching assistants, and they play a vitally important role in undergraduate teaching, whether as markers, lab demonstrators, or tutorial leaders. Indeed, as many introductory courses become larger and more impersonal, the TA often provides a "friendly face" for many students, and also serves as a key link between the undergraduate and the professor.

This handbook was prepared by the IDC as a printed source of information about many of the issues faced by teaching assistants in their day-to-day work. We believe you will find the manual a useful guide to becoming an effective teaching assistant, and that your experience as a TA will serve as a preparation for future teaching roles. However, printed advice is no substitute for real experience. We hope you will supplement the information provided here with attendance at one of the workshops offered for TAs, or the other sessions presented on a regular basis by the Instructional Development Centre. The IDC also offers personal consultation to any instructor at Queen's, including TAs. If you would like to learn more, or are facing a problem in your teaching, you can drop into the Centre (Old Medical Building, Room 101) or call us at 533-6428.

Christopher Knapper, Director  
Instructional Development Centre

Are you enthusiastic about learning? fascinated by your discipline? curious about your students?  
wondering whether you'll be an effective teacher?

If you're dedicated to doing your best as a teaching assistant and willing to learn from your TA experiences, then you're off to a great start as a teacher. Look around and you'll find that there is plenty of support, advice, and information available to help you do a good job.

Teaching is hard work...and a privilege. Enjoy!

Susan Wilcox, Adviser on Teaching and Learning  
Instructional Development Centre

Welcome to your new role as a Teaching Assistant! Whether you are teaching a class, leading discussions, marking exams or papers, or tutoring students one-on-one, your work as a TA has a tremendous influence on the quality of education at Queen's. I hope you take the time to read through this Handbook -- it offers a wealth of information that will help you with your work throughout the year.

The Instructional Development Centre employs a Teaching Assistant Associate (TAA) to work specifically on TA training issues. My goal is to help you have a rewarding and successful TA experience. Throughout the academic year, I'll be offering a series of workshops on key issues of interest to TAs, including giving presentations, evaluating your students' work, and handling difficult situations. I am also available to help you plan and run a TA training workshop in your own department, or just to offer advice as needed on TAing in general.

Don't hesitate to call or e-mail me at [taas@post.queensu.ca](mailto:taas@post.queensu.ca) if there is anything I can do to assist you in any way! I look forward to working with you this year!

Katherine Lagrandeur  
The Teaching Assistant Associate of the IDC

# **WHY SHOULD WE PREPARE GRADUATE STUDENTS TO TEACH?**

## **For the Good of the Department/Institution:**

1. Better preparation of undergraduates: Well-prepared Teaching Assistants (TAs) provide better help for learning of undergraduate students, and improve the quality of undergraduate education thus enhancing the reputation of the department and the institution.
2. More efficient support for faculty: The provision of departmental training in basic teaching skills ensures a certain level of competence for all TAs.
3. Enhanced reputation of graduates: A department's reputation is based not only on the research work of its graduates, but also on their abilities to succeed at their future places of employment.
4. Wise use of resources: TAs allow institutions to provide a high quality education to a large student body at a nominal cost.

## **For the Good of the Graduate Student:**

5. Building self-confidence: Preparing graduate students for their role as TAs (and perhaps as future professors) helps alleviate the anxiety associated with teaching inexperience, and increases their self-confidence.
6. Improving efficiency: A little time spent learning the basics of teaching and how to manage it can make TAs much more efficient at the task, thus leaving them more time to work on their research.
7. Teaching as a set of transferable skills: Teaching skills can be applied to careers in a number of different sectors in the labour market.
8. Gaining the edge in the job search: Students who are able to show that they have had some training in teaching during their graduate years will be more competitive in their job searches.

and

9. It is the right thing to do.

Adapted from Svinicki, M. (1995). A Dozen Reasons Why We Should Prepare Graduate Students to Teach, *Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development*, 3 (1): 5-8, Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.

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Much of the information in this handbook was adapted from similar documents produced at other Canadian and/or American universities. We wish to acknowledge the valuable contributions made to this handbook from the following sources:

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We also wish to thank those members of the Queen's community who assisted us by providing information for a number of sections in this handbook.

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# **ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

## **Roles of the Teaching Assistant**

The use of the plural in the title of this section is deliberate, for you will play many roles as a Teaching Assistant (TA). These roles include that of subject expert and facilitator of learning, role model and advisor for students, assistant to a professor, representative of a department, and employee of the university. Perhaps most importantly, the TA acts as liaison, providing both a bridge and a filter between the student and the course instructor. Depending on the particular situation, these roles may be very rewarding or very trying.

Your duties as a TA may be one or several of the following: assisting with marking; leading seminars, discussions or laboratory sessions; preparing teaching materials; or occasional lecturing in the absence of the course instructor. Supervision and assistance with the marking of final exams is another duty; this requires TAs to be available until the end of the examination period. The extent of your involvement in the marking of final exams will be discussed in the section entitled "Evaluating Students".

The range of TA duties may be wide, but the length of time devoted to these duties should not exceed an average of 10 hours per week. This figure is computed on the basis of a full term, inclusive of the examination period. There may be one or two weeks when you will put in much less time than 10 hours, while in others you may do much more. If you are consistently working more than 10 hours, have a word with the course instructor or coordinator. Supervisors are well aware of the 10 hour limit and will want to know if you are working beyond it. Perhaps your duties need to be more clearly defined. See Appendix B for a sample Job Description Form.

The roles you will play and duties you will perform as a TA vary from one department to another. The purpose of this handbook is to provide assistance and resources for a wide variety of TA roles and duties.

## **Responsibilities/Ethics and the Teaching Assistant**

Teaching Assistants have responsibilities to: (1) the professional standards of the discipline, (2) the general academic standards of the university, (3) the department to which the TA is attached, (4) the students, (5) the professional being assisted, and (6) themselves. The diverse set of roles played by the teaching assistant also carries the potential for serious value conflicts. It is not our intention to provide grounds for either assessing or resolving these conflicts, but merely to provide a realistic picture of the range of these responsibilities and implied ethical obligations.

### **(1) Student**

As a graduate student, you should be concerned with your responsibilities to yourself and your department. You have been accepted into the graduate program primarily as a student and should therefore ensure that:

- (a) you get your own work done;
- (b) this work is completed within a reasonable amount of time;
- (c) you do the best job possible on your own assignments.

### **(2) Teacher**

As a teacher, your responsibilities are primarily to the students. Show that you want to help the students with their learning. You should:

- (a) ensure that the students know who you are;

- (b) keep up with the progress of the course;
- (c) be familiar with the course material;
- (d) be available to the students, especially during your stated office hours;
- (e) use appropriate teaching methods and techniques.



### **(3) Assistant**

As an assistant to a faculty member, your responsibilities are primarily directed towards that individual. It is your responsibility to:

- (a) discuss with the course instructor exactly what your duties and responsibilities will be for the course;
- (b) be familiar with the text book and course outline;
- (c) know the technical details of the course (e.g., the number and weight of assignments);
- (d) keep in contact with the instructor of the course.

### **(4) Professional**

In your capacity as an expert, you are expected to represent the department by being knowledgeable (as best you can) in the subject matter of the course. Your responsibilities are to:

- (a) do sufficient background reading so that you may answer the students' questions carefully and accurately;
- (b) remember your position in the department, and not represent yourself as THE authority;
- (c) be intellectually honest and admit when you don't know the answer to a student's question.

### **(5) Advisor**

Students will come to you for advice. In your capacity as an advisor you should:

- (a) respect the student who comes to you for help, being especially careful not to become patronizing or manipulative;
- (b) refer students with extreme personal or academic problems to the appropriate counsellors or resources (see Appendix A);
- (c) consider the student's individual needs when you are giving advice regarding course selection (abilities, interests etc.);
- (d) ensure that in your role as a mediator, you remain neutral.

## **Building Trust With Your Students**

The importance of trust in the student-teacher relationship cannot be overemphasised. Two components of trustworthiness are teacher credibility and teacher authenticity.

*Do not deny your credibility.* It is important to acknowledge your students' ideas, experiences and abilities, however, be careful not to undermine your own credibility. Be confident that you have earned your position as a TA.

*Make sure your words and action are congruent.* Avoid saying one thing and doing another or espousing principles that you do not believe in or put into practice.

*Be ready to admit your errors.* Such admissions will help reduce the tension students feel about their own need to be seen as perfect by their peers and teachers.

*Reveal aspects of yourself unrelated to teaching.* When you reveal aspects of yourself that do not relate to your teaching role, it makes you appear more *human* to your students.

*Show that you take your students seriously.* Listen carefully to any concerns, anxieties or problems voiced by students. Arrange opportunities and provide encouragement for students to speak out about what is on their minds. Never let an issue go unresolved.

*Do not play favourites.* Playing favourites quickly destroys teacher credibility. Avoid showing preference through verbal *and* non-verbal cues.

*Realize the power of your own role modelling.* Acknowledge the symbolic significance of your actions, and ensure that these actions are perceived as authentic by students.

Adapted from Brookfield, S. (1990). *The Skillful Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

# **GETTING STARTED**

This section is intended to help you in **getting started** with the organization and logistics of your position as a teaching assistant. Keep in mind that some of these things will vary from one department to another. You will find additional information pertaining to your position as a graduate student in Appendix C.

The departmental graduate studies office should provide you with the name of the instructor you will be assisting, as well as information regarding the course name, description, times, etc. They will also provide the necessary paperwork pertaining to your employment as a TA. Once you have agreed to the assigned teaching job, contact the course instructor and make yourself known. Check that it is really the course you are supposed to teach, and that the instructor knows your strengths and weaknesses in the subject matter of the course.

## **Things to Check with your Supervisor**

- (1) Who will supervise me? How? How often?
- (2) What are the objectives of the course? Is it a prerequisite for majors? general education for non-majors?
- (3) When are the classes? How many students will I have?
- (4) Will I be leading discussions regularly? occasionally? when the instructor is absent? When leading discussions, should I stay close to the text or the lectures? encourage all students to talk? do most of the talking? deal only with their problems?
- (5) Will I be tutoring and/or giving individual assistance? How much help is too much? What kind of assistance shouldn't I give? Should I organize group help/review sessions?
- (6) Will I conduct/supervise laboratory exercises? Do I keep track of and obtain supplies and materials? Will I design or revise experiments? Will I give demonstrations? How do I handle emergencies? Am I responsible for preparation and clean up?
- (7) Will I be lecturing regularly? occasionally? when the instructor is absent?
- (8) Will I be grading papers? projects? reports? quizzes? examinations? student participation? Are criteria for assigning grades clear? Is the process for determining grades clear? Will the instructor review disputed grades? How do I handle disputes about grades given by the instructor? How much time will I spend grading? Should I keep records of grades?
- (9) Will I be using AV equipment? What equipment? Am I responsible for getting/returning it? How do I schedule it?
- (10) How much autonomy or latitude will I have to try new things? to present new ideas? to present different perspectives?
- (11) Are there materials to help prepare for the course, i.e., texts? manuals? guides? test items?
- (12) What about my office hours: how many hours per week? when? where? coordinated with the instructor's?

- (13) What is Departmental procedure for handling such problems as plagiarism, cheating, and grade appeals?
- (14) What should I do and whom should I contact, if I am unable to attend a lab/discussion session?
- (15) Do I handle disputes, or does the instructor? Do I report student concerns with lectures, exams?
- (16) Will I be evaluated? By whom: the instructor? the department? the students? Will I have access to evaluation results? Will I be allowed to include questions on student evaluation forms?
- (17) What other responsibilities will I have?
- (18) Should I attend lectures? Or, will the lecturer brief me on course progress?

While most departments try to match TA interests with positions available, some courses must be taught whether qualified teaching assistants are available or not. If the course is new to you, quickly analyze the level of competence you need to reach. You may need to do some additional study. Ask your supervisor for help with this - some suggested reading, for example. If you feel absolutely (or even partially) incompetent to handle your assigned task, consult the course instructor and the Graduate Studies coordinator immediately.

### **Survival Tips for the First Day**

If you will be leading seminar or laboratory sections, don't take the first day of classes for granted. Initial observations and impressions are too important to risk an ill-prepared introduction. Think about the course, why it is important, what you will say about it, how you will describe course content, and your role in presenting it to students. Students are often overwhelmed with input the first day of class and hope everything will settle out in time. They may not recall the details and they may lose the syllabus. What matters is what actually happens. What kind of an impression did you make? Did you let them know why the course is interesting, why you are pleased to teach it, what they will know and be able to do by the end of the course? The effort spent preparing something special lets students know that you care about them and the course.

- (1) Prior to your first class, visit the room. Inspect for future planning: furniture arrangement, electrical outlets, chalkboards, lights, and equipment. Have shortcomings corrected if possible.
- (2) If you want to achieve an informal style, arrive early for the first class and get to know the students. If you prefer a more formal style, wait until the scheduled hour and arrive just before class begins.
- (3) Write on the chalkboard, or provide on a handout: course name, number and section; your name, office number, office hours; other relevant phone numbers.
- (4) Introduce yourself. Tell the students something about yourself to help break the ice: where you are from; your professional background; the degree you are working on.
- (5) If the class is small, let students introduce themselves telling: where they are from; their program; their year in their university program; why they are in the course. If the class is large, go through the class list and record students present. To break the ice in larger classes, ask students to introduce themselves to the student on their right/left.
- (6) Ask students for information you need or want. How many have taken a previous related

course? What do they intend to get out of the course?

- (7) Explain course structure (include on your syllabus), how it relates to overall course objectives, how the tutorial/course fits into the overall curriculum, and what you expect of students.
- (8) Discuss policies affecting student grades: attendance; exams; homework; assignments; weight of assignments and exams; assignment numbers; assignment deadlines; group assignments.
- (9) Discuss texts, required readings, and library reserve readings.
- (10) Define and discuss policies on make-up exams, late assignments, plagiarism, and cheating.
- (11) Ask to see anyone with registration problems after class instead of taking up class time.
- (12) Tell why you are excited about the course or the subject. Enthusiasm can be contagious!
- (13) If you are quite nervous facing the class for the first time you can:

Accept that it is okay and normal to feel that way.

Mentally step out of your space for a moment. Look at the area in which you are about to work and look at yourself in it. See yourself doing well. Take a deep breath, step back into your space, and begin.

Admit to your students that you are nervous. They too are often nervous the first class.

Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Repeat whenever you begin to feel panicky.

Slow down your rate of speaking.

Practice positive feelings. Imagine how you might feel with all eyes on you. Attune yourself to where you feel tense and nervous and try to relax those parts of your body.

Shift the focus of your attention. Concentrate on what you are talking about instead of on how you are feeling, how you are saying it, and how you appear. Invite students to speak.

Accept that nervousness is one small step from positive excitement. Enjoy the adrenalin flow!

### **First Day of Classes Checklist**

#### **Do You Have...**

The course name and number

Course prerequisites and corequisites

Names of textbooks and other materials required for the class

Your office address, phone number, e-mail address, and office hours

Course objectives, outline and description

A list of critical dates such as:

last day to add classes

last day to drop classes without penalty

last day to drop classes with a grade

dates for examinations and assignments

A detailed description of how the course will be graded

A list of assignments as far into the semester as you think is proper

A detailed description of major projects or assignments which may be required in the course

A statement concerning how absences and tardiness will affect the final grade.

Adapted from Lewis, K.G. (1991). Teaching Pedagogy to Teaching Assistants. Austin: University of Texas at Austin.

### **Encouraging Students to Attend**

\_\_\_TAs are often concerned about how to encourage students to attend discussion sections. Sometimes tutorial participation is a course requirement or a component of the student's grade, and sometimes it is not. Occasionally, students may believe that their attendance is not essential since the TA rather than the professor is in charge. Therefore you may want to devise a way to structure required assignments, projects, or presentations into your sections so that section participation will be a part of the final course grade. If students know that the TA has some responsibility for determining their grades, they may be more likely to attend sections or lectures led by the TA.

If attendance does not directly influence their course grade, try to explain the indirect benefits of attendance. Make it clear to the students that you are a valuable resource to them and that your sessions will enhance their understanding of the material. If they miss the small group sessions, they will not have the same grasp on the material.

### **Learning Names**

- jot down distinguishing features
- hand out name cards each day until you can get them all right!
- collect a class/discussion group picture - then quiz yourself
- hand out assignments personally
- ask students to visit you in your office
- when students tell you their name, repeat it back in a sentence

### **Office Hours**

The TA's office hours are an important extension of the classroom. (Not all departments have space for graduate offices. If this is the case in your department, find out the usual procedure for making yourself available to your students.) Office hours provide an opportunity and place where the University environment can be personalized. Most TAs have office hours but students are not necessarily required to come in during those times. Make sure that the office hours you set are appropriate to the students' needs. For example, try to schedule your office hours before classes meet if possible, and not the hour immediately before assignments must be handed in. You will also need to be sure that your office hours don't conflict with office hours held by your office-mates. Post your name and the hours on the office door, and announce the time and place to your classes.

For a first visit/introduction to your office some TAs find it useful to invite students to their office - two at a time. This ensures that they know where you are located and eases the stress of a first meeting. It may be easiest to do this when you hand back the first assignment.

As an integral part of teaching, your office hours should be included in the workload allocation you arrive at with your supervisor. The number of office hours you hold must be discussed jointly. No matter how many you schedule, however, you will no doubt also find it necessary to be available at other times. If you don't want to be at your students' seemingly constant beck and call, be sure to announce with your scheduled hours that you will meet students at other times **by appointment**. It is extremely important that you make it clear that you are also a student and require notice to schedule appointments around your own work. Some TAs choose to hand out their home numbers. You may decide to do this, but be prepared to be called at all hours unless you make the "appropriate" hours VERY clear.

Finally, be reliable. If you can't make an appointment or will not be present during your posted office hours, leave a message and an alternative time.

# **LEADING SEMINARS & TUTORIALS**

This chapter will focus on the general preparation and skills required to run effective seminars and tutorials. It will begin with an overview of the discussion method, will then provide some advice on questioning and giving feedback to students, and will end with some alternative instructional methods for use in the tutorial or seminar settings.

## **Class Discussion**

The term class discussion refers to periods of class time during which discussion leaders guide student discussion of specific course content for learning purposes.

### **Why use discussion?**

Discussion groups can serve many functions for students. These groups may help them to learn to formulate theories or concepts in their own words, and to suggest applications of these theories or concepts. They may be used to help students discover or define problems in a reading or lecture. Or they may function simply to make students aware of alternative points of view, and to develop critical and dialectical skills within an environment of respect and tolerance. Often, discussion periods are the only time students get the chance to voice their ideas, and therefore actively engage in a critical part of the learning process.

### **How to prepare?**

Be sure to let students know ahead of time how they can best prepare for the discussion period. They need to know what reading should be done and/or what activities should be completed before they come to class.

### **How to arrange the room?**

Discussion takes place most effectively when students can be face-to-face, rather than in lecture-style seating. Approximations of a circle provide the best facilitation for participation. For small group work, chairs will need to be moved into clusters around the room.

### **How should the discussion be led?**

It is important to take on a neutral-guidance-questioner role as a discussion leader. Care must be taken that lengthy lectures are not given by the facilitator because only brief factual inputs may be needed. Remember, your purpose is to encourage discussion among the students. Restraint and patience are often called for. The leader should:

Introduce the topic and its importance, briefly.

Mention sub-areas to be covered and timing for each.

Give simple ground rules: for example, participants should speak up without being called upon and address each other, not the TA.

Get discussion started with a prepared first question: short, stimulating,



easy to have an opinion about. **Wait it out** - someone will pick it up.

Guide group thinking, impartially and without talking too much yourself, by using questions as your guidance tool to probe, challenge, rephrase their comments.

Summarize what has been said periodically then redirect the group to the next topic sub-area with a new question.

Be generally accepting; don't constantly make evaluative comments that punish and reward, rather ask examining questions which force students to rethink and re-evaluate their comments themselves.

Encourage general participation by using questions such as: "How do the rest of you feel about this?" or "Are there other reactions?"

Keep the discussion "on track." If it seems to be on a tangent, ask the group about the connection to the subject.

Listen carefully and ask impromptu probing questions which make the students examine their views carefully, provide evidence for their views, examine their assumptions, and relate the information to things they already know.

### **How should it be ended?**

Allow time at the end for a summary. Let the students take ownership of the summary by developing it themselves. Acknowledge those times when there has been a fruitful exchange of ideas, giving the class a feeling of accomplishment. Finally, reflect upon what has happened in class. Consider whether issues were ignored or key questions only partially considered.

### **Some Common Difficulties in Moderating Discussions**

Moderating a discussion skillfully requires creating a context of "organized spontaneity" in which the leader gives the students opportunities and incentives to express themselves.

One of the keys to facilitating a discussion is to guide its course without appearing to do so. Here is a list of some common difficulties TAs encounter in leading discussions which relate to the problem of "control," and some suggestions for overcoming them:

**If you habitually can't get discussion started** you first need to pay attention to the topics you're picking; they may not be broad enough. Or, you may not be using good questioning skills -- putting people on the spot or embarrassing them.

**If one or two students consistently monopolize the floor** there are many causes at work, but the end result is a great deal of tension. You don't want to reject the one student, but then you don't want to alienate the rest of the class. You may want to take one of two approaches. Either you can use their comments to throw the discussion back to the class ("You've raised an important point. Maybe others would like to comment."), or you can acknowledge the comments and offer another outlet ("Those ideas deserve a lot more time. Maybe we can discuss them after class.")

**If there is a lull in the discussion,** relax. This doesn't mean you've failed. Every

conversation needs a chance to catch its breath. It may mean that your topic is exhausted or it may be a pause for people to digest what they've heard. If the lull comes too frequently, though, you may need to give more attention to the types of topics you're picking. You may also be inadvertently shutting down discussion by dominating rather than facilitating.

**If students are talking only to you instead of to each other**, you are probably focusing too intently on the speaker. You can help students talk to each other by leading with your eyes, looking occasionally at others in the room. This will lead the speaker to do likewise.

**Remember that some students are often more hesitant to speak in class** (particularly if they feel they are in a minority). If you notice that a particular group of students are dominating the discussion, or that others are habitually silent, make a point of drawing those students into the discussion gently when you see that they have something to contribute but are unwilling to do so. ("Alex, you seem to disagree with that opinion. How would you approach that subject?"). In such cases, be careful not to put students on the spot, and when a response is made, try to be especially appreciative. You may want to make a point of speaking to these students before or after class to indicate your interest in hearing their views in class more often.

**If you run out of material before the end of class**, ask your students if there are other topics they might be interested in discussing. If not, let them go early. Don't keep them the whole hour just for form's sake.

**If a fight breaks out over an issue**, then you've got a hot topic on your hands! Facilitate! Your major task here is to keep the argument focused on the issues. Don't let it turn personal, under any circumstances.

## **Questioning**

Sometimes the course instructor will give specific questions to be covered in the tutorial session. If you aren't given clear and specific questions by your supervisor, you will want to prepare some on your own. That way, if the discussion is sluggish, you will have some material with which to spark a discussion. In addition, this will allow you to anticipate questions that may arise, and to formulate strategies for dealing with those questions.

By learning to handle questions effectively in the classroom, TAs can accomplish a number of interrelated goals. First, by engaging students in dialogue, the usual "one-way" flow of information from TA to students is transformed into a more interactive process. Second, encouraging students to ask questions helps them become more active participants in their own learning. Finally, skillful questioning by the TA can encourage students to engage in higher level cognitive processes (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation), thus helping to develop students' critical thinking capacities.

### **When developing discussion group questions, you may want to keep the following in mind:**

A good way to ensure that your students will be prepared for a discussion group is to give them a few pages of assigned readings, and have them look for the essential points, the weakest argument, etc. Another idea is to have the students spend a couple of minutes writing about something they found interesting about a lecture or a reading, and then discuss what they wrote. Or you can break up into smaller groups to discuss certain questions, and then come back together as a group to discuss the answers arrived at.

When a question is related to a text that the students were expected to read, it is best to make specific references to the text. This will help to develop the students' critical reading skills, by showing them what kinds of questions to ask themselves when reading the course material. It will also provide students with a model of how to give textual evidence to support an interpretation of a text.

In order to develop useful questions, always try to avoid ambiguity, and don't use closed questions that require yes or no answers. Make the questions interesting and relevant by using real life examples that the students can relate to. Also, it is very important that the students be encouraged to develop their own examples when they are dealing with your questions.

The kinds of questions that are most helpful for stirring discussion are ones that require students to make an **evaluation** (requiring clear and consistent application of standards), or an **inference** (involving deductive application of principles or an inductive formulation of principles from a series of premises). Sometimes it is also useful to formulate questions that consider the **cause and/or effect** of events or ideas, or questions that require a **comparison** of situations, theories, applications, etc. Another particularly useful (though controversial) kind of question for generating a discussion is one which elicits suggestions of **solutions** to practical, everyday problems.

Generally, your questions should be aimed at the whole group. Questions that are directed at a particular person should be used only after allowing a long pause for a reply. Though questioning students directly can be useful for speeding things up and for cutting off overly talkative students, this style of questioning can sometimes mean that the other students will "get off the hook" by not being expected to provide a reply. In addition, direct questions can often put a student in the awkward position of looking foolish if they suddenly go blank or hadn't previously considered the question.

Questions can also be crafted in such a way that they will necessarily elicit a response from at least someone in the group. For instance, a **negative question** (eg. "Shouldn't we do so-and-so in that situation?") can be very useful if the suggested action doesn't logically follow. **Outrageous questions** that rely on silly suppositions will be difficult for anyone to accept, and therefore are also very useful for stirring up an unusually dead crowd. However, when using these tactics, always be prepared to admit to defeat or silliness, or your students will otherwise begin to suspect your other, more serious questions.

### **To improve your use of questioning:**

**After asking a question, wait for a response.** Do not answer the question yourself, repeat it, rephrase it, modify it, call on another student to answer it, or replace it with another question until you have waited at least three to five seconds. Students need time to think about the question and prepare their responses. The research indicates that with a wait-time of three to five seconds, students respond more, use complex cognitive processes, and begin to ask more questions. One word of caution is in order here, though. Sometimes when discussion leaders reword questions because they believe that the initial question is unclear, the result is greater student confusion. Students may not know which question to try to answer. In short, ask a question, wait, and thereby express your expectation to receive a response and your willingness to listen to it. Be patient.

Ask only one question at a time. Do not ask a string of questions one after the other in the same utterance. For example, ask, "Compare the skeleton of an ape with that of a human." Do not ask, "How are apes and humans alike? Are they alike in bone structure and/or family structure and/or places where they live?" A series of questions tends to confuse students. They are not able to determine just what the questioner is requesting from them.

When student questions are desired, request them explicitly, wait, and then acknowledge student contributions. For example, you may wish to solicit questions about the plays of Shakespeare which the class has been studying. You might say, "Are there any questions or clarifications of points we have raised?" or "Please ask questions about the main characters or the minor characters, whichever you wish at this point," or "In the light of Sally's allusion to Lady MacBeth, I invite you to ask her some questions for embellishment or clarification." Indicate to students that questions are not a sign of stupidity but rather the manifestation of concern and thought about the topic. Be very careful not to convey subtly or even jokingly the message that a student is stupid for asking for clarification or restatement of an idea already raised in class or in the text.

Distribute questions one or two sessions before and assign a group to prepare answers to each question.

Use a variety of probing and explaining questions. Ask questions that require different approaches to the topic, such as causal, functional, or chronological explanations. Avoid beginning your question with the words "why" and "explain", and instead phrase your questions with words which give stronger clues about the type of explanation sought. Thus, for a chronological explanation, instead of asking, "Why did we have a depression in the 1930's?" try "What series of events led up to the stock market crash of 1929 and the high unemployment in the 1930's?".

### **Rewarding Student Participation and Providing Feedback**

In responding to students there are some guidelines which can positively reinforce good student responses and facilitate further discussion.

**Praise the student in a strong positive way for a correct or positive response.** Use such terms as "excellent answer", "absolutely correct", "bull's eye", etc. These terms are quite different from the common mild phrases often used such as "O.K.", "Hmm Hmm", and "All right". Especially when the response is long, try to find at least some part that deserves praise and then comment on it.

**Make comments pertinent to the specific student response.** For example, suppose that a student has offered an excellent response to the question, "What function did the invasion of the Falklands serve for Argentina?" You might say, "That was excellent. You included national political reasons as well as mentioning the Argentine drive to become the South American leader.". This response gives an excellent rating to the student in an explicit and strong form. It also demonstrates that you have listened carefully to the student's ideas.

**Build on the student's response.** If you continue to discuss a point after a student response, try to incorporate the key elements of the response into the discussion. By using the student's response, you show that the points made were valuable. By referring to the student explicitly by name (eg. "As Pat pointed out, the Falklands' national political status..") you give

credit where credit is due.

**Avoid the "Yes, but..." reaction.** This response is often used when a response is wrong or at least partly wrong. The overall impact of these phrases is negative and deceptive even though the intent is probably positive. The "Yes, but..." tactic says that the response is correct or appropriate with one breath and then takes away the praise with the next. Some straightforward alternatives can be recommended:

Wait a count of five with the expectation that another student will volunteer a correct or better response.

Ask "How did you arrive at that response? (Be careful, though, not to ask this question only when you receive inadequate responses; ask it also at times when you receive a perfectly good response).

Say "You're right regarding X and that's great; wrong regarding Y. Now we need to correct Y so we can get everything correct."  
Say, "Thanks. Is there someone who wants to respond to the question or comment on the response we've already heard?"

These four alternatives are obviously not adequate to fit all cases. Indeed, it is generally difficult to field wrong or partially wrong responses because students are sensitive to criticism. However, with these alternatives as examples, you will probably be able to generate others as needed.

## **Explaining Clearly**

### **General strategies**

Place the concept in the larger context of the course. A brief summary will help the class see the relevance of the new concept and its relationship to the course's main themes.

Give students a road map by providing an outline of the class.

Avoid telling students everything you know. Be selective: deliver the most essential information in manageable chunks.

Set an appropriate pace. Talk more slowly when students are taking notes, or when you are presenting new or complex material.

### **Aiding students' comprehension:**

Do not make assumptions about what students know.

Acknowledge the difficulty of concepts students are likely to find hard to understand. Cue students to the most difficult ideas by saying, "Almost everyone has difficulty with this one, so listen closely." This will get students' attention.

Create a sense of order for the listener. Your voice must convey the structure of your lectures. Use verbal cues to:

- forecast what you will be discussing,
- indicate when you are in the development of your ideas,
- restate main ideas.

Begin with general statements followed by specific examples.

Move from the simple to complex, the familiar to unfamiliar.

### **Presenting key points and examples:**

Limit the number of points you make in a single lecture.

In introductory courses, try to avoid the intricacies of the discipline, try to focus on fundamentals, and to use generalizations -- do not give too many exceptions to the rule.

Demonstrate a complex concept rather than simply describe it.

Use memorable examples.

Liberal use metaphors, analogies, anecdotes, and vivid images.

Call attention to the most important points.

### **Using repetition to your advantage:**

Stress important material through repetition.

Use different words to make the same point.

Use redundancy to let students catch up with the material.

Adapted by the IDC from Davis, B.G. (1993). Tools for Teaching. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

### **Alternative Instructional Methods**

Seminars and tutorial sections vary enormously in their types and purposes. In addition to group discussion, any of the following methods may be used, depending on the purpose:

1. Buzz groups
2. Panels
3. Symposium
4. Debates
5. Experience discussion
6. Brainstorming
7. Case studies
8. The Jigsaw

### 1. BUZZ GROUPS

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <b>Description</b> | Allows for total participation by group members through small subgroups of participants, followed with discussion by the entire group.  |
| <b>When Used</b>   | When participation from every group member is desired. In conjunction with other group methods.   |
| <b>Procedure</b>   | Prepare one to two questions on the topic to give each group. Divide the members into small subgroups of 2 to 4 individuals. A leader is chosen in each subgroup to record and report pertinent ideas to the whole group. |
| <b>Limitations</b> | Thought must be given to the purpose and organization of the groups (e.g. a variety of ability levels). Success is also dependent upon the kinds of questions selected or the suitability of those questions.             |

### 2. PANELS

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Description</b> | A discussion in conversational form among a selected group of persons with a leader, in front of an audience that joins in later.  |
| <b>When Used</b>   | As a technique to stimulate interest and thinking, to provoke better discussion.   |
| <b>Procedure</b>   | The leader plans with the four to six panel members, each of whom are given a specific topic to study. The panel discusses informally without set speeches. Leader opens the discussion to the group and summarizes. |
| <b>Limitations</b> | Can get off track. The personality of the speakers can overshadow the content of the discussion. A vocal speaker can monopolize the program of the leader is uneffected.   |

### 3. SYMPOSIUM

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Description</b> | A discussion in which a topic is broken into various parts: each part is presented by an expert or well informed person in a brief, concise speech.                              |
| <b>When Used</b>   | When specific information is desired.  |
| <b>Procedure</b>   | Facilitator meets with three or four group members and plans an outline. Participants are introduced and give reports. The group questions the speakers. Facilitator summarizes. |
| <b>Limitations</b> | Can get off track. Personality of the speakers can overshadow the content. A vocal speaker can monopolize the conversation. Speaking times must be set and adhered to.           |

#### 4. DEBATES

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Description</b> | A pro and con discussion of a controversial issue. Objective is to convince the audience rather than display skill in attacking the opponent.                    |
| <b>When Used</b>   | When discussing a controversial issue on which there are fairly definite opinions on both sides to bring these differences out in the open in a friendly manner. |
| <b>Procedure</b>   | Divide the group into sides of pro and con. Each speaker should be limited to a predetermined time followed by rebuttal if desired.                              |
| <b>Limitations</b> | Members may have difficulty defending a view they do not hold themselves. Emphasis on taking sides can be divisive and may inhibit learning for some students.   |

#### 5. EXPERIENCE DISCUSSION

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Description</b> | A small or large group discussion following a report on the main point of a book, article, or life experience.   |
| <b>When Used</b>   | To present a new point of view or an issue to stimulate thought and discussion.  |
| <b>Procedure</b>   | Plan with others participating on how the review is to be presented. Then have an open discussion on pertinent issues and points of view as experienced. |
| <b>Limitations</b> | Students may need assistance in preparing a presentation that will lead effectively to a class discussion.   |

#### 6. BRAINSTORMING

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Description</b> | Technique in creative thinking in which group members think about a problem or topic and throw out all the ideas they can come up with.  |
| <b>When Used</b>   | To get new ideas and release individual's potential to think of ideas.   |
| <b>Procedure</b>   | Facilitator and members of planning group select suitable problems or questions on the topic selected by the entire group. The leader explains to the group the meaning of brainstorming and the following rules: critical judgements ruled out; criticism applied later; quantity of ideas wanted; more ideas, the better chance of good ones; free wheeling welcomed; wilder the idea, the better since its easier to tame them down than to pump them up; hitching is legitimate -- if you can improve on someone's idea so much the better. Recorder lists the ideas. Follow up: type list for next meeting to give to members for a more structured discussion. |
| <b>Limitations</b> | Practical with not more than 20 people. Becomes disorganized without careful planning of material to be covered and skillful direction from discussion leader.   |



## 7. CASE STUDIES

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <b>Description</b> | An actual account of a particular incident and/or problem is presented to the class. How the matter was resolved is included.   |
| <b>When Used</b>   | When a specific example is the best means of illustrating a topic. This method is often used to supplement traditional lecture approaches to a topic. Can be used to synthesize ideas and apply theory to practical problems. |
| <b>Procedure</b>   | Facilitator documents a case study, altering actual names and places if required. The case study is presented to the class and is generally followed by discussion.   |
| <b>Limitations</b> | Case studies require additional work by the facilitator to ensure they are straight forward and good examples of what is being represented.   |

## 8. THE JIGSAW

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <b>Description</b> | Allows for total participation by group members as experts and learners. It is often followed by a problem solving situation where all the knowledge must be utilized in order to succeed.  |
| <b>When Used</b>   | When participation by every group member is desired and the subject, topic or skill is easily broken down into manageable chunks.   |
| <b>Procedure</b>   | Students work in small groups (expert groups) to master material. The facilitator rotates among groups to answer questions and make sure the material is being mastered and understood. Students return to home groups which consist of one member from each expert group. They teach each other their areas of responsibility and then use the new knowledge to solve a problem, write a group essay or exam, etc. |
| <b>Limitations</b> | Thought must be given to the purpose and organization of groups (e.g. a variety of abilities). Success is dependent of the kind of material chosen and the final problem to be solved.  |

# LABORATORY TEACHING

## **Preparing Lab Sections:**

The most important thing you can do to ensure that your labs run smoothly is to be well prepared.

Prior to the start of the term, your preparation should include being acquainted with the storeroom of the lab so that time won't be lost during a lab looking for necessary equipment or materials, becoming familiar with procedures for getting emergency assistance, and, if applicable, knowing the location of the first aid kit, eye-wash station, fire blankets, extinguishers, spill kit materials, safety data sheets, etc.

Basic weekly planning for your lab section might include the following:

**Know exactly what the students are supposed to learn and why they have to learn these things.** This may come in handy when the students start to wonder why they are doing what they are doing.

**If appropriate, perform the entire lab exercise in advance.** By going through the lab yourself, you will be familiar with some of the stumbling blocks that your students may confront, and you will know the subtler points of the process you are demonstrating.

**Read and study the theory on which the lab activities are based.** Your understanding of the theoretical aspect of the lab will be useful to you in handling student questions.

**Decide how to introduce the lab most effectively.** Before students get underway with the day's lab, will they need you to demonstrate the procedures they will be following? Is a handout with written instructions in order? Do you want two students in the class to demonstrate the experiment to the rest of the class? Will a 15 minute lecture about the theory and intent of the lab suffice? Your initial introduction to the lab or the day's first activity can set the tone and motivation for the rest of the lab.

**Prepare handouts if they are not already available.**

**Consider how to handle unprepared students.**

## **Safety:**

Safety takes on special importance when you are directly responsible for the health and well-being of 25 or 30 laboratory students. Window-shattering explosions are rare, but it is not uncommon for students to break beakers of acid, cut themselves while inserting glass tubes into rubber stoppers, or ignite a stack of lab notes with a bunsen burner.

If your department's orientation does not cover safety procedures, the professor in charge of the course will probably take responsibility for describing to students the proper technique of handling materials, organizing a work area, and using equipment. These are all precautionary measures you now probably perform almost unconsciously. However, your students do not have your experience and will therefore appreciate your concern and advice.

During your pre-laboratory presentation, emphasize any safety items or procedures that are specific to the laboratory of the day; e.g., if ethanol and bunsen burners are being used at the same time, emphasize that ethanol is extremely flammable.

The following tips will help ensure laboratory and classroom safety:

- 1 . Know where the emergency exits and best evacuation routes are.
- 2 . Know where the closest first aid kit is and be prepared with simple first aid procedures. Don't forget to wear rubber gloves when working with flesh injuries.
- 3 . Know where the nearest telephone is and in an emergency who to contact. Queen's Emergency Report Centre can guide the appropriate help to the location on campus (533-6111).
- 4 . Report malfunctioning equipment even if it is only a leaking tap. Report problems to the administrative staff.
- 5 . Observe no smoking rules and regulations.
- 6 . In the laboratory be sure that both you and the students do the following:
  - a) Wear safety glasses if required. As a general rule any labs using chemicals require safety glasses.
  - b) Do not consume food and drink.
  - c) Do not have bare or stockinged feet, even if it is tempting to take off shoes when standing for long periods.
  - d) Do not engage in any horseplay and pranks, they are potentially dangerous.
  - e) Confine long hair and clothing when working with lab equipment and chemicals.
  - f) Know the location of fire extinguishers, safety showers, and eyewash stations, and know how to use them. Point them out to the students and explain how to use them.
  - g) Wash your hands before leaving the lab.
  - h) Develop a healthy respect for machinery, animals, and chemicals. Be alert for unsafe practices and techniques.
- 7 . In the event of a fire, pull the fire alarm and call ERC (533-6111)
- 8 . In the event of a fire alarm:
  - a) Direct your students to leave the building by the shortest, safest route.
  - b) Give assistance to handicapped persons.
  - c) Close the door after everyone has left, but do not lock it.
  - d) Do not return to the building until authorized to do so.

### **Student Preparation:**

Students who arrive at the lab with only a hazy recollection of the previous lecture may mindlessly go through lab procedures step-by-step, without any genuine understanding of the principles underlying the procedures. These students will derive as much knowledge from completing the lab activities as they would from spending a term in the coffee shop! Explain the benefits of preparation to the students, suggest some practical approaches to preparation, and try to provide some incentives for preparation. Reviewing lecture notes and/or the lab manual may be all that is necessary for most students. You might ask students to submit a statement of purposes and procedures or an explanation of why and how the exercise is relevant to the course - students are more likely to do this on a regular basis if it accounts for part of their lab grade.

## Supervising the Lab

A review of the purposes and procedures of the exercise at the beginning of the lab emphasizes the importance of preparation. You might deliver a brief but inspiring introduction on how the exercise relates to current developments in the discipline, or encourage the students to discuss the relevance of the activity to course objectives. Ask for questions, clarify any ambiguities in the lab manual, and demonstrate special procedures now rather than interrupting the experiment later.

If both you and your students are well prepared, you will be free to perform your most important role, that of giving guidance and advice. Circulate among the students, and try to talk with each student at least once during the exercise. Technical and procedural matters can be handled quickly with a few words of advice or a very brief demonstration. Your primary role, however, is to help students master the steps of scientific inquiry -- recognizing and stating a problem, formulating hypotheses, collecting data, testing hypotheses, and drawing conclusions.

Helping students master each step is not an easy task. You can tell students to "hold the stopper between your index and middle fingers while you're pouring," but telling them to "think better" or "remember what the professor said about that yesterday" will not be very effective. There is a variety of ways to help students solve problems for themselves, including some of the techniques in the earlier section on seminars and tutorials.

The use of questioning is especially important. Encourage students to ask questions of each other as they go through the lab exercises. You will need to make decisions over and over again about when to ask questions, who to ask, what to ask. Most importantly, you will need to make decisions about answering questions. Don't be too quick to give outright answers or advice. For example, if lab partners ask, "Why can't we get this to come out right?" try asking them a series of questions which leads them to discover the reasons for themselves rather than simply explaining why the experiment failed. Of course sometimes the reason will be relatively simple, but just as often the reason will be more substantial -- a matter of timing, sequence, proportion, or interpretation. Perhaps the student has properly completed all the steps in the exercise but has overlooked an important step in analyzing the results or is unable to devise a solution.

It is very tempting to help students by saying, "Aha, I see where you went wrong," but unless you resist the temptation, they are likely to falter at the same stage in the next assignment. Students may become frustrated if they can't get a straight answer out of you, but they will also learn more.

# PRESENTING INFORMATION

In your role as a teaching assistant, it is unlikely that you will be asked to lecture to large groups on a regular basis. However, you may need to present information to a group of students as the foundation for further discussion in seminars or tutorial groups. Or, the students may be expected to make presentations to their peers, to demonstrate and share what they have learned. The following guidelines can be used in planning an effective presentation. If you are asked to take over a lecture, these same guidelines should help you out.

The best presentations use methods that suit the personal style of the presenter, the learning needs of the students, and the material to be presented.

## **Preparation**

The requirements for content and organization of material are much the same as for an essay or written report. You must:

do the necessary reading and gather the necessary support material  
arrive at a thesis or main idea and organize your supporting proofs or details  
prepare an effective introduction and conclusion, and lead the audience through your argument with clear transitions and connectives between the ideas.

A good outline can help planning and organizing the content effectively.

Remember to have your supporting material prepared (page references or statistics clearly marked or listed on a handout or overhead). Make sure all of these illustrations are clearly related to your arguments or main points.

## **Presentation Style, Delivery of Content**

Unlike an essay which can be read and reread, an oral presentation is transitory -- once spoken, it's gone. You must make every word count.

### **a) Capture**

Your first words must CAPTURE the audience's attention, engage, perhaps surprise them. Some good capture techniques are:

- a startling statement or unexpected fact;
- a quotation;
- a question for the class to ponder and answer internally or orally;
- a short story -- either funny, exciting, or tragic.

Make sure whatever method you choose is **clearly** related to your topic.

### **b) Purpose/Preview**

Tell the class briefly what you are planning to do, and give them a preview of your main points -- this will focus their attention and help them to follow the presentation. They must feel confident that you will not waste their time, that you are well-organized and know your subject. This will motivate them to listen to you.

If the audience is unfamiliar with the topic and needs some background knowledge, give it to them now. This could be definitions of terms or factual information. If the ideas are difficult or

complicated, use a handout, overhead, or blackboard diagram.

### c) Style

It's good to...

- speak clearly
- pronounce correctly
- add emphasis
- use familiar, concrete, short, active words
- look at the audience
- be sincere
- use brief notes as aids on cards
- pause occasionally
- use appropriate gestures
- stand confidently
- breathe!!

Try not to...

- memorize
- read
- lean on the desk or blackboard
- hurry
- dawdle
- mumble or drone
- grunt, groan, sway, weave, bob, fidget, "um...ah...eh"

### d) Conclusion

Briefly summarize your main points and relate them to your thesis or opening. Prepare questions for the class to encourage discussion. Do not say "Any questions?" and sit down. Do not end with "Well, I guess that's it" and sit down.

Tie all your points together neatly and make them see why what you said was important, answer their questions competently, smile -- then sit down!

## **Presentation Aids**

Audio-visual aids can be a great advantage for any oral presentation as long as you remember their one main purpose: to help make a point. They should not be used randomly, but should be chosen carefully to reinforce or illustrate your message in the best possible way.

Choose the medium that best suits your purpose from the following list:

- overhead transparency
- blackboard
- large pieces of paper (bristol board, chart paper)
- slides
- filmstrips, films
- objects, displays, demonstrations
- tapes or records
- handouts

Whatever you choose, remember the following:

- make sure each visual can be read or heard without strain by the whole class
- keep it simple! (organize, simplify, highlight main ideas, use point form - not sentences)
- present material in small chunks as it relates to your content
- print all lettering neatly, checking spelling and spacing to ensure correctness
- face the audience at all times -- do not read from the screen, or stand in front of the screen or board.

Handouts can be very useful for the class. An outline with your main points can show your organizational plan and help your listeners to make notes. Make sure you prepare the handouts far enough in advance for them to be duplicated.

# TIPS FOR ASSESSING STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE

Marks and grades are extremely important for most students, hence, marking and discussing those marks with students may take up a great deal of your time as a TA. For the most part, assessment tasks (tests, exams, papers, etc.) are set by the instructor. However, marking is often done by TAs. Some TAs may also wish to devise their own quizzes for use in labs or tutorials.

## Objective Tests:

Objective tests are those which generally have answers that are seen to be either right or wrong, and can include multiple-choice, short answer, true/false, or fill-in-the-blank items; mathematical or logical proofs and problems; or tests which require the student to draw or fill in diagrams, tables or charts. If not already prepared, the first thing you will want to do is to prepare an answer key with the appropriate answers. By having this key beside you, you can simply compare the student's answer with the preferred answer, and give the appropriate grade. In addition, having such a key will ensure fairness, because any other TA who might be marking a portion of these tests will do so in a way that is consistent with you.

Deciding what answers are appropriate is often the job of the supervisor that designed the test, though you will likely want to sit down with them to discuss how at least some of the answers were arrived at (if it is not obvious). One good reason to do this is that there could conceivably be other answers that are partially or wholly correct. By sitting down with your supervisor, you can work together to discover and agree on appropriate responses to the more ambiguous questions. As well as making your job easier, this will assist your supervisor to design clearer tests in the future.

You may also want to discuss the following questions with your supervisor prior to marking:

What is the point-value of each question, and what letter grades correspond to what numeric scores? Often your supervisor or another TA will also be grading assignments or tests, so it is important that you all evaluate the students in a fair and consistent way.

Does your supervisor want you to mark the tests on a "curve" or do they want you to assign a grade according to the raw percentage? (This could mean the difference between the top score getting an "A", or perhaps a "C"). Explain the method to your students.

How much weight are you to give to the process students used to arrive at their answer? Often a student may make a small error that will carry through a whole problem, even though the rest of the work is essentially correct (given the initial error).

It is a good idea to post the answer key outside your office door. This will let your students know where your office is, and perhaps give them some incentive to come in and talk with you. In addition to merely posting the answers, you or your supervisor may prefer that one of you distribute the assignments or tests in class, or have the students come by your office to pick them up. This method of returning the students work is preferable to merely leaving it to be picked up, because it may allow the TA to make some kind of personal connection with students who might otherwise remain merely a number on a page. However, if you do give assignments back to students in person, try not to embarrass anyone by inadvertently letting others know what grade the student got. You can do this by handing the paper back up-side-down, or with your hand over the grade.



## Essay Tests:

These tests usually ask students to respond to specific questions in a way that is understandable and readable. Because the questions are focused, there are usually some basic points that the student is expected to include in their essay. Therefore, before marking these tests, the first thing you should do is to sit down with your supervisor to discuss what these essential points are, so you can prepare model answers in advance. If there are other TAs marking these same tests, they should also be in on these discussions, so that the marking will be as consistent as possible. In this discussion you should also determine if there is more than one acceptable answer to a particular question, and decide on appropriate ways of dealing with these ambiguous or unclear questions ahead of time.

Another thing that should be clearly worked out at this meeting is how the grades are to be distributed on the test. You will need to decide how much each answer is worth, and how important incorrect spelling and grammar will be (in terms of the overall grade). It may also be useful to make lists of common improper answers, along with the penalties for each.

## Evaluating Discussion Group Performance:

This section presupposes that you are expected to grade the students in your discussion group, and that you are wondering how to go about this fairly. Generally, the preferred method of grading students is on the basis of three general factors: quantity, quality and progress.

**Quantity** refers to how much a student speaks. It is unreasonable and unfair to expect that no student of yours will be too shy to speak in the group, so a large part of your job as a facilitator is to help your students "break out of their shell". If you clearly explain your expectation that everyone will make sincere efforts to speak, and do all you can to help your silent students, then it will be more than fair to mark the students on this basis. In the long run, they'll be thankful, since a great deal of what is required to "make it" in the academic world has to do with one's ability to communicate what she or he thinks. Though it may not be necessary to make a note every time a particular student speaks, keeping this requirement in mind will help you to decide who needs more help during the course. In addition, it will provide you with a way of considering the contributions of your students when you sit down to give out the grades at the end of the course.

With that said, it must be pointed out that many discussion group facilitators may be faced with students who speak either too much, or never to the point. This is where the second requirement of **quality** comes in. By considering the quality of what a speaker says, you will have some means of assessing the difference between a student who talks a lot and says nothing and a student who only occasionally talks yet always "hits the mark". Again, you should clearly explain to your students at the beginning of the class that not every contribution will be positively evaluated, so they can learn to use judgement before speaking out.

Deciding what makes one student's contribution qualitatively better than another's can sometimes be a tricky matter. Generally, the points you'll want to look for are similar to those you would look for in a good essay, namely: a clear understanding of the course content (e.g. the facts, theories and concepts used); an accurate use of logic (e.g. not contradicting themselves, or using trivial or fallacious arguments); an effective ability to communicate (e.g. asking and answering questions effectively, and being clear and concise). Moral insight (e.g. the ability to identify the values inherent in course material, and to formulate justifications according to some value system) is also an important element in any good discussion. In addition, there are skills to look for that are specific to group situations, such as well developed interaction skills (e.g. degree of enthusiasm) and the student's overall contribution to the class (e.g. the relevance and constructiveness of their contributions).

Another factor on which a student's discussion group grade can be based is the particular student's progress or improvement. It is unfair to expect every student to enter a discussion group feeling equally comfortable about talking, or equally capable of contributing in a meaningful way. Therefore it would be unfair to hold the earliest performance (or lack of it) against a student for the duration of the course. Instead, a student should see improvements in their grade that reflect improvements in their contributions (based on the factors already discussed). Moreover, as a course proceeds, the material will likely become progressively more difficult because it relies on earlier lessons being understood and applied. So in factoring in the progress component of a student's grade, you will likely want to consider weighing useful contributions that occur later in the course more heavily than those occurring earlier.

One final alternative for marking a student's participation is to use learning journals. This not only allows the student to release any concerns or feelings about the course or issue, but also lets you see that the student has taken time to reflect upon the material discussed in the session. Often we neglect to consider the importance of silent thinking within the discussion group. Some students generate questions, theories, and elaborations in their heads, but may be reluctant to express these in front of the group. Journals provide a way of evaluating these reflections. There are many useful ways of using journals and further information is available in the Instructional Development Centre.

As you have probably figured out by now, it is rather difficult not to be somewhat subjective when evaluating a student's discussion group performance. The progress component is intended as a safeguard against your students doing consistently badly, but it will only work if you are always very clear with them about their progress in the course. Providing accurate and up-to-date assessments of the student's performance may have the added effect of motivating students to do even better.

### **Making a Personal Connection in Your Evaluations:**

Some teaching assistant jobs will consist entirely (or almost entirely) of marking papers, exams, labs, etc. This experience can be an alienating one, both for you and for the students. You may have began this job with the hope that you could have a clear and lasting impact on your students' education, but you now discover that you will rarely get a chance to interact with them. The following suggestions will allow you to still maintain some human contact with your students, even if you rarely (or never) see them.

Giving out grades (even extremely bad ones) need not be the meanest thing you ever do. Softening a criticism so that it isn't taken as a personal attack is always a good idea. For instance, instead of saying "Only an idiot would say..." or "How could you possibly think that", etc., you could write "So-and-so disagrees with your statement that... . What do you think about that?". This response, rather than stirring an immediate reaction of anger or despair in the student, will allow them to delve further into a question, and to come to understand for themselves where they went wrong. Even when marking objective tests and assignments, something as minor as not using red ink can go a long way towards improving your students' confidence (some students have said that red ink looks too much like blood). Invite (in writing) students to come to see you for help when you must give them bad grades.

Always be sure to add positive and encouraging points where you think that the student has done well. For example, you could say "Good point. You should mention this the next time this issue comes up in class" or "Very interesting...I hadn't considered that before", etc. Rather than only telling your students where they've gone wrong, this will go a lot further toward helping them to develop the academic motivation and confidence they need to do even better in the future. Even adding some encouraging comments at the end of an objective test will go a lot further than handing back a paper full of check marks and numbers.

If you do know something about a particular student (e.g. because you've heard them speak in class, or talked to them during office hours, or you've marked their previous work), you might want to add specific or personal remarks on their tests or papers, depending on what sort of support or encouragement you think that particular student needs, or on the specific interests she or he has. You may even want to provide extra-challenging remarks for the more gifted students. This will help you to feel a closer connection with your work, and will help your students to know that someone out there cares about what they are doing.

### **Dealing with Grade Disputes:**

1. Only discuss a student's grades in private. Have the student make an appointment to meet you in your office. If possible, ask to have their paper or exam so you can review it before the student arrives for the appointment. If the concern is a miscalculation of marks, you may ask the student to give you the paper, so you can re-total the marks, and return it to the student at the next class session.
2. Prepare for the student meeting by having your marking scheme and answer keys ready. You do not need to defend what you have done, but be prepared to explain it.
3. The student may be right; you could have made a mistake, or the student may convince you the answer is appropriate. If this happens, be gracious. Apologize if it is your mistake and change the grade. If the student convinces you that the answer is correct, acknowledge you had not thought of that possibility and alter the marks accordingly.
4. If the student approaches you with a grade dispute for something you did not mark, do not get involved. Tell the student to talk to the person who did the marking.
5. If you and the student can not resolve the dispute, meet with the course instructor. This will appease the honest student and discourage the one who might be trying to intimidate you.

### **Ten Tips to Help You Get Through Your Marking**

*Use a marking scheme:* Have a clear guideline of marking criteria. This allows you to be more consistent in your grading.

*If there is more than one grader:* Meet with the other graders to determine evaluation criteria. It may be useful to have each TA pick a question and grade all the students' responses to that question.

*Use "Range Finder" papers:* Read a few papers to get an overview of your students' grasp of the assignment. Select "good" and "not-so-good" papers to guide your grading.

*Read the paper before you begin to mark:* This gives you a general impression of the student's work.

*Choose the appropriate level of feedback for the task:* As comments should be future oriented, it may not be necessary to provide extensive feedback on a final assignment.

*Use short comments throughout the paper:* Elaborate the reason for your grade in remarks at the end of the paper. Don't forget to highlight the positive aspects of the assignment.

*Don't rewrite your students' papers:* Focus on particularly effective or problematic passages.

*Use marking symbols:* This decreases the amount of writing you have to do on each paper.

*Keep an eye on the clock:* Keep to your allotted time per paper.

*Take breaks!* You will be more efficient if you give your mind a rest and reward yourself at regular intervals.

# **TIPS FOR ASSESSING YOUR OWN PERFORMANCE**

The most immediate measure of your teaching abilities is your students' response in class - if they start doodling frantically, yawning, or talking among themselves, if their numbers dwindle noticeably as the term progresses, if you are distracted from your grand orations by the sound of snoring... you may be justified in suspecting that your presence is not as compelling and charismatic as you have believed. On the other hand, sleeping, snoring, absenteeism, and scuffling seem to be a way of life among many undergraduates, and are not necessarily any reflection on your abilities as a teacher. If you do feel that you are doing something very wrong, one way to find out for certain is to invite a neutral observer to one of your classes. Another TA, the professor in charge of the course, or a representative from the Instructional Development Centre could be asked to do this for you. Alternatively, you might have your session videotaped, so that you can observe your own behavior. Finally, you can collect some additional information through student evaluation of teaching.

## **Another TA**

A fellow teaching assistant is the least threatening and least obtrusive observer. Your students are unlikely to notice a colleague and will behave more naturally. The TA may afterwards be able to point out to you any basic flaws in your teaching such as speaking too softly, asking the wrong kinds of questions, or using the wrong kinds of material.

## **The Professor in Charge of the Course**

The course instructor or coordinator may want to sit in on one of your classes at some point during the term to see how you are doing. Your supervisor will try to remain as inconspicuous as a professor is able by sitting quietly at the back of the classroom, and will not interfere unasked with the conduct of the class.

It is a good idea to inform your students a week in advance of the professor's visit, and make it clear that they are not "on trial"; if anybody is, you are. After the class, the professor will discuss with you an estimation of your "performance", and perhaps make some suggestions that would improve your teaching.

## **The Instructional Development Centre**

The Adviser on Teaching and Learning in the Instructional Development Centre is available, upon request, to observe teaching assistants or faculty in the classroom. A brief written report is provided, and is followed up by an informal consultation concerning your teaching. These services are completely confidential.

## **Having Your Class Videotaped**

If you want to observe your classroom demeanour firsthand, you can have a class session videotaped. Talk to the graduate studies office in your department. If they do not have the equipment you require, the Instructional Development Centre can help you to make arrangements with Queen's TV.

## **Student Evaluations**

At the end of the term, a course evaluation questionnaire will be administered in most classes. This usually asks students to evaluate the instructor in terms of teaching effectiveness, availability outside of the classroom, marking of papers and examinations, etc. Often these evaluations only cover the professor's performance and neglect to evaluate the TA.

If you wish, you could conduct your own evaluation halfway or a third of the way through the term. This is an especially effective way to obtain feedback from students so that you can identify what is working in the classroom and what needs to be improved. Be sure to share the results of the evaluations with the students, and to tell them what changes you plan to make in response to their feedback. There are suggestions on how to conduct your own evaluation in Appendix C.

# PROBLEMS

## Problems with Students and Students with Problems

Although for the most part your teaching may go very well, inevitably you will face some problems with students that are not easily resolved. Sometimes unusual student behaviour in the classroom can be overlooked, but not if it disrupts the work of the group or upsets some of its members. Some problems you can handle yourself, while more serious ones need to be referred to a professional competent in handling them. In some sense you are the "antennae of the system" and need to exert your influence in making it humane. Here are some brief characterizations of "problem" students encountered by TAs before you, along with suggestions from experienced TAs for handling these difficulties in a positive manner.

### **"The Loud-mouth:"**

There is a young man in the first row who talks too much: he blurts out answers before others have a chance, asks complicated questions off the subject being discussed, or holds forth at length on a pet topic. An occasional digression is fine, but if this behaviour persists for several meetings you need to take action.

Start indirectly, trying to head off trouble by saying "Let's spread the answers around a bit," and obviously passing over the loud-mouth, or saying, "That's a fascinating topic; let's discuss it after class."

If this does not work, it is confrontation time. As class breaks up, ask this person to stay for a minute. Then in the empty classroom, in an office with the door closed, or over coffee where you can talk privately, explain that you have a problem and ask for the student's help. (The problem is indeed yours; after all, talking too much is not causing any pain to this student.) Tell the student that you value participation and wish more students contributed. If this student's answers are generally good, say so. Do not criticize, but point out matter-of-factly the difficulty of involving everyone if someone dominates. If the student's knowledge of the subject is really advanced, should that student be in another class? When the point has been made and acknowledged, change the subject. At the end repeat your determination to involve everyone in class.

### **"The Possible Date:"**

It is a situation that occurs in various sexual guises, but typically let's say you are a teacher of average libido, who can't help notice an attractive student who sits in the second row, asks good questions, and sometimes comes up after class with a comment. You find yourself drawn to this student and wonder if you should ask this person for coffee, dinner, or a show. Our advice is simple -- DON'T.

You are not equals: this is a power relationship. This means that if you have misinterpreted things and the student does not really want to go out with you, you may leave the student feeling pressured and unhappy. Even if the student does like you and you become involved with each other, the unequal relationship and possible sense of ulterior motives on either side can make for a lot of grief or trouble. Even if the two of you can manage it, others in the class will be suspicious and cynical, and your relationship with them will deteriorate. So don't make a move until the term is over and the grades come out. (If it is love at first sight and the two of you are desperate, the student should at a minimum change sections.)

### **"The Silent Student:"**

"You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you." Students should have at least as much right to silence as those arrested for a crime. No one can or should force participation. Nevertheless, students who attend regularly but never speak up may be waiting for encouragement. Learn their names; when handing back assignments, compliment a particular solution if you can; ask them to come in during your office hour. After calling on three or four others in class, call on the silent one by name. None of these strategies may work. That is all right. Only gentleness is justified here.

### **"The Dependent Student:"**

It may be flattering to have a student continually asking questions after class, filling your office hours, perhaps seeking extensive personal advice. It can also be a pain in the neck. If so, you have to decide where the problem is and act.

If the student has too weak a background because of missing prerequisites, it is not your job to supply these by personal tutoring -- recommend delaying the subject a term, or a transfer to an easier version of the course if one is available.

If the prerequisites are all there, but the student is just very weak in the subject, you do have some responsibility to help. However, it should be shared with the other tutoring services available (see Appendix A). Set firm bounds on the amount of time you can spend and let the student know.

Some students are "dependent types" -- they like to be taken care of, or are used to leaning on someone. But this does not have to be you. Encourage them to stand on their own feet: "I could help you with this, but I think you'll learn more doing it by yourself."

The student may be personally attracted to you -- may want to be friends, or just enjoy spending time with you, possibly without realizing this explicitly. There's nothing wrong with this, but if you are unhappy about it, or cannot afford the time, there are many subtle ways to show that personal attention is unwelcome. Be businesslike, but tactful.

### **"The Troubled Student:"**

Students may come to you with personal or academic problems, because they like and trust you. Listen as you would listen to a friend who wanted to talk, and respond as you would to a friend, offering what advice you can.

If you feel more experienced guidance is called for -- this will certainly be so if the problems are serious, with possibly deep-lying causes -- then be wary of offering too much advice of your own. It is better to refer the student to one of the University's counselling resources. Often first year students (in particular) should be encouraged to talk to a don in residence who is familiar with the referral procedures. If the student is not living in residence, you may want to consult with any of the resource people listed at the back of this manual (e.g. Counselling Services, TALK, Human Rights, etc.). Never promise a student complete confidentiality. It is important that the student know that you may be able to avoid using names but that you will have to talk to someone for your own health and safety, as well as the student's. In general, for serious cases, try to have the student make the appropriate appointment by phone while still in your office.

A comprehensive list of campus resources is included at the end of this handbook. If you are not sure what the best thing to do is, call and ask for advice. If a life may be at stake, it does not



matter how unlikely you think it is, act fast. If nothing else, contact the dean's office and voice your concerns.

### **"The Student with Academic Problems:"**

You should get in touch with students who do poorly on the first test or exam, or who miss a couple of homework assignments, to find out what the problem is. It is usually you who will have to do the seeking out, since students are embarrassed by poor grades or performance and thus feel awkward about seeing you. Many will try to pretend to themselves there is not a problem, or optimistically hope that things will go better "when they get things together". Some first year students behave this way when after 12 years of success in school they find themselves for the first time in academic trouble and have to cope with the resulting internal and external pressures.

Your job is to confront these students gently with reality and get them to make sensible plans for their academic work. They may need suggestions on how to study and manage their time, as well as help with the course material. Encourage them to take advantage of the services available (student counselling, dons, writing centre, tutors, etc.). Perhaps there is another student in the section or an upper year student who is interested in tutoring.

If the problems seem serious, particularly if they extend to the other courses (be tactful about inquiring), you should contact an advisor in the student's major.

### **Professional Problems**

#### **Problems with Professors (Your Supervisor):**

1. If you are having problems with your supervisor, i.e the course instructor:
  - (a) Talk to your supervisor.
  - (b) Discuss the problem with another professor whom you respect.
  - (c) Talk to the head of your department if you cannot resolve the issue.
  
2. If students are having problems with the course instructor:
  - (a) Do not get caught between the course instructor and the student in these kinds of disputes.
  - (b) You can listen to the student long enough to find out what the problem is, then help them to devise a manner in which they can deal with it. It is generally recommended that they talk to the course instructor, the department head, and the faculty dean, in that order.

#### **Issues of Academic Integrity:**

Scholarship is at home only in an atmosphere of honest practice. All members of the academic community should conduct themselves in a straightforward and honourable manner.

Faculty and teaching assistants should make appropriate preparations for all encounters with students, meet classes as scheduled, evaluate students' work fairly and impartially, and be prompt for prearranged conferences and regularly scheduled office hours. Inappropriate language in the classroom, off-colour remarks or jokes in class as well as in personal conferences, and frequent deviations from the course topic have no proper place in the university. In turn, students should fulfill in a reasonable way the requirements and expectations of the course as stated by the instructor.

It is also important to respect the principle of confidentiality. Do not, for example:

- (a) discuss students' marks in public circles;
- (b) give out one student's marks to another;
- (c) discuss publicly or gossip about the instructors or your peers.

As a TA, you are responsible for ensuring that academic dishonesty is not rewarded among the students you work with. Students need to know that if they work honestly, they will not suffer because of those who do not. Challenging a student you think may have cheated or plagiarized is not pleasant. If you feel uncomfortable in this area of responsibility, helpful literature and advice are available at the Instructional Development Centre.

The Faculty of Arts and Science Calendar, 1999-2000, states that:

*Where cases of academic dishonesty within a course are suspected, the instructor must advise the student in writing of the suspected academic dishonesty, set out the evidence on which the allegation is based, note the possible penalties, give the student the opportunity to respond, and advise the student of the right to have representation for any response made to the allegation of academic dishonesty. (On matters of procedure and representation, the Grievance Advisors of Queen's University are available for consultation and assistance). After considering the available evidence, the instructor must inform the student in writing if the penalty is imposed, of the opportunity to appeal the decision to the Head of the Department. In a finding of academic dishonesty, the instructor may assign other work or a low mark as is judged necessary.*

*If the matter is more serious than the penalties an instructor may impose would satisfy, the case shall be referred to the Head of the Department who may assign a failure in the course (even if the deadline for withdrawing without failure has not passed). The instructor must inform the student in writing if the allegation of academic dishonesty is referred to the Head of the Department. In the event of a referral to the Head, the student must be advised by the Head in writing of the suspected academic dishonesty, the evidence on which the allegation is based, the possible penalties, and be given the opportunity to respond. The student must also be advised of the right to have representation for any response made to the allegation of academic dishonesty. The student and instructor must be notified, in writing, of any hearing of the case, invited to appear at the hearing, and advised of the right to have representation at the hearing. After considering the available evidence, the Head must inform the student and the instructor in writing of the decision, the penalty, if any, that will be imposed, and if a penalty is imposed, of the opportunity to appeal the decision to the Board of Studies.*

*If the matter is more serious than the penalties the Head of the Department may impose would satisfy, the case shall be referred to the Board of Studies which may impose such sanctions as it considers appropriate such as failure in the course or forfeiture of the year, and may recommend to Senate that the student be required to withdraw from the Faculty or from the University. The Head of the Department must inform the student in writing if the allegation of academic dishonesty is referred to the Board of Studies. In the event of a referral to the Board of Studies, the student must be advised in writing by the Associate Dean (Studies) of the suspected academic dishonesty, the evidence on which the allegation is based, the possible penalties, and be given the opportunity to respond. The student must also be advised of the right to have representation for any response made to the allegation*

*of academic dishonesty. The student and instructor must be notified, in writing, of any hearing of the case, invited to appear at the hearing, and advised of the right to have representation at the hearing. After the Board has considered the available evidence, the Chair of the Board of Studies must inform the student and the instructor in writing of the Board's decision, and the penalty, if any, that will be imposed or, in the case of withdrawal, the Board's recommendation to Senate.*

# ADVISING STUDENTS

## **Giving Personal Assistance:**

Getting students to come to your office is not always a problem; you may find that many students will come in, and for many different reasons. You may find yourself helping a student with the material for your course, with the logistics of a course that contains unfamiliar material, or with a personal problem. You should be aware of ways to facilitate a helpful tutorial or counselling session.

Try to be as approachable as possible. The best thing to do when a student comes in during your office hours is to make him or her feel welcome. It is very easy to make students feel that they are intruding; it takes only a little bit of care to create a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere in which communication is natural and easy.

Rely on the student to tell you what he or she has come to see you about. You may suspect some hidden problem, but you should not press the student to disclose it. You can help students if they actively request your help, but your responsibility need not extend further than their requests.

Listen to your students when they come to your office. Give them your undivided attention. This is all part of making students feel welcome and encouraging communication. The best way to show that you are listening is to ask questions -- it also shows students that you find their concerns important. Students often fear that they are wasting your time; by listening attentively and responding thoroughly, you can help allay their anxiety.

Finally, you should realize that you won't always be able to provide the answers or information that are needed. There is nothing wrong with saying, "I don't know, but I can find out for you."

In a situation where the student is asking for more personal counselling, remember that you are not always the best qualified person for the student to be talking to. If you feel that the student needs more specific advice, you may be able to suggest someone who can provide it. Appendix A has been compiled to serve as a referral list for you. It may not solve all of the problems you are confronted with, but it is a start. When in doubt you should always consult the faculty member you are working with, especially if you feel that a student may be having serious emotional or some other kind of difficulties.

## **Letters of Recommendation:**

Students may ask you to recommend them for a job, acceptance to another institution, or graduate school. If you do not feel you know the student well enough, simply explain why not. If you are willing to write the letter, do so promptly, while you still have the student and his or her performance sharply in mind. A carefully written and thoughtful letter takes time and you are a busy person, but remember that others have done and will do this same kind of chore for you.

Ask if there is a specific form to be used or whether a letter is needed. Have the student note the nature of the job or situation for which he or she is applying and any particular abilities that you might mention. Then be as specific as possible. Focus on the student's best points, but don't exaggerate; be honest. Be sure to define the context within which you knew the person, e.g. in class, as an advisor formally or informally, and state over what period of time. If you later see the student for whom you wrote the recommendation, ask about the results. This not only lets the student know you are interested but gives you feedback on your own letter-writing efforts.

Keep your old grade books for some time. Students may call upon you long after a class is finished. Some instructors make a habit of noting both good and not-so-good points about students in the margins of their grade books. This serves as a mental refresher if it has been some time since you last dealt with the student.

Keep in mind that you are legally responsible for statements you make in your recommendation, to the extent, at least, that you are liable for any deleterious remarks you make. If you have reason to be concerned about something you want to express, preface what you have to say with something like "To the best of my knowledge...".

A provincial act called the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act Revised. R.S.O. 1987 c.25 ensures free access of individuals to public records and information about themselves. In other words, a student has the right to see a copy of your recommendation unless s/he is willing to sign a waiver. If you have no objections, this problem can be circumvented by giving a copy of the recommendation to the student.

# **CREATING A SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

Students at Queen's come from a variety of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and economic backgrounds. This institution prides itself on its support of lifestyle choices, a high proportion of female students, growing numbers of international students, and its continually improving accessibility to students of different abilities. In order to do your job well, you must be sensitive to the varied backgrounds and needs of these students. Here are a few suggestions on how to create a welcoming and safe learning environment.

## **For Mature Students**

Most mature students have sacrificed a lot to be in school, and are therefore often very conscious of risking failure. This fear of failure or embarrassment may mean that these students will be reluctant to speak in class, or that they will undergo a great deal of stress over their academic performance. They might have difficulty with being corrected, especially if their TA is considerably younger than them. Bear this in mind when making comments (written or oral) and try to be tactful.

Years of absence from school can lead some mature students to have inefficient study habits or unrealistic expectations of their capacities. You might want to offer special assistance in these areas, or recommend remedial workshops and courses.

The wealth of life experiences brought to the classroom by an older student may mean that they will favour "real world experience" over theory. Where a younger student may need to be reminded to take practice into account, older students may need to be steered in the other direction.

Mature students can easily feel marginalized from the rest of the student body. TAs should be extra-careful not to encourage this through classroom dynamics.

Many mature students have work or family-related demands and stresses that need to be taken into account.

## **For International Students**

Language often acts as a barrier for students from other cultures or languages, either because they are conscious of their accents or dialects, or because they are sometimes unable to find the right words when under pressure. Take the time to listen carefully to what all of your students are trying to say. Rephrasing a question or response may prove helpful, but try not to pressure your students when they are speaking.

Some international students may be from a culture in which education is more authoritarian, or where public dissent and debate are not encouraged. Creating an open and supportive environment in your classes will go a long way towards dealing with this problem.

Encourage international and ESL (English as a Second Language) students to speak in class, but do not push too hard.

Sometimes the words we use, the speed at which we speak, or the culturally-based examples

we use (e.g. examples drawn from television shows) will prevent international students from understanding what we are saying. A puzzled or bored look may be a sign that there is a problem with comprehension. New terminology should always be written on the board and defined, and difficult concepts should be explained as graphically and concretely as possible. Colloquialisms and irony may be ineffective when communicating ideas that we want the students to understand exactly. Address your explanations and clarifications to all students in the class, not just international students.

Many international and ESL students will benefit from opportunities to submit drafts of essays for preliminary comments and advice. Students may be embarrassed to admit to difficulties of comprehension, so you might need to approach them outside class in a sensitive and personable way to ensure that they are understanding the material.

Like mature students, international or ESL students can easily feel discriminated against. If you suspect racism, or are aware that one of your students is or has been racially harassed, contact the Anti-Racism Respondent Advisor at 533-6095 or the Anti-Racism Coordinator in the Human Rights Office at 533-6886.

If international students are looking for additional personal or academic support, you could refer them to the International Centre at 533-2604.

### **For Students with Special Needs**

Remember, think of the person before the disability. Special needs students at Queen's are **differently** abled but they are intelligent, capable people first and foremost.

Students with vision impairment, motor coordination difficulties, or hearing impairments may require notetakers, copies of overheads and class notes, and special testing situations. If this is the case your supervisor should be notified and the Disability Services Office should be contacted for advice. Students who require notetakers may solicit your help early in the term to find a volunteer. These volunteers will be trained and paid by the Disability Services Office.

Students with learning disabilities may vary widely in the type of special accommodation required. Specialized testing and recommendations are available through the Disability Services Office.

Students in wheelchairs may need few special arrangements, though you may want to leave a little extra time for them to arrive (especially in the winter months). Lab stations may require some modification in order to accommodate wheelchairs.

In the case of emergencies, the TA should ensure the safety of their students. Some students with disabilities may require special assistance evacuating a building in case of fire or a fire drill.

If you require more information on assisting a student with special needs, or if one of your students needs more information or support, call the Disability Services Office at 533-6467.

### **For Women**

Anyone can inadvertently fall into behaviour in the classroom which is not gender inclusive. While women may be more sensitive to the concerns of female students, this is not always the case. Deeply rooted patterns of behaviour towards women in our society can lead any of us to marginalize the classroom contributions of women students. Subtleties such as using a distinct tone of voice or different

mannerisms with female students can have the effect of discouraging women students from achieving their full academic potential. For instance, studies have shown that:

**Women students are more frequently interrupted when speaking, and instructors make more eye contact with male students.** The implication for a woman is that her contributions are less important than those of the male students. Extra care should be taken that **no** student is persistently interrupted, and that all students are paid equal attention in discussions and lectures.

**Female students and instructors are more often judged according to appearance rather than accomplishments; and women's successes, rather than being attributed to intelligence, are more often seen as the result of diligence or luck.** This degrades the academic struggles of women, and inhibits them from striving to do their best. Judge students on their academic merits, and accord similar praise to all academic successes.

**Certain academic projects or issues (or even disciplines) are seen as being particularly appropriate or inappropriate for women.** This tends to "ghettoize" women in certain occupations, and can work to inhibit them from attempting to enter non-traditional fields of study or research projects. Your job is to facilitate and enrich students' education, and not to constrain or destroy it.

**Language patterns, such as the regular use of male referencing, or of the generic "he" or "mankind" persist throughout the academic community.** This serves to exclude the historical contributions of women, and often makes the women in the classroom feel invisible or unimportant. Rather than saying something like "Man is descended from the apes", we can easily say "Humans descended from the apes". OR instead of male-only examples or assumptions of maleness such as "When the doctor found the broken bone, he began to...", we can either alternate our examples from she to he, or use more generic terminology (e.g. "...they will").

**Women students are more often the targets of sexist jokes or other forms of sexual harassment in and outside of the classroom.** As a general rule, if you think a joke may offend someone, then don't tell it or tolerate others telling it.

### **For Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Students**

\_\_\_\_\_ While a person is not wholly defined by sexual orientation, it is a major component of one's life. Creating a comfortable environment for gay, lesbian and bisexual students may reduce some emotional barriers to learning. There are some things that you can do as a TA to contribute to the development of a welcoming learning environment for these students:

Confront homophobic jokes. Target these jokes both inside and outside the classroom.

Remember that you often do not know what the sexual orientations of your students and co-workers may be -- never presume someone's sexual orientation.

Do not make assumptions -- gay, lesbian and bisexual students often do not fit stereotypes. Gay, lesbian and bisexual students may be in wheelchairs, or they may be foreign students (to name some examples).

These students may be facing extra pressures. For example, the fear of "coming out" often carries with it concerns about the associated loss of economic and emotional support. As with



mature students, on occasion these stresses may need to be taken into account.

Language often acts as a barrier. Discourage the use of terms such as fag, dyke, etc.

Use gender inclusive language such as partner or spouse.

Where applicable use positive examples of different lifestyle choices (eg. inspirations of gay poets in literature). Silence of this kind of material can indicate censoring.

Homophobia often controls the disciplines and professions that people go into (eg. nursing, rehab, engineering, etc.). Encourage students equally to pursue their interests beyond the limits of traditional fields.

Finally, if a student comes out to you, treat it as a privilege and in total confidence. There are a number of resources to which students may be directed on campus (e.g., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transidentified Association at 533-2960 and the Anti-Heterosexism Coordinator in the Human Rights Office at 533-6886).

### **For Racial Minorities**

Confront racial slurs and associated jokes both inside and outside the classroom.

Remember that different racial and religious groups often celebrate different holidays. Some students will miss classes which conflict with their religious or cultural celebrations. An extensive list of religious holidays is available at the Chaplain's Office (533-2186).

Students may not fit into traditional stereotypes. Never make assumptions about a student's background or ability.

Encourage students to voice different views or perspectives freely and furthermore, give these views consideration and support where possible. Do not use or tolerate the use of language which discriminates against any minority.

### **In Conclusion ...**

At Queen's, creating an environment where everyone can feel comfortable and strive for academic excellence is taken very seriously. Our harassment policies and grievance advisors now explicitly exclude many offensive behaviours. All students must be treated with respect. The first step is to recognize that there is or could be a problem, and the second is to find a way to deal with it. Talk about these issues with your supervisor, other faculty members, other TAs, and students.

# APPENDIX A

## ASSISTANCE FOR THE ASSISTANT

|  |  |  |
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| <b>Academic Advising</b>                       | See the undergraduate calendar. Counsellors are listed at the front of each Faculty or department.   |  |
| <b>Apartment and Housing</b>                   | Accommodation listings and services.<br>(169 University Avenue)  | <b>533-2501</b>                                  |
| <b>Alma Mater Society</b>                      | Main governing student body in charge of policy making, club grants, electing the Board of Directors, and overseeing every faculty society.<br>(AB01A John Deutsch University Centre)      | <b>533-2725</b>                                  |
| <b>Athletics and Physical Education Centre</b> | Recreational facility for students and staff including varsity teams, houseleagues, intramurals and instructional sports.<br>(Union St)  | <b>533-2500</b>                                  |
| <b>Ban Righ Centre</b>                         | Resource centre for women who have been away from academic pursuits for some time -- provides counselling, speakers, workshops, etc. (32 Queen's Crescent)                                 | <b>533-2977</b>                                  |
| <b>Campus Bookstore</b>                        | Stocks all required textbooks for all courses at the university plus a wide range of general interest books, magazines, and stationary. It also orders books upon request.<br>(Clark Hall) | <b>533-2955</b>                                  |
| <b>Campus Security - Escort Service</b>        | Available at any time for security assistance and provides escorts across campus whether for personal safety reasons or when moving money.   | <b>533-6080</b>                                  |
| <b>Career Services</b>                         | Provides resources and workshops to help with job searches and career planning.<br>(St. Lawrence Building Queen's Cres.)   | <b>533-2992</b>                                  |
| <b>Chaplain's Office</b>                       | Minister to the university community regardless of faith, provides counselling, particularly in crisis circumstances.<br>(102 Physical Education Centre)                                   | <b>533-2186</b>                                  |
| <b>Childcare Resource Centre</b>               | Links you up with child care facilities in the Kingston Community (contact the Child Care Resource Centre several months in advance).<br>(380 Bagot Street)                                | <b>533-4915</b>                                  |
| <b>Counselling Services</b>                    | Offers personal, educational, and career counselling and workshops.<br>(Lower Level, St. Lawrence Building)  | <b>533-2893</b>                                  |
| <b>Disability Services</b>                     | Assists students with physical disabilities or learning disability in a university setting.<br>(St. Lawrence Building)   | <b>533-6467</b><br><b>TDD</b><br><b>533-6566</b> |

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| <b>Emergency Report Centre (ERC)</b>          | <p>Campus security patrols are on duty 24 hours a day. <b>533-6111</b></p> <p>For emergencies you should call them (before 911 in minor emergencies/after 911 in more serious situations). They will direct emergency services to any building on campus.</p>   |
| <b>Emergency Telephones</b>                   | <p>These blue-light phones are located outdoors across campus. Indoor assistance phones are the red-lift phones. All phones can be used in situations of fear, concern, or crisis. When you pick them up you are immediately connected with the Emergency Report Centre and your location is known to them. Assistance will be with you in minutes.</p>                 |
| <b>Financial Services</b>                     | <p>For tuition fee payment, accounting, payrolls, budgets etc. <b>533-2050</b></p>  |
| <b>Gender Issues Committee</b>                | <p>A proactive and educational committee of the AMS which offers a forum for discussion and awareness of issues relating to gender. <b>533-2725</b></p>   |
| <b>Grad Club Inc.</b>                         | <p>The grad club is independently operated for graduate students and medical students for refreshments, meals, recreation and relaxation. Unless you "opt-out", your tuition covers your membership. <b>533-3427</b><br/>(162 Barrie Street)</p>  |
| <b>Graduate Studies and Research</b>          | <p>Controls admissions, deans awards and assistantships etc. <b>533-6100</b><br/>(207 Fleming Hall)</p>   |
| <b>Graduate Residences and Accommodations</b> | <p>Co-ed, room-only residences on Main Campus. <b>533-2550</b><br/>(Residence Admissions -Victoria Hall)</p>  |
| <b>Grievance Advisors</b>                     | <p>Grievance advisors were established in order to assist students and faculty in solving problems, especially those related to decisions made by the university. <b>533-6095</b><br/>(Contact the Senate office at the number listed here)</p>   |
| <b>Health Information</b>                     | <p>For any questions about health related issues. <b>533-6712</b><br/>To speak to a consulting nurse. <b>533-6859</b></p>   |
| <b>Human Rights Office</b>                    | <p>Develops education programs and recommends policies on human rights issues for the university community. Provides support for people making complaints of discrimination or harassment, through the services of the Anti-Racism Coordinator and Sexual Harassment Coordinator, and Anti-Heterosexism Coordinator. <b>533-6886</b><br/>(108 Old Medical Building)</p> |

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| <b>Info-Bank</b>                        | Provides general information about Queen's <b>533-2502</b> including a lost and found. It also houses the Ride Board which students may use to offer or look for drives out of town.<br>(007 The John Deutsch University Centre)  |
| <b>Information Technology Services</b>  | Services and support for education, research and administration, including hardware, software, laser printing, courses and workshops.<br>(Dupuis Hall -- Room G23) This is where you sign up for a mainframe account and for E-MAIL and where you can buy computers and printers at discounted prices.<br><br>(Help Desks: Stauffer Library, Room 120D; Jeffery Hall; Mackintosh-Corry Hall) <b>533-2058</b>              |
| <b>Instructional Development Centre</b> | The main focus of the centre is to improve directly and indirectly the quality of teaching at Queen's. The centre provides services to all Queen's teaching staff (including TA's). Please drop in for a visit or a browse through the library. You can also e-mail the Teaching Assistant Associate(s) at <a href="mailto:taas@post.queensu.ca">taas@post.queensu.ca</a> .<br>(101 Old Medical Building) <b>533-6428</b> |
| <b>International Centre</b>             | Promotes cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity to stimulate and support the academic and personal development of participants (international students and internationally-minded Canadian students)<br>(117 John Deutsch University Centre) <b>533-2604</b>  |
| <b>John Deutsch University Centre</b>   | Offers a place where students, staff and faculty may meet, relax, and dine. Facilities include meeting rooms, reading lounges, study halls, games rooms, music listening rooms, cafeterias, and commercial outlets.<br>(Corner of Union and University) <b>533-2794</b>   |
| <b>Judicial Committee</b>               | Deals with non-academic discipline involving <b>undergraduate</b> students. <b>533-2725</b>   |
| <b>Kingston Crisis Pregnancy Centre</b> | Assists women experiencing unplanned or crisis pregnancies.<br>(74 Johnson Street) <b>533-0425</b>  |
| <b>Learning Technology Unit</b>         | Encourages faculty and TAs at Queen's to use technology as a tool in teaching through a broad range of services, programs and activities. (By appointment only - Stauffer Library 008A) <b>x75611 or 75640 (internal number)</b>  |
| <b>Legal Aid Clinic</b>                 | Provides legal advice and assistance to Queen's students and low income members of the Kingston community<br>(212 Macdonald Hall) <b>533-2102</b>   |

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| <b>Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Issues Committee</b>          | Promotes discussion pertaining to lesbo/homophobia and heterosexism, and provides a safe and affirmative space for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.  | <b>533-2725</b>                    |
| <b>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transidentified Association</b> | Dedicated to helping and supporting lesbians and gay men live positively in the context of their sexual orientation.<br>(51 Queen's Crescent)  | <b>533-2960</b>                    |
| <b>Library Assistance</b>                                  | For assistance with any topic or assignment, ask the librarian on duty, or call:   |                                    |
|  | <i>Information Desk</i>  | <b>533-2525</b>                    |
|  | Art Library  | <b>533-2841</b>                    |
|  | Education Library  | <b>533-2191</b>                    |
|  | Health Sciences Library  | <b>533-2510</b>                    |
|  | Law Library  | <b>533-2842</b>                    |
|  | Music Library  | <b>533-2839</b>                    |
|  | Science and Engineering library  | <b>533-2838</b>                    |
|  | Stauffer Library   | <b>533-2505</b>                    |
| <b>Parking Office</b>                                      | This is where you get your parking permit.<br>(202 Fleming Hall)   | <b>533-6979</b>                    |
| <b>Post Office</b>   | This is where stamps may be purchased and external mail may be posted.<br>(Lower Level, John Deutsch Centre)   | <b>547-4757</b>                    |
|  | Queen's internal mail services are located at 115 Barrack Street.  | <b>533-6305</b>                    |
| <b>Printing Services</b>                                   | Queen's professional printing service for jobs requiring either a photocopier or a printing press.<br>(115 Barrack Street)   | <b>533-2912</b>                    |
|  | Satellite Printing - For a convenient place on campus get large numbers of copies (ie. course outlines, exams etc.). There is no printing press at this location. (08 Dunning Hall).   | <b>533-6600</b>                    |
| <b>Publishing and Copy Centre</b>                          | An AMS owned and run photocopy centre which has cheap rates.<br>(Lower Level, John Deutsch University Centre)  | <b>533-6543</b>                    |
| <b>Queen's Day Care</b>                                    | Accommodates children of students, faculty and staff ages 6 months to 5 years. (Apply early.)<br>(169 Union Street and 96 Queen's Crescent)  | <b>533-3009</b><br><b>533-3008</b> |
| <b>Rector</b>  | Assists students with academic concerns regarding faculty or academic assessment. The Rector investigates claims of unfair treatment or the use of improper procedure and may act as a mediator in negotiating a solution.<br>(John Deutsch University Centre) | <b>533-2733</b>                    |
| <b>Registrar's Office</b>                                  | Handles student records and transcripts.<br>(103 Richardson Hall)  | <b>533-2040</b>                    |

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| <b>Residence Dons</b>                                | Senior students who assist in making the adjustment first year university easier. They counsel and refer students in residence about financial, medical, academic, or personal matters.           | <b>Residence Life</b><br><b>533-6790</b> |
| <b>School of English</b>                             | Offers non-credit courses in English as a second language.<br>(11 St. Lawrence Avenue)  | <b>533-2472</b>                          |
| <b>Sexual Assault Crisis Centre</b>                  | 24 hour crisis line to provide support and assistance survivors of sexual assault.  | <b>544-6424</b><br><b>545-0762</b>       |
| <b>Sexual Harassment Advisors</b>                    | Provide information on how to handle the situation how to lodge a sexual harassment complaint.  | <b>533-6095</b><br>or<br><b>533-6629</b> |
| <b>Sexual Health Resource Centre</b>                 | Information and counselling on birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual health etc.<br>(Student Affairs Building - 51 Queen's Crescent)   | <b>533-2959</b>                          |
| <b>Society of Graduate and Professional Students</b> | The SGPS is an autonomous student organization which promotes the interests and represents the views of graduate students.<br>(021 John Deutsch University Centre)                                | <b>533-2924</b>                          |
| <b>Stat Lab</b>                                      | Provides assistance and counselling about statistics issues and problems.<br>(205 Jeffery Hall)   | <b>533-2443</b>                          |
| <b>Student and Community Services Building</b>       | Houses student affairs clubs and associations including Amnesty International, Queen's Women's Centre etc.<br>(51 Queen's Crescent -- the grey house).  | <b>533-2958</b>                          |
| <b>Student Health Services</b>                       | Provides out-patient medical and psychiatric care to students registered at Queen's.<br>(St. Lawrence Building)   | <b>533-2506</b>                          |
| <b>TALK (Telephone Aid Line Kingston)</b>            | Distress information and befriending line. Provides listeners and an information base from 7 pm to 7 am daily.  | <b>544-1771</b>                          |
| <b>Telephone Information</b>                         | Provides telephone numbers on campus, and dialling information.   | <b>533-2000</b>                          |
| <b>Walkhome Service</b>                              | Available every night for any person on campus who would like to be accompanied home or to their car.   | <b>533-2662</b>                          |
| <b>Who's Where</b>                                   | Student phone book which lists student numbers and information on just about everything on campus and in town. It is available to ALL students in the fall and may be picked up at the Info-Bank. | <b>533-2725</b>                          |
| <b>Work Study Program</b>                            | Helps students in serious financial need meet their educational costs by working part-time during the school year.  | <b>533-2216</b>                          |
| <b>Writer's Line</b>                                 | Open during normal working hours to answer questions about grammar punctuation and usage: also see Writing Centre.  | <b>533-6294</b>                          |

**Writing Centre**

Provides proofreading, tutoring, and workshops on essay and exam writing.  
(140 Stuart Street)

**533-6315**

# APPENDIX B

## JOB DESCRIPTION FORM

The intent of this form is to assist the supervisor and teaching assistant defining specific roles and expectations.

| <b>ROLES</b> | <b>DESCRIPTION</b>  | <b>HOURS ALLOTTED</b> |
|--------------|---|-----------------------|
|              | pedagogical training and orientation  |                       |
|              | marking of _____ reports @ _____ minutes each                                     |                       |
|              | _____ office hours per week for _____ weeks                                       |                       |
|              | _____ labs times _____ hours per week   |                       |
|              | _____ hours of prep. time for _____ labs/tutorials                                |                       |
|              | meetings with supervisor  |                       |
|              | time for entering grades  |                       |
|              | <b>TOTAL HOURS</b> (must not exceed an average of 10 hours per week for the term) |                       |



# APPENDIX C

## COLLECTING FEEDBACK ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

### A. INFORMAL WRITTEN FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS ABOUT INSTRUCTION:

**Index Cards.** Several times during the term pass out index cards to students and ask them to respond to two questions, one on the front of the card, the other on the back. You can pose general questions, such as:

*How are you finding the course?*

*What's good about the course? What's not so good? Any suggestions for improving the course?*

Or you may prefer to ask more specific questions about aspects of the course, particularly those aspects of the course which are new to you and/or the students:

*Are the problem sets too difficult?*

*Is the pace of the class causing difficulties? Are the readings facilitating your learning?*

You can also provide prompts, such as:

*I would like you to do more...*

*I would like you to do less...*

and ask students to complete the sentences.

It is important that you respond quickly and candidly to your students' comments. At the next class meeting after this activity, begin by thanking students for their comments. Present a brief summary of their comments, and then respond to any concerns that have been raised. Clarify any confusions about your goals and their expectations. Then indicate which suggestions you will act upon this term, which must wait until the course is next offered, and which you will not act upon.

**Suggestion Box.** Bring a manila envelope to class or tape one to your office door and ask students to place unsigned comments, questions, or complaints in it. You could ask them to comment on material they don't understand or on the presentation. Clear up any ambiguities or confusion at the next class meeting.

### B. INFORMAL WRITTEN FEEDBACK ABOUT LEARNING:

**The one-minute paper.** This simple approach to the improvement of in-class teaching works by instructors setting aside the last minute of their classes and having their students write on a scrap piece of paper:

What was the most significant thing you learned in class today?

What question is uppermost in your mind at the end of today's class?

Collect the responses immediately and read them before the class meets again. These papers can help

you evaluate how well you have conveyed the material - when you go through the papers you'll know what the students understood and what they didn't. This information can help you structure the topics for the next class meeting.

