

Faculty of Science

Teaching Assistant

Handbook



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Welcome

Congratulations for being chosen as a Teaching Assistant (TA). This handbook was written to help clarify your responsibilities, whether you are working as a marker, a recitation TA, or a lab TA. If you use the handbook as a resource, you may be able to avoid common problems, and be prepared for possible scenarios. Remember, however, that each instructor will have his/her own specific expectations. **Always consult your instructor at the beginning of the term (and on a regular basis thereafter) to ensure that misunderstandings do not develop. If you have not signed a contract with your instructor, use the TA Checklist in [Appendix A](#).**

There are many reasons for becoming a TA, but many students enjoy the convenience of working on campus as a means of supporting their studies. The work of a TA can be a demanding, sometimes frustrating, but often rewarding experience. You are expected to have a good understanding of the discipline in which you are working, and you are an important role model for students. Your work directly impacts student learning, and it is important that you do your job well.

Good teaching assistants greatly ease the workload of an instructor. Since you are close in age to the students that you are teaching/marking, they may come to you with their questions or concerns. You are expected to have up-to-date knowledge of the material related to the course, but you will not always have the answer. Consult with your instructor if you are uncertain. You will lose credibility if students discover that you have misled them.

Professionalism is essential in your interactions with students. Your experiences working as a TA will provide you with the opportunity to improve your teaching, collegiality, leadership, and organizational skills. With good recommendations from faculty, you are much more likely to be hired again, whether at Saint Mary's or other institutions. TA experience also looks good on your resume and enables professors to write positively about you in reference letters.

How Many Hours Are You Expected to Work?

In past years, concerns about workloads have occasionally been raised by student Teaching Assistants. When you sign your contract, the number of hours you are expected to work in the specified term should be stated. It frequently ranges from approximately 30 to 100 hours per semester, depending on your assignment and whether or not you are a graduate student. However, make sure that you talk to your instructor or Departmental Chair to ensure that there are no misunderstandings.

You cannot teach a person anything; you can only help him find it within himself.
Galileo

Role of TAs in the University

TAs play a very important role in improving the learning experience of students in their assigned class. Typically, TAs have completed and performed well in the course in which they are assisting, often with the same professor. This case is less common for graduate TAs, since many would have been undergraduates at other institutions.

What is your role as a TA? Depending on your contract, any or all of the following may apply to you.

1. Teacher

Not only are you supporting your instructor in teaching, you are actively involved in the teaching process. It may be helpful to discuss the course goals with your instructor at the beginning of the term. If you keep them in mind, it will help you focus on what is, or is not, essential for the students to learn. Whether you are teaching in the lab, or marking assignments, you are expected to have a good understanding of the material and you need to organize your schedule to allow for adequate preparation time. If you are working in the lab, make sure that you read the laboratory instructions, revise the material, and ensure that you know how to use all of the equipment before a particular lab begins. No TA knows all the answers, and do not hesitate to tell students when you are unsure of the answer. You should, however, consult your instructor or another colleague to find out the answer and report back to the student.

If you are marking tests/assignments/labs, make sure that you give adequate feedback by means of notes or comments. Your job is to “help” students develop their ability to learn and to give them quality feedback; you should not merely assign a mark. Guidelines on how quickly you should provide feedback are given in the section on TA Responsibilities.

2. Role model

Both graduate and senior undergraduate students have the opportunity to be excellent role models for undergraduates. You have been successful in your studies, and your enthusiasm and knowledge can motivate other students to succeed.

3. Intermediary

You act as an important bridge between faculty and students as, ideally, you understand both sides. You can explain the instructor's rationale to the students and you can act as an early warning system when things are not going well by relating the students' likes and dislikes to the faculty member.

4. Colleague to your students

TAs are well aware of the frustrations that students face (meeting deadlines, being judged, and living by the rules of others). You are in an ideal position to treat each student as a unique and worthwhile individual. By being knowledgeable, enthusiastic, helpful, and fair, you will provide an enormous service for your students.

Faculty Expectations of Teaching Assistants

Academic standards

Assign marks according to the instructor's marking scheme, and do not provide unfair assistance (i.e., by completing an assignment, or part of an assignment for a student). Each student needs to take responsibility for "earning" his/her grades.

Avoidance of conflicts of interest

Examples where a conflict of interest may arise - TAs dating students, meeting them off campus, or socializing with them when they are responsible for marking their work.

If you are involved in a "difficult" situation, think about ways of turning it into a learning opportunity. Consult with your instructor, or other more experienced TAs, if you are in doubt about how to handle a situation

Confidentiality

You are required to maintain all information regarding student performance in strictest confidence.

- All written evaluations/grades should be returned to the student in a confidential manner.
- If students are picking up tests or assignments from a stack at the front of the class or lab, the grades should not be visible. Fold and staple the front page to conceal the grade, return the test/assignment in an envelope, or record the grade inside.
- You are not permitted to leave unattended stacks of tests/assignments in the lab or in the hallway.
- Do not return a test, assignment, or mark to someone other than the actual student.
- Without proper consent; do not leave any student work visible to other students.
- An individual's performance should never be discussed with anyone other than the faculty member.
- TAs should not grade/evaluate material in front of other students.

Diligence

Your instructor relies on you to complete your assigned tasks well. The course will suffer if you do not take your TA position seriously. Ensure that your understanding of course material is sufficient to fulfill your responsibilities by reviewing, reading, or discussing the material with the faculty member.

Fairness

You need to balance the needs of the individual student with the needs and rights of the whole class.

- If a student is from a culture where silence in the classroom is expected, he/she should not be penalized if they do not participate in discussions. It is your role to explain what is expected and to encourage participation as the course proceeds.
- If a student that monopolizes discussions, you may need to talk to him/her individually so that you can discuss classroom expectations.
- If someone who is already a good friend signs up for a course in which you are the TA, make it clear to them that they will not be treated differently than any other student. You should never mark a friend's work; ask your instructor or another TA working in the same class to mark it instead.

Feedback

Students need appropriate, prompt feedback on performance to benefit from courses.

Honesty

If you do not know the answer to a student's question, admit it, but tell them that you will find out the answer before the next class. If a student asks inappropriate questions, tell them that you cannot answer them.

Listening/communication skills

Listen carefully to a student when he/she comes to you with a particular problem. Put your self into his/her shoes so that you can remain empathetic. Keep in mind that the issue that they come to you with may not be the underlying problem.

Organizational and time-management skills

Some TAs spend very little time in the classroom, and their primary responsibilities may be limited to marking tests and assignments, and assisting a professor in the preparation of teaching materials. Good organizational and time-management skills are essential. You need to balance your own studies with the demands of your TA assignment. Plan to complete your own assignments early; keep in mind that the "busiest" part of your term will probably coincide with the times you are needed to mark midterms or other assignments. Your students need prompt feedback on their progress so that they can seek extra help, if required, or decide whether they should withdraw from the course (without academic penalty) before the "drop date".

Plagiarism/cheating

Refer to the section entitled Conflicts and resolutions (the section on [Violations of Academic Integrity](#)).

Professionalism

- If you are a marker, and a relationship does develop with a student, you must declare a conflict of interest to your instructor, or the Department Chair. Alternate means of evaluation will be arranged.
- When meeting students in an office, leave the door open.
- If a student approaches you with personal problems, direct him/her to Student Services (420-5615).
- Avoid commenting on a student's appearance, both inside and outside the classroom.
- Be critical of ideas, not persons.
- Put an immediate stop to discriminatory remarks in the classroom; many students will be offended by them. Discourage the use of humour or gratuitous remarks that demean or belittle individuals because of their race, religion, or physical characteristics.
- If a student is harassing you, and the behaviour persists, discuss the situation with your instructor or the [Conflict Resolution Officer](#) (420-5113). (Refer to the [Harassment](#) section in this handbook.)
- If students complain that they are harassed by someone else, take the complaints seriously. Encourage them to approach the [Conflict Resolution Officer](#) (420-5113). (Refer to the [Harassment](#) section in this handbook.)

Punctuality

As a TA it is essential that you arrive for labs, student meetings, tutorials, etc. on time, and preferably at least five minutes before the class/lab is due to start.

Respect

Respect the dignity of all students, and do not become overly "familiar". It is likely that you will be treated with respect if you maintain an air of professionalism. Also, it is wise to refrain from sharing negative generalizations about students, no matter how much their attitudes or behaviours frustrate you (e.g., calling a class lazy or shallow after having graded a dismal set of papers).

Preparing to Work as a TA

<p>As soon as you know who you are working for...</p>	<p>Using the checklist provided in Appendix A, meet with the instructor to find out the extent of your responsibilities.</p> <p>Find out the following if relevant to your position:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the location of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ the instructor's classroom if you are required to assist in class assignments, lectures, etc., ○ the photocopier, and ○ the room where you will be holding tutorials or meeting with students • the times of your office hours. <p>Ask for a copy of the course syllabus, and familiarize yourself with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the course objectives, • the text, lab manual, etc., • due dates for labs, assignments, etc., and • class policies relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ lateness and absence, ○ lab attire, ○ use of laptops, cell phones, and other electronic equipment ○ academic integrity, and ○ group work.
<p>A couple of days before your first lab...</p>	<p>Make sure that you know where all of the following safety features can be found (if applicable):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the fire extinguisher, • eye washes and emergency showers, and • the emergency telephone. <p>Familiarize yourself with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lab handouts, • lab procedures, • lab equipment, • the computer and projector, • the classroom setup: • the blackboard/whiteboard, and • seating arrangements.

TA Responsibilities

TA responsibilities vary from course to course and from one professor to another. That is why it is essential for you to meet with your assigned professor at the beginning of term. To avoid misunderstandings and unnecessary frustration, find out what you are expected to do, how many hours per week you are expected to work, and whether or not it is necessary for you to attend class lectures. Some typical tasks are listed below, but you and your professor should refer to the checklist to ensure that your responsibilities are clearly stated.

1) Recitation

To be effective:

- Ensure consistency and fairness to all students.
- Ensure a “safe environment” for learning. Students need to feel free to ask questions and express their ideas without fear of ridicule.
- Be prepared and review the material thoroughly before meeting with students.
- There should be a close alignment of lecture and recitation problems.
- Never be afraid to admit that you do not know the answer to a particular question. Tell the student that you will find out, and ensure that you do. E-mail them, or tell them the correct answer in your next meeting.

You may be required to:

- Create and present weekly lessons to a recitation section of 20 to 30 students. Create and/or grade the homework for the class.
- Create and/or grade quizzes, depending on the class.
- Grade the class exams.
- Calculate grades for individual recitation sections.
- Attend class lectures and meetings with the professor(s)

2) Marking

To be effective:

- Ensure consistency and fairness to all students.
 - The use of a marking rubric can be helpful, and most instructors will provide you with one.
- Be efficient and use effective time management.
 - If you tell your students or instructor that you will return their quizzes, etc. on a certain day, make sure that you do.

- Be unbiased. If someone who is already a good friend signs up for a course in which you are the TA, make it clear to them that they will not be treated differently than any other student. You should never mark a friend's work; ask your instructor or another TA working in the same class to mark it instead.
- Provide constructive feedback rather than just assigning a mark on written answers.
- Review material before grading assignment.

How much time do I have to mark student work?

Pop quizzes

Many instructors assign short quizzes on a weekly basis and students benefit from rapid feedback. If possible, it is ideal if you can mark this type of assignment before the next class.

Midterms

In most cases, instructors try to return midterms within one to two weeks. If the deadline for withdrawing from a course without academic penalty is approaching, you must return the marks as soon as possible so that the student can make an informed decision about remaining in the course or dropping it.

Assignments

Most instructors will provide you with answer sheets and/or marking rubrics. However, before you start marking, make sure that you have a good understanding of what is expected of the students, and ask the instructor for further explanation, if required. There is nothing more frustrating for an instructor or a TA than remarking 100 questions.

Essays

TAs in graduate programs may be responsible for marking some of the essays assigned by an instructor. It may be helpful for you to refer to Appendix A: Editorial Symbols. It is not your role, as a marker, nor will it be useful to students, to edit the entire paper. You should, however, point out errors in spelling, grammar, etc. when they first occur in an essay so that the student can avoid similar errors in future papers.

The use of a marking rubric can be helpful, and some instructors will provide you with one.

Short answer questions

As a TA, it is not uncommon for you to be required to mark short answer questions. Read several responses before you attempt to mark them, so that you can get a better idea of the depth of responses. It may be helpful for you to design your own marking rubric so that your marking remains consistent. If you are uncertain, contact the instructor for more guidance.

When do my obligations for marking end?

TA obligations often extend past the examination date for the course. Many instructors require their TAs to assist them in the marking of end-of-term assignments and examinations. If you are in any doubt, contact the instructor.

3) Laboratory

To be effective:

Be prepared for labs.

- Arrive a few minutes early in case there are any last minute instructions. Make sure that you are familiar with the related concepts that have been taught in lectures so that you can answer questions relating the lab to lecture material, and answer questions regarding lab reports.
- Make sure that you know how to use all equipment (if required). Always wear the required lab coats, safety glasses, etc.

Act as a role model.

- Enthusiasm is essential. Keep in mind that your role in the lab is as a teacher, and not as a student. Be friendly, but remain professional in your interactions with your students.
- Ensure that the students receive good quality instruction.

Circulate among students during the lab so that you are able to answer questions or provide assistance. (Do not read or study while demonstrating in the lab. You are there to assist students and maintain the lab in a neat and orderly fashion.)

Limit social conversations with students, other TAs or your instructor.

Make yourself accessible to all students.

Be attentive to all students' questions and answers.

- If a student appears perplexed, ask them how the lab is going. Do not intimidate them by asking too many questions or watching every move that they make.
- Rephrase questions instead of directly answering them to encourage students to think for themselves.

- If you do not know the answer, say so, and then consult a colleague, your instructor, or a textbook
- Never insinuate that a question is a “stupid” one. You do not want to inhibit students from asking questions during the lab.

Call students by name, if possible. If a student feels that they are not anonymous, and that their absence will be noted, they are more likely to attend labs.

Working in Labs: General Information

Weekly meetings with the professor teaching the course

Most instructors have weekly meeting with their TAs to ensure that the TA understands the lab procedures, techniques, goals, etc. If your instructor does not require you to meet before the lab, you should speak with him/her regular intervals to ensure that there are no misunderstandings.

Lab preparation and clean-up

- Make sure that you are well prepared for the lab, and that you understand what is expected of the students.
- If applicable, listen to lab instructions given in the first few minutes of the lab session.
- Make sure that you can operate any equipment that students will be using in the lab.
- Ensure that students leave their lab space tidy and replace caps on any bottles.

Marking lab assignments

Provide your students with prompt feedback. There is nothing more frustrating to a student than having their assignments/labs returned after the exam or midterm.

Accident/incident forms

If there is an accident/incident in the lab, the lab instructor is responsible for ensuring that an accident/incident form is completed. You should know where the forms are kept but, if in doubt, ask your lab instructor or the departmental technician. There is also an online [Injury/Incident Report form](#) or a hard copy which can be obtained from Human Resources, McNally South 103 or from Occupational Health and Safety, McNally South 117. The form should be completed within 2 business days of the incident or injury.

Grounds for dismissal

If the instructor/lab technician reports to the Chair of the Department that you are not fulfilling the responsibilities of your position (absenteeism, lateness, etc.), you may be dismissed.

WHMIS training

If you are working in a lab where chemicals are used, you must have WHMIS training at Saint Mary's before you start. If you have previously taken the course, you must take a refresher course each year.

Biology:

Training is provided by [Heidi de Boer](#) (420-5580) You must make sure that you have no other commitments during the training session (about 1.5 hours).

Chemistry:

Training is provided by [Darlene Goucher](#) (420-5659) and [Elizabeth McLeod](#) (420-5182) .The session is approximately 3 hours in length.

Lab-specific instructions

Astronomy/Physics labs

Teaching assistants will:

- Wear lab coats and safety glasses, when required; ensure that all students also comply.
- Meet with instructor and the Astronomy/Physics Technician, [Mike Dunlavy](#) (420-5833). The lab coordinator may also be in attendance. Health and safety issues, lab procedures, and lab instruction are discussed. Meetings are about half an hour in length, and take place the week before the lab.
- Help students by answering questions, and providing assistance.
- Mark the labs.

Biology labs

To work as a lab TA in Biology, you must normally have taken the course and have declared Biology as your major. There are some exceptions (for example, if you are a graduate student or if you have transferred to SMU from another institution).

Teaching Assistants will:

- Wear lab coats and safety glasses (if required), and ensure that all students also comply.
- Be paid for four hours per week for eleven weeks per term.
- Be available in the laboratory for a full three hours (2:30-5:30).
- Record any accidents occurring in the lab on the Accident/Incident report Form.
- Familiarize themselves with the equipment used, and procedures to be followed in the experiments prior to the lab. If there is any doubt, the student assistant will see the technician or lab instructor in charge.

- Assist students who are having trouble understanding the lab procedure.
- Ensure that students leave their work space tidy.
- Ensure that the area where the chemicals, general supplies, and balance area for student use is organized, wiped up, and all bottles capped.
- Ensure that all equipment is turned off, and unplugged if necessary.
- Ensure solutions are properly stored, i.e., fridge, etc.
- Comply with and help enforce the Laboratory Safety Rules, Laboratory Procedures, and Emergency Procedures.

Chemistry labs

Teaching assistants will:

- Wear lab coats and safety glasses, and ensure that all students also comply.
- Be paid for four hours per week for eleven weeks per term. (Attendance is recorded and pay will be deducted for hours missed).
- Be available in the laboratory for a full three hours (2:30-5:30).
- Arrange to meet the Department Technician in charge, prior to the lab, for one hour to discuss lab preparation duties.
- Familiarize themselves with the equipment used, and procedures to be followed in the experiments prior to the lab. If there is any doubt, the student assistant will see the technician or lab instructor in charge.
- Run all eye washes for 3 minutes at the beginning of each lab.
- Assist students who are having trouble understanding the lab procedure.
- Ensure that students leave the equipment in the same state as they found it, unless otherwise directed by the technician or lab instructor.
- Ensure that the area where the chemicals, general supplies, and balance area for student use is organized, wiped up, and all bottles capped.
- Ensure that all equipment is turned off, and unplugged if necessary.
- Clean up fumehoods, wiping up spills and removing garbage.
- Remove dispensettes from bottles and rinse thoroughly. Ensure bottle is capped.
- Ensure solutions are properly stored; ask the technician/instructor if you are unsure of how/where they should be stored.
- Comply with and help enforce the Laboratory Safety Rules, Laboratory Procedures, and Emergency Procedures.
- Not read or study while demonstrating in the lab. You are there to assist students and maintain the lab in a neat and orderly fashion.

Environmental Studies labs

Due to the nature of many of these labs (field work, analysis of case studies or data, etc.), it is important for you to speak with the instructor. He/she will let you know what is expected.

Geology labs

In preparations for your lab, meet with your instructor and/or the Geology Technician, [Randy Corney](#) (420-5184). If you are hired as a lab TA in geology, you will be expected to work for the number of hours stated in your contract. For example, if your lab is only two hours in length in one particular week, you will be required to make up the remaining hour(s) by helping the technician set up labs, etc.

Psychology labs

For more detailed information, refer to the Psychology Department's [Teaching Assistant \(TA\) Handbook](#).

In Psychology:

- Graduate TAs may be required to teach labs.
- Instructors may arrange a pre-lab meeting for approximately one hour before the lab. Issues arising from the previous week's lab may also be addressed.
- Some instruction may be given on how to facilitate small group and class discussions.

Encouraging discussion

Questions can help to facilitate discussion during tutorials, recitations, or in the lab. The types of questions that you pose, however, will determine the level of discussion. The lower levels require less in the way of thinking skills. As one moves down the hierarchy, the activities require higher level thinking skills. (Bloom, et al., 1956; Carleton University, 2007)

Questions that limit discussion

Type of question	Problem with the question	Example
Dead end questions	Require only a yes or no response.	Is the climate changing?
Run-on questions	These are series of questions with no pauses for student responses. Run-on questions tend to be confusing and inevitably some of the questions in the series will be overlooked.	Was Rachel Carson's book on pesticides, <i>Silent Spring</i> , less influential than Al Gore's book, <i>Earth in the Balance</i> , and if so, do you feel that it was the lack of environmental knowledge in the 1960s that reduced the impact of Carson's work?
Programmed response questions	Doesn't necessarily require only yes or no, but does indicate in its form what the intended answer is.	Many scholars say that animals can communicate with each other, but are they using signals or language?
Put-down questions	This type of question insults the individual/group.	You don't really believe that all greenhouse gases cause ozone depletion, do you?
Fuzzy questions	It is difficult to determine what is being asked.	Why is Climate Change Policy the way that it is?

Questions that encourage discussion

Level	Testing for...	Definition	Example
Lowest level	Knowledge	Student recalls information, ideas, and principles in the way in which they were learned.	Who, what, where, why, and when questions. What is the definition of...?
	Comprehension	Student explains, interprets, gives examples translates, or summarizes concepts in his/her own words.	How would you describe...? Explain how... Discuss... Summarize...
	Application	Student applies what has been learned to other topics and situations.	How is...an example of...? How is...related to...? Why is...significant?
Higher levels	Analysis	Student distinguishes, classifies, and relates the assumptions, hypotheses, evidence, or structure of a statement or question.	What are the parts or features of...? Classify...according to... Outline/ diagram... How does... compare /contrast with...? What evidence can you list for...?
	Synthesis	Student integrates ideas into a product, plan or proposal that is new to him or her.	What would you predict/infer from...? What ideas can you add to...? How would you create/design a new...? What might happen if you combined...? What solutions would you suggest for...?
	Evaluation	Student makes value decisions about issues, resolves controversies or differences of opinion, develops opinions, judgments or decisions	Do you agree...? What do you think about...? Place the following in order of priority... How would you decide about...? What criteria would you use to assess...?

Keeping the Ball Rolling: Maintaining Discussions

Even though you are well-prepared, some discussions will inevitably go better than others. Before you decide that you are not well-suited to be a TA, examine the following frequently encountered situations, and find out how others deal with them.

Students who monopolize discussions

An awkward situation often arises when there are two or three students who monopolize the discussion. You don't want to reject the student(s) for participating too much but, you also don't want to alienate others who may want to participate, but feel that they cannot "compete" with the more outgoing students.

Suggestions for handling this situation:

1. You can use their comments to bring the discussion back to the class. For example, "You've raised an interesting point, would anyone like to comment?"
2. You can acknowledge the comments and suggest another time to discuss them in depth ("Those ideas deserve a lot more time. Maybe we can discuss them after class.").

The sound of silence

A lull in a discussion does not mean that you need to quickly start talking to fill in the silence. Possibly, no one has anything further to add. However, it could indicate that students may need a few moments to reflect on what they have heard. If you notice that "lulls" happen frequently, examine the topics that have been chosen for discussion and choose a more appropriate way of teaching it to the class.

All discussion is directed to the TA

If you are trying to encourage discussion among students, and they are speaking only to you instead of to each other, it is probable that you are staring too intently at the speaker. Instead, if you lead with your eyes to other students in the classroom, the speaker will likely begin to look at others as well. If possible, walk around the room to keep from sitting always at the "head of the table."

You don't know the answer

As a TA you are not expected to be all-knowing person of the course material. You should have a good grasp of the subject, but there will inevitably be instances when you may not have an answer. In this case, there are several different ways of handling the situation.

1. You can explain that you don't have an answer but will find out by next class. *"Can I think about that and come back to you"*
2. You can throw the question back at them, allowing the student to work out the question orally. This approach will help them develop their problem-solving skills, and potentially also give you insight on their understanding of the issue. *"Well, what do you think?"*
3. The student can be encouraged to find the answer. *"Where do you think you could go to find an answer to that question?"*
4. You and the student can explore together. *"Why don't you try looking in that book and I'll try this one."*

They just didn't do the readings

This happens in all classes, especially during mid-terms and the end of the term. You may find that it is necessary, at times, to summarize the main points of the readings. Giving them discussion questions in advance might also help them to focus their reading when pressed for time.

The discussion that goes off track

Your job is to keep the "train on the track" and to stop it from heading to some unknown location. It may help to keep discussions on track if you list the questions or issues to be covered on the board, or summarize the discussion on the board as it proceeds. It may also help to stop and ask a student to summarize the discussion to help illustrate all the relevant points together.

Practicing reflective listening skills

Instead of responding intellectually or even defensively to student comments, try saying back to them what they have just said, or ask questions to elicit more information about what they have just said. You could achieve this by:

- summarizing the main point of what a student said
- asking open ended questions, e.g. "Can you tell more about ... ?" Such questions invite a student to expand on a topic in a non-directive way.
- asking a specifying question, e.g. "I'm wondering what specifically you mean by...?"
- "I'm curious about ... ?"
- reflecting back content, feelings, meanings.

You and Your Students

It is no longer easy to generalize about the typical student at Saint Mary's. There are many who choose to study on a part-time basis, many mature students, students with special needs/disabilities, and many international students with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. Often students work outside the university and have the challenge of trying to balance studying, working, family life, and socializing.

It is important to keep in mind that your interactions should always be inclusive. Get to know your students, and acknowledge them as individual learners and contributors, each with their own strengths that they bring into discussions, labs, etc.

Mature Students

Mature students often return to school after years of absence, sometimes resulting in writing and reading skills that are not at the same level of others in the class. However, mature students are usually keen to learn and bring a wealth of other experiences to the class. Some of the following suggestions may be helpful to you.

- Be tactful in your comments (oral and written).
- If you notice someone is struggling with the material, offer study or reading tips, and direct him/her to other support services (e.g., the Writing Centre).
- Encourage them to participate by using their experiences and then asking them to relate their experiences to theory.
- In group work, ensure that mature students are "mixed" with others in the class. It allows them the opportunity to share their experiences (benefiting others in the group), while allowing them the opportunity to learn from other students.
- Be mindful of their other commitments. Mature students usually take their educational responsibilities very seriously, and lateness in handing in assignments may be due to work or family demands.
- Students in **OPTIMUS** (the Organization for Part-Time and Mature University Students) may be able to offer you advice and give support with respect to problems involving mature students.

International and ESL students

International and ESL (English as a Second Language) students face many more challenges than their domestic counterparts. Language difficulties and cultural differences may pose significant barriers to participation in labs, small groups,

etc. Some of the following suggestions may help you accommodate their needs better.

- Speak clearly, and at a moderate pace. Avoid the use of slang.
- Face students when speaking.
- Learn how to pronounce their name correctly.
- Encourage them to ask questions, and if they are having difficulties in communicating, take time to try and understand what they are saying.
- Encourage participation in small groups and discussions with an open, non-critical atmosphere. Never push too hard if you feel that a student is uncomfortable.
- Ask students questions on an individual basis to see if they have understood the material.
- In group work, ensure that international and ESL students are “mixed” with others in the class.
- The International Centre at Saint Mary’s provides international students with many opportunities and encourages them to become involved in multicultural as well as Canadian activities.

Students with disabilities

The mission of the Atlantic Centre at Saint Mary’s (founded in 1985) is to create a learning environment free of barriers for persons with disabilities. Students range from those who are visually, physically or hearing impaired, to those with attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, or other non-visible disabilities.

Accommodations are often made for students registered with the Atlantic Centre, and your instructors will receive letters informing them of the specific accommodations required. (Sometimes students write exams and tests in the Atlantic Centre, as they may need extra time.) You should keep the following points in mind.

- Students, who ask for accommodation, need official documentation from the Atlantic Centre. If a student approaches you, asking for accommodation without documentation, you should suggest that they visit the Atlantic Centre.
- Ask your instructor to inform you if there are any students with disabilities in the group of students that you are assisting.
- Be sensitive to student needs, but never, in class, identify students registered with the Atlantic Centre.

Conflicts and Resolutions

Violations of Academic Integrity

Violations are listed in the Saint Mary's University [Faculty Handbook on Academic Integrity](#), 2007-08.

If, in spite of all your efforts to prevent academic misconduct, you suspect a student has cheated or plagiarized, what do you do?

As a Teaching Assistant:

- Collect all evidence and document the situation you are dealing with.
- Bring it to the attention of the course instructor and provide documentation.

Categories of misconduct:

a) Plagiarism

- quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing text without proper acknowledgement/citation
- paraphrasing too closely (changing only a few words or rearranging the text)
- submitting the paper for credit in more than one course without the permission of the instructors involved
- downloading all or part of a paper, journal article, or book from the Internet or a library database and presenting it as one's own work
- purchasing papers from the Internet and presenting them as one's own work
- sharing papers (including the selling of essays, tests, or other assignments)

b) Cheating

- impersonating someone during a test or exam
- copying/sharing information during a test or exam
- using unauthorized materials during a test or exam
- obtaining or looking at a copy of a test or exam before it is administered
- improper use of technology (cell phones, laptops, etc.)
- unauthorized collaboration between students when individual work is required

c) Falsification

- submitting a false excuse for missing a class, exam, etc. (e.g., forging a medical or death certificate)
- falsifying course work (e.g., altering or making up data, using fake citations in a bibliography)

- changing the answers on a returned assignment and resubmitting it to be re-evaluated
 - submitting false information on a university admission form or other documentation
- d) Tampering**
- destroying, hiding, or stealing library materials
 - altering or destroying university computer programs or files without authorization
 - accessing and altering official records without authorization

Strategies to Prevent Plagiarism

Provide guidance.

- Define plagiarism and provide examples of the types of plagiarism that can occur in your discipline. Provide students with examples of what it means to summarize, paraphrase, quote, and cite sources properly.
- Discuss what needs to be cited or not (e.g., common knowledge) and the reasons why it is important to reference sources. Talk about intellectual property and copyright.
- Encourage students who may not understand to seek clarification.
- Recognize that definitions of plagiarism are not universal (the North American concept of ownership of intellectual property may be culturally specific). Make sure that all of your students are clear about what constitutes plagiarism and academic misconduct.
- Advise students not to lend their assignments/essays to anyone. Remind students that if they allow someone else to copy their work, they too are guilty of dishonest behaviour and unethical conduct. Also warn students not to leave their work lying around or open on a public computer terminal, where it could be vulnerable to theft.
- Make sure students are aware of on-campus resources and services that can help them with their research and writing needs (e.g., the library and writing centre).
- Provide a style sheet or recommend a specific style manual to be followed.
- Demonstrate good behaviour by good examples - reference your own sources in handouts and on overheads, etc.
- Clarify your expectations regarding student collaboration for every assignment.

Harassment

Saint Mary's University "Policy on the Prevention and Resolution of Harassment and Discrimination" can be found at this site.

http://www.smu.ca/administration/hr/documents/HarassmentpolicyAug2005_000.pdf

If you need any confidential advice, feel free to contact the Conflict Resolution Officer, [Bridget Brownlow](#), and she will be able to help you in deciding your best course of action.

What is covered under this policy?

Discrimination/Harassment (based on the protective characteristics set out in the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act)

The words **discrimination and harassment** refer to any action or behaviour, which is known or reasonably ought to be known to be offensive or inappropriate, that denies equality and fair treatment.

Sexual Harassment is defined in The Nova Scotia Human Rights Act as:

- vexatious sexual conduct or a course of comment that is known or ought reasonably to be known as unwelcome;
- sexual solicitation or advance made to an individual by another individual where the other individual is in a position to confer a benefit on, or deny a benefit to, the individual to whom the solicitation or advance is made, where the individual who makes the solicitation or advance knows or ought reasonably to know that it is unwelcome;
- a reprisal or threat of reprisal against an individual for rejecting a sexual solicitation or advance.

Retaliation

Retaliation, in this policy, is considered harassment. Retaliation includes vengeful actions against an individual:

- for having invoked this policy (on behalf of themselves or another individual)
- for having been associated with the persons invoking this policy or participating in these procedures

Reasonable Person Test

This refers to an assessment of responsibility that takes into account not only what the complainant and respondent actually experienced, knew, or understood about one another or the situation, but also what a reasonable person in each of their circumstances would or ought to have experienced, known, or understood.

Organizational Conflict

Harassing, unfair or threatening behaviours that do not involve any of the grounds of prohibited discrimination are not covered by the Saint Mary's University Policy on the Prevention and Resolution of Harassment and Discrimination. Such behaviours, including bullying, should be addressed with your instructor, your Dean, or Human Resources. (Although these concerns do not fall under the policy, the Conflict Resolution Office can provide assistance and information about available resources and will educate the University community about the negative effects of these types of behaviours. This kind of conflict will be addressed through an Informal Resolution Process.)

Teachers who inspire realize there will always be rocks in the road ahead of us. They will be stumbling blocks or stepping stones; it all depends on how we use them.

Author Unknown

Good practice in undergraduate education

*The following are intended as guidelines to help improve teaching and learning. They are taken from Arthur W. Chickering & Zelda F. Gamson's "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" and the numbers marked with * are taken from the University of Western Australia's site on "Principles for Good Practice in Teaching and Learning".*

1. Frequent student contact

- Frequent student contact is an essential factor in student motivation and engagement. Students need to feel free to ask questions, and to seek extra help, if necessary.
 - *If you are working with small groups, try to learn the names of your students.*
 - *Strive to act as a mentor or informal advisor to students.*
 - *If your students are not attending office hours, here are some questions you should ask yourself:*
 - *Are my office hours at a convenient time for my students?*
 - *Are my students aware of when and where my office hours take place?*
 - *Do I encourage my students to visit me during office hours on a regular basis? If you find that students need assistance but are not coming to tutorials/ recitations, try to talk to them privately. Students are much more likely to attend if they are invited.*
 - *Am I presenting myself to the students as approachable and friendly?*

2. Encourage cooperation among students

- Discussion and collaboration increases student engagement in the learning process, and helps to facilitate a deeper understanding of the material.
 - *If you are running a tutorial, or working in the lab, encourage your students to share ideas, problem-solve, and try to reach a consensus.*
 - *Encourage students to explain difficult concepts to each other.*
 - *If appropriate, encourage students to discuss key concepts with students from cultures or races different from their own.*
 - *Make sure that they know the difference between collaboration and plagiarism.*

3. Encourage active learning

I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand. (Confucius)

To learn effectively students must do more than just listen to others. They need the opportunity to talk about what they are learning, to write about it, and to try to relate what they are learning to their daily lives. The research of Meyers and Jones (1993) showed that:

- Students are not attentive to what is being said in a lecture 40% of the time.
- Students retain 70% of the information in the first ten minutes of a lecture but only 20% in the last ten minutes.
- Four months after taking an introductory psychology course, students know only 8% more than students who had never taken the course.
 - *Ask students to relate outside events or activities to topics covered in the course.*
 - *Encourage students to challenge ideas, ask questions, and exchange ideas.*

4. Give prompt feedback

- It is essential to inform students on their progress. It is impossible to learn effectively if you do not receive any feedback until the end of term. Lab assignments, quizzes, tests, etc. need to be marked promptly so that the student can discover their learning “gaps” early enough in the term to rectify them.

5. Emphasize time on task

- Effective time management is essential in the learning process. It is not helpful if you set unrealistic time limits, or if you constantly extend due dates without just cause.

6. Communicate high expectations

- If you expect you student to perform to a high standard, then it is much more likely that your expectations will be fulfilled. All students will benefit, especially if provide guidance on what you expect of them. Try to avoid giving them the answers to all of their questions. Instead, try to steer them in the right direction so that they can come up with the answer themselves.

7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning

- Not all students learn in the same way. Some may do extremely well on exams but are barely able to complete a laboratory assignment in the time given. Remain supportive, and encourage them to learn to work with others. (*Make sure that they know the difference between collaboration and plagiarism.*)
 - *Encourage students to speak up when they don't understand.*
 - *Discourage sarcasm, teasing, and other class behaviours that may embarrass students.*

***8. Acknowledge diversity**

- Students in the classroom represent the diversity that is found in the global community. Such diversity includes cultural and linguistic

backgrounds, religious beliefs, educational and employment experiences, urban and rural backgrounds, different school experiences, family and community structures, sexual orientation, gender and age. The effective classroom acknowledges, supports, and uses this diversity to enhance the learning experience.

- *Encourage students to relate their learning to their own experiences.*
 - *Emphasize the need for open-mindedness.*
 - *Maintain civility in the discussion of differences, and insist on it in students' interactions with each other.*
 - *Respect and value the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of students.*

***9. Reflect clear organisation, smart preparation and clear presentation**

- Teaching strategies must be organized and clear. The level of difficulty of content should match, as much as possible, the student's prior level of understanding. However, being organized and prepared is not enough; you must be able to communicate your knowledge.

***10. Base teaching on interconnected knowledge**

- It is much easier to learn when new knowledge is connected with existing knowledge. If you have a general idea of the big picture, can see its relevance, see how it is connected to practice and how it builds on what you already know.
 - *Give prompt feedback so that you can ensure that the student has the opportunity to "unlearn" incorrect previous knowledge. For a learner, this is one of the most difficult tasks that they face.*

***11. Communicate enthusiasm for the subject and for teaching**

- One of the most motivating factors for a learner is an instructor's or TA's interest in and love for teaching. When a student senses that an instructor's enthusiasm is genuine, he or she tends to respond in a similar manner.
 - *Show your enthusiasm for the subject matter and work to provoke students' curiosity.*

***12. Emphasize fairness**

- Instructors and TAs must be fair to their students and insist that students are fair to each other. An academic institution thrives when all of its members are committed to the five fundamental values of academic integrity (honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility).
 - *Be consistent in expectations and grading.*
 - *Never ignore violations of [academic integrity](#). For more details, go to page 26 of this handbook.*

Frequently Asked Questions

What do I do if I can't work during a scheduled lab/tutorial?

If you cannot work at a time that you are scheduled for, you must notify your instructor and/or the lab technician so that other arrangements can be made.

What counts as class disruption and how do I deal with the student responsible?

A civil classroom is conducive to student expression, and is a place where students feel comfortable asking questions and proposing solutions without fear of being shouted down, made fun of, or brushed aside. On a more fundamental level, however, it has much to do with a simple, distraction-free learning atmosphere. Examples of common distractions are students talking to one another during a lecture, reading the newspaper, wearing headphones, eating, and so on. Such behaviour, of course, is not fair to the majority of students who want to get the most out of the class. Classroom disruptions must be dealt with immediately. The easiest way to avoid conflict is if there are behaviour guidelines in the syllabus, indicating what types of behaviour are not acceptable in class. When students engage in one of these behaviours, calmly but firmly remind them of the class policy and ask that they stop.

A new form of disruption has appeared, not just in the classroom, but in many walks of life: cell phones. They have no place in the classroom, and from the first day, you should make sure that your students understand this. A cell phone ringing during class is the same as a student getting up in the middle of a lecture and shrilly screaming in three-second intervals. This would never be tolerated, so don't tolerate ringing phones and beepers. Again, make sure to inform your students that all cell phones and beepers must be turned off before they enter the classroom.

(Adapted from Rutgers University, 2008)

If students come to me with their personal or psychological problems, how should I respond?

Many undergraduates feel more comfortable confiding in their TAs than their professors. If a student comes to you with a problem, it is important to listen to the student, but keep in mind that you are not qualified to deal with serious personal or psychological problems on your own. It is a good idea to make your faculty advisor for the class or your department chair aware of the problem. There are also counselling services available to undergraduates at Saint Mary's. You may want to refer your student to [Counselling Services](#). If you think that a student is in crisis, you may advise them to go to QEII Hospital Emergency

Department (473-3383); *The Emergency Department is located on the north side of the Halifax Infirmary. The access road is off Summer Street, adjacent to the CBC building.*
(Adapted from Rutgers, 2008)

What constitutes harassment in the classroom, and how can I avoid it?

Harassment is a form of discrimination directed toward an individual or group based on race, religion, color, national origin, ancestry, age, sex, sexual orientation, disability, or marital or veteran status. Harassment may be physical, non-verbal or verbal, and is a serious concern. As a TA, it is your responsibility to respect the rights and dignity of all of your students equally. At the same time, the University is committed to the principles of academic freedom and believes that vigorous discussion and debate, as well as free inquiry and free expression, are integral parts of the University community. The complete policy and procedures for handling harassment may be found [here](#).

(Adapted from Rutgers, 2008)

Appendix A: TA Checklist

Name of Teaching Assistant and Degree Program	
Department	
Course title and number	
Course instructor	
Have you previously taken this course?	

WHMIS training required?
 Date completed?
TA training?
 Date completed
Goals/objectives of the course
Textbook
Other course materials?

Teaching Activity	Checklist	Hours per term (approx.)	Notes
Contact with Students			
Leading/supervising labs On a regular basis Occasionally			
Leading tutorials			
Leading discussions On a regular basis Occasionally			
Recitations			
Office hours			
Answering e-mail inquiries			
Class websites/course tools			
Other:			
Marking and grading			
Tests and quizzes			
Midterm exams			
Class assignments			
Lab assignments			
Written assignments			
Final exam			
Other:			
Contact with Supervisor			
Meetings (e.g., before labs)			
E-mail			
Other:			
Other duties			
Photocopying			
Lab preparation time			
Post-lab clean up			
Research			
Other			

Total number of expected hours this term	
Average hours per week	
Total number of hours allowed	
Total remuneration per term	

I would like to acknowledge the following works used in the preparation of this document.

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