

# Handbook for Teaching Assistants

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## I. Introduction

Being a teaching assistant is a rewarding part of your experience as a first year PhD student. But it can also be challenging or even frustrating if you are uncertain what is expected of you. The goal of this handbook is to address some of the practical matters of being a TA in the English Department at Stony Brook. It strives to anticipate some of the questions you may have about your role as a TA and to provide you with some helpful tips about what you can do to make the most of your time as a TA. Because it is futile to anticipate every eventuality, this handbook will also provide you with some resources that might be of further assistance during your first year at Stony Brook, including who to contact with other questions as they arise.

## II. Before the semester starts

Semesters get hectic, fast! And none more so than your first. There is a lot for you to adjust to: a new environment, new colleagues and professors, the demands of rigorous coursework, a new campus. Your reading and writing assignments will be heavy, and you may find that you struggle to keep up with all your responsibilities. But there are some things you can do before the semester starts to make your teaching assistantship go smoothly.

### 1. Meet with the professor to whom you have been assigned

This is perhaps the most important thing you will do at the beginning of the semester. Each professor will have slightly different expectations for his or her teaching assistants, and it is important to discuss what those expectations are from the start. Indeed, keeping an open dialogue with your supervising professor throughout the term will ensure a successful semester for you both.

When you meet with your professor, be sure to ask for a syllabus and any introductory handouts. The professor should also be able to provide you with free desk copies of any texts used in the class. Enquire about the professor's classroom policies for attendance, grading, late work, and any other practical matters. Find out what sorts of work the professor intends to assign and what the due dates are in order to plan your semester accordingly. Be sure you know where and when class is held so that you will be on time your first day. Find out when your professor's office hours are and discuss what will be a convenient time for you to hold your own office hours. If there is more than one TA assigned to the class, discuss how the work will be divided. Also determine whether you will keep attendance records for lectures and/or your recitation sections.

Serving as a TA is an important part of your professional training as a teacher and a valuable means to establish a close working relationship with individual faculty

members. Cultivating that relationship early will enhance and facilitate your experience.

## **2. Read ahead**

Hopefully you'll have some familiarity with the material for the class you've been assigned. Nevertheless, it's important to refresh your knowledge of that material since you'll be taking an active role in teaching it to students and evaluating their grasp of it. Once you've obtained the syllabus and texts from your professor, it may be a good idea to read ahead before the semester gets going.

## **3. Prepare your materials**

As will be discussed further below, an important part of your responsibility as a TA will be record keeping. Print out class rosters (available on SOLAR) before the first day. It's a good idea to have a few copies. Consider, perhaps, a spreadsheet for attendance and one for grades. If you keep records on your computer, be sure to back them up. Very likely you'll want to have hard copies in class as well.

# **III. Classroom responsibilities**

## **A. Lecture**

### **1. Attending Lecture**

TAs are expected to attend all lectures for their assigned course, to read the assignments, and to take notes on the material. Think of yourself as a role model for the undergraduates in the course—you want to be on time and attentive throughout the class. If you cannot make it to a lecture for any reason you must notify the supervising professor and arrange to get notes covering the material you miss. You are often the students' first source for questions, whether you are leading a discussion section or not. It is therefore important that you be well versed in what the professor has covered during the lecture.

### **2. Record keeping**

Most professors will ask TAs to keep track of attendance, both for lectures and recitations. Find out what is expected of you and develop a system that will be easy to maintain throughout the semester. It's a good idea to confer with your fellow TAs on this.

### **3. Teaching**

Some professors will offer you the opportunity to teach one or two of the lectures. Although this may seem intimidating, lecturing offers valuable experience and an opportunity to receive feedback on your teaching from the professor who observes the class. You'll often find that the undergraduates are supportive and enjoy it too.

#### **4. Proctoring**

TAs act as proctors for exams, tests, and/or quizzes.

#### **B. Recitation Sections**

During one or both semesters of your first year you will likely be assigned to conduct a recitation section. Large group lectures will meet on Monday and Wednesday while you will meet with a smaller group of students at the same time but in a smaller classroom on Friday. Recitation sections are a great opportunity for the students to have a chance to discuss the material and for you to get some teaching practice. While some professors may ask you to give brief quizzes or assignments in recitation, by and large the purpose is group discussion. Leading a discussion is a skill that will invariably take some practice. No doubt some days you'll seem to have more fruitful discussions than others, depending on the text or the mood of the class. Nevertheless, there are some tips to keep in mind when preparing for your recitation section that may help you improve the consistency and value of the discussions you lead.

##### **1. Get to know your class**

It may seem obvious, but the first important thing you can do in the semester is to get to know your students by name. Students appreciate the personal attention you can give them, particularly if they are enrolled in numerous large lectures. Make a seating chart, play a name game, repeat their names often—whatever works. You can also access photo rosters with pictures of every student through SOLAR. This will help you establish a connection to your class and make everyone feel more comfortable. It's also helpful for calling on reluctant participants. Repeating students' names often will help them learn each other's names too, which will foster an atmosphere of community in your classroom.

##### **2. Have a plan**

Having read the material and attended the lecture, while important, are not enough. You should not expect your students to be able to sustain discussion on a text without your guidance, sometimes even your prodding. It is therefore important that you have a goal or purpose for the day's lesson and that you break down the hour in a way that will allow you to achieve that goal. Be flexible and receptive to students' needs, of course, to tweak your plan as you go or to help you design future lessons.

It's a good idea to break down your hour into smaller, more manageable segments. The following is merely a suggestion, but hopefully a useful one that you can build from as you gain experience. You might break your lesson down as follows:

- Step 1: Get students ready to learn
- Step 2: Present new material or review difficult material
- Step 3: Let students engage material
- Step 4: Debrief that engagement

## Step 5: Prepare for the next section<sup>1</sup>

Step 1: You can get your students ready to learn in a variety of ways. Remember that Stony Brook is a large university, and many of these students, especially if they are freshman or sophomores, will be taking mostly large lecture classes. As a TA, you will be the teacher they get to know and feel most comfortable approaching. You can facilitate this relationship with your students and go a long way toward making them more comfortable and more likely to participate in class discussion by taking time to welcome them at the beginning of the class. This might include asking them how they're progressing with the reading or if they're having any particular difficulties with the class.

Focus the class for the day's discussion by letting students know what your goal(s) is for the class period. You might do this verbally, by telling students what you hope for them to get out of the day's discussion. For example: "Class, by the end of the hour I hope you'll have a few reliable strategies for approaching a Shakespearean sonnet." You might write on the board two or three general topics you hope to cover. Or you might present an overarching question for the class period. With this strategy it's sometimes a good idea to put the question on the board and allow students a few minutes to brainstorm on paper. This focuses their thoughts and makes them more likely to participate in class discussion since they have something concrete before them to contribute. You can also call on students to read their responses later in the class period should discussion lag or as a strategy for engaging reluctant participants.

Step 2: You might need to spend some time in the recitation section simply explaining difficult material. This teacher-directed part of the class should be kept short, however, in favor of active student participation and discussion.

Step 3: This step should be the heart of the recitation section and the bulk of the time should be devoted to it. Remember that your students are receiving most of the content of the class in lecture format, but that the best way for them to actually learn and process that information is by actively engaging with it. Therefore your goal is to get all of your students to actively participate in the recitation section. There are several strategies that will help you to do this. Not all of these will work for everyone, so don't get discouraged! Mix up your methods until you find one that you are comfortable with and that works for you. And remember, leading a good discussion takes practice!

Have questions prepared ahead of time: Always have some of your own questions prepared, even if you plan to use some of the other methods. Practically speaking, you don't want to run out of things to do. But by the same token, you don't

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *Becoming Teachers: The Graduate Student Guide to Teaching at Yale University*

want to be caught merely killing time. Having questions prepared that address your goal for the hour is a good way to make certain you're using your time effectively.

While discussion questions should be broad enough to elicit debate, if questions are too broad discussion will founder. So "Characterize the role of the female characters in Hamlet" might result in blank stares, while "How do Hamlet's interactions with his mother differ from his interactions with Ophelia?" narrows the discussion to a more manageable focus. Having follow up questions helps too: "What might we infer about Hamlet based on these interactions? What might we infer about the role of women in the play?" etc. Or break large questions down into smaller, more manageable parts that allow students to build from observation to analysis. So, for the example question about Hamlet, you might first ask about Hamlet's attitude toward his mother, then his attitude toward Ophelia, and finally ask the class to draw some larger inferences from both. Further, have specific scenes, speeches, poems or passages in mind to look at, read together and discuss in relation to your questions (Better still, always ask students to point to scenes to support their answers. But just in case, have your own in mind!). Preparing handouts might be helpful too, but that's up to you.

One caution about follow-up questions: try to avoid peppering students with questions. Don't be afraid of a little silence in the classroom. Students need time to ponder questions, especially complex, critical ones. Give them a few minutes to think or jot down answers. If you still don't get a response after a minute or so—or your only response is vacant looks—then it may be time to rephrase your questions or ask a follow-up. Don't be afraid to ask your class if they understand your question; they'll tell you if they're confused.

Have students come up with discussion questions: This is a bit trickier, and can require more thinking on your feet on your part. But it can also be an effective way to find out how students are engaging with a text, what parts interest them, and what parts they are having difficulty with. Beware, however: students will need practice and instruction in coming up with good discussion questions as their inclination will be to ask fact-based questions rather than discussion questions. It's a good idea to have your own questions prepared ahead of time to supplement theirs, especially the first time you try this.

Small Group Discussion: Group work can be an effective way to get all your students involved, but often its effectiveness depends on group dynamics as well as your ability to manage it effectively. You must be attuned to what's going on in the groups, listening in, circling the room, joining in various groups. It may sound surprising, but it takes as much skill and practice to have your students work in small groups as it does to lead a larger discussion.

Try having different groups work on different things at the same time. Assign each group a different question and then come together to have the groups lead the larger discussion on their questions. Or give each group a different question to

work on for a set amount of time and then have them trade until each group has gotten a chance to work through each question. This helps prevent groups from simply racing to the end of a sheet of questions instead of carefully considering each one. You might ask different groups to marshal evidence for opposing sides of issues and then debate them in the large group. However you work it, the same principles apply to small group discussions as to large group discussions—perhaps even more so since you are not directly monitoring all the groups all the time: students need clear, specific instructions and questions that are carefully crafted to provoke discussion.

Don't be afraid to call on people: If discussion is lagging, call on someone. If the same couple of people continually dominate the discussion, ignore them for a while (you might say, “let’s hear from someone new”) and call on someone else. Do your best to get everybody to participate in every class, especially in the first few weeks of the semester. If they realize from the beginning that they can’t hide in your class, your students will be more likely to come prepared and to volunteer themselves when they have something worthwhile to contribute. Allowing students to brainstorm on paper for a moment or two before calling on them is a good way to help out shy students or reluctant participants and can result in more thoughtful responses.

Pushing the envelope: Your class discussions will never go very far if you are satisfied with the first answer you receive. Ask follow up questions, encourage students to defend their answers with evidence from the text, ask other students to challenge a viewpoint or adopt the opposite viewpoint for the sake of argument. You don’t want to be dismissive of a point of view, but you do want to encourage the class to think it through.

Step Four: Bring your discussion to some kind of conclusion before the hour is up. Sum up how you as a class have achieved the goal(s) you set for the period and what the highlights of the conversation were. What do you hope your students will take away from the discussion? (Sometimes it’s even a good idea to ask a student to sum up.)

Step Five: Send the students on their way with something to think about. Remind them of upcoming assignments and challenge them to apply something you’ve discussed in class to what’s on the horizon. Give them something to focus their reading for your next discussion.

Things to avoid: While it may be necessary to go over complex material if students are confused, in general avoid lecturing. By the same token, avoid presenting your own complex theoretical readings of the material. The recitation section is the time for the students to engage the material, not for you to show off your own readings. Never make fun of students for their ideas or writing (even if it is when looking at an anonymous piece of writing)—in addition to potentially hurting someone’s feelings,

this is a surefire way to quell discussion in the class at large. Correct misunderstandings, to be sure, but leave the sarcasm at the door.

### 3. What to do on the first day

Spend some time on the first day getting to know the students by name and introducing yourself and your expectations. For example, remind them that this is a discussion section and as such their participation and preparedness is key. Insist that students be respectful to each other while welcoming debate. Remind them of practical things, like that cell phones should be silenced and if they need to leave the room during class to try to cause as little disruption as possible. Stress how students can get in touch with you, and encourage them to take advantage of your office hours.

Most importantly, hit the ground running. Remember that the first day of class is a regular, full class period, and should have a goal and a discussion like every other. Keep students the full, allotted time and follow the five steps outlined above. Consider even starting the first class with a discussion of relevant material and leaving the business stuff until the end. Students tend to put their best foot forward on the first day and if they see that this is what you will insist on as a teacher, they are much more likely to continue to be prepared and on point throughout the semester. The way you lead class will convey as much about your expectations as stating them ever will.

#### Some other things to think about for the first day:

What are students going to call you? Some TAs prefer to be informal and go by their first name. Others go by Mr. or Ms. and their last name. It's up to you how formal you want to be, but either way it will be easier on your class if you are clear about how you want to be addressed.

What are you going to wear? How you present yourself will inevitably give your students clues about who you are and what your teaching style is. Some professors and TAs go for a casual and relaxed look while others prefer very formal and professional clothing. Either way, remember that this is your job and your clothes should reflect a measure of professionalism by being clean, neat, and modest.

### 4. Dealing with problems

It's pretty unlikely that you'll have a student who is a real disruption to your class. But it's important to be prepared to deal with this type of situation, should it occur.

Talk to your supervising professor: If you sense that trouble is brewing or if there is an actual incident in your class, the first person to go to is your supervising professor. He or she will be able to help you find the best way for dealing with the situation. The same is true if you suspect that one of your students is having a problem such as drug addiction, abuse or depression. You might both want to consult with Stony Brook's Center for Prevention and Outreach (<http://studentaffairs.stonybrook.edu/cpo/index.shtm>).

**Student-Teacher Relationships:** Under no circumstances is it permissible for a TA to have a social or sexual relationship with an undergraduate student in his or her class. This is both unprofessional and unethical. Should you find yourself the recipient of inappropriate advances from a student or the victim of harassment, tell your supervising professor and/or the graduate director immediately. It's best to err of the side of caution here, and to avoid any appearance of impropriety.

If you find that students are confiding in you about things beyond the scope of the class, you might refer them to Stony Brook's free counseling services (<http://studentaffairs.stonybrook.edu/ucc/index.shtml>).

**Less serious issues:** Some more common, less serious, problems that TAs run into include students that don't participate in class at all, students who dominate the class discussion or frequently interrupt others, those who text or use phones in class, or other more minor disruptive behavior. Often the best way to deal with these interruptions is to be clear about your expectations for classroom behavior from the start and to talk individually with those students who pose a problem after class, politely but firmly reminding them of your expectations. Should problems persist, talk to your supervising professor.

## **IV. Other responsibilities**

### **A. Office hours**

All TAs, regardless of whether you are a grader or a section leader, must hold regular office hours. The times for these should be arranged in consultation with your supervising professor and should total 3 hours per week. Be diligent about holding your office hours as scheduled as nothing frustrates students faster—or leads to more complaints—than finding that someone is not in his or her office during the appointed hours. TAs also typically make themselves available by appointment and via email to answer student questions.

### **B. Grading**

Grading student work will be one of your major responsibilities, as well as one of your more time-consuming duties. It's therefore important that you use your time efficiently to make precise and useful comments for your students. Here too, consulting with your supervising professor is crucial. Discuss what the professor's expectations for the assignment are. Ask if the professor can provide you with a rubric and/or an example of what he or she judges to be an A paper and/or if you can all grade the same paper as a control case to ensure consistency.

Beyond merely assigning a fair and equitable grade, however, the comments you make on student papers should serve as teaching tools. The following are some tips about what kinds of comments are most useful. They will hopefully help you use your time more effectively.

It is not necessary to correct every single error: On some papers you would drive yourself crazy and waste a lot of time if you tried to correct every single error. Worse, your hard work and time-consuming efforts would probably have very little effect on the student and might even be overwhelming. Try to concentrate on a few of the more egregious or persistent problems. What affects the quality of the paper overall? Mark it once or twice and perhaps note in your end comments that the student's confusion of tenses (or whatever the particular student's problem is) makes it difficult to follow their argument and harms their credibility as a writer.

Engage the paper: You will be a more successful grader if you think of grading papers as having a conversation about ideas. You are not there merely to tell the student what they did wrong. Your job is to ask questions, prod, make suggestions, and genuinely engage the student's ideas. Therefore a comment such as "interesting idea, but you have not given enough evidence to convince me" is more helpful than simply writing "unclear." Comments like "unclear" and "awkward" are often puzzling to students. They may serve to justify the grade, but they do not improve the student's writing or help them learn.

End comments: Many teachers find that most of their comments appear at the end. Here we can show our students that we have thoughtfully considered their paper as a whole. Start positive: what has the student done well? It's unhelpful to overwhelm a student with a litany of mistakes. Choose two or three things that the student can reasonably hope to work on or improve for the next paper and try to give concrete suggestions for how the student can do this. Too often both students and teachers are guilty of thinking of comments as mere justification for the grade. Let's face it—they are that to some extent. We are telling our students what about the paper made it merit the letter grade we have assigned it. But we miss an important teaching moment if we neglect the instructive part of end comments.

Extra help: Urge students who have particular difficulty with writing assignments to take advantage of your office hours. They can also receive help, including individual tutoring sessions, from the writing center.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is often a problem in literature classes, especially with the pervasiveness of online study guides like Sparknotes. Be aware of this and research papers that contain sudden shifts in diction or vocabulary that seems unrelated to the course. If you suspect that a student has plagiarized, make your supervising instructor aware of it as soon as possible. It might also be a good idea for you to familiarize yourself with the university's policies and procedures regarding academic dishonesty (<http://naples.cc.stonybrook.edu/CAS/ajc.nsf/pages/info>).

### C. Other

Your supervising professor might ask you to deliver a lecture or two. This is a great experience, though a challenging one. He or she will be able to give you guidelines and suggestions beforehand as well as feedback afterwards.

Some supervising professors ask TAs to lead review sessions close to exams. Others may ask for TAs' input in designing exams or assignments. One thing you are not responsible for as a TA, however, is photocopying materials for class.

TAs who are leading discussion sections should expect to be observed at least once, often twice, during the semester by their supervising professor. Your professor will provide feedback on your teaching style. You may ask the professor who observes you to write a letter to add to your teaching file. All TAs will receive an evaluation from the supervising professor at the end of the term. This will be placed in your student file.

Many faculty members meet with their TAs on a regular basis, often weekly. This is a good way to keep in touch about course expectations and progress.

Consider organizing your own collaborative meetings with your fellow TAs. Working together to plan recitation sections or grading together can stimulate creativity and can often be more time-efficient for all.

## **V. Miscellany**

### **A. Professor/TA relations**

As stressed in the beginning of this handbook, a genial relationship with your supervising professor is important. He or she is your first resource for help and questions regarding your teaching and grading duties. Make sure each professor you work with has your contact information, particularly if you do not use your Stony Brook e-mail account. Should you encounter a problem with your professor, your next resource is the graduate director.

### **B. Managing your time and your resources**

Make sure to take care of yourself! Eat right, exercise, and get enough sleep. It's going to be a busy year, but you'll be much more productive if you're healthy and well rested. If you do get sick and need to miss class, make sure to let your supervising professor know.

Be helpful and available to your students, but don't let them monopolize your time. If a student is expecting you to respond to frequent emails at length, politely remind him or her that you are available during your office hours and that you have set aside that time to help students.

Keep your TA grading schedule in mind when signing up for things like class presentations in your own classes.

Keep an open dialogue with your supervising professor. Faculty will usually understand if you need another day or two to get your grading done—they're busy people too!

### C. Where to go for help/Who's who in the department

There are many people you can turn to for help during your time at Stony Brook. We are a friendly department, so don't be afraid to ask questions!

Supervising Professor Your first resource for all things related to TAing

Graduate Student Mentor A great resource for practical matters relating to grad school life at SBU

Graduate Director: For questions regarding program requirements  
Professor Rowan Phillips or for problems with TAing  
HUM 2089, rowan.phillips@stonybrook.edu

Graduate Program Coordinator: Dorothy Mason,

Graduate English Society (GES) Your representative body in the English dept

Executive Board:

President: Kimberly Cox - HUM 1088, [kimthisox@yahoo.com](mailto:kimthisox@yahoo.com)

Vice Presidents: Matthew Kremer- HUM 1086, [mkremer@ic.sunysb.edu](mailto:mkremer@ic.sunysb.edu)

Burcu Uyurkulak – HUM 1086, [burcuuyurkulak@gmail.com](mailto:burcuuyurkulak@gmail.com)

Emma Brinkmeyer – HUM 1086, [emmabrinkmeyer@gmail.com](mailto:emmabrinkmeyer@gmail.com)

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Treasurer: Mike Streeter - HUM 2075, [Michael.streeter@stonybrook.edu](mailto:Michael.streeter@stonybrook.edu)

Secretary: Daniel Lee - HUM 2075, [Daniel.d.lee@stonybrook.edu](mailto:Daniel.d.lee@stonybrook.edu)

GSO Reps: TBA

GSEU Rep: Nate Doherty – HUM 2075, [Nathaniel.doherty@stonybrook.edu](mailto:Nathaniel.doherty@stonybrook.edu)

English faculty liaison: Daniel Lee - HUM 2075, [Daniel.d.lee@stonybrook.edu](mailto:Daniel.d.lee@stonybrook.edu)

Writing Program Liaison: Lauren Esposito,

MA Rep: TBA

### Graduate Student Employee Union (GSEU)

As a TA, you belong to a union, the Graduate Student Employee Union (or GSEU), which consists of TAs and GAs in the entire State University of New York system and comprises the educational division of the Communication Workers of America (CWA) Local 1104. The GSEU is responsible for negotiating your contract with the state of New York and helping you make sure that your workload and work conditions are in adherence with the terms of the contract. If you suspect you are doing work outside the purview of your contract, contact the English department's GSEU representative (who is also a member of the GES executive board and is sometimes called a "department mobilizer"), and he or she can help you by putting

you in contact with Stony Brook's GSEU Business Agent--the graduate student elected by Stony Brook GSEU members to represent your needs to CWA 1104, Stony Brook University, and the state of New York. These individuals will be able to help you find answers to questions you have about the contract-mandated terms of your employment and effective solutions to your problems. In the event of a series breach of contract they will be able to initiate the process of filing an official grievance.

For more information, visit their website at [gseu.org](http://gseu.org), talk to your GSEU representative on the GES executive board, and consider getting involved in your union! The GSEU meets on a regular basis, and those meetings are open to all union members.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Hopefully this handbook helps you feel more prepared to face your teaching assistantship and answers some of the questions you may encounter as you go. If not, please feel free to ask questions and get help.

We look forward to working with you. Welcome to the English department at Stony Brook University!