Edition

1

YORK UNIVERSITY

Teaching Commons

International TA (ITA) Handbook

YORK UNIVERSITY – TEACHING COMMONS

International TA Handbook

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Contents

Welcome International Teaching Assistants v
About the Teaching Commons vi
Teaching Commons Contact Information vii
About this Guide ix
Acknowledgements x
1.0 Introduction 1
1.1 New to Canada, New to York University 1
1.2 Teaching at York 2
1.3 Supporting Units for ITAs 2
i) The Teaching Commons (TC) 2
ii) Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS) 3
iii) Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903 3
iv) York University Graduate Students' Association 4
v) York International (YI) 4
vi) The English as a Second Language –Open Learning Centre (ESL-OLC) 5
1.4 Important Health Care Information for ITAs 5
2.0 The Role of ITA at York University 7
2.1 Types of Unit 1 Teaching Assistantships 7
i) Tutorials 7
ii) Labs 7
ii) Tutor 3 (Marker Grader) 8
iii) Other University Appointments 8
2.2 TA Responsibilities and Relationships 8
i) Your Responsibility to your Course Director (CD) 8
ii) The TA/CD Relationship 9
iii) Your Responsibility to your Students 10
iv) The TA/Student Relationship 12
v) Your Responsibility to the University 14
vi) The TA/University Relationship 16
3.0 The Context of the Canadian Classroom 18
3.1 Managing "isms" 18
3.2 Related Campus Resources 19
i) The Centre for Human Rights (CHR) 19
ii) The Centre for Aboriginal Student Services 20
iii) Counselling and Disability Services (CDS) 20
4.0 Adapting English Language Skills 22
4.1 Adapting English Language Skills 22
i) Language in the ITA Classroom 22
ii) Cultural Language Issues 22

iii) Planning the Tutorial or Class: Organization and Structure 23
iv) Listening to Students 23
4.2 Classroom Strategies for the ITA 23
i) Language or Teaching? 23
4.3 Related Campus Resources 25
i) The English as a Second Language –Open Learning Centre (ESL-OLC) 25
5.0 Preparing for the First Day of Classes 26
5.1 Your Classroom Space 26
i) Technology 26
ii) The Physical Arrangement of the Classroom Space 27
iii) Starting and Ending Class 27
5.2 Surviving the First Class 28
i) Tips on Surviving your First Class 28
ii) Some Ideas for Icebreakers 29
5.3 Teaching Tips for the ITAs 31
6.0 Following Up: Preparing for the Rest of the Course 33
6.1 Setting up Patterns and Breaking Patterns 33
6.2 Moving Beyond the First Day 33
i) Effective Presentations 33
ii) Varying Instruction 34
iii) Approaching Student Questions 34
7.0 Marking and Grading 37
7.1 York University's Grading System 37
7.2 Defining Assessment 38
i) What Are TAs Responsible for? 38
ii) How do I Maintain Professionalism? 39
iii) Tips and Strategies for Grading with Consistency 39
7.3 Effective Grading for the Time-Pressed Student 39
7.4 Comments and Feedback 40
7.5 Approaches to Assessment 41
i) The Holistic Method 41
ii) The Structured Marking Scheme 42
8.0 Conclusion 44
References 45

Welcome International Teaching Assistants

I am delighted to welcome you to the Teaching Commons. As an International Teaching Assistant (ITA) at York University, you have a vital role to play in the experience of undergraduate students. By embarking on a central element of scholarly life – the passing on of knowledge—you are also joining in the scholarly activity of helping others to develop their own connections and insight.

As an ITA, you will be working with the course director to assist students in their studies, and you may do this in a variety of ways—such as facilitating discussions, advising in labs, grading papers and giving feedback. In all of these endeavours you will be able to find support, resources and a community of peers in the Teaching Commons.

This manual is a starting point, not a comprehensive guide to all you need to know about teaching at York University. We hope you will engage with the variety of opportunities on offer centrally, in the Faculties and at a departmental level to support your journey as a teaching assistant. Please visit the Teaching Commons website regularly where you will be able to find resources and notices about forthcoming events. Those of you who take part in the ITA orientation session will benefit from becoming part of a peer group supported by experienced TA mentors.

As you continue through your career, the Teaching Commons offers several programs to help you develop professionally. The Teaching Assistant Certificate in Teaching (TACT) is available for all TAs with at least one semester of teaching experience, while the Senior Teaching Assistant (STA) program is for veteran TAs who are passionate about helping others develop their teaching knowledge. Please visit the Teaching Commons website for further information.

The ethos of the Teaching Commons is one of partnership, of collaborative collegial learning and of mutual support and respect. I welcome you as a member of this community and look forward to our shared learning experience.

Dr. Celia Popovic
Director, Teaching Commons
York University

About the Teaching Commons

Who are we? The Teaching Commons brings together like-minded individuals who are interested in exploring and sharing teaching and learning innovation at York University. We have a physical presence in TEL 1050, and a virtual presence via the web and Moodle courses - but we are also more than that. The Commons is a network of colleagues, collaborations and projects, working across and within Faculties and support services. It is a hub for the collective wisdom of York faculty on effective and engaging teaching at the post-secondary level.

What do we do? We seek to act as a catalyst for the enhancement of teaching and learning at York. We do this through projects with course teams, Faculties, individuals and external partners.

What services do we offer? We offer facilitation with groups such as program teams; schools and departments, externally validated courses such as eLearning at York and the Teaching Assistant and Senior Teaching Assistant programs, structured workshops such as the yearlong program for new faculty, and ad hoc events on request. We support and conduct pedagogical research and we share good practice from around the world.

Please visit our website: http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/ to explore all that we have to offer.

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About this Guide

Canada is a multicultural nation that welcomes and celebrates diversity, and York University is no exception. At York, we are fortunate to have students from around the world, whose participation in our graduate programs enrich the academic life of the university. The knowledge and background of our International Graduate Student population brings interesting and diverse global perspectives to our York University learning community. As an International TA (ITA) you now play an important role in the education of undergraduates at York University.

While at first you may feel as though this is an incredibly daunting task, the Teaching Commons is here to support you through every stage of your TAship. Whether you are a new ITA or an ITA looking to continue developing your teaching skills, the Teaching Commons offers programming and resources that will support your academic teaching journey.

This handbook was designed to support the new ITA, but its content will be of value to ITAs and TAs alike at any stage of their educational experience. Fundamentally, it seeks to make the implicit cultural norms around teaching and learning more explicit. Its purpose is to help guide new ITAs to the ways in which cultural differences manifest in Canadian academia, while also providing concrete strategies on how to begin their teaching assistantship. However, this guide is just that—a guide, not a prescriptive how-to manual. It is meant to work in tandem with our Teaching Commons ITA and TA programming, as well as your own experience in the classroom. Attending the ITA Orientation in addition to referencing this manual will provide you with a strong foundation from which to begin your TA experience.

What makes York University such an exciting place to learn and to teach is the number and the diversity of Faculties, departments, students and teaching philosophies. With this in mind, we at the Commons have tried to strike a balance between offering concrete information regarding your teaching assistantship with broader contextual information about teaching and learning in Canada and at York University. As such, this handbook is very much a work in progress and we, at the Teaching Commons welcome any suggestions on ways to improve its content and delivery. Please do not hesitate to email us at teaching@yorku.ca should you have any suggestions for the next edition.

Until then, we welcome you to York University and to the Teaching Commons. Being a TA is an incredibly rewarding and exciting opportunity. As an ITA, you are now a valued member of the Teaching Commons community. We look forward to a collaborative and collegial journey.

The Teaching Commons Team
Teaching Commons, York University

Acknowledgements

The content from this Handbook came from a number of sources, including: an International TA Focus Group conducted by the Teaching Commons in June 2014; the Teaching Commons' current TA Start-Up Guide for Teaching and Learning at York University by Dr. Mandy Frake-Mistak; a past Teaching Assistant Handbook created by York International; and finally, the Department of History's *Quick and Dirty Guide to being a TA* created and written by Leanne Dustan and Joseph Tohill, as well as the second edition by Jodi Burkett and Ian McPhedran.

Thanks are due to Dr. William Jenkins, Graduate Program Director in History for his permission to reference and adapt sections of the Department of History's *Quick and Dirty Guide to being a TA.* Also, thank you to Nick Elson, from the Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics for his Chapter 4 inclusion, Adapting English Language and to Dr. Jon Sufrin for his insight and expertise on the Marking and Grading Chapter as well as his additions throughout this newly edited version. Special thanks to my colleague Dr. Natasha May for her on-going support with the ITA initiative and to our Teaching Commons Tutors (TCTs), Khyati Nagar and Andrea Valente for their invaluable insight into the ITA experience and feedback on this handbook.

Jennifer Bolt, Research Assistant, Teaching Commons
Produced by the Teaching Commons - York University

Chapter 1

1.0 Introduction

Welcome to York University! As an International Teaching Assistant (ITA) you will have the chance to grow in a significant way in your field of study, as well as in your approach to pedagogy. The aim of this handbook is to introduce you to your new academic home at York University, and to orient you to cultural norms of teaching and learning in Canada. What makes this book of special value to the ITA is the content that addresses the implicit cultural approaches to teaching and learning that may differ from your home country. In addition to providing ITAs concrete strategies on ways to achieve quality teaching, the guide also seeks to orient the new ITA to the multiple support networks available at York University. There is absolutely no need for the ITA to feel alone or unsure of his or her role. The university and more specifically the Teaching Commons is here to support you through what may be a profound and powerful learning experience.

As with any handbook or guide, its value only goes so far. Nothing takes the place of hands-on experience. But with this in mind, the text you are reading will complement the workshops and TA/ITA Orientations available to ALL graduate students who teach as a TA. After reading this guide, we encourage you to visit our website at http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/graduate-students for an on-going list of programs and related resources that will support you at every stage of your teaching career at York. This book is also a work in progress, and as such, we welcome your feedback and encourage you to tell us how we might improve future editions.

1.1 New to Canada, New to York University

As an international graduate student, you may not only be new to York University, but new to Toronto and/or new to Canada. In addition to navigating your way through an entirely new graduate student experience and completing your own course work while TAing, ITAs must simultaneously adapt to a new culture of teaching and learning. This may seem a daunting task at first, but rest assured that many students have made it through being an ITA in the past, and you will be able to make it through just as well. The great thing about York University is now you are part of a large community of international graduate students and international TAs, many of whom have faced similar challenges. Rely on them to share the wisdom of their experience. The key is not to be afraid to ask questions of your course director, other professors, other TAs and most especially the Teaching Commons about how the system here works. This is especially important if the Canadian educational system is unfamiliar to you. You might even consider asking another ITA if you can sit in on one of her tutorials to get a feel for how things work.

1.2 Teaching at York

York University is considered one of the most diverse, multicultural universities in Ontario. Founded in 1959, York is Canada's third largest university with a student population of 55,000 students and 7,000 faculty and staff. The university prides itself on its "unwavering commitment to excellence" while also reflecting a rich diversity of perspectives and a strong sense of social responsibility.1

It is important to understand the context at York and the students you will be teaching. For example, York University is considered a commuter campus, which means a large majority of its student population live off campus. In addition, many undergraduates at York are also new to Canada and/or may be the first generation in their families to attend university. As such, many of the undergraduate students you will be teaching may be experiencing varying degrees of culture shock while transitioning from their pre-university learning context into York University (much like you!).

While the diversity of cultures present in the classroom can enrich the teaching and learning space, it can also create challenges for you and your students if you are not entirely aware of the context of the Canadian cultural norms in the classroom. For example, while the majority of cultures tend to recognize the teacher as an authority figure, in-classroom behaviours and expectations can vary widely across cultures. Canadian higher educators typically encourage high levels of participation and welcome students to challenge the ideas of their teachers and peers. This may be a practice contrary to your previous educative experience. Addressing your responsibilities as a TA at York is the first step in understanding the context of the Canadian higher education classroom. The good news is that there are multiple support networks available to you as an ITA at York University, and you are actively encouraged to access them as you encounter challenges in the classroom.

1.3 Supporting Units for ITAs

The following section provides an overview of the multiple supporting units available to International TAs. Please note that these descriptions are brief and only provide introductory information on what these services offer. Please visit their individual websites for more information.

i) The Teaching Commons (TC)

As you venture into this new chapter of your academic teaching experience at York University. For ITAs, the Teaching Commons is your primary source for support, networking and professional development. The Teaching Commons endeavours to support the teaching work of Graduate Students at all levels. Whether you are new to York University and new to teaching or if you are a Graduate Student preparing to teach your very own course, the TC offers an array of workshops, programs and resources for you. The Commons features extensive programming options, including TA and ITA Orientation Sessions, Professional Development Workshops and on-line resources. It also brings together like-minded individuals who are interested in exploring, sharing and encouraging teaching and learning innovation across York University.

[1] "York at a Glance," http://www.yorku.ca/web/about_yorku/glance.html. Retrieved on August 6, 2014

Teaching Commons Keele Campus Location: Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Building, 1050.
Website: http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/graduate-students/
Tel: 416-736-5754 Fax: 416-736-5704
Email: teaching@yorku.ca
Office Hours: Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 4:30pm

ii) Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS)

York's Faculty of Graduate Studies provides support for international graduate students pursuing a graduate degree. In close association with York International and the Teaching Commons, FGS strives to enrich the educational experiences of international graduate students, including those who are coming to York University as exchange students, visiting students, or both. Apart from offering various academic and financial supports necessary to smooth out the transition of international students, FGS also seeks to ensure that international students succeed in their academic endeavors. Please visit http://www.yorku.ca/grads/ for a complete list of FGS services. FGS's online handbook, New Incoming International Graduate Students is designed to help you navigate the process of coming to Canada and settle into your new home at York University and in the City of Toronto. The handbook is located at http://gradstudies.yorku.ca/current-students/international-students/international-handbook/. Highlights include information regarding immigration requirements, entry Visas, study permits, housing, choosing your courses, health insurance, health care, academic life at York, Safety on Campus, and money matters such as personal finances in Canada, budgeting for your education and taxes in Canada. Of special relevancy to your teaching assistantship at York is the information related to health insurance coverage. Beginning on page 10 of this handbook is a synopsis of Important Health Care Information for ITAs.

Faculty of Graduate Studies Keele Campus Location: York Lanes, 230
Website: http://www.yorku.ca/grads/
Tel: 416-736-2100 ext. 55521 Fax: 416-736-5592
Email: garym@yorku.ca
Office Hours: Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 4:30pm

iii) Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903

CUPE 3903 represents non-tenure track contract faculty, teaching assistants, and graduate/research assistants at York University. The union contains three separate bargaining units, and so has three separate collective agreements with the university. Each collective agreement contains a scope clause, which defines what employees are covered by each agreement.

Two basic principles guide the way these collective agreements divide members into units: first, the type of work they are contracted for and second, the member's student status (if any) at the time of receiving the contract. A worker is only ever in one unit at a time, but because it is common for people's type of work and student status to change from year to year, it is possible for someone to switch units over time. Included below are the actual scope clauses from each collective agreement.

Unit 1: Unit 1 includes full-time graduate students who have a teaching contract (teaching includes demonstrating, tutoring, and marking). *Note that Unit 1 members who receive a graduate assistantship in order to fulfill their guarantee of summer work are still considered Unit 1 year round. That is, even though their work changes, they do not become Unit 3 members for the summer. Most ITAs are in Unit 1.

Unit 2: Unit 2 can include graduate students who have a teaching contract (or a teaching assistantship, contract as a practicum leader, music or design tutor or other kinds of assistantships) and are not full-time graduate students. Unit 2 members are often post-PhD graduates on temporary teaching contracts.

Unit 3: You have a graduate assistantship or research assistantship and are a full-time graduate student.

The International Graduate Students' Committee (IGSC): The IGSC advocates for international graduate student members of CUPE 3903. The IGSC normally has 2 elected members who coordinate the affairs of the IGSC. The IGSC has an annual budget of $5,000. Committee members are elected for a one-year term. Honorarium: The two elected members each receive an honorarium of $250 per year. They organize information sessions for International Students (http://3903.cupe.ca/event/information-and-consultation-session-for-international-students/)

CUPE 3903 Keele Campus Location: Atkinson Building, 143
Website: http://3903.cupe.ca/
Tel: 416-736-5154 (voice-mail only) Fax: 416-736-5480
Email: see website contact address list for appropriate email contact and telephone number
Office hours: Monday to Friday, 9:00am to 5:00pm

iv) York University Graduate Students' Association

The York University Graduate Students' Association (YUGSA) is the student government for graduate students at York. They are the fully autonomous student body that represents full and part-time graduate students registered at York. With over 6,100 full- and part-time graduate students, the YUGSA is organized around principles of accessibility, social justice, and equity as it works to improve the learning, teaching, and working environments for all graduate students at York University.

YUGSA's Keele Campus Location: 325 Student Centre.
Website: http://www.yugsa.ca/
Tel: 416-736-5865 Fax: 416-736-5729
Email: info@yugsa.ca
Office Hours: Monday to Friday, 10:00am to 1:00pm and 2:00pm to 4:00pm

v) York International (YI)

York International provides assistance to all visiting international students as well as facilitating Global Learning Experiences such as an exchange, summer abroad or international internship/placement for all York students, Canadian or international. YI is the international education office of York University, and as such, works towards the internationalization of the university.

York International (YI) Campus Building Location: York Lanes, 200
Website: http://yorkinternational.yorku.ca/
Tel: 416-736-5177 Fax: 416-736-5176
Email: yiinfo@yorku.ca (general inquires)
Office Hours: Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 4:30pm

vi) The English as a Second Language –Open Learning Centre (ESL-OLC)

If English is not your first language, ESL-OLC offers support to ESL students registered in credit courses at York University. The Centre is open to all York students, registered in degree programs, and is free of charge. Graduate students are welcome. Students may request help in ANY aspect of English: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Drop-ins are welcome.

ESL Open Learning Centre Campus Location: Ross, South 327
Website: http://www.yorku.ca/eslolc/keele/default.asp
Telephone: 416-736-2100 ext. 22940
Email: eslolc@yorku.ca

1.4 Important Health Care Information for ITAs

As an international student studying in Ontario, you do not qualify for the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP), the domestic health insurance for Ontario residents. You will find, however, that you are offered a number of health care support structures through various departments at York. Read through the plans carefully to find out what each plan covers, and what procedures you must follow to use them.

i) University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP)

University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP) is a mandatory health plan for all international students at York. Students must sign up each year for UHIP through York International (students should bring their York Card and Passport when signing up). An annual (September-August) premium will automatically be charged to your student account to cover the cost of the Plan. For more information and the latest rate premiums, please visit York International's website at http://yorkinternational.yorku.ca/current-international-students/health-insurance/ or contact the UHIP staff at uhip@yorku.ca.

ii) CUPE Health Plan

As an ITA you are eligible for supplemental insurance through the CUPE Health Plan over and above UHIP as described above. The plan covers prescription drugs, vision care, and dental care. You should receive an enrolment package from York a few weeks before you become eligible for coverage. If your contract begins in September, you must fill out your enrolment form and return it to the address provided so that your coverage can begin in January. It is therefore important to note that this coverage begins only after an initial four month waiting period during your first year as an ITA at York. However, your coverage remains in effect for four months after the end of your time working at York. If you do not receive an enrolment package, contact the CUPE office at 416-736-5154 or visit http://3903.cupe.ca/ for more information. For supplemental coverage during this initial four month waiting period, please see the Graduate Student Association (GSA) Health Plan below.

iii) Graduate Students Association (GSA) Health Plan

The GSA health plan is, like the CUPE 3903 health plan, a supplemental insurance that goes beyond what UHIP covers to offer you coverage for vision, dental, and prescription drugs. The GSA health plan is for all full-time graduate students who are not teaching assistants. The GSA is currently amending its procedures on opting out and into this plan.

Please refer to http://gradstudies.yorku.ca/current-students/international-students/international-handbook/ for a more extensive explanation of health care coverage for international students.

Chapter 2

2.0 The Role of ITA at York University

Now that you are aware of the multiple support networks available to you even before you set foot into a classroom, this chapter provides an overview of the type of TAships offered at York University, followed by an exploration of your responsibilities and relationships to students and members of the teaching team in your course.

2.1 Types of Unit 1 Teaching Assistantships

Reminder: Unit 1 members of CUPE 3903 include full-time graduate students who have a teaching contract. Please see below for descriptions of the various types of Unit 1 TAships one can hold.

i) Tutorials

A tutorial is a one to two hour session meant to complement the lecture given by the course director (see below). It is the place where students can meet in smaller groups to get clarification on issues that arise from the lecture. It is also where undergraduate students can get direct access to an instructor (that's you!). The course director will give you guidance about organizing your tutorials, but generally tutorials consist of discussion(s) about the assigned reading and about lecture content. Ideally, they deepen students' understanding of the course content.[2]

Role of a Tutorial Leader (Tutor 1)
As a tutorial leader, your role is typically to facilitate discussion; however, check with your department/course director to confirm what your new role entails. Although it is sometimes necessary to clarify issues or answer specific factual questions, the best tutorials are the ones where students get a chance to broaden and deepen their understanding of issues raised in lecture by discussing them with you and their peers (rather than simply being told the same information again).[3]

ii) Labs

A lab is typically a hands-on practical experience of content addressed in a large lecture. In the case of Fine Arts, studio labs provide students with the opportunity to experience the medium (i.e. theatre) or the materials of their art form. For example, dance labs are often conducted in larger studio spaces where students have the opportunity to embody (act out) theoretical material discussed in

[2] Adapted from Burkett and McPhedran (2006) *TA guide: A Quick and Dirty Guide to Being a TA in the Department of History at York.* 2nd Edition, p. 3-4.
[3] Ibid

their lecture. Science labs provide students with the opportunity to conduct experiments and experience other hands-on related experience.

Role of Tutor 2 (Demonstrator) and Tutor 6 (Studio Instructor)
The role of the Tutor 2 and 6 is to familiarize oneself with the practical hands-on experience of the subject matter. These lab leaders need to have a sound understanding of how to keep students safe in these learning contexts whether students are working with hazardous chemicals (as in the case of science labs and some visual arts labs), or working with the medium of their bodies.

ii) Tutor 3 (Marker Grader)

As a tutorial leader one of your many duties may include marking and grading; however there are also teaching assistantships that consist primarily of assessing students' work.

Role of marker/grader
Your role as a marker grader is to assess students' performance of their course work on behalf of the course director with respect to his/her guidelines, i.e. in the form of assignments, tests, exams, lab reports, essays, classroom participation etc. You may also be asked to invigilate exams and/or consult and meet with students on an as-needed basis.

iii) Other University Appointments

Course Directorship (CD): an individual is assigned principle responsibility for the design and/or presentation of a course. These positions are occasionally given to Senior TAs (called teaching 'tickets'). Some large courses may have 2 CDs.
Team Lecturer – are individuals responsible for a portion of a course as part of a team in a team-taught course, but not the courses overall design or assignments.
Instructor (Faculty of Education): – individuals who are assigned secondary responsibility for the presentation of a course in which a course director is also appointed and for which the team lecturer model is not applicable.
Music Tutor: A professional level musician/teacher who is contracted by Department of Music to teach private instrumental or vocal lessons or coach, lead and conduct music performance.
Please see the Unit One Collective agreement for more comprehensive descriptions of all these Unit 1 TAship including Tutor 4, 5, 6 and 7. http://3903.cupe.ca/files/2012/03/77973-1_YorkU_CUPE3903-1.pdf

2.2 TA Responsibilities and Relationships

The following section outlines your responsibilities and relationships to your course director, to your students, and to the university. A description of your relationship with each of these entities follows.

i) Your Responsibility to your Course Director (CD)

As a TA, you will be working with a professor or course director to help administer a course to undergraduates. Course directors are responsible for preparing the course and all of its components, including a course outline (syllabus), readings, assignments, lectures, and exams.

Your CD should outline the purpose of the course and your role in it. Sometimes the CD will leave it up to you to determine how to explore readings and structure your tutorial time with students, while others will have clear objectives they want to be met in tutorial. CDs will normally provide you with free copies of the all the course materials.

Here are some questions you might want to discuss with your Course Director early in the term:

What are the objectives of the course and what is to be accomplished in the tutorials/labs?
What are the course director's expectations?
Do I structure my own classes/tutorials/labs, or are there outlines I should stick to? Should I stay close to the text or lectures? What is my role in the course? What are my priorities while teaching it?
When conducting labs, what are my responsibilities? Do I keep track of supplies and materials? Do I design or revise experiments? Do I give demonstrations? What do I do in the case of emergency or accident?
How can I contribute to the course more generally (e.g., through assignment design, preparing written or web-based resources, guest lecturing, etc.)?
How much responsibility for grading will I have?
If there are other TAs in the course, how is consistency maintained among tutorials?
How many office hours should I hold and when? How do they fit in with my overall workload?4

Note: It is not typically a TA's responsibility to deal with petitions, plagiarism cases, deferrals, make-up exams, or special accommodations. Students may first come to you about such issues, but you should refer to them to the course director.

In sum, your responsibilities to your course director include:

To conduct TA responsibilities as set out by the CD
To be professional, meet deadlines and reliably teach classes
To fulfill the duties set out in your TA contract
To relay feedback and issues from students5

ii) The TA/CD Relationship

The key to a successful TA/course director relationship is clear communication. Ideally, this communication should occur at the beginning of one's TAship and be maintained throughout the course to ensure you are fulfilling your roles and responsibilities as their Teaching Assistant. It is essential to recognize, however, that these responsibilities will vary from one department to another, from course to course, and from one CD to another. For this reason, it is helpful to take time at the beginning of the term to get a clear idea of what will be expected of you during your posting. Course directors may assume you have been a TA before, and offer little guidance. If you need help or clarification it is imperative that you ask for it and it is better to ask sooner than later. A good start with your course director will translate into a strong start to the course.6

[4] Adapted from *TA Start Up Guide for Teaching and Learning* 1st Ed by Dr. Frake-Mistak, after *TRACE Tip Sheets,* www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infotrac/tips/tachecklist.pdf,

[5] Adapted from Frake-Mistak (2014*) TA Start up Guide for Teaching and Learning at York University*, Teaching Commons.

[6] Adapted from Burkett and McPhedran (2006) *TA guide: A Quick and Dirty Guide to Being a TA in the Department of History at York.* 2nd Edition, p.1.

As a teaching assistant at York, you are also enrolled in post-graduate studies. You are in the unique, but exciting role of both student and instructor and so you may experience conflicting priorities. A key skill to practice is finding the balance point between the amount of time spent on your teaching activities and on your academic responsibilities and interests.

To manage your allocated workload requirements, it is critical that you and your course director meet to decide how you will fulfill your hours. To fulfill your workload requirements (e.g. 135 hours for half TAship or 270 hours for full TAship), you will be asked to do some or all of the following: lead/facilitate tutorials or labs, attend lectures, mark assignments, invigilate and mark examinations etc. At this meeting, you will be given a workload form that contains a breakdown of the hours you should spend on each task, including preparation, teaching, grading, attending lectures, and holding office hours (see Appendix A). The total should add up to no more than your TAship (e.g. 135 hours or 270 hours). While it is the responsibility of the course director to make sure that you are not being overworked, it is your responsibility to accurately track your hours. Make your supervisor aware of potential overwork as soon as you realize it is becoming a problem so you can jointly come up with an alternate plan.

As a new TA, you may find that preparation and grading (your two main tasks) may take you longer than expected. Conversely, if you teach in the same course several years in a row, the number of hours you spend preparing may go down. Everyone is different and comes to the TA experience with varying degrees of experience and so everyone prepares and teaches differently. It is therefore important to keep track of your hours and seek assistance if you think something is taking you too long. You can make a request to meet with your course director half-way through the term to review your hours to make sure that the breakdown is still reasonable.

Also note that your course director may wish to visit your tutorials during the year. The CD should inform you in advance of any such visit and provide you with the purpose of the visit. If the visit is to be used for informal evaluation purposes, the CD must discuss with you the time and criteria for such evaluations and must discuss the results with you. A formal evaluation of your teaching (one that goes on your record) can only be carried out under conditions set out in the CUPE 3903 Collective Agreement. Your course director should be familiar with the Unit 1 Collective Agreement since she or he is your job supervisor. Your CD has a duty to respect the provisions of the Collective Agreement, particularly the rules concerning workload and class sizes.

iii) Your Responsibility to your Students

TAs play a vital role in undergraduate teaching at York University. You not only introduce students to your subject matter, but also represent the front line of university administration. This gives you both power and responsibility, for you will be responsible for much of your students' university experience. Chances are you will be teaching a diverse group of students who vary in cultural background, and educational experience. Some students may also be new to Canada and to York. Your most important role and responsibility to your students is to deliver quality teaching, but what exactly does this mean?

There are many ways to teach effectively and no "one-size-fits-all" approach to quality teaching, but here are a few important things to consider.
Quality teaching seeks to:

- establish a positive learning environment
- motivate student engagement
- demonstrate knowledge and enthusiasm for both the subject matter and your teaching
- provide challenges
- respond to students' learning needs, concerns, and opinions
- fairly evaluate student learning
- make yourself available and approachable to students[7]

The suggestions above may seem vague at first. How exactly does one establish a positive learning environment? What does it mean to motivate student engagement? Answers to these questions will be addressed in the subsequent chapters of this handbook; however, the Teaching Commons also offers a number of Workshops designed to provide concrete strategies to achieve such quality teaching. It is also important to consider that every teacher will have different strengths. In time, you will learn what your strengths are and become aware of areas you can improve on through continued professional development (workshops, courses and your own experience).

In addition to providing your students with quality teaching, you may also be responsible for providing any number of the following possible duties depending upon the teaching assistantship:

Preparation for classes: For those conducting tutorials, TAs are required to do course readings in order to prepare for each tutorial. This can mean three or more hours preparing for each week, including reading and crafting a lesson plan.[8]

Leading discussion groups or labs: If you are a tutorial leader or lab demonstrator you may be asked to lead small group discussions or lab activities depending upon the type of teaching assistantship you have been allocated.

Attending lectures: Check with your course director about whether you are required to attend the course lectures. Some departments require TAs to attend every lecture, especially if you have not taught the course before. Most courses with tutorials have two to three hours of lectures per week.

Grading students' work: The majority of teaching assistantships require you to assess students' performance of the course work. (See Chapter 7 – on Marking and Grading).

Holding office hours: TAs are often expected to hold one office hour per week, but this is largely dependent upon the type of TAship you hold. If you are required to hold office hours, choose an hour that will be convenient for both you and your students, preferably on the same day as the course lectures or (better yet) your tutorials. In most cases, you will also be sharing an office with several other TAs, and so try to arrange a time that does not conflict with your office mates' office hours. If you are a new TA, do not be surprised if students rarely come to see you, at least not until they have assignments due. Often students (and some TAs) seem to prefer email correspondence, although

[7] Adapted from the Department of History, *A Quick and Dirty Guide to Being a TA in the Department of History at York* 2nd ED after *The Teaching Assessment and Evaluation Guide*, published by the SCOTL, York University)

[8] ibid.

you should try to keep email correspondence to a minimum. Encourage your students to come and see you instead!

Invigilating tests and exams: You may be asked to attend and help supervise tests and exams, including during the December and April exam periods (if your course has a mid-term and final exam). Your CD will make these expectations clear when you fill out your course workload form.

Blanket Applications: Even though the contract guarantees you five years of teaching beyond your first posting, you must submit a "blanket" application) for the following school year by January 31. You should apply to every department or hiring unit in which you have an interest in teaching.

iv) The TA/Student Relationship

Managing Student Expectations and Setting Ground Rules: What should you expect from your students and what should your students expect from you?

If you are used to a more formal teaching context, you may find some students at York do not fit your expectations. Certain behaviours that may be classified as rude in your native culture may be more acceptable in Canada. While some cultures view asking questions or voicing disagreements with the instructor as a sign of disrespect, these are common student behaviours in the Canadian classroom. Other student behaviours such as sleeping during class or causing distractions while someone else is speaking are not appropriate in this learning context. In such cases it is up to your discretion on how you decided to handle such behaviors. Singling students out in class may make a point but can also make matters worse. Consider laying out detailed ground rules and expectations with your students the first day of class. If you observe behaviours you feel are affecting other students' ability to learn, it is up to you to enforce the rules and expectations you have established. "Tough but fair, with clear expectations" is high praise from students.

Canadian students tend to prefer and in some cases have come to expect interactivity in the classroom. This means the TA should be prepared to engage in creative teaching techniques, which go beyond the once standard one-sided lecture. As the instructor, you have the power to facilitate a positive and inclusive learning environment; however, it is important to acknowledge the implicit power dynamics that exist between instructor and student and at times between students and their peers.

Gender/Race/Sexuality: Anticipate your classroom will be diverse across gender, ethnicity and sexual preference. In celebration of such diversity, your classroom can evolve into a dynamic learning environment, but it can also become a room filled with uncertainty and conflict. As educators, we have a duty to promote a classroom space that is positive and accepting of difference across gender/race and sexuality. All members of the classroom space, (CDs, TAs, and students alike) share the right and responsibility for creating a safe and inclusive learning environment, free from harassment, exclusion, and intimidation. How can you prepare for this? Consider the following questions:

- What are your own biases and stereotypes?
- What is your own background?
- Are you sensitive to issues regarding different cultures, sexual preferences, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds?9

[9] Adapted from Adapted from the Department of History, *A Quick and Dirty Guide to Being a TA in the Department of History at York* 2nd ED after *The Teaching Assessment and Evaluation Guide*, published by the SCOTL, York University)

While one cannot expect to leave one's identity at the door, it is important to have a level of awareness about all the issues that you will certainly confront at a campus as diverse as York.

Discourage 10

- qualifiers which reinforce racial stereotypes
- assumptions that all members of racial groups are the same, or even similar
- ethnic clichés
- racist/ethno-centrist jokes
- patronizing behaviour or tokenism by race, including expecting students of non-European ancestry to respond for their entire ethno-racial group
- avoidance of eye contact with students of non-European ancestry
- relating a students' academic difficulties with her/his ethno-racial background
- using a "colour-code" to describe or interpret the actions of students

Encourage

- an acknowledgment of the presence of racial diversity in your classroom taking responsibility for managing/monitoring ethnic and racial interactions
- ground rules for mutual respect in the classroom choosing language that does not reinforce bias
- giving equal respect to all races and presenting a balanced representation in visual aids and other media
- choosing texts and print media for class discussions that avoid racial discrimination and stereotyping
- expanding your horizon by including contributions from non-traditional scholars
- acknowledging and respecting all of your students' accents and being patient with students whose first language is not English
- encouraging students to relate their learning to their personal experience

[10] Adapted from *Voices from the Classroom: Reflections on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (Toronto: Garamond, 2001) as cited in *A Quick and Dirty Guide to Being a TA in the Department of History at York* 2nd ED the following section offers a checklist for *Engaged Pedagogy in Racially Diverse Classrooms.*

Burkett, McPhendran, Dustan and Tohill (2006) offer sound advice for ALL TAs to consider. They write:

> Having some "cultural competence" about other cultures will help you to avoid (out of ignorance) offending your students. We know that you are pressed for time but try to become more informed about the groups of students that make up your class. Be aware of your language and do not make any assumptions about students' backgrounds. You don't know, for example, your students' socio-economic backgrounds, whether or not they came from 'traditional' family structures, whether their parents went to university/college, or if they recently immigrated to Canada. An off-the-cuff comment about the students' social lives that assumes that they are heterosexual can be disrespectful. In other words, check your language, actions, and assumptions in order to create an environment of respect in your class. Finally, in laying the ground rules at the start of the year, you must be absolutely and unquestionably firm about not allowing any disrespectful, openly hostile, or intimidating behaviour. No, you don't have to threaten your students. But be clear that you want your class to be one where people respect each other, and this respect should extend to you as well. In laying these ground rules and agreeing on them together, it is clear that sexist, heterosexist, and racist behaviour is not allowed. With any luck, this proactive approach on your part will set a tone of respect from the beginning of the year. (41-42).

v) Your Responsibility to the University

While it may seem obvious that all TAs have responsibilities to their course director and to their students, it is also important to consider your obligations to the university. As a TA, you are required to familiarize yourself with university resources and policies and maintain these policies throughout your contract with the university.

The following section provides a brief overview of some of the university policies you should be aware of in relation to your teaching assistantship. This is not an exhaustive list. Be sure to verify anything that you are unsure of with your course director and your department/Faculty staff.

Important University Sessional Dates: Be sure to familiarize yourself with the undergraduate sessional dates, accessed through York's Current Student home page under Course and Enrollment. These dates include when the terms officially begin and end, official exam dates, university closures due to holidays and other important information such as the official drop and add deadline for undergraduate courses. While course directors are required to highlight these sessional dates in their course outlines, be sure to visit this web link http://www.registrar.yorku.ca/enrol/dates/index.htm should you require a full list of important dates.

York University's Grading Structure: Should your teaching assistantship require you to assess students' work, you will need to be aware of York University's grading structure. The evaluation of student work is one of the most important tasks as a TA. While your course director will create the assignment/performance tasks and provide percentage breakdowns, you are responsible for knowing and understanding how this translates into the grading of students' work. Information on other policies related to grades is available from Faculties, departments and schools, and the University Secretariat (http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/policies/). See Chapter 7 (Marking and Grading) below for more details.

University protocols regarding submission of grades: If your duties as TA include marking and grading, it is imperative that you keep accurate records of students' grades. It is not enough to simply allocate a letter grade to an assignment or as a final grade unless explicitly asked by your course director. Assume you need to offer students feedback on their work and keep a full numerical breakdown of students' grades. Typically, the course director and the department require a copy of this breakdown for future reference. Check with your course director and/or departmental administrative staff when they require this breakdown. If a student has a grievance over their grade, your course director and the main office have a rationalized numerical breakdown to reference. According to the York University website the grading scheme (that is, the kinds and weights of assignments, essays, exams etc.) for each course must be announced and be available in writing within the first two weeks of class. This is the responsibility of the course director and is part of the course director's course outline/syllabus. Your course director should provide you with a copy of this syllabus so you are fully aware and understand the grading breakdown. See the Marking and Grading chapter for more details about marking and grading in general.

Petitions and Grade Re-appraisals: It is the responsibility of the course director to follow-up with a student's request for a grade re-appraisal, or petition of their final grade. That said, students will typically approach the TA first with this request. Contact your course director directly should a student request this. You may be required to contribute information regarding the students' performance, but you are not required to address this matter.

Academic Accommodation with Students with Disabilities: York University has a policy to make reasonable and appropriate accommodations and adaptations in order to promote the ability of students with disabilities to fulfill the academic requirements of their programs. As a TA you need to be aware of these policies because often students will approach TAs with such requests. If a student approaches you with an academic accommodation form or letter, explain that the course director needs to be aware of the accommodation request and also receive a copy of the supporting documentation. Provided students have given sufficient notice about their accommodation needs, instructors can take reasonable steps to accommodate these needs in a manner consistent with the guidelines established hereunder. Guidelines for this policy can be accessed on various University websites, including the University Secretariat (http://secretariat-policies.info.yorku.ca/policies/academic-accommodation-for-students-with-disabilities-policy/).

Religious Accommodation: It is important to be aware of the Senate's policy governing the setting of sessional dates and examination schedules. More information can be found on the Current Students home page under exams: https://w2prod.sis.yorku.ca/Apps/WebObjects/cdm.woa/wa/regobs. The Senate Policy can be found at http://secretariat-policies.info.yorku.ca/policies/sessional-dates-and-the-scheduling-of-examinations-senate-policy/.

Code of Students Rights and Responsibilities: York University is a place of research, teaching and learning where people value civility, diversity, equity, honesty and respect in their direct and indirect interactions with one another. Freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom to study and to learn, freedom to engage in research, and the freedom to write and to publish are all recognized as central to the mission of the institution. It is acknowledged that these values can only be meaningful, and these freedoms fully realized, in an atmosphere of safety and security. As such TAs must not only be aware that this code exists, but work to maintain an atmosphere of safety and security. The entire Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities is available at http://www.yorku.ca/oscr/pdfs/CodeofRightsandResponsibilities.pdf.

Senate Policy on Academic Dishonesty: This is a very important policy that all members of the York community, including TAs, need to be aware of and familiar with. The Policy on Academic Honesty is an affirmation and clarification for members of the university of the general obligation to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty. As a clear sense of academic honesty and responsibility is fundamental to good scholarship, the policy recognizes the general responsibility of all faculty members (including TAs) to foster acceptable standards of academic conduct and of the student to be mindful of and abide by such standards. Academic honesty requires that persons do not falsely claim credit for the ideas, writing or other intellectual property of others, either by presenting such works as their own or through impersonation. Similarly, academic honesty requires that persons do not cheat (attempt to gain an improper advantage in an academic evaluation), nor attempt or actually alter, suppress, falsify or fabricate any research data or results, official academic record, application or document. Should you suspect a breach of academic honesty in your class, contact your course director immediately. Suspected breaches of academic honesty will be investigated and charges shall be laid if reasonable and probable grounds exist. A student who is charged with a breach of academic honesty shall be presumed innocent until, based upon clear and compelling evidence, a committee determines the student has violated the academic honesty standards of the university. As a TA, this is yet another reason to keep accurate records of your evaluations of students' work. A finding of academic misconduct will lead to the range of penalties described in the guidelines, which accompany this policy. Information about guidelines and procedures related to this policy can be obtained from the University Secretariat website (http://secretariat-policies.info.yorku.ca/policies/academic-honesty-senate-policy-on/). If you suspect a breach of academic honesty, contact your course director immediately for guidance on how to proceed.

Student Records Policy on Access to Records and Protection of Privacy: It is important to be aware of the University's Policy on Access to Information and Protection of Privacy that complies with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, which can be accessed by visiting http://www.registrar.yorku.ca/privacy/. This may become pertinent to a TA should a student's parent contact you for grade information, for example. You are not able to provide grade information to anyone other than the student in question. You are also not obligated to meet with parents. Should such a matter arise, consult with your CD and department on the appropriate manner to proceed should a parent contact you or wish to meet with you. It is also against university policy to email students grades in advance of their formal submission online. If students email you requesting their final grade, you are not permitted to provide a breakdown of their grade until they have formally viewed it on the university's main system, which is typically the responsibility of the CD to input. After that time, students may be given a grade breakdown. On this note, it is best to communicate with your CD should a student request a grade breakdown.

vi) The TA/University Relationship[11]

As a Teaching Assistant at York, you have both responsibilities and rights but there are limits to both. All part-time employees registered at the university as full-time graduate students and employed in teaching, demonstrating, tutoring, or marking belong to Local 3903 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Canada's largest union (See Chapter 1 for CUPE 3903 description). The rights and responsibilities of TAs are negotiated by the union and contained in a document called the Collective Agreement (CA). The CA describes the essential aspects of your employment including rates of pay and hours of work; protection against discrimination and harassment; eligibility for leaves

[11] This section adapted from Burkett and McPhedran (2006) *TA guide: A Quick and Dirty Guide to Being a TA in the Department of History at York.* 2nd Edition, p.1.

(including maternity leave); grievance and disciplinary procedures; and more. You should receive a copy of the CA soon after beginning your first contract. You can also find copies online through the Union's website or from a link off the Human Resources web page.

As a TA you are automatically a Union member and have access to the following benefits:

Benefits Plan: Review Chapter 1 for a full description.

Funding for research and travel: As a Unit 1 TA, you are eligible to apply for research and travel funds to help defray travel expenses to conferences. For a full description of all funds available (and application deadlines) through CUPE, including the Graduate Development Fund, Thesis Completion Fund and others, please visit http://3903.cupe.ca/equity-and-benefits/. CUPE also has a pool of money for bursaries that are available on the basis of need. Single parents and visa students are prioritized for these funds. You can find out more about this fund and the application process from the Union website.

Other funds are available to you through the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS) http://www.yorku.ca/grads/ and the Graduate Students' Association (GSA) http://www.yugsa.ca

Summer Minimum Guarantee and Tuition Indexation: While you are a member of the "priority pool" (essentially your first five years as a TA), the Collective Agreement requires York to provide you with work during the twelve-month period beginning in September. This work is not to exceed 135 hours per term. Often this work will involve doing research for a professor, but you may be asked to do something else at York, such as academic advising for incoming undergraduate students. During the summer, this work may include extra teaching (a summer course) or a research contract.

Right of First Refusal: Once you are teaching a course, you have the "right of first refusal" for that course the following year. If you are still in the priority pool and if the course is offered, you will be offered the course again unless you refuse the offer. Once you leave a course, you have no seniority rights to the course in future years, although you get the right of first refusal in your new course assignment.

Professional Development: The Teaching Commons offers a number of professional development workshops and programs designed to support and enhance your teaching skills. Please visit the Teaching Commons for a comprehensive overview of workshops and programs designed to support you at every stage of your TAship and your level of experience.
http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/graduate-students/

Transferable skills as a TA: Be sure to include a record of your teaching assistantship(s) on your Curriculum Vitae (CV). The skills that you gain as a TA and any Professional Development Workshops or Programs you take with the Teaching Commons will assist you in the job market.

Chapter 3

3.0 The Context of the Canadian Classroom

While Chapter One provided a broad overview of the cultural context of the Canadian learning environment at York University, and Chapter Two offered an overview of your responsibilities as a TA to the course director, to students and to the university, this section considers various student and teaching related issues that may arise during your teaching assistantship. While it is not an exhaustive list, it will help you consider in advance where to seek further guidance should these issues arise. Even if you feel comfortable with the issues described below, it is a good idea to read over this section to become more familiar with the resources available at York. Not every issue you will face will be listed here, but the ones that are should give you some working knowledge of how to approach these issues.

3.1 Managing "isms"

Intolerance of difference often stems from ignorance, whether this intolerance is based on ethnicity, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, or something else. The section below covers questions you may wish to ask yourself or your class concerning these issues. The following section offers some questions to ask yourself in managing your own unconscious biases12.

Are you conscious of expectations you may hold about student performance based on something other than academic merit such as gender, ethnic background, or age?

How do you react to uses of language (accent or dialect) that are different than Standard English or those different from your own? How do your students react to your accent (if you have one)? Do you discount the speaker's intelligence and information?

What is the number of males versus females or students of various ethnic groups called on to answer questions? Which students do you call by name? Why?

What types of students participate more frequently through answering questions or making comments? Is the number disproportional enough that you should encourage some students to participate more frequently—or assess participation in different ways?

Do interruptions occur when an individual is talking? If so, who does the interrupting? If one group of students is dominating classroom interaction, what do you do about it?

[12] This section adapted from York International Teaching Assistant Handbook, p. 37-38

Is your verbal response to students positive? Aversive? Encouraging? Is it the same for all students? If not, what is the reason? Is it based on actual evidence, or presumptions or biases on your part? (Valid reasons occur from time to time for reacting or responding to a particular student in a highly specific manner)

Do you tend to face or address one section of the classroom more than others? Do you establish eye contact with certain students more than others? What are the gestures, postures, and facial expressions used; and are they different for men and women, people of colour, international students, those of different ages or levels of ability?

Are you making sure to address gendered language, racist language, homophobic language, or other uses of language that could be perceived as hurtful? Be sure not to simply ignore or avoid such language; if course work includes these types of language, be sure to address it in class and discuss whether the use is appropriate.

3.2 Related Campus Resources

i) The Centre for Human Rights (CHR)

The Centre for Human Rights assists individuals and groups in addressing and resolving allegations of discrimination and harassment as defined by the Ontario Human Rights Code. Their mandate covers all grounds of the Code, as well as York's human rights policies and provisions. Where a complaint cannot be resolved informally, the matter may be investigated. Most of the labour will be conducted at an informal level, seeking resolution early and effectively for the individual(s) involved. The CHR advocates for the adherence to both the spirit and provisions of the Code, as well as all human rights policies at York.

The CHR will play a significant role in human rights education, and in promoting a culture of equity and mutual respect among all members of the university community. As part of its educational role, the CHR will continue to liaise with human rights groups/committees/associations both within the university and in the broader community as resources permit. Accordingly, education and training services are available for free to faculty, staff and students (see below for examples). Please visit the CHR website for a full listing of workshops being offered over the academic year.

Centre for Human Rights Campus Location: Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Building, 2070
Website: http://rights.info.yorku.ca/
Tel: 416-736-5682 Fax: 416-650-4823
Email: rights@yorku.ca
Office hours: Monday to Friday: 9:00am to 5:00pm

Positive Space: Located within the Centre for Human Rights, SexGen York Committee offers Positive Space Training Sessions. This 3-hour workshop will provide the necessary information to help you create a Positive Space at York. Positive Space stickers will be distributed at the end of the session. The Centre for Human Rights is responsible for these sessions with guidance from the SexGen York Committee and the Positive Space Working Group. Information about the SexGen York Committee can be found at: http://rights.info.yorku.ca/sexgen-york-committee/.

REDI (Respect, Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity) Tutorial: The York University Respect, Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity (REDI) Tutorial has been developed to introduce you to university values and expectations. This is so we as a community can be respectful and provide equitable treatment for all diverse groups and to foster an inclusive campus where you can contribute to the best of your ability as a York community member. To self-enrol, visit: www.yorku.ca/redi

ii) The Centre for Aboriginal Student Services

This center recognizes that many Indigenous nations have longstanding relationships with the territories upon which York University campuses are located that precedes the establishment of York University. York University acknowledges its presence on the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, the Huron-Wendat Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Métis Nation of Ontario.

Centre for Aboriginal Student Services Keele Campus Location: York Lanes, 246
Website: http://aboriginal.info.yorku.ca/
Tel: 416-736-5571 Fax: 416-736-5903
Email: rpitawan@yorku.ca or a list of other contacts
Office Hours: Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 4:30pm

iii) Counselling and Disability Services (CDS)

Through its professional staff, Counselling and Disability Services strives to provide a range of essential psychological services to the York University community in order to optimize the quality of the scholarly and communal life of the university. The primary aim of CDS is to help students realize, develop, and fulfill their personal potential in order to maximally benefit from their university experience. Achieving this aim requires that a range of programs as well as individual and group counseling are available to all students enrolled at the university. CDS also acts as a resource to faculty and staff of the university.

Below is a list of all of the services offered by Counselling and Disability Services, including the locations and contact information for each unit, beginning with the main office for Counselling and Disability Services. Visit the individual units' webpages for their specific information, including office hours.

Counselling and Disability Services Keele Campus Location: Bennett Centre, N110
Website: http://cds.info.yorku.ca/
Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, 9:00am to 4:30pm and Tuesday, 9:00am to 7:00pm

Learning Disability Services (LDS)
Location: W128 Bennett Centre for Student Services
Tel: 416-736-5383
Website: http://lds.info.yorku.ca

Mental Health Disability Services (MHDS)
Location: N110 Bennett Centre for Student Services
Tel: 416-736-5350
Website: http://mhds.info.yorku.ca

Physical, Sensory & Medical Disability Services (PSMDS)
Location: N108 Ross Building
Tel: 416-736-5140
TTY: 416-736-5263
Website: http://psmd.info.yorku.ca

Personal Counselling Services (PCS)
Location: N110 Bennett Centre for Student Services
Tel: 416-736-5297
Website: http://pcs.info.yorku.ca

Learning Skills Services (LSS)
Location: N110 Bennett Centre for Student Services
Tel: 416-736-5297
Website: http://lss.info.yorku.ca

Counselling & Disability Services, Glendon Site
111A Glendon Hall
416-487-6709
Website: http://glendon.yorku.ca/counselling

Chapter 4

4.0 Adapting English Language Skills

All ITAs face a cultural shift coming from their home country to Canada, and often this shift will include switching to using the English as a working language for nearly everything—from conversations to writing and marking papers. Below are a number of suggestions about adjusting culturally, with special attention to language skill adapting. This next section was written by Nick Elson, an experienced professor in English as Second Language (ESL) and Applied Linguistics with York's Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics. His particular teaching and research interests include second language teaching theory and application, sociopolitical aspects of second language teaching and learning, and language assessment issues.

4.1 Adapting English Language Skills

Leaving specialized courses aside, York's working language is English. The demands on English proficiency can be significant, as university life requires a range of interactions (registers) from very casual to very formal and academic. Below are a number of suggestions about adjusting culturally, with special attention to language skill adapting.

i) Language in the ITA Classroom

Your native language ability, the culture that you grew up in, and your bilingual abilities are assets that can enrich your work as an ITA. University study places a heavy emphasis on language use, even for native speakers of English. Language in the classroom involves how it is used by students, as well as yourself, and strategies for effective language use can have an important and positive effect on the learning process.

ii) Cultural Language Issues

You may find that students address you with a familiarity and directness that you are not accustomed to. Slang and even swear words may be used in classroom discussion. While this may appear rude, it is not necessarily so. You are entitled to let students know how you wish to be addressed, and can in turn ask how they wish to be addressed. This helps to establish what sort of "tone" you expect in the class. Students in Canadian classrooms often expect a certain level of informality and casualness in their interactions with instructors and each other. "First naming" is a common feature of this. You are entitled to indicate to a class what the appropriate form of address is. Take opportunities to observe the classes of more experienced TAs and professors and get a sense of what the norms are.

Students can be very casual, in dress and behaviour in the classroom. This may come across as indicating less respect for you as the teacher than you expected, although it may not be intended that way. While it can be hard to set firm limits, you are expected to have a classroom that is an effective teaching and learning environment, and you are entitled to try to correct anything that interferes with that. Most students will appreciate a well-organized class or tutorial. Again, observation of how other classes are managed can be very helpful.

iii) Planning the Tutorial or Class: Organization and Structure

The main purpose of tutorials is to encourage the sharing of ideas, information and opinions related to the course material, and to further understanding of course content. These discussions can be lively and exciting. Try to seek a balance between so much control of the class that little spontaneous discussion takes place, and so little control that the discussion becomes directionless and hard to follow. While a certain amount of information can help the discussion, the tutorial is not intended to be a “mini-lecture.”

Most students appreciate the opportunity to participate, to “have their voices heard”. Be prepared to intervene, guide the discussion through questions, suggestions, and rephrasing of ideas. Try to draw in people who seem reluctant to participate. Draw connections between people’s contributions to show how they relate to each other. When it appears appropriate, take time to define specific terms being used in the course materials, so that there is a common vocabulary for the discussion.

In cases where you might be teaching a seminar class where you are the primary instructor, as opposed to leading a tutorial, many of the same considerations apply. One main difference, however, is that commonly a seminar class is more teacher-centred and there is less open discussion. This puts an emphasis on the need for clear and well thought out lectures that build on course readings, and help students to understand what is important in this course.

iv) Listening to Students

Listening is a basic human skill. A common student complaint is that when they try to talk with instructors they are too busy or don’t really seem to be listening. Try to find time to deal with students who have questions, or who want to come and see you. Be conscientious about keeping office hours: students get very resentful if they go to see someone during their posted office hours and they are not available.

You should also decide whether it suits you to make yourself available for consultation over email. This can help you deal with student questions and concerns without having to arrange a specific appointment. It also allows you the opportunity to work out answers more carefully than in a hurried conversation at the end of a class.

4.2 Classroom Strategies for the ITA

i) Language or Teaching?

There are studies that suggest that if the teacher’s use of English is a difficulty in the classroom, students tend to downgrade the quality of the teaching. Then it becomes easy for a student to say:

“I’m not doing well in the course, and it’s because of the instructor.” If you are not a native speaker of English, you can reasonably anticipate that it could cause some difficulty in the classroom. While this may only be until students get used to your particular style of speaking, some of the strategies suggested below can be helpful in preventing problems.

You are in this position because you have expertise in and experience with the subject matter. Let your enthusiasm for and interest in the students and the subject matter show. If you don’t appear to be enjoying working with the material, the students won’t either.

Take the time to be well-organized and prepared. This makes your life easier, and students notice and appreciate it. This also makes you familiar with words and phrases that will probably come up in the class, making you better able to lead the discussion.

Solicit concerns and feedback throughout the course. Don’t let problems build up. Make it clear from the beginning of the course that you encourage students to raise questions and seek clarification. If students are having trouble following you, it is much better to find out earlier in the course than later. Students should feel that they can approach you at the break or after the class to raise any issues they might have.

Use handouts when possible for discussions and lectures. This gives students a sense of structure, both of the course and of individual components of the course, but it also lets you take the time to prepare materials that might explain aspects of the course more clearly than you could orally.

Use visuals as much as reasonably possible. While this is good teaching methodology, it is also particularly important if you are a non-native speaker of English. Using the board, PowerPoint slides, overheads, handouts, etc. lends visual reinforcement to the points you are making to the class.

Have examples prepared ahead of time to illustrate points you anticipate might come up in class discussions.

Use small groups from time to time, to encourage interaction and learning. The groups can then report back on their discussion to the rest of the class. This relieves you of some of the responsibility of leading the discussion, and lets students interact among themselves. Mix up the groups from time to time so that different students are interacting with each other.

As much as possible, avoid unnecessary pauses and hesitations when addressing the class. This is part of communicating that you are prepared and in control of the material. Some rehearsal prior to the class will help to make the presentation flow more smoothly and make your descriptions more clear.

Use other students in class to answer questions from time to time. This takes the focus off you, and involves students in the learning process.

Some students may try to dominate the discussion. Deflect these people with phrases such as, “Let’s hear from someone else,” or “Does someone else have a view on this?” Encouraging those who are more reluctant to participate is part of your role as a teacher.

Check frequently that students are following both you and the classroom discussion, using phrases such as “Is that clear to everyone?” “Do you see what I’m saying?” “Let me put that another way,”

and so on. If you are not a native speaker of English that will be apparent to the class, and indeed, at York University, it is quite likely that many members of the class are themselves non-native speakers of English. But if the class is well run, with interesting subject matter, students quickly focus on the content, not on the teacher's use of English.

When marking assignments, if you write comments, it is often more effective to keep comments on the paper to a minimum, but to then meet with the students to discuss their individual papers in person. This engages the students more and leads to more understanding on their part.

4.3 Related Campus Resources

i) The English as a Second Language –Open Learning Centre (ESL-OLC)

This campus resource offers support to English as a Second Language (ESL) students registered in credit courses at York University. The Centre is open to ALL York students, registered in degree programs, AND IS FREE OF CHARGE. Graduate and undergraduate students are welcome.
The Open Learning Centre is constantly developing its programs to meet the needs of ESL students at York. You can drop in to ask questions or to browse our library during any of our open hours. Students may request help in ANY aspect of English: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Graduate students are invited complete an ESL Grad Survey as a way to design programs specific to their needs.

ESL Open Learning Centre Campus Location: Ross, South 327
Website: http://www.yorku.ca/eslolc/keele/default.asp
Telephone: 416-736-2100 ext. 22940
Email: eslolc@yorku.ca

Chapter 5

5.0 Preparing for the First Day of Classes

So far, this handbook has focused largely on the institutional information that is important for you to know as a Teaching Assistant at York. Chapter One explored the culture and contexts of York's teaching community, Chapter Two your relationships and responsibilities as a TA, Chapter Three outlined classroom standards and resources, and Chapter Four suggested ways to adapt your English language skills. With this background at hand, you are ready to begin preparing for your first day of classes.

The department within which you are taking and teaching courses will shape your experience as a TA. And how you prepare for class will be different depending on whether you are assigned to lead a lab, a tutorial discussion, a workshop, or something else. The following sections will deal with some of the more general details you will face, and raise issues where your course director's input may be necessary.[13]

5.1 Your Classroom Space

Before the first day, take some time to become familiar with the room you will be using for the class, and the rules regarding enrolment limits. Depending on the sort of course you are leading, there are very specific class size restrictions, and a class may not be over-enrolled without your permission (and you are paid extra if it is). Be sure to speak up if you find that your class has more students than it should. The department secretary or course director will be able to advise you in the case of an overloaded class. The department secretary and course director will also be able to help if you find there is a problem with the room assigned for your class. You should visit the room in advance of the first day in order to make sure that it will be suitable. Things to check include the number of available seats for students and the physical condition of the room. If you find one of those things, or something else, is not appropriate or has a problem, be sure to request a different room as soon as possible. If a room change does take place, or if there is an error regarding the room listed in the course calendars, be sure to post a sign at the original room instructing students where the class has been moved to. It is important that your classroom is offering a good environment within which students can learn.

i) Technology

If you are planning to use technology in the classroom space, this is the time to test it out and become familiar with the kinds of technology available. Be aware that most rooms require you to log-

[13] The following chapter has synthesized material from *York International Teaching Assistant Handbook* and Burkett and McPhedran (2006) *TA guide: A Quick and Dirty Guide to Being a TA in the Department of History at York.* 2nd Edition.

in with a password to even turn on the technology. Connect with your home department staff to find out what this password is. Too often valuable time is wasted trying to load and prepare the technology while students wait. The last thing you want is for technical glitches to become the focus of your first day with students.

As a TA, you can order audio-visual equipment from the Instructional Technology Centre. Visit http://staff.computing.yorku.ca/faculty-staff/teaching-research-computing/ to view computing services and facilities that aid teaching and research at York. There are course and teaching aids, technology in or for classrooms, labs, information systems about students, testing and evaluation guidance, and consulting services for research needs. Teaching aides available through ITC include: Classroom Technology, Computer Labs, Learning Management System (Moodle), Lecture Recording @ York, Collaboration Tools, Clickers, Plagiarism prevention (Turn-It-In), and other web development services.

ii) The Physical Arrangement of the Classroom Space

When you make that initial visit to the classroom, think about how you will organize the setup of the room on the first day. Do you want chairs in a theatre style? Perhaps if you plan to lecture alone, but arranging seats in a circle or horseshoe pattern makes more sense for a more interactive discussion group. The most important thing, no matter how you decide to set up the room, is that students will be able to see you, the instructor, without straining. On the first day, ask students if the classroom setup is working for them, and if there are problems, ask for their advice to make it work better. Do not forget to ask students to return tables and chairs to their original position at the end of class.

You might want to go through different scenarios in your head before class begins, this way if something out of the ordinary happens, you will be prepared to guide the class through it. What follows will be a variety of suggestions and tips, which you may or may not have heard before. Following that are some ideas for icebreakers on the first day of class. Getting to know your students is an important step in the education process, which you should begin immediately on the first day of class.

iii) Starting and Ending Class

Remember that, like you, students are paying tuition for their classes and they expect those classes to begin and end on time. Students are often late—their prerogative—but the instructor should never be. Arrive at class in good time, and be ready to begin precisely according to schedule. Give yourself a few moments to prepare your notes and/or presentations, answer student questions and mentally prepare yourself for the day's session. Similarly, it is important to end the class promptly, and not keep students "for just a few more minutes." Many will have classes following yours, and must also arrive there in enough time for their next session.

Nota Bene: At York, most classes begin at 30 minutes after the hour (i.e. 1:30, 2:30, 3:30). Similarly, classes normally end at 20 minutes after the hour, even if the posted time says "60 minutes." The ten minutes between classes are necessary for students to move to their next class, and for the next instructor to have a few moments to set up the room. Therefore:

A tutorial scheduled from 1:30pm-2:30pm starts promptly at 1:30pm, and ends at 2:20pm.
A tutorial scheduled from 11:30am-1:30pm, starts promptly at 11:30am and ends at 1:20pm.
A tutorial scheduled from 10:00am-11:30am (rare) starts promptly at 10:00am and ends at 11:20am.

All experienced instructors at York are aware of this convention, and it is normally followed. Thus, you should expect the room for your 1:30pm tutorial to become free roughly around 1:20pm, so you can get set up and start on time.14

5.2 Surviving the First Class

It is natural to feel a bit wary when you are about to embark on a new path. Still, having and displaying confidence in yourself will help students retain a positive first impression of you as a TA. The suggestions below will be useful in realizing a positive experience on your first day in the classroom with students.

i) Tips on Surviving your First Class

The following section offers some tips on surviving your first class.

In particular, be ready for enrolment problems. In the first few weeks, often there will be students in attendance who are still trying to enroll in the course. Check your department's policies beforehand to see how you should proceed with enrolment problems. You should also see how your professor is planning to deal with these issues. Students will want to know as soon as possible their chances of getting into the course; be informed so you can give accurate answers.

A great way to start your first class is by writing your name, office hours, contact information, and the title and course code of the course on the board. Students want to be reassured that they have arrived at the correct classroom, and they seek the security of knowing they can contact you in case of an emergency.

When you begin to speak to the class, take your time. Try not to feel rushed or panicky, but if you do, try slowing down your rate of speech and repeating points. Focus on what you are trying to say instead of concentrating on how you are saying it or how you might appear to students. Make sure to give students time to respond, in case they have missed something you have said. Try not to be discouraged if you have to repeat yourself or ask students to repeat themselves. Once you have established that you care about their learning, such desires for clarifications will be viewed as such.

At some point near the beginning of this first class, it is important to introduce yourself. You may want to begin with this, or you may wish to wait until after some icebreaker activities in case any students are running late and have not arrived.

Your introduction to the class should detail not only your interest in the course material but also your previous experience. It will be useful for your students to know a little bit about your background, including where you have studied in the past, and what you bring to the classroom. Icebreaker activities, which will be described shortly, allow students to connect and get to know each other not to mention help you get to know them.

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[14] A very few instructors may routinely teach the whole hour, but this is generally regarded as rude. If you are normally not able to enter tutorial room in enough time to get prepared and start on time, tell your course director or department secretary and let them address the issue.

If English is not your first language, consider being open to your students regarding your experience with English, and let students know the origin of your accent. Also consider communicating with students that if they miss or misunderstand something you have said, to ask you to repeat it, perhaps in slightly different words. Also, do not be afraid to ask students to repeat statements that you have trouble understanding.

One thing to avoid is talking down to or appearing to patronize students when they ask you to rephrase something. You may face students who are rude or patronize you as if your capability in English indicates your intellectual level. This is a serious issue and you may wish to speak one-on-one with the student about it in your office hours.

Beyond taking down student names to work on getting to know them, you may wish to record student needs that you notice, or add things from the information seeking strategies you use to get to know your students.

As mentioned earlier, a valuable way to make it clear to your students that you are organized and serious about the class is by preparing beforehand a handout, which features extensive information about yourself and the nature of the course. Include your name and contact information as well as the professor's name and office hours. You might also wish to mention required texts and readings, although this may already be covered in the syllabus for the course (which you should review extensively before the class begins).

Review the syllabus. Students will be eager for information regarding assignments and mark breakdowns, so it would be very worthwhile to directly cover this material. Important dates could be mentioned, as well as a detailed breakdown of what you are looking for in assignments. Be careful though—stick with the information given in the course outline. Do not give information you are not certain of, or details that may change; a student may cling to the original information and become confused. As long as you are careful to keep the class aware of their responsibilities, you are setting up a strong learning environment.

Convey your enthusiasm about the course material through facial expressions, smiles, attentiveness to students, eye contact, moving around the classroom, and observing student expressions. Students will notice immediately if you are not enthusiastic about the material. This may lead students to think that since the instructor is not interested, they should not be either.

A good way to conclude your first session is with a time set aside for students to comment and ask questions. Ask for honest opinions about how they'd like to see the class function. Keep student suggestions in mind to help construct a class that will be challenging and rewarding to you and your students.

ii) Some Ideas for Icebreakers[15]

A great way of opening communications among students is by doing a series of "icebreakers", activities that help students get to know each other. Below are suggestions about leading the class through some icebreaker activities. Choose which of these approaches would work best for you, and adapt as you see fit.

[15] This section adapted from York ITA Delivee L Wright, in *York International Teaching Assistant Handbook*, 33-35

- Have students raise their hands indicating what year they are in, whether they are majors in the department, their experience with course materials, and any other student descriptors. This will give you a sense of who the students are that make up your class, and will let them know where other students are coming from.
- Go around the class and have students introduce themselves and give some information about themselves, perhaps in relation to the course material and their experiences. Students could tell a little about where they are from and why they took the course, or even what they did in the summer. (After the class has done this, it is a good time to give your introduction).
- Try using a "naming cycle" in which students introduce each other repeating names of the students already introduced, (i.e. first student introduces themselves, then the next person repeats the first student's name, and introduces themselves, etc.) This will help you and your students learn people's names more quickly.
- Have students interview each other and then have them introduce that person to the class, and introduce them once again at the beginning of the next class. An alternate way of doing this is having students write a short sketch about the person they are interviewing to be handed in.
- Get students to fill out an interest or experience survey from which you can provide summarized feedback on the second class. Alternatively, you could try having students switch surveys with a partner and have other students introduce them.
- Select a keyword from the course title and have students do an "association exercise" by reporting what they came up with, and writing these ideas on the board. This is a good way to shift into describing what the course will entail.
- A similar idea is to record what problems and ideas students would like to see come up in the course. Later, using the course syllabus, you can refer to this list to help students clarify or correct expectations and perceptions of the course.

Just as you will be able to structure your teaching better if you know more about your students, your students will be able to function more effectively if they know a bit about you. As an International TA you have the added expertise of having trained in another cultural environment. In your introduction let students know about the other countries you have lived and studied in, and what experience you bring to the class. This will help students respond to you on a more personal level, and will help generate a level of respect that will continue throughout the course. Some questions you may want to answer during your introduction include:

- What was your first exposure to the course material? When did it "come together"? What else would your students like to know about your academic history?
- What are your approaches to teaching and learning? What do you expect of them as your students? Who is responsible for what in an academic setting?
- What are your hopes for the course? What would you like to get out of it, and what would you like students to get out of it?

Here is a quick reference list for the first day and beyond.

1. Involve students quickly
2. Identify the value and importance of the subject
3. Set expectations
4. Establish rapport
5. Reveal something about yourself
6. Establish your own credibility
7. Establish the 'climate' for the class
8. Provide administrative information
9. Introduce the subject matter16

5.3 Teaching Tips for the ITAs

The teaching tips below, some specific to ITAs, some general to all TAs, will help orient you to the cultural ethos of the Canadian university classroom. These suggestions are aimed at creating a supportive classroom environment, which will make you and your students at home and prepared to engage with course material.17

i) Create a Supportive Classroom

An environment conducive to learning and the pursuit of knowledge through discussion should be a comfortable environment for students and instructors alike. Encourage careful thought and critical questioning (even of you!), and discourage the repetition of myth and prejudice. Your goal is your students' intellectual growth; give them the tools and space to develop and explore.

ii) Learn Student Names

If a student sees that you know his or her name, they will receive the positive message that you care about your students enough to learn their names. Alternately, if a student feels the need to interrupt or throw discussions off-course, addressing them by their name in a neutral tone is often enough to discourage future interruptions. If you have a hard time memorizing names, try using index cards to write out student names or ask students to say their name before they speak for the first few classes.

iii) Encourage Student Participation

Participation is a large component of many courses at York, and even sometimes included as the overall grading scheme. Some students will not hesitate to make their opinions and answers known to the class, while others may need more encouragement to share their ideas and reactions. Often students respond well to verbal encouragement: try paraphrasing a student's statements, then point out the positive elements of what they said, and make gentle corrections or counter-arguments if required. Non-verbal acknowledgements are also important; nodding to show you understand a point and maintaining eye contact are great ways to make students feel their participation is valuable.

iv) Avoid Discouraging Students

Hand in hand with encouraging student participation goes avoiding discouraging students. Whether making a joke at the expense of a student who is chronically late for class or making fun of a student whose perspective you disagree with, the TA must be careful not to humiliate or discourage students.

[16] As cited in Frake-Mistak (2014) TA Start up Guide for Teaching and Learning at York University, Teaching Commons, p.5.

[17] This section adapted from York International Teaching Assistant Handbook, p. 11.

Refrain from condemning students for incorrect answers and rather lead them towards answers that are more accurate. A student can even interpret comments on a paper as an insult. The best way to avoid discouraging students is to provide positive reinforcement and relate to them on a personal level. Treat students the way you would want to be treated as a student. Also, even if a specific student does not mind “joking” with you, other students will observe your behaviours and adapt their own in response.

v) Treat Students as Adults

You may find students in your classes lack maturity or even display rude behaviour towards authority figures (which you, as a TA, are). Though your students may not display adult behaviour, it is important that you treat them as adults, and as your equal. Someday students in your classes may be TAs or even ITAs themselves, and you can shape their perception of this role by the way you treat them. If you are speaking to a student, and immediately turn away to speak to a colleague, a student will remember this and see you as someone that cares more about their colleagues than their students. Instead, in a similar situation, you might introduce the student to your colleague or excuse yourself politely from the student making arrangements to meet them during your office hours.

vi) Read Behaviours and Consider Your Approach

Knowing when to change your approach is an important skill for all TAs, and one that requires observation and a little intuition. More detail about strategies for varying classroom instruction will follow in an upcoming section, but here are some ways to know when you might be best suited to shift strategies.

When students are attentive, making eye contact, participating enthusiastically, smiling, or even nodding in agreement, you will know that your current teaching technique is engaging to the students. If, on the other hand, you find that students are shuffling or shifting in their chairs, coughing awkwardly, glancing at other students (or their watches), sleeping, or even talking on cell phones, your classroom may be in need of a change of direction. Rather than reprimanding students (although those who fall asleep or text message may need to be approached after class) a good idea is to vary your approach or at the very least, reflect on your current approach.

vii) Model the Behaviours You are Advocating

Students will instantly notice a negative attitude, and will react accordingly. Try your best to bring a positive atmosphere with you to the classroom while also modeling the kinds of behaviour and atmosphere you are advocating for your classroom space.

viii) Make Students Comfortable

The strategies listed above will help make your students feel at home in your class, and can have a positive effect on you. The best thing you can do is to create a comfortable and supportive place for learning. As an ITA you have the added advantage of another cultural reference point. Consider bringing in that knowledge and experience from places students might not otherwise be familiar.

Chapter 6

6.0 Following Up: Preparing for the Rest of the Course

Now that you have survived your first class, how does one proceed with the rest of the course? When it is time to enter into the classroom again, how should you proceed? Ideally, you have set up a healthy and well-informed classroom during the first class, but it is an ongoing challenge to facilitate this environment throughout the course. The following section offers some suggestions on how to maintain the quality teaching that we have been exploring thus far.

6.1 Setting up Patterns and Breaking Patterns

You will want to review everything you set up during the first class and make sure your next classes build on your early success. Creating patterns such as having a mini-lecture, then small-group discussion, then reconvening may be helpful. When using such tactics, explain what the structure of the class will be that day at the beginning of class. Just as it can be a challenge to set up positive patterns in the classroom, it can be even more of a challenge to break out of negative patterns. Be patient and creative. If you find the class slipping into patterns which students are not responding well to, it may be time to rethink your approach in order to engage students in a more meaningful way.

6.2 Moving Beyond the First Day

Beyond the first day lies an adventure for you as an ITA. You will face both difficult and rewarding times as a TA at York, so learn from your mistakes and maximize your strengths as you proceed. Remaining conscious of your teaching and open to change (that is, trying new things in the class and incorporating feedback) is the path to continued success.

i) Effective Presentations

Sometimes as a TA you will be expected to, or may feel it is necessary to, present a formal lesson to your class. There are hundreds of excellent books available about giving effective presentations. If you are going to be giving presentations as part of your TAing duties, what follows are six characteristics of effective teaching, as formulated by N. L. Gage, in Teaching and Learning at York: a Guide for Teaching Assistants and Course Directors.
The characteristics of effective teaching are:

- Stating objectives at the beginning of a lesson.
- Outlining the lesson content.
- Signaling transitions between parts of a lesson.
- Indicating important points in a lesson.

- Summarizing the parts of the lesson as the lesson proceeds.
- Reviewing main ideas and facts covered in a lesson, at the end of a lesson and at the beginning of the next lesson.

ii) Varying Instruction

As noted above, it is the TA's responsibility to notice if students are becoming restless, and alter the instructional method accordingly. Although it is important to keep students interested, you are not expected to be an entertainer performing at the front of the classroom. The ideas below should help you with some strategies to vary your teaching style, while still engaging with students in a significant way.

Pause to give restless students a few moments of silence while making eye contact. This is often enough to get discussions back on track. In addition, try moving around the room as you speak, alternating your voice patterns to prevent a monotone effect, and changing the pace of the class. If things seem hopeless and students continue to have problems concentrating, sometimes the best course of action is to allow a break in which both you and your students can recharge your energies. Instruction styles can be varied within one class session or vary from session to session. Don't feel restricted by what you have planned to teach; if you must reassess the situation and alter your teaching style in the middle of a class, do it. It is better to keep students attentive to the course material than it is to cover course material in a specific order. If there are a lot of hard facts to be covered, lectures can be split up into several separate segments, interspersed with small group work related in some way to the material in the lecture.

Be aware of the three different modes of learning: auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. Some students may learn concepts more easily if they are given examples not only through explanation or discussion (auditory), but through use of slides, overheads, or diagrams drawn on the board (visual). Other students may learn better if they can apply their knowledge to solving a problem themselves or physically manipulating equipment (kinesthetic) rather than observing the examples on paper that others have produced. A good strategy is to incorporate all three modes of learning into your sessions. Vary your sessions by teaching in each of these three modes.

Use both deductive and inductive teaching methods. With a deductive approach, students are given information and asked to apply this information to a task or answer questions involving the information they have received. Alternately, the inductive (or discovery approach) asks students to perform a task without receiving prior information, and therefore encouraging learning through discovery. Inductive approaches are often followed up by discussion about what students discovered, or what roadblocks they came up against. Some students will find they learn information more easily when they have already attempted a problem themselves. A combination of both deductive and inductive approaches will make for a more balanced learning environment.

iii) Approaching Student Questions

A point of anxiety for many ITAs is responding to questions from students. Even with great preparation, communication hurdles can appear. Sometimes it is the way that student questions are asked, sometimes it is how to approach answering those questions that can be confusing to those new to or inexperienced with English. In this section, we will discuss the most common types of questions you will receive from students, and give examples of how you can answer them. Many of

the ideas below are adapted from the article “Student Questions: When, Where, Why, and How Many" by Patricia L. Rounds.

Be careful of sidestepping questions. Try to be sure you address all students’ questions, even if they may seem straightforward to you. If students feel their questions are being avoided or not fully answered, they will think future questions are not worth asking. Avoid the "questions must be asked at the right moment" system. Sometimes it is best to let students interrupt a lecture if it will make things clearer for the class. Similarly, even the best preparation can sometimes fail. If you don’t know the answer to a question, don’t fake it. It is far better to answer, “I don’t know, but I will look into it and get back to you next week” than to give a vague or confusing answer. Students will respect that you were honest, and took the time to research their good questions seriously.

If you find yourself overloaded with questions, write them on the board and have students answer some of them. This gives you a chance to recognize any local slang and a few moments to think about how you will respond to the question. If you do have other students answer, be sure to monitor their answers to make sure they are accurate. Listen carefully not only to determine if what the student answering the question says is correct, but also how a native speaker of English phrases their answer.

Listen to students. Sometimes students have understood what someone has said, but would like to clarify some points by paraphrasing what they have heard. When a student begins a question with something like "So what you're saying is..." they are most likely giving you their understanding of what has just been said, and looking for authentication of this being correct. Listen carefully and either agree with the student, or point out places where what they have said is off the mark or could be clearer. One of the best ways to answer student questions is to make sure you listen in order to know what the student is actually asking. Do not be afraid to ask the student to repeat themselves if you are having problems with their language.

Be careful of responding to direct challenges defensively. Consider where the student is coming from. If a student feels inclined to challenge the instructor, there may be several different things at play. Perhaps you forgot to mention something which will make your points clearer for the student; perhaps the student has a valid point, but one that needs developing; or perhaps there has been an oversight or mistake made somewhere along the line, and the student is pointing out an inaccuracy. If you are constantly getting challenges from students, you may want to rethink your approach to the subject matter. In addition, using everyday examples can help make your teaching more accessible. Prevent digressions. Some questions may cause the discussion to move away from course material. These questions should be answered as quickly and succinctly as possible in order to keep the focus of the session in sight.

Leave time for student questions. After you have covered some material, leave time for students to ask questions about the information you have presented. You should have question breaks like these several times each class, especially after covering particularly difficult concepts. Be prepared to wait a few seconds, sometimes it takes a student a few moments to establish what they would like to ask. Be open to changing your classroom. If students are consistently raising questions about certain aspects of the class, it may be time to reappraise your teaching style. Not all teaching styles work with every class, you will need to pay close attention to student questions in order to track if your current approach is working.

Below, are a variety of scenarios in which students may posit questions followed by some potential strategic responses. These examples are general and void of contextual information. Always consider the context of your classroom and the nature of the discipline and/or topic before considering implementing these suggestions. (Adapted from the article “Student Questions: When, Where, Why, and How Many" by Patricia L. Rounds)

Clarification
Question: Student either misunderstood or did not hear information, or would like more detailed information.
Response: Paraphrase the information in a more detailed manner using everyday examples if possible.

Interpretation Check
Question: Student attempts to paraphrase information in a way that is easier for them to understand, or gives an example from their own experience.
Response: Listen carefully, and let student know that they are on the right track, or make gentle corrections where necessary.

Digression
Question: Student asks a question which is either off-topic, or one which will swerve the discussion towards irrelevant issues.
Response: Address any issues related to the session, being careful to not let the discussion move too far away from the central course material.

Challenge
Question: Student refutes something you or someone else has said in the class or points out what they perceive as errors.
Response: Review the student's points, then review your own and see where the inconsistency lies. If the student is correct, acknowledge this and move on. If the student is incorrect or has misunderstood, attempt to re-explain your case. If the student wants to continue the challenge, offer to meet with him or her in your office hours to continue the discussion.

Demonstration Requested
Question: Student would like to see instructor perform a problem described or give an example.
Response: Use an example from everyday life to work through the problem. Sometimes multiple examples may be required.

Answer a question
Question: Student answers a question you have posed to the class as a question.
Response: In this case the question being asked is whether the answer they have given is complete and correct. Simply acknowledge the student's answer as correct or incorrect and make any corrections required.

Chapter 7

7.0 Marking and Grading

Assessing student work will be one of the most time consuming and most important tasks as a TA. Most courses at York are broken up into several components, each worth a certain percentage of the student's final mark, which can include written assignments, seminar presentations, lab work, exams, participation, and several other areas depending on the course. Below is York's common grading scheme for all undergraduates, which will give you an idea of how to grade students.

Before you evaluate anything, you should have a sound understanding of York University's 9 point grading system. Think carefully and consciously about how each level is represented for you. For instance, what is the difference between "a fairly high degree of skill" and "considerable skill," as per below? Answers will vary.

7.1 York University's Grading System

Mark	Percentage	Grade Point	Level of Achievement
A+	90-100%	9	Exceptional Thorough knowledge of concepts and/or techniques and exceptional skill or great originality in the use of these concepts, techniques in satisfying the requirements of an assignment or course.
A	80-89.99%	8	Excellent Thorough knowledge of concepts and/or techniques together with a high degree of skill and/or some elements of originality in satisfying the requirements of an assignment or course.
B+	75-79.99%	7	Very Good Thorough knowledge of concepts and/or techniques together with a fairly high degree of skill in the use of those concepts, techniques in satisfying the requirements of an assignment or course.

B	70-74.99%	6	Good Good level of knowledge of concepts and/or techniques together with considerable skill in using them to satisfy the requirements of an assignment or course.
C+	65-69.99%	5	Competent Acceptable level of knowledge of concepts and/or techniques together with considerable skill in using them to satisfy requirements of an assignment or course.
C	60-64.99%	4	Fairly Competent Acceptable level of knowledge of concepts and/or techniques together with some skill using them to satisfy requirements of an assignment or course.
D+	55-59.99%	3	Passing Slightly better than minimal knowledge of required concepts and/or techniques together with some ability to use them in satisfying the requirements of an assignment or course.
D	50-54.99%	2	Barely Passing Minimum knowledge of concepts and/or techniques needed to satisfy the requirements of an assignment or course.
E	40-49.99%	1	Marginally Failing
F	0-39.99%	0	Failing

7.2 Defining Assessment

According to Angelo (1995), “Assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance” (7).

i) What Are TAs Responsible for?

As a TA, you are responsible for understanding how students’ assignments (i.e. essays, midterms, tests, lab reports, etc.) translate into York University’s grading structure and university policies, while working to maintain objectivity throughout the grading process. TAs are also responsible for completing the grading task(s) according to the CD’s deadline in an efficient and consistent manner. Finally, TAs need to have a sound understanding of the connection between the assessment piece(s) in relation to the course outcomes.

We suggest you speak directly with your CD and/or academic staff within your Faculty or Department regarding the following:
Academic Dishonesty
Record keeping i.e. numerical breakdown
Submission of grades – to whom and when?
Normative grading – grading on a curve?
Petitions and Grade Re-appraisals

ii) How do I Maintain Professionalism?

Your job is to fairly assess students' work via the course/assignment criteria. However, how can we ensure consistency in our grading practice? One must try to grade based on students' mastery of knowledge and skills and not other considerations that could affect your grading of the assignment. Try marking "blind" by flipping back the cover page of all the assignments before you begin. This may not always be an appropriate or necessary practice for all types of grading, but it can be an option if you think you might be influenced or biased in your grading of students' work if you know their identity. Most importantly focus on the York University grading structure to prevent comparative grading between students. i.e. refer back to York's grading structure descriptions.

iii) Tips and Strategies for Grading with Consistency

Group similar styles or answers together in piles and don't change your grading policy halfway through. Also, consider how consistency might be addressed across the following dimensions: Consistency across time, i.e. would the results have been the same if the test or assessment had taken place on another day, or at another time? Consistency across tasks, i.e. would the result have been the same if other tasks had been chosen to assess the learning? Consistency across markers, i.e. would the results have been similar if another marker had scored the assessment? Consistency across students i.e. would the results be comparable across your group for similar levels of achievement?

7.3 Effective Grading for the Time-Pressed Student[18]

The following section offers tips and strategies for grading efficiently and effectively. The key to effective grading is to have a system. The first round of essays and exams that you mark might take some time, but with experience the process will become faster. Regardless, here are some helpful tips to grading efficiently, offered by TAs from the Department of History. Please note that not all of these suggestions may be appropriate for your discipline.

Be clear about the format you plan to use while grading (see below for some suggested models). First, talk to the course director about her expectations when it comes to grading. Will she be looking for a grade or a percentage? Both? Second, discussing the assignment or exam with other TAs may also provide helpful insight.

Set the groundwork early – be clear about your expectations of your students for each assignment. Discuss the assignment in detail when it first becomes available. This helps lay the ground work and

[18] This section was adapted from Burkett and McPhedran (2006) *TA guide: A Quick and Dirty Guide to Being a TA in the Department of History at York.* 2nd Edition, p. 24-30.

saves you headaches later. Neither you, nor your students, will benefit from an "anything goes" approach to assigning essays and answering student questions about your expectations. Students with further questions should be encouraged to visit you during your office hour for guidance. Some things, such as the policy on late assignments, will be explained in the syllabus.

Effective and efficient grading involves being organized. Obvious? Perhaps. Nevertheless, many of us have our own stories of colossal time-wastage from skipping the pre-marking steps. Clear a block of time for yourself with few distractions (although you may be tempted to just turn the TV on quietly while you mark...don't!). Make sure that you have the original essay/exam questions, some extra paper, any sources you need, and some writing utensils at your side. A dictionary might not hurt either.

Consider recording the amount of time the first few papers take to grade to estimate how long the rest will take. Try not to mark all the assignments in one sitting. Breaking the marking into smaller chunks (a few papers at a time) will make the task more manageable, and you will be more efficient as a result. Clearly, your attention span will flag after a couple of hours of reading the same material (not to mention the fact that you may become irritable, reading fifty papers on the same topic at once). To be fair, you should take short breaks and come back to the grading. Many graders find it useful to take an initial read-through of the assignments in order to get a feel for the content and style of the papers. If students are writing on a variety of topics, mark those with similar topics together.

Keep a copy of your marking criteria handy so that you have a concrete model to work from. This will ensure that you remain as consistent as possible. Rather than commenting on every single mistake in a student's paper (over-grading) make thorough comments and corrections of sentence structure, verb-agreement, and other grammatical errors on two or three pages. Students don't need five to ten pages of reminders of their mistakes. Your thorough grading of a few pages should be enough to flag some of their most common errors.

Grading is highly discipline specific. Evaluative criteria and the method of grading depend largely on the discipline, the subject matter and the kind of assignment you are evaluating. We highly recommend you attend one of the Teaching Commons' Marking and Grading Workshops that offer detailed guidance on how to grade within each discipline.

7.4 Comments and Feedback[19]

Do consider that many students take grades and comments very personally and seriously. As such one should try to include comments that are encouraging, constructive, and as specific as possible, especially if you are suggesting improvements. For example, if you are grading an essay, write about the things that you appreciated about the paper, and start with a positive comment. Comment on areas where the student could improve and make concrete suggestions about how to do so. Be specific! Avoid writing brief and general positive comments only to invariably follow them with "but" or "however" and a litany of very specific negative remarks. Instead of writing, "Your ideas were excellent, but your writing needs a lot of work," write, "You could highlight your strong grasp of the material and your excellent interpretations by improving your sentence structure and paragraph

[19] This section was adapted from Burkett and McPhedran (2006) *TA guide: A Quick and Dirty Guide to Being a TA in the Department of History at York.* 2nd Edition, p. 24-30.

organization, and thus making the point clearer to your reader." If you are commenting on a student's tendency to generalize, cite an example and be sure to tell him or her, what makes the statement a generalization. Students need the building up much more than the tearing down.

In sum:

- Feedback is communicated through words, not a score.
- It is specific information about what the student did well, and what needs improvement. Good feedback contains concrete suggestions for the latter.
- Students require this information in order to improve their performance.
- Different assessment tools allow for different types of feedback.
- When possible it is advantageous to students' learning when feedback is individual and personalized.
- Feedback can take many different forms depending upon one's discipline, but is normally verbal or written.
- Feedback can be formative (as the assignment progresses) or summative (after the assignment is completed)
- Assessment tools help focus the kind of feedback to give
- Feedback should be consistent with the grading scheme / guidelines or rubric

7.5 Approaches to Assessment

There are two main approaches to assessing students' work: the holistic method and the structured marking scheme.

i) The Holistic Method

The holistic method provides a single score based on an overall impression of a student's performance on a task. It does not specify separate levels of performance for specific criteria, which comprise the performance. When should one use the holistic method? When you want a quick snapshot of achievement and when you want a general comment encompassing the overall quality of the work.

Strengths of the Holistic Method
Holistic grading allows for flexibility in your grading. Comments are often more personalized and essay specific. This method of grading allows you to get a sense of the argument and quality of the work as a whole.

Sample of Holistic Grading[20]

Example of Holistic Grading Method

Essay #2

This is an excellent essay. You've been quite comprehensive, have a clear thesis, and argue persuasively. I compliment you on the various ways you inserted primary sources into your paper. This is a real research essay, and as such, is interesting to read and quite informative. I was especially impressed by the way you developed the government's attempt to "squeeze out" women as the war came to the end. The way you established that position, by use of quotations, newspaper headlines and other evidence was really well done.

In a few places the paper is a little unclear on some important issues-- why, for instance, did the "second recruitment" turn to the enlistment of married women? How did the NSS react (or did they?) to the knowledge that women were less interested in the war effort than in making money? Was this interest because of the lack of male earners to support the family? In several places, the essay provides some good WW2 and post War stats, but because it doesn't include pre 1939 figures, it's harder to understand the significance of your numbers. The paper also mentions that men were less supportive of women's work (pg 7) but doesn't back that up with specific evidence. I don't think it quite follows that unemployment leads to marriage, as suggested on pg. 10, and finally, though the point about consumerism was a good one, there's not a lot of specific evidence included to back up that position.

Nevertheless, I don't want you to get the impression that your paper was badly flawed. A lot of these are pretty minor-- I think, only the consumerism, the context for statistics and the unemployment = marriage issues really affected your overall argument.

I hope you won't mind me saying that this paper was a pleasure to read. Looking back over the comments I've given you on previous papers, it's clear that you worked quite hard on this, and have made some real strides in essay writing. Well done!

Mark: 84 (A)

ii) The Structured Marking Scheme

The structured marking scheme sets out a number of criteria, each of which are assigned a portion of the final grade. This method breaks down the student's grade and allows them to see what areas need to be improved. This approach can cut down on students appealing their grade and allows you, the grader, to justify more clearly the grade you assign.

Strengths of Structured Marking
Structured grading describes clearly to students how you arrived at the grade and highlights the areas that need work. It is a quick method of grading and easy for the student to follow.

[20] Reprinted with permission from Jon Sufrin, Writing Department, York University

A basic example of a Structural Feedback Model[23]

Example of Structural Grading **Student:**

Grade:

CONTENT **/30**

- demonstration that research materials were understood
- essay includes citations, but is not predominantly made of citations
- citations used are appropriate and help to further the thesis statement argument
- critical assessment of research; nothing is accepted at face value
- student's own ideas are present and developed
- demonstration that information presented has been carefully and specifically chosen to strengthen the thesis statement
- use of appropriate course terminology and concepts – essay clearly fits within the scope of the course

STRUCTURE **/30**

- strong, clear, tight, appropriate thesis statement
- every paragraph relates back to the thesis statement
- paragraphs flow well – continuity from paragraph to paragraph
- introduction provides lead-in to paper and thesis statement; does not start with generic statement
- conclusion indicates how the essay has progressed from point A to point B – it does not conclude with a topic completely unrelated to the introduction

STYLE **/20**

- grammar, spelling, and punctuation
- most sentences are short; longer sentences are clearly structured
- variety of vocabulary used appropriately
- variety of sentence structures
- personal flair

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES **/20**

- all citations are cited properly and consistently
- all references in the essay are provided in the bibliography
- only references used in the essay are cited
- appropriate and variety of references used (especially academic)
- more than minimum number of references used
- all citations are properly formatted and used appropriately and consistently (whether parenthetical, footnote, or endnote)
- both citations and bibliography are present

Comments:

In sum:

- Keep your goals of professionalism, reliability, validity and efficiency in mind.
- Include at least a few end comments wherever possible. The number one pet peeve from students = "C+" and nothing else.
- The better records you keep, the happier you'll be.
- Try grading as a reviewer, rather than a judge.
- Consider two big feedback issues: Over marking and vagueness.
- Remember your tone at all times. Students look to you for guidance, and they can internalize your comments.

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Chapter 8

8.0 Conclusion

At York, we are fortunate to have students from around the world participating in our graduate programs, and enriching the academic life of the university. The knowledge and background of our International Graduate Student population brings interesting and diverse global perspectives to our learning community. Just like domestic TAs, ITAs may experience anxiety and uncertainty with respect to their new role and classroom responsibilities, but it is not uncommon for ITAs to experience additional tests and obstacles as they transition into their new Canadian academic culture at York University. In other words, York University and the Teaching Commons are aware of the challenges facing ITAs and have devised systems and supports to help you navigate the transition to the Canadian University system successfully.

We hope that this handbook provided you with some insight into teaching and learning in Canada and at York University. What is the next step? The Teaching Commons offers specialized TA Orientation sessions and workshops that address the Canadian ITA experience here at York University. In September, ITAs have the option of choosing one of two ITA Orientation Workshops. In addition to providing resources and guidance to prepare ITAs for the Canadian classroom experience at York, these sessions allow ITAs the opportunity to share, discuss and explore how their nationality and cultural distinctiveness are an asset to the York learning community in their new role as an ITA.

For more information on ITA Orientation please visit http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/graduate-students/courses-workshops-and-events/events/ta-orientation/. For a full listing of our Professional Development Workshops please visit http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/graduate-students/courses-workshops-and-events/workshops/.

We wish you the best of luck on your new journey!

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