TEACHING ASSISTANT GUIDELINES

The presence of Teaching Assistants (TAs) in a course benefits both instructor and students. An assistant’s responsibilities typically include grading, troubleshooting, and fielding student questions, and their role is evolving to meet the needs of the online classroom.

As seen through advertisements for positions such as academic or learning coaches, and student mentors, the list of duties of these online assistants is expanding to involve tracking student progress and providing encouragement toward course completion. The efforts of TAs can extend your reach as the instructor, particularly in large classes with multiple sections, to more efficiently serve the needs of your students.

Responsibilities of a TA

The Teaching Assistant (TA) for an online course can be valuable in allowing an instructor to give more time to teaching, and less time to other kinds of tasks. Toward this goal, possible areas of TA responsibility have been identified in this document based on recommendations from other academic sources, with experience in online courses.

- Becomes familiar with content and how it is organized. The TA should be familiar with the content to be able to explain it to students.
- Reviews the syllabus, class schedule, assignment instructions, learning objectives and grading rubrics.
- Studies and works ahead of students on all course materials.
- Checks active links in advance of each week’s materials.
- Responds to student inquiries on discussion forums regarding grades, assignments, attendance, and course material.
- Sends messages or posts announcements to students at different times during the course.
- Evaluates student performance, including grading exams, quizzes, assignments, and papers. Meets with course instructor and assists in determining grading criteria.
- Notifies the instructor/author of any errors found in course materials.
- Checks Class Pulse. Takes the initiative in getting in touch with students to become aware of what individual students are coping with.

Tone and Class “Pulse.”

- **Basic tone:** Use a professional tone in responding to and encouraging students to get and stay on track.
- **TA challenges:** If a student challenges your response, respond respectfully and explain why you think you are right. If needed, escalate to the author/instructor.
Managing edX Discussion Forums: Guidelines

The discussion forums in edX are a little idiosyncratic, so here are a few of tips for working with them.

1. Students can post two kinds of message: questions and discussions. We can define different categories for these, which will make it easier to filter the discussions.

   In practice though, students tend to ignore this and always post using the default options!
2. You can filter the list of posts by category, or search for a specific term. By default, the most recently active posts appear at the top.
3. The icon at the left of each post indicates whether it’s a question or a discussion item.
4. Threads you’ve read are shown as grey. Threads you haven’t read are shown as white, with a blue balloon indicating the number of posts in the thread.
5. Threads you’ve previously read, but which now contain new posts are shown as grey with a white balloon indicating the number of unread posts.
6. You can “upvote” a post, mark it as a favorite, and use the […] button to delete it, flag it as abuse, or pin it.
7. Pinned posts stick to the top of the list. If there are any threads contain insightful or important info that you want all students to see, pin it. The FAQ post is already pinned.
8. The post editor is based on Markdown. To create a new line, you need to enter two carriage returns; and if you apply too many formats it tends to crash! One important point, if you’re posting a code sample, use the Code Block format button (above the editing area) to format it — otherwise all the lines tend to run together. Markdown uses inline formatting markup (for example *bold*), which can really mess up code examples — so be careful!
9. You always get a preview under your post as you type it, so use this to get a WYSIWYG view of your post.

Guidelines for Instructors/Course Authors

To help TAs be more effective on online courses, effective communication and collaboration between the instructor and TAs are essential. Here are a few recommendations for getting everyone on the same virtual page:

- **Consider a contract or memorandum of agreement.** This can be informal, but captures in writing the expectations you have of your assistants — the specific tasks they will complete—and communicates them before the course begins.
- **Coordinate in advance.** Share your approach to teaching in general and the course specifically. Walk through the syllabus, class schedule, and assignment instructions, and review learning objectives and grading rubrics. Meetings, in person or virtual, are great, but this kind of coordination can also take place via email to make sure resources are available and questions are answered.
- **Provide grading guidelines:**
  - What do you want the TA to grade?
  - What guidelines or rules for marking, commenting, and recording grades do you want the TA to follow?
- How soon do you want grading to be completed after submission of an assignment?

- **Be available for questions and clarification.** Set aside time during the week to connect with or hold your virtual office hours for your TAs and respond to email as quickly as possible. TAs are often trying to answer questions students have emailed to them, so shortening this cycle of response is helpful to all involved.

- **Provide access to information and resources.** Your assistants don’t need to have full editing permissions, but it can be helpful for them to view any information related to student progress, especially if they are responsible for monitoring student activity and intervening when problems occur.

- **Introduce TAs:** Introduce all your TAs and their role to the students at the start of the class.

- **Ask for feedback after the course.** Through informal conversation or structured survey, solicit your TAs’ ideas for the course and suggestions for instructor-assistant interaction and communication. Their experiences working with your students can inform the revision of materials.