

Being Proactive for Your Work Assignment: TAs, RAs and Sessional Instructors

Hosted by Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE) and Graduate Student Association (GSA)

Guiding Questions for this Document

- 1) What do I need to know about the **teaching context** at Waterloo?
- 2) What does **being a proactive TA** mean to you?
- 3) What **teaching development opportunities** are available to TAs at Waterloo?
- 4) How do I **balance my role as a TA** with my other responsibilities?
- 5) How can the GSA better **advocate** on behalf of graduate TAs and sessionals?

Part One: What do I need to know about the teaching context at UWaterloo?

To have a good professional experience and to know how to advocate for yourself, it's important to know the departmental and institutional context and resources that are available to grad students for their different needs, situations or challenges that they might encounter when working as TAs or sessional instructors.



Reflect:

What teaching supports do you currently know about in your department? How can you find out more about these supports?

Things to Know about Graduate Student Teaching

As you prepare to teach at UWaterloo, you will want to gather some key information that will be specific to your department. We recommend that you:

- 1) Familiarize yourself with **departmental norms and expectations** around TAing
- 2) Know **how to access** teaching opportunities
- 3) **Consult** departmental resources or guiding documents for TAs (if available)



As part of your professional development in teaching, it will also benefit you to:

- 1) Set your **professional growth goals** and share them with the course instructor/supervisor
- 2) Gather **feedback on your teaching** from various sources (e.g., students, course instructors, peers, CTE staff)
- 3) **Document** your professional growth by collecting artefacts from your teaching activities and feedback on your teaching
- 4) Seek **teaching mentors and supports** among experienced peers and faculty members



Campus-wide Resources and Policies

There are many campus-wide resources available to you as a graduate student TA, RA, and sessional. These resources can help you begin a conversation with your work supervisor (e.g. course instructor, department chair, research supervisor). There are no right answers, but it is **useful to identify expectations and discuss any differences.**

Graduate Work Resources:

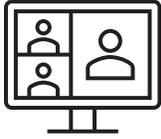
- [TA Allocation of Hours Template](#) - one of the tools you can use to discuss expectations and workloads in your role as a TA
- [TA Checklist: Questions to Ask](#) – a series of questions to discuss before/at the start of the term
- [Supervisor and Research Student Expectation Questionnaire](#) (Kiley & Cadman’s questionnaire) – questions for discussing expectations and identifying potential differences
- [Employment Accommodations for TAs and RAs through Occupational Health](#) - this is similar to accommodation that undergrad and grad students can receive for academic courses through Accessibility Services, but applies to employment as TAs, RAs, and sessionals. At UWaterloo, all requests for accommodations related to employment are managed by Occupational Health.



Relevant University Policies:

There are many policies that guide our work as TAs and instructors. You may find these policies to be relevant at different times and in different circumstances, so it is good to be aware of them. They are all available on the [University of Waterloo’s Secretariat website](#). Here are some of the most relevant:

- **Policy 30** – Employment of Graduate Student Teaching Assistants (amended in 2020)
- Policy 33 – Ethical Behaviour
- Policy 69 – Conflict of Interest
- Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances



These policies are complex! Watch the “[Know Your Stuff](#)” webinar by GSPA, especially the explanation of policies by Dr. Müller for an overview of the policies and their applicability. You can also set up an appointment via GSA [student advising service](#) if you have specific questions.

People on Campus to Know

There are lots of people on campus who can help you with your teaching work and professional development as a teacher. Consider reaching out to:



- 1) [CTE Faculty Liaisons](#) – These members of the CTE team directly support teaching in each of the six UWaterloo faculties and are a great resource for faculty-specific teaching practices and information.
- 2) [University Teaching Fellows](#) – These representatives of each UWaterloo faculty work to improve teaching and learning at UWaterloo.
- 3) [Award-winning instructors and TAs](#) – instructors and TAs who have been formally acknowledged for their efforts and contributions to student learning are a great resource as you develop your own teaching.

Part Two: What does being a proactive TA mean to you?



Reflect:

What types of interactions do you have with students? With your work supervisor(s)?

You may feel like you don’t have any autonomy to make instructional decisions or to suggest positive changes as a graduate student employee, but there are many ways to have agency and a sense of ownership in your work. Some examples include:

- How you facilitate interactions with students and/or work supervisor(s) (e.g. holding office hours or scheduling regular meetings)

- Initiating and helping to plan initial teaching team meeting (especially in courses with multiple TAs) - see [sample agenda](#) that can be adapted to your context
- Providing feedback to course instructor on what is working and what could be improved
- Suggesting a course-relevant [icebreaker](#) to help establish a positive tone and sense of community
- Suggesting resources or supplemental materials that would enhance the course and student learning
- Engaging in collegial conversations with the course instructor about how to support student learning and sharing your observations about student successes and challenges (What are students struggling with? Are they showing interest and effort? Are you noticing stress or confusion in your students?)
- Asking for growth opportunities when you are ready (e.g. asking to deliver a guest lecture)



Reflect:

What decisions are you able to make about your work?

There are some decisions about your work or work environment that you may not be able to control. Other aspects of your work may be more flexible. Some examples may include:

- Holding office hours (e.g. what time and in-person/online)
- Marking assignments (e.g. developing [rubrics](#))
- Advising students about how to connect with you (e.g., email, online office hours, or in a discussion board for their questions), and setting expectations around your response time.



Reflect:

How can you incorporate professional development into your work?

There are lots of professional development (PD) opportunities on campus. You may want to discuss with your work supervisor how to incorporate these opportunities according to your career plans and aspirations. Some questions to ask include:

- Are there hours in your contract allocated to professional development?
- Does your department have any mandatory professional development/training?
- How can you get feedback on your work as a TA?
- What opportunities are there for you to apply your professional development knowledge?

When proactively integrated into your graduate work experience, these PD opportunities will help you feel more confident and prepared for your role which in turn will lead to more fulfilling and positive work experience as a TA or course instructor.

Part Three: What teaching development opportunities are available to me at Waterloo?

When graduate student employees are provided opportunities to grow in their roles, they will be best prepared to support undergraduate student learning and make positive contributions to undergraduate education. To support graduate students in their teaching roles, UWaterloo offers two teaching certificate programs (both optional): Fundamentals of University Teaching (FUT) and the Certificate in University Teaching (CUT). These programs are useful even if your career aspirations don't directly involve teaching because:

- Teaching experience helps you develop important professional skills and practices: relational skills, communication skills, planning and time management strategies, feedback giving (and receiving!) skills
- Teaching development programs help you connect with peers from other departments, learn about disciplinary differences, develop skills in teaching new information to others

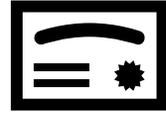
Fundamentals of University Teaching

- Open to master's and PhD students
- Consists of 6 workshops and 3 microteaching sessions (small group practice teaching)
- Can register any time
- Takes 2-3 terms to complete
- Estimated time commitment: 24 hours
- CTE-approved certificate with a notation on transcript



[Certificate of University Teaching](#)

- Open to PhD students who completed Fundamentals
- Consists of 3 courses/components
- Admission once a term
- Takes 6-8 terms to complete
- Estimated time commitment: 80-100 hours
- Senate-approved certificate with a notation on transcript



Other Teaching Supports

There are many other teaching supports available on campus, and new workshops are added all the time. You do not need to be registered in a formal professional development program to take a workshop. Other teaching supports include:

- LEARN for TAs sessions by CTE (at the start of every term)
- [CTE Teaching Tips](#) (short, actionable, research-based ideas for various teaching topics)
- [CTE's TA Handbook](#) (a quick overview of most key teaching topics for TAs)
- [Getting Ready to Facilitate Online Course: TA Training](#) (4-week course offered by the [Centre for Extended Learning](#))
- [Fostering Engagement: Facilitating Online Courses in Higher Education](#) (self-paced online module developed by the Centre for Extended Learning)

Remember to check your UWaterloo GoSignMeUp account for a record of all the workshops and events that you have formally participated in!

You may also talk to instructors and/or senior TAs in your department/faculty. They may have developed additional teaching resources specific to your discipline. Some examples include:



[Dan Wolczuk](#) – a continuing lecturer in the Faculty of Mathematics, who writes about active learning in Math, assessment methods, and motivating students

- [James Skidmore](#) – a professor in Germanic & Slavic Studies, who writes about teaching and learning online, use of technology, and language instruction among other topics

Part Four: How do I balance my TA work with my other responsibilities?

Being a graduate student means wearing a lot of different hats: You are a student, perhaps a researcher, a teacher, and a human with a life outside of UWaterloo. Finding ways to balance these responsibilities can be difficult.



Reflect:

What strategies and/or tools do you currently use to balance your work, graduate studies, and personal life?

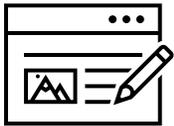
Everyone will have a preference on how to do the work of balancing work, graduate studies, and personal life. Pick tools and strategies that work for you, and be okay with adapting those tools and strategies as needed.

Here are some suggestions:

- Know what responsibilities you have and any specific dates related to those responsibilities
 - E.g. will you give a guest lecture, and if so, on what date? Do you have marking responsibilities, and if so, when will the marking be due?
- Set goals! This will vary by personal style, but you can set goals for the day, week, month or semester
 - Break these goals down into sizable chunks to avoid being overwhelmed. Take it one task at a time
- Try to estimate how long different tasks might take
 - E.g. do you need to prepare materials for a tutorial? How many hours do you need to schedule for office hours each week?
- Use tools you know and are familiar with to organize your work
 - E.g. Outlook calendar, a GANTT chart, a physical notebook/journal, an app such as Trello, ClickUp, or Asana
- Get to know your working style and take advantage of your energy levels throughout the day

- If you know you have a difficult time waking up, do easy administrative tasks in the morning and leave the tasks with deeper concentration for the afternoon
- Block time for other activities such as research, writing, time with friends and family
 - E.g. “6pm-7pm every night is dinner with my family, so I will not check email or do work during that time”
- Plan ahead!
 - Consider using an “at-a-glance” approach so that you can see where you may have too many things scheduled

Part Five: How can the GSA better advocate on behalf of graduate TAs, RAs and Sessionals?



Reflect and Share:

What resources are you still missing?

Share your thoughts on how the GSA can best allocate efforts to support you in your work assignments and beyond:

- Contact the GSA Labour coordinator with feedback directly at gsa-labour@uwaterloo.ca
- Contact your [Departmental Councilor](#) and provide feedback for them to advocate at the monthly council meetings
- Contact departmental representatives or associations as appropriate
- Provide general feedback [here](#)
- Follow the GSA on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) to stay up to date on opportunities for personal and professional growth and community building