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## **Guidelines for Teaching Assistants**

Prepared by the Office of Graduate Studies  
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## **THE BARE BONES**

(For those who only have time for summaries):

### **Introduction**

The rationale behind the compilation and writing of this booklet is explained on....

### **Benefits of a Teaching Assistantship**

The money is good, and the experience is invaluable....

### **Before Your First Meeting**

Be sure to provide your bank information and fill out an income tax form....

### **Initial Contacts**

If you are freaked out by the prospect of teaching, or have any other problems, talk to other graduate students, the professor for your assigned course and/or the Graduate Program Director...

### **Getting Set**

Contact the course professor; get copies of course outline, textbooks, details of the class, and anticipated number of students....

### **The Roles of the Teaching Assistant**

The TA not only works for the professor, but sometimes acts as a bridge between the students and the professor....

### **Range of Duties**

You are permitted to work a maximum of 10 hours a week on average for the whole term, including exams, so in any one week you may do much more or much less than the 10 hours. Your teaching tasks could include marking, leading discussions, guiding labs or taking field trips, attending the Prof's lectures for the course in which you are a TA, but not buying the Prof. coffee!....

### **Teaching - Preparation for the Class**

Talk with the professor well before the first class. Overcome obvious deficiencies before you start. If you have a problem, the course professor will only be too pleased to help. Teaching aids are freely available, but make sure that you are familiar with their use. The open approach shown to you by faculty members should guide you in your relations with students. Warm and friendly attitudes are best....

### The First Class/Tutorial/Lab

Know the material and objectives beforehand. Introduce yourself, speak slowly and write your name on the board. Make your expectations of them clear, especially as to where, when and how often they have to hand in assignments.

In consultation with the students, decide on "office" hour(s). Give the students adequate warning if you will not be available at these times, otherwise be there....

### Classroom Manner and Communication

Be clear, friendly and encouraging. Do not be arrogant nor sarcastic. We are all students after all....

### Lectures and Relationships with the Professor

Go to the lectures if you can fit them in. You can then more effectively relate your own duties to the lecture material, and answer student questions more effectively. If the professor doesn't invite you to attend lectures, then simply ask, "May I attend?"....

### Language

Make sure that the students can understand you. Make it clear that the students should ask you to repeat things that they do not understand. Make sure you understand the students. If the tutorial is large, repeat the question for all to hear....

### Tips on Teaching

To get the attention of a large class, try a couple of key words: "*exam*" usually works....

### Class Participation

Class participation takes a while to build up. Do everything possible to make it easy for students to communicate with you. Ask simple questions to get things started. Ask questions of specific students, but do not make them uncomfortable. Form small groups and ask one student to report back from group discussion. Never put a student down!....

### Confrontations

Political and emotional turmoil surrounding current events might spill over into seminar discussions. You must not allow yourself to get rattled or emotional....

### Feedback

Informal feedback is very helpful for both yourself and the course professor. Allow opportunities for it to develop. If you listen carefully, students can help you to develop your public performing talents....

### Discussing Assignments

TA's can save themselves and their students a good deal of wasted effort by explaining assignments carefully to their students. Take five to ten minutes of the tutorial or lab to review expectations, and permit students to ask questions about the assignment....

### Marking

Never cut short on the quality of marking. Use a contrasting pen and look through several papers before assigning final grades. Work with other TAs for the course so that your marking standards are similar. Mark positively and make constructive comments. Make sure that the students are clear as to where they went wrong. Remember questions can also be badly worded. Record the marks carefully and, if possible, store them in duplicate. If you get tired or annoyed take a break. Do not return marked papers via a chair in the corridor; they are confidential documents.....

### Cheating, Lying and Other Nasty Things

Copying and plagiarism are the most likely problems. Early in the term explain to the students what constitutes plagiarism, and in the case of copying, a quiet word with the students concerned is usually sufficient. In some cases, students will have worked together on the same project....

### Poor and Anomalous Marks

Firstly, is it your fault or the students? Or a combination? You can help them on a personal level....

### Professionalism and Confidentiality

Do not gossip about professors, whine about the course, or give out final marks for the course....

### Concluding Comments

If you would like to improve this booklet for future TA's, your assistance would be most welcome....

### Appendix A

What is an A paper?....

## **INTRODUCTION**

The primary purpose of this little booklet is to ease the burden for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) at Trent University and to help them carry out their role more effectively. It is intended to be a practical document, with immediate applications, to provide assistance, and to dissipate apprehension.

## **BENEFITS OF A TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIP**

The chance to act as a TA brings not only financial rewards but also an experience that in itself is rewarding and of direct assistance in a number of situations. It provides experience that may be of value when applying for a permanent job. You will learn a great deal about the subject matter in the course with which you are assisting. (You may have to, just to keep up with your students!) TAs often admit that they learn as much about their subject through their TA experience as they do through their formal courses. The experience will help to develop an ability to think quickly and clearly, and to cope with varied situations. This is great for your self-confidence. You can more easily sell yourself and your ideas. You can get closer to people more easily. Convinced? Try it, you'll like it!

## **BEFORE YOUR FIRST MEETING**

All first time TAs will have received a letter from the Graduate Studies Officer offering you a teaching assistantship, and you accepted that offer not knowing what would be expected of you as a TA. You will be asked to complete a TD-1 form on or before Registration Day. The Office of Graduate Studies will also require your banking information (address of bank, and account number). Your pay cheque will be deposited directly into your bank account on a monthly basis.

## **INITIAL CONTACTS**

If the thought of being a teaching assistant for any class leads to immediate anxiety and the decision that this function is beyond your ability, then you should immediately hold discussions with a number of people. (Remember, though, that some degree of apprehension is normal.) Contact persons should include some of your peers, especially those who have had some teaching experience, and the Graduate Program Director. It is equally important to contact the professor in order to be certain of the course you will be involved with, and what the professor expects of you re: content, workload, grading, your attendance at lectures, etc.

## **GETTING SET**

Don't equivocate. Spend time with the course professor and ask all the questions you can about the course and your part in it. Obtain a course outline and any other materials, including a copy of the textbook(s) that may be relevant. This will depend on the actual duties which you are expected to perform. Ask about any other support materials you could use, for example access to copying equipment, computer, audio-visual facilities. Find out all you can before you begin your duties, but be kind to the professors, as this is a harrowing time of the year for them as well. The quality of your assistance will depend on the degree of preparation. In these first days you will have a multitude of things to do, so get your act together quickly. The professor has

an obligation, however, to clearly define your roles and responsibilities. And you have an obligation to clearly understand your role and responsibilities.

Find out what your general duties will be, and how many students you will contact in your grading, tutoring or generally assisting in the course. Some professors will require or suggest that you attend lectures, if time permits, so that you are aware of what is happening in class. Alternatively, the professor may brief you on course progress.

If the course is new to you, quickly analyze the level of competence you need to reach. The appearance of being competent is not enough, you really need to know your stuff.

## **THE ROLES OF THE TEACHING ASSISTANT**

The use of plural in the title of this section is deliberate, for the TA fulfills a range of functions besides the major role of complementing the lecture material delivered by a faculty member for a particular subject, or assisting in the evaluation of students in a course. The TA may provide both a bridge to, and a filter between, the student and the professor. Depending upon assigned duties, the TA could communicate student feedback and may, in a small way, act as a father or mother confessor to those with work problems and, indirectly, problems of adjustment. Depending on the particular situation, these roles may be very rewarding or very trying. But remember that you are also a Graduate Student and must meet your course and assignment obligations.

## **RANGE OF DUTIES**

The range of duties that the TA performs may be wide, but at no time should the length of time devoted to those duties exceed 10 hours per week on average. This figure is computed on the basis of a full term, inclusive of the examination period.

There may be one or two weeks when you will put in much less time than 10 hours, while in others you may do much more. If you are working efficiently but spending longer than 10 hours on your duties, have a word with the course professor who is well aware of the 10 hour limit. An understanding must be reached between the two of you. Be tactful in this discussion but stick to the rule. Don't forget, you need a minimum of "B-" in all your graduate courses. The duties may be one or several of the following. A TA might assist with marking mid-term exams and quizzes, leading seminars, discussions or tutorial sessions, preparing teaching materials or perhaps teaching part of the course in the absence of the professor. Unless clearly specified otherwise, your duties relate to teaching (seminar, discussion groups, marking, etc.). You are not required to fetch coffee for the faculty. Yours is a professional and business relationship and should remain that way.

## **TEACHING - PREPARATION FOR THE CLASS**

This section is one of the most important in the booklet. The amount of preparation you have completed before class, tutorial, or discussion group, directly governs how rewarding the experience will be for all concerned. As the Boy Scouts say - BE PREPARED. Of course you can bluff your way through a tutorial or seminar class with minimal preparation, but the students are keenly attuned to the process of heiferdust

(they have experience with it every day) so they know what's happening. Your credibility plunges if you get caught. Answer student questions to the best of your ability. Don't be afraid to admit (now and then) that you really do not know the answer. Students respect honesty. Your popularity may not suffer. You will probably still get paid, but you are not fulfilling your function if you avoid being honest.

You are assisting in teaching a subject, and while specific and detailed portions of knowledge are not expected of you, a reasonable degree of understanding is required. Whether you know the material or whether it is completely new to you, obtain a course outline, bibliography and textbook as soon as possible, and certainly before the first meeting. The professor will help here and will most likely underline the concepts on which the course is based. If this is not done, politely pester the professor until both of you understand the objectives of the course.

The professor should also explain her or his expectations of you and of the tutorial, discussion or seminar sessions. Ask around to find out how teaching aids are made available and where they are located. This exercise can have its frustratingly amusing side and is guaranteed to bring you into contact with quite a few members of your Department.

Equipment and aids such as projectors are freely available for use. Check to be sure that they are in working condition and that you know how to operate them. Otherwise, considerable embarrassment may result, and the session may be disrupted. Above all, you should be familiar with the extent and location of source materials.

In whatever role, the TA has a number of advantages over those who are more experienced with the system. Generally, the TA only recently left the undergraduate situation. The TA can, therefore, relate easily to the language, the morals and the attitudes of those being assisted. TAs are very aware of the problems that exist since they were often their own problems in previous years. This can pose a problem in itself, especially if the TAs are at the university where they were an undergraduate, as the different attitudes applicable to graduates and TAs may disorient them for some time. For those who come from other universities, attitudes at this University may well be quite different so some adjustment may be required.

Advice from students suggests that the most comfortable operating environment for them is one permeated by friendliness, and devoid of arrogance. If there were only one "don't" in this booklet, it would be "DON'T BE ARROGANT". This attitude leads students to be uncooperative and unwilling to make any contribution. Avoid sarcasm. Sarcasm or abuse of students is unprofessional and inappropriate in a classroom or as written comments on tests or assignments. Be friendly, open and receptive to all thoughts and opinions. Be honest, forthright, and demonstrate an immediate willingness to help. From discussions and tutorials to comments written on assignments, let constructive criticism be your theme.

If something that the students are asked to do seems unjustifiable, or unclear to you find out the objectives of the exercise from the professor, and certainly take up with the professor any aspects of your assignment that are unclear or seem unprofitable. All class exercises (essays, assignments, tests) should have a clearly defined purpose for the course. They should not seem to you like 'make-work' projects.

They should always have feedback - e.g. comments on essays or discussion of exams.

Let the students know that you care, ask them how they are doing in other subjects. Warning: avoid becoming too friendly as it can lead to grief.

## **THE FIRST CLASS/TUTORIAL/LAB**

This and the following few sections apply most directly to those of you who will be leading seminars, discussions, or tutorials. Others who only grade or mark, but may still contact their students occasionally, may still find these hints useful.

Remember the students are more nervous than you are. First impressions count. Take a deep breath and speak slowly. Write the course number and your name on the board and briefly outline your background. When using the blackboard, write legibly and press hard so that your message can be read from the back of the room and try to avoid speaking while facing a black (green) board. You may circulate a sheet of paper to obtain students' names and I.D. numbers, as well as their year and program. Learn their names and how to pronounce them as quickly as possible.

Establish immediately that your expectations are of a dialogue, not a monologue with you as the only contributor. Don't demand dialogue, encourage it. How? By asking questions that are thought-provoking and require more than one word answers - pretend you are a television interviewer. Use one student's answer to develop another question. Relate tutorial and discussion sessions to class materials. These materials are part of the course and should be related to lectures, tests and exams. At this early stage you are being judged as to your potential performance. Do not be timid and do not be late. Remind students that they are expected to be on time as well.

In the first session, let the students know what your expectations of them are. Clarify the amount and standard of work expected. Let them know the marking scheme, the points you are looking for in any project or written material, and define very carefully your policy on dates and times for handing in materials. Whether you want their completed work at the beginning of the next session or before that time, make sure that they are clear as to where and when you expect to receive their work. Be firm about deadlines, but be prepared to be flexible, especially at times of mid-term and final exams and during periods of illness.

Keep in mind, though, that it is easier to mark and keep a consistent marking standard if you have all the papers with you at one time. Be explicit about mark deductions (if any) that are made for lateness. Being lax about deadlines helps neither the student nor yourself. A student's mark or grade for any assignment is a private matter. Professionals respect client privacy and confidentiality.

For discussion and tutorial sessions, make sure you know the purpose before you start, and communicate it to your students. Let the students know how you will run the tutorial and demonstrate the relationship between the lecture material and the material covered in the tutorial.

During this busy first class session, determine in consultation with all class members (if they have found the room) acceptable times for office hours. It is during these times that students can see you, on a personal basis, about questions that are important to them. Two or three half-hour sessions per week should be sufficient to give everyone a chance to catch you. It is great to be able to say "drop in anytime", but first realize the implications of what you are saying. It will be taken literally, so expect a continual stream of student questions in that final frantic hour before your own oh-so-important graduate course paper is due. And don't forget your office mates who may have to sit through all the discussion and chit-chat. For your own academic work it is more satisfactory to restrict and regularize the hours. Then everyone else in the office can go for coffee at those times. About phone numbers: If you give yours out, expect calls - late at night!

Inform students of acceptable times and locations to meet with them outside of regularly scheduled sessions. You will find that locations will vary: TA's office or carrel, a small meeting room, a faculty member's lab, etc.

### **CLASSROOM MANNER AND COMMUNICATION**

The three greatest virtues in a TA are probably clarity, friendliness, and an ability to encourage. It is difficult to be specific about methods of achieving these, as much appears to be dependent on personality. Nonetheless, elucidation of, and advice about, communication in the classroom tutorial, discussion groups, or seminar is one of the prime aims of this booklet. By no means is it claimed that this discussion is all-encompassing, but it is felt that the following suggestions may be of considerable assistance. After all, the process of learning to teach never ceases.

### **LECTURES AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE PROFESSOR**

Unless you have had previous experience with the course you are probably well advised to attend lectures. This depends on what role you are playing, and should be prepared to discuss and clarify lecture material. Attendance at lectures leads to a greater degree of rapport with students and gives them confidence in having both regular access to the TA and a feeling that all parts of the course are integrated. Course fragmentation worries students and they will have greater confidence in you if they know you are familiar with all facets of the course.

Lecture times are ideal for the communication of any messages to tutorial and seminar classes, e.g. reminders about when next assignments are due. Professors are generally amenable to any brief interruptions of this nature. Attendance at lectures will make it more likely that you are aware of problems, and also that you have an interest in solving them.

### **LANGUAGE**

Start speaking slowly and clearly (that means, "Try to avoid using jargon words just to try to impress") and stress that you be asked to repeat or clarify that which is not understood. A good approach, in your first meeting, may be to explain a little of your background and suggest in a friendly manner that you be asked to repeat things if they don't understand. A well selected anecdote about a comprehension problem you once had will ease their feelings of hesitation. They won't ask at first, as they may be

experiencing this problem for the first time. Calm reassurance and sensitivity to feedback are needed on the part of the TA.

## TIPS ON TEACHING

[Suggestions from a Conference of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) on how to enliven, improve and involve the class, University Affairs, October 1995.]

- Legitimize students' ideas by writing them on an overhead.
- Have a question box at the front of the classroom so that students who are uncomfortable participating in class can still ask questions.
- To ensure you're not fielding questions from the same people all the time, have a mental map of the room divided into sections, and answer raised hands from all sections.
- If no one will attempt to answer your question, call for a vote by a show of hands.
- To get the attention of a large class, try a couple of key words: "exam" usually works.
- Teach each concept two or three times.
- Start the course slowly and then speed up near the end of term.
- Break up lectures with other activities, such as exercises that pair students.
- Use lots of examples.
- In large classes, ask for volunteers to act as ombudspople, communicating student concerns to the instructor.

## CLASS PARTICIPATION

For all discussions, seminars, or tutorials led by TAs, the issue of class participation, or the lack of it, may represent a minor crisis. If your students seem unwilling to communicate, try any or all of the following:

Scrutinize your attitude towards your class:

- Are you open, friendly and honest? Your own inspiration with, and interest in, any particular topic will do much to break the ice.
- Try asking a series of questions that you consider answerable immediately, but sufficiently above the common sense level to let your class know that it is not their basic intelligence you are questioning.
- Direct a general question to the class as a whole, this can gradually be narrowed down by a series of questions. Use varying approaches in your questioning. If the session involves more questioning than true discussion, the manner in which you respond to the first replies is very important. Entertain all questions and points of view even if you disagree. Endeavour, however, to keep the objectives of the class in mind. What is the specific purpose of today's session.
- Encourage any answer, gradually turning the answers towards the real issues. Once the first question has been answered, the session will probably go more smoothly. Do not be afraid of silences. Give the students time to think about answers. A 20-second silence feels like an hour, but may be more valuable

than idle chatter. Use the blackboard for drawing diagrams and illustrating ideas.

- Encourage the students to write their ideas on paper and then call on several to read them aloud. This approach puts the students less on the spot than direct questioning as they have time to plan their answer, and can now read it out.

If the class is of the seminar type where discussion is likely to be protracted:

- Start discussion somewhere near the subject area. Record key words on the board. Then sit back and be quiet. Endless chatter on your part is not a good way to promote discussion.
- Listen carefully and when discussion tends to be irrelevant to the main focus, gently direct its course by suggestions and questions, back to the subject of the day. Digressions are fine but keep them under control.
- If an impasse is reached or the topic is exhausted, be prepared to summarize and give your own opinion. Students expect that you will round off a discussion and resolve problems as necessary, so do your best to offer reassurance. Indeed, summarizing what you've done at the end of a class or seminar is always a fine idea.
- An alternative means by which discussion of a particular topic could be approached is to divide the class into a number of subgroups (three groups with 3 or 4 persons in each is a good number) and ask them to consider the questions. Present both the format for discussion and the question itself in such a way that it is not perceived as an ultimatum, but is merely an alternative approach. During the discussion, move between groups and, if necessary, offer suggestions. Give the students 5 to 10 minutes for group discussion and then call on one person from each group to summarize the group's thoughts.
- If you are instructing a practical course, the format may be considerably different. Introduction of the lab or tutorial may provide an opportunity for discussion, but the balance of the session is set aside for the students to work on the lab, with your guidance. One approach may be to encourage group participation, but individual write-ups. The students will feel more comfortable in talking to you and asking questions if you are casually walking around the class instead of you sitting behind a desk at the front of the room.

## CONFRONTATIONS

The political and emotional turmoil surrounding current events might spill over into seminar discussions. Early in the year you must establish an atmosphere conducive to rational academic discussion. You should demonstrate, and expect from your students, courtesy for all, respect for the opinions of others, hearing out of views that you may personally reject, calm rebuttal of others' arguments.

If an emotional outburst does occur, you should quietly say that this is inappropriate in the present setting. It may help to explain to others in the class why the issue has become so upsetting before moving on. Teaching assistants must not allow themselves to get rattled or emotional, but must exhibit the confidence and knowledge needed to support their positions of authority.

## FEEDBACK

This term is applicable in all types of exchange in either direction between students, TAs and professors. While the formal side of feedback is covered in the section on marking, informal feedback is more continuous and hence, probably more important. The comments you give to students let them know what is expected and what is not, what is "Right" and "Wrong". The feedback they give you either in a direct or in an indirect manner indicates to you how you can better do the job. The clues they give you may be subtle - a yawn here, some doodling there. Are you being interesting? Is the material relevant? Your attitude does much to determine the amount and type of feedback you get. Be attentive and open; this feedback will be a lot of help to you.

## DISCUSSING ASSIGNMENTS

Many students perform poorly on labs, essays, or reports, not because they do not understand the material, but because they do not know what they are being asked to do. Nothing is more frustrating to a teacher than to receive a lab in which the student clearly has not realized that a particular format must be followed or to receive an essay with a plethora of secondary sources when the student was to investigate only one primary text. Marking such assignments is difficult: Would the student have passed if he or she had followed instructions? Is it unfair to give no acknowledgement of effort? Teaching assistants can save themselves and their students a good deal of wasted effort by explaining assignments carefully to their students.

First, teaching assistants should determine themselves what they are asking students to do. Is there a particular format to follow? What exactly are students expected to do? Take five to ten minutes of the tutorial or lab to review expectations, and permit students to ask questions about the assignment. If possible, direct students toward model essays or labs that demonstrate preferred form. Many students will ask, "What do you want?" Do not interpret this as a question about your political views or right/wrong answers. The query is legitimate. Students do need to know what you think constitutes a book review or an essay, and they will write better when they have a clear idea of the end product.

## MARKING

Grading can be one of the most interesting duties performed by a TA, but so often it turns out to be the most tedious. The type and amount of marking done by a TA depends largely on the course professor, though it can be modified by the TA in a number of ways. The modifications can serve several purposes. They may shorten the marking time, make the marking more accurate and equal, and allow the TA some say in the determination of criteria for and objectives of the marking process. All are desirable and give you both confidence in your approach and a chance to rationalize any philosophical issues that may concern you.

There comes a time for every TA (and the earlier the better) when you must accept the possibility that you will have a major role in passing or failing a student. Think about this early and think clearly. You, of all people, should be familiar with the inequalities that exist in any marking scheme. Very early in the term, ask the professor to clarify his or her position on marking. Analyze your own outlook and preconceptions. Together, work out an approach to the philosophy of marking.

Determine your criteria for the differences between grades; e.g. between a B+ and an A-. Talk to your peers on this issue and determine their approach. Don't just let this worry spin around the back of your mind, but bring it out into the open, and be prepared to modify your approach on the basis of experience and information. Again, if you have doubts talk with the professor as, ultimately, he or she must bear responsibility for all marks and grades, including yours - profs must sign final grade sheets.

Once you have determined your approach, be prepared to modify it as necessary. Having the prospect of 50 or more papers to mark, knowing that each one will take 20 minutes, can be totally awesome for most TAs. The following are some hints on shortening and improving the process. However, never should the quality of the marking be lowered to achieve this. If the time spent is consistently too long, discuss the problem with the course professor.

- Use a red pen so that your comments stand out.
- If you are marking an exam, test or tutorial assignment, mark by question, moving through the same question in each paper.
- Set up an ideal answer from the marking scheme beforehand, after reading several papers to determine the kinds of points you expect to be made to gain marks. For essays, determine in advance how much emphasis the professor wants you to place on content, organization, style, and language. In either case don't expect perfection because you will rarely find it on exams or in essays.
- In most cases, the professor will have established the marking scheme for you. It should be followed closely, and any problems with it must be reported to the professor. There is often some value to talking with other TAs for the same course.
- Students should feel that they will receive equitable treatment from all TAs in the same course.
- Take regular breaks to ensure that you don't penalize students because you are tired or bored.
- After initial experience, modify the type and number of answers demanded such that you feel comfortable in accepting it. Eventually, with experience, your confidence will grow in your grading standards.
- Now that you have a reasonable amount of work and an efficient approach, consider the following to achieve the finest quality results.
- Mark clearly and positively so that the student knows which points were desirable. If parts of an answer were clearly wrong, say so, but suggest alternative approaches or answers, so that the students know where they went wrong.
- Don't be miserable, sarcastic or arrogant, especially with essays. This is far from the best way to approach a subject if you are trying to be positive. It leads to alienation.
- Add up carefully and record marks clearly in a place where you won't lose them. It's often a good idea to record marks on two sheets to be safe. Avoid leaving papers lying on your desk. Keep them in a folder in a drawer so you can be sure who has handed them in.
- Where desirable, comment on the paper as a whole and make suggestions for improvement. Let constructive criticism be your approach. Also comment on the parts of the paper or tutorial exercise that have been well done. A little praise may lead to a better effort next time. Remember, the purpose of the assignment is to teach!

- If a mistake is common to many papers, save yourself some time by commenting on it to the class as a whole next time you meet with them. In this way, each individual is more likely to learn from the mistake. Generally, one should review tests and exams in class.
- When dealing with essay questions, marks may go given for specific points made in the answer, but the overall structure, style, coherence and argument of the question as a whole may also be important.
- On occasion, when work is being done as a learning exercise but is not being marked for student record purposes, the answers to questions can be marked by the group. Students can either correct and/or mark their own papers or one another's. In this way, the correcting and marking becomes part of the learning process.
- Discussion of the best answers can be useful to the whole group of students. Take care not to embarrass students whose answers you might use.
- Collect due papers in such a way that there is no doubt as to whether the student has or has not handed the paper in. Hand back papers during the class to each student individually.
- One of the most common and pressing complaints by students is that marking standards vary considerably among TAs in the same course. An estimate of the value of a paper by one TA may be considerably different from another. Though class times may, by virtue of timetable associations, determine groupings of students collected in particular classes, marking standards and marks given should be similar.

## **CHEATING, LYING AND OTHER NASTY THINGS**

There are formal ways of dealing with cheating in exams. These methods are well established and the chances of your having to deal to any extent with this are minimal. In the laboratory or seminar situation, however, a number of devious things can take place. Students may copy the work of other students and hand it in as their own. This may happen with the knowledge of the student whose work was copied, or his/her work may be stolen. The theft sometimes takes place off the TA's desk. Make sure that the students hand in their work directly to you. Put it away safely in a drawer.

Plagiarism may also take place, though it is often difficult to detect. In many cases, except that of theft, a quiet chat with students on the values of being honest and the penalties for being caught cheating, is adequate to clear up the problem. In the case of theft it is best to decide on a course of action in consultation with the professor. Often, students do not realize what constitutes plagiarism and it would be beneficial to discuss the subject with them during one of the early teaching sessions. If in doubt as to who should handle the situation, first discuss it with the professor.

It is useful to quote a few words from the Graduate Studies Calendar:

"...Plagiarism is defined in Trent's Notes on the Preparation of Essays as "passing off someone else's words or thoughts as your own"...Since plagiarism is theft and fraud combined, and strikes at the very roots of the University by threatening the integrity of its degree, it is obvious that it must be treated as a very serious academic offense..." (p. 52)

In all cases where plagiarism or cheating is suspected, talk with your course professor before any action is taken. In almost all cases, the professor will take whatever action is necessary. If your students are uncertain whether a course of action might constitute plagiarism or cheating, advise them to consult with the professor involved in advance of the action.

### **POOR AND ANOMALOUS MARKS**

It is always disappointing when a pleasant and bright student is not doing as well as he or she should. Pick up on it immediately, though certainly not in any intrusive manner. (The reasons behind the problem may represent feedback for you about your teaching.) It is often difficult to give students feedback on how well they are doing until after their papers have been marked. Several alternatives exist and the following are ways in which one can avoid these kinds of disappointments.

For any papers, projects, essays and even tests, clarify your expectations immediately. Let students know what is being looked for. In cases where they choose their own topic, as so often happens, ask them to summarize their ideas and the literature available before they start work. If possible and necessary, suggest alternative topics, approaches and resource materials.

Encourage students to talk with you about the topic and their progress. If we learn by making mistakes, then it is a good idea if those mistakes are made before evaluation is undertaken. Your duties will depend on your role; many of you will not be expected to do this. Professional counselling (on emotional problems, for example) is best left to those with the necessary training and background, for example at the Counselling Services.

If the problem lies with the student's ability to spell and write in an acceptable manner, then there is much that can be done. Correction of spelling and grammar is advisable. Remember, though, that many spellings and other quirks that are considerably different from the "Queen's English" are acceptable in North America. Most students appreciate assistance with writing, especially with grammar. Students should be directed to the university's Academic Skills Centre for assistance with style, exam and essay writing workshops etc.

### **PROFESSIONALISM AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

Avoid discussing marks gained by students in public circles, especially with other students. Don't give out one student's marks to other students, in fact avoid giving out marks at all. Your Department may post unofficial final grades for each course, and the University officially notifies the students of their grades.

It is totally unprofessional to discuss publicly or gossip about the professors or your peers. TAs certainly get to know their professors well, but don't fall into the gossip trap.

Furthermore, it is almost inevitable now and then that personality problems arise. It is the measure of the professional how well and maturely such difficulties are handled.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

This booklet is an evolving document. It represents contributions from faculty, graduates and students, and, it is hoped, will be modified by Teaching Assistants in succeeding years in the light of their own experiences and needs. It represents the basis of a problem-solving approach to the task of being a Teaching Assistant. As a Teaching Assistant, its benefit to you can be augmented by any comments and suggestions you may have regarding its improvement.

## **APPENDIX A**

If your responsibilities include grading essays, term papers, or other major written assignments, you will be required to distinguish an A from a C from an F. Although your professor will probably hold regular, in-detail marking and grading sessions with you, you may find the following comments from A Manual for Teaching Assistants in the Department of English, University of Waterloo, useful.

### **The A Paper**

The A paper is such stuff as scholastic dreams are made on. You too can have a dream come true, and it's as well to recognize it when it does. The A paper is stylistically outstanding, and demonstrates a perceptive and comprehensive grasp of the assigned topic. It is characterised by a freshness, and sometimes originality of thought lacking in the B paper. Secondary sources are used critically and intelligently. The student is in control of the material and obviously has a clear idea of where the paper is going. The ideas are logically ordered and well-supported. The introduction is appropriately introductory and the conclusion, conclusive - a surprising number of students consider the concluding paragraph to be just the place for introducing a new topic, totally unrelated to the preceding essay. There is a high consciousness of word value; both grammar and spelling are correct; sentences and paragraphs are well constructed.

### **The B Paper**

This is a potential A paper which doesn't quite make the grade. It is informed and fluent; the style is acceptably plain, but the overall control of the A paper is lacking, and although the content is good, it is not original. Some of the material is inadequately developed and some of the ideas are insufficiently supported. Punctuation and grammar are, for the most part, free of error. The B paper, described by some TAs as the "blah" paper, is probably the most difficult to grade, because it is often hard to see just what is wrong with it. It is technically sound, but may be unexceptional to the point of being boring.

### **The C Paper**

The C paper is boring. An A student could make a gripping read out of the sex life of a micro fossil; the C student could be writing about Erotomania in Japanese Transsexuals and bring tears of boredom to your eyes. The C paper is characterised by shallowness, superficiality, lack of originality and monotonous sentence structure. I'm bored just writing about it. The paragraphs tend to be short and undeveloped, there is a great deal of "padding" to fill up space and, at the same time, a dearth of

supporting detail. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that the student has thought intelligently about the subject; the language is reasonably sound and the spelling tolerable.

### **The D Paper**

The ideas in the D paper may well be better than those in the C paper, but they are running amok and crab walking all over the pages so erratically that you may have difficulty following them; the D paper has no basic structure. The writer doesn't really know what he wants to say, and even if he did, he wouldn't know how to say it. The grammatical mistakes are serious, the punctuation exotic. There may be some apparent attempt at enlargement of vocabulary, but the writer shows a painful insensitivity to the value of words; he may be a Roget's Thesaurus addict; he is the student who writes, "I culminated from my pallet at matins inconvenienced by the colic," when he wants to tell you he got out of the bed this morning with a hangover. The essay is in control of him rather than vice-versa. The content is slight, there is no evidence of solid thinking and there is a noticeable lack of clear purpose.

### **The F Paper**

The F paper is a sad paper. The writer may not know how to construct a sentence, let alone a paragraph. The mistakes in grammar, punctuation and spelling are so numerous that you'd work through a whole pencil before correcting them all. There is little or no supporting evidence and little continuity or development of argument. This student will probably misunderstand the demands of the assignment; he will tell you about the day he and his Uncle Michael went to the races and lost all their money, when the assignment asked him to construct a spatial paragraph describing horse.