Stanford | Center for Teaching and Learning

Working Effectively with Teaching Assistants Online

This resource is intended for faculty or primary instructors working with Teaching Assistants or Course Assistants as part of a teaching team for online instruction. Below are suggested practices to make the work you do together effective, efficient, and beneficial for all involved.

1. [Things to do before the quarter begins](#)
2. [Things to do during the quarter](#)
3. [Things to do at the end of the quarter](#)
4. [Topics to discuss at your initial meeting with TAs](#)

Before the Quarter:
Contact TAs as soon as you can. Share a syllabus (or syllabus draft/reading list) and any pertinent information about training, textbooks, or materials. Let the TAs know when you want to meet with them before the quarter begins.
Make sure TAs are registered in ExploreCourses so that they will receive student evaluations. If TAs are not listed in ExploreCourses please contact your department administrator.
Hold an initial meeting via Zoom just before the quarter or during the first week. Provide information about the job and what support is available, including any relevant departmental resources. This can also be a chance to get to know your TAs and let them get to know one another. You might also discuss US academic culture with international TAs, including norms around students asking questions, informality between students and instructors, and definitions of plagiarism at Stanford.
Clarify expectations and ensure your Teaching Assistants know what responsibilities they will be expected to perform. A written agreement can be helpful at this stage to ensure that everyone is on the same page. There is a list of topics you can discuss during the initial meeting at the end of this document.
Discuss communication protocols. It is extremely important to be explicit and intentional about communication when teaching online. Will you meet via Zoom regularly? If so, how often? Do you prefer to be contacted via email, over Slack, etc.? Consider how you will communicate if technology fails (EG via text or phone).
Help the TA set goals for the coming quarter. Would they like to gain more confidence around teaching, try new techniques for teaching with technology, learn to discuss controversial topics in class? You can revisit the goals at the mid-term and at the end of the

quarter. Many members of teaching teams are on a learning curve around online teaching so being explicit about goals can be very beneficial.

Acknowledge the tensions among teaching, research, and other responsibilities and contingencies. Let your TAs know that you're aware that they have competing demands on their time and invite them to share about their situations if they wish to do so. Especially now, they may be juggling dependent care responsibilities, research, teaching, challenging living situations, and more. Be as realistic as possible about time commitments for the TA position and plan accordingly in case unforeseen issues arise during the quarter.

Work with experienced TAs during the design phase of courses, if their employment agreement allows, so they can see your planning and decision-making processes. This is a great opportunity for your experienced TAs to learn about online course design. If you'd like to involve your TA in the course design process before the formal start of their TAship, consider seeking a stipend or other funding from your department.

During the Quarter:

Meet with TAs regularly to see how their work is going. This is especially important when teaching online. Work with the TAs to address unexpected challenges or make necessary changes. Ask about what they are hearing from students or how students seem to be working through the course material. Be explicit in asking about workload and time commitment. If grading is taking longer than expected, for example, guidance from you can help them streamline their process.

Build a positive environment with your TAs. Maintaining a friendly demeanor and working to create a supportive environment will help ensure that they can come to you with feedback from students, questions about the course, or other topics of discussion. This is also an important part of community building while Stanford instruction is occurring remotely.

Provide activities, frameworks, and examples that might be useful during discussion section or labs. Especially for inexperienced and/or International Teaching Assistants, access to relevant examples and activities can ease the transition to their teaching assignment (this can also be an area to connect current and past TAs). Even if the example has been used in face-to-face situations previously, it may still be useful for a virtual setting. You or TAs can also create a drive where TAs can create, curate, and share a repository of activities from year to year.

Connect new TAs to experienced TAs. Arrange for new TAs to observe their experienced peers' Zoom sessions or vice versa. Or, encourage them to discuss common challenges and approaches to teaching different topics. A Slack channel can be a good way to connect TAs asynchronously.

Model a variety of teaching strategies to encourage the idea that there are many effective ways to teach online as your TAs are developing their teaching styles. You can also encourage your TAs to observe other instructors' courses for additional modeling.

Demonstrate how you think about teaching by discussing your planning process, decision-making, and rationale for what you do, particularly with experienced TAs. This transparency can enable TAs to develop as online instructors.

Structure TA tasks so they have the information they need to complete the work. For example, if you want TAs to develop exam questions, make sure they know the learning goals for that unit. And don't assume that TAs are "digital natives" just because they are graduate students. They may need training on Zoom, Canvas, or other tools.

Be open to different perspectives by asking experienced TAs to suggest new ways to teach a particular concept or asking them to guest-lecture and then discussing their performance.

Invite dialogue, ask questions, listen to TAs' ideas, and offer feedback on them. This might take place at a regular meeting with your TAs or at departmental events that focus on teaching. Use artifacts to spark the conversation, such as classroom assignments, draft quizzes and tests, feedback from students, a classroom observation, etc.

Be accessible during pre-arranged times or according to pre-arranged parameters.

At the end of the quarter:

Reflect on the course together. What went well, and what could be improved? Was the TA able to meet their goals for the quarter? Why or why not? What can you learn from the student evaluations? What would you like to change in the next iteration of the course?

Ensure section materials are preserved for future TAs in the course repository. Make sure that TAs are storing their section syllabi, activities, examples, or other teaching materials in a Box or Google Drive folder, on Canvas, or in some other online repository. They can also include notes to future TAs outlining the experience of the quarter and sharing words of wisdom.

Topics to Discuss at Your Initial Meeting with TAs

Clarifying expectations is one of the most important things you can do as an instructor working with TAs online. Meet with TAs at the beginning of the quarter to make sure they know their responsibilities for the quarter. This is a good opportunity to share an overview of the course (if possible), including its organizational scheme, times that the workload may be more and less intense, and any potential issues for which TAs should be prepared.

Topics to discuss might include:

- TA impact:
  - Teaching Assistants serve a vital purpose and contribute to education, especially to helping students feel connected to Stanford as they study remotely. Make sure TAs are reminded of the impact of their role.

- Discussion Sections:
  - Will the TA be responsible for a discussion section?
  - What is the purpose of discussion section? (Review key points from lecture? Work on class projects? Something else?)

- Office hours:
  - Should the TA hold them and, if so, how often?

- Quizzes, Exams, and Assignments:
  - Who will write them, who will write the solutions, and who will write the rubrics?

- Grading responsibilities:
  - What will the TA need to grade?
  - What is the expected turnaround time for the grades?
  - Are there existing tools (rubrics and software such as Gradescope) with which the TA should be familiar?

- Email correspondence with students:
  - Who is responsible for responding to student inquiries?
  - What is the expected response time and are there exceptions on weekends and evenings?
  - Would having a class Slack channel or other way to connect be preferable for the teaching team?

- Lecture:
  - Are TAs expected to attend?
  - Should they plan on signing in 10 minutes early or staying late?

- ○ Will they be expected to create breakout rooms, monitor the chat, or perform other duties during lectures?

- Canvas:
  - ○ Who is responsible for Canvas site development and maintenance?

- Course policies:
  - ○ Who will track student attendance?
  - ○ What flexible policies are in place for students to turn in late work?
  - ○ Who will decide whether to grant students extensions?
  - ○ What will happen if a student tests positive for COVID-19 and discloses that information to a member of the teaching team?

- Workload:
  - ○ How much time should TAs spend on their work responsibilities?
  - ○ Does the TA expect to be unavailable at any point during the quarter? Do you?
  - ○ What contingency plan is in place in case there is an unexpected period of absence?

Works Cited:

Hood, Denice Ward, and Wen-Hao David Huang. "Professional development with graduate teaching assistants (TAs) teaching online." *Adult and Continuing Education: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*. IGI Global, 2014. 212-228.

Meyers, Steven A. "Creating effective working relationships between faculty and graduate teaching assistants." *Effective college and university teaching: Strategies and tactics for the new professoriate* (2011): 9-16.

Nyquist, Jody D., and Donald H. Wulff. *Working Effectively with Graduate Assistants*. Sage Publications, Inc., Thousand Oaks, CA 91320, 1996.

Park, Chris. "The Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA): Lessons from North American Experience." *Teaching in Higher Education* 9.3 (2004): 349-361.