



Teaching Assistant Orientation Appendices

What are Teaching Assistants?

Course Assistants, Teaching Fellows, and Course Coaches—or, TAs for short—assist faculty members with teaching courses at HKS.

Working as a TA is a great way to help your fellow students, form a close working relationship with an HKS faculty member, and get involved with the school community. It's also an opportunity to further your own learning. There's no better way to learn something than by teaching it to others.

More information on TA roles can be found [here](#).

CONTACT

academicplanning@hks.harvard.edu

These appendices include a variety of resources that may be useful to you in your TA role. Additional resources can be found in the [TA Portal](#) on Canvas (email Kate Hamilton for access).

- [Appendix A: Teaching Assistants Can Support Instructors By...](#)
- [Appendix B: Creating Productive Relationships with Teaching Teams](#)
- [Appendix C: Leading Effective Office Hours](#)
- [Appendix D: Working With the HKS Communications Program \(CP\)](#)
- [Appendix E: Request a Course Librarian from the HKS Library](#)
- [Appendix F: A User-Friendly Snapshot of Learning Theory](#)

Appendix A: Teaching Assistants can support instructors by...

1. Helping to create materials and plan class sessions

- Help professors brainstorm ideas about class sessions, assignments, and exams
- Assist professors in creating assignments and exams: writing first drafts, proofing, and perhaps actually working through the assignments (analyzing both quality and length)
- Distill the essence of students' web posts, allowing professors to use that information to hone their lesson plan

2. Managing technology

- Manage the course Canvas site (Note: if you will be managing Canvas, you should attend an optional training session with [Ian Tosh](#) from [HKS Education Technology](#))



- Be in charge of classroom technology (Note: it is best to practice using equipment or tools before a given class session and to consult with EdTech or Media Services for any difficulties or special needs. See Ian Tosh's resources on Educational Technology training for TAs [here](#))
- Track participation using Teachly, an HKS-developed participation tracking software. (See Ian Tosh's resources on using Teachly [here](#))

3. Assisting during class

- Circulate among discussion groups to answer questions and deepen reflections (if TAs are going to be helping with specific quantitative problems, it is good for professors to provide TAs with advanced notice and answers)
- Give brief presentations (e.g. explaining experiment data or summarizing web postings)
- Record a class to help professors reflect on their teaching or to assist students who have to miss that class
- Collect data (e.g. noting the amount and types of questions instructors ask) to provide the professor with feedback about a given class session

4. Assisting students outside of class

- Hold office hours that are spread throughout the week, and are offered at different times of day (see [Appendix C](#) for more details on holding effective office hours)
- If applicable, TFs can hold well-prepared Friday review sessions
- If applicable, TAs can run a workshop on background material that some students may not have mastered, like using Stata software
- In special cases, TFs can hold an extra review for students who are struggling

Professors can help make these interactions more effective by:

- Encouraging TAs to take the needs of students into account when scheduling support sessions, possibly by having students take a poll to rank potential options
- Providing TAs with guidance about how directive to be with students on problem sets and/or memos
- Helping TFs plan review sessions and giving the TFs feedback early in the semester

5. Helping give written feedback to students

- Give feedback on: problem sets with clear answers, assignments that receive a $\sqrt{+}$ / $\sqrt{/}$ / $\sqrt{-}$, or assignments that get credit just for being submitted.
- Do a "first read" of paper/memo assignments, sorting the work broadly according to quality and possibly providing notes for the instructor on a separate sheet of paper

NOTE: TAs are not allowed to give any final grades. Any marking done by TAs must be reviewed by the faculty of record before being made official.



6. Give the professor feedback about students

- Inform the professor how students are doing with the material and workload (e.g. conveying the most common office hour questions and problem set mistakes)
- Keep track of the quantity and quality of student participation in class, especially if professors will be grading participation (Teachly can be very helpful here)
- Identify students who are struggling and refer them to appropriate resources (Student Support Services @ HKS, Counseling and Mental Health Service (CAMHS), etc.)
- Conduct an anonymous student survey early on in the semester to see if there are any productive course corrections the professor might want to make

7. Helping to create institutional memory

- Assist the professor in debriefing the course experience and in developing suggestions for possible changes worth exploring for future iterations
- Conduct a poll asking students specific questions that are not addressed on the general end-of-semester evaluation
- Create an editable “Class [X] - TA Tips Sheet” to pass along accumulated wisdom to your future TAs

Appendix B: Roles and Responsibilities: **Creating Productive Relationships with Teaching Teams**

Whether you're a new HKS TA or an experienced member of a teaching team, it is important for you to know your responsibilities – before the semester starts. The questions below can help you work with your faculty member and teaching team (including the Faculty Assistant) to clarify your role. We recommend scheduling a teaching team meeting prior to the first day of class.

As part of this initial meeting, we recommend reviewing the time constraints / expectations for your specific role. See [this link](#) for more details.

- Am I required to attend every class?
- Will I be responsible for creating a shared agenda for the teaching team?
- Who is the Faculty Assistant for the course instructor? [Note: You can find your instructor's FA listed on their [faculty profile](#), and it is usually listed on the course syllabus. You may also contact [Karl Coleman](#), the Director of the FA Program]. What role does the FA play in setting up and editing the course Canvas site, finding course materials, etc.?
- What duties will I be expected to perform during class:
 - Take attendance?
 - Track participation? (Am I using [Teachly](#)?)
 - Support/assist students during class?



- Give occasional lectures or presentations?
- Manage the slides?
- What duties will I be expected to perform outside of class:
 - Meeting with you (faculty) & the teaching team? If yes, how often? when?
 - Prepare class materials?
 - Prepare and coordinate class technology?
 - Hold office hours? If yes, how often and for how long? When?
 - For TFs only: Run Friday review sessions? If yes, how much autonomy will I have to present new ideas, use different teaching methods, or bring in outside perspectives?
 - Review problem sets/written work? If yes, how – providing provisional marks? providing written feedback? Using what criteria?
 - Give the faculty feedback on classes and/or student progress?
 - Gather student feedback?
 - Proctor exams?
- If working with a group of TAs, how should these responsibilities be distributed?
- If I am expected to give students individual assistance, what kinds of help are acceptable? What kinds of assistance should I not give?
- What are the specific course policies regarding:
 - Responding to student emails (i.e. 24-hour response time? 48 hours?)
 - Late submission of coursework?
 - Late/Early exams?
 - Requests for grade review?
- How often should we meet as a teaching team?
- What worked well and didn't work well the last time you taught this class?
- Are there any other roles and responsibilities we haven't discussed yet?

Appendix C: Leading Effective Office Hours

adapted from the [Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence](#), Carnegie Mellon University

1. Set boundaries with students

- It is helpful for the entire teaching team to agree upon standard boundaries. Otherwise, students will often seek out and overload the TA that is the most willing to make themselves available. Ideally, these boundaries should be made clear to your teaching team and your students from the start, both in the syllabus and in the introductory class/review session (see [Appendix B](#) for details on issues you might wish to discuss).



- Don't feel guilty about sticking to your boundaries. You should spend the time needed and expected to do a good job in this role, but you should not have to sacrifice the other commitments you have made this semester.
- It is good to let students know how and when they can provide constructive feedback about their experience in the course. This can facilitate course improvements, and makes it easier to deal with students who need an outlet for venting (as you can direct them towards a specific and a more productive avenue for voicing their concerns).

2. Maximize “helpfulness per time spent” with students

It is easier to stick to reasonable boundaries if the time you spend on TA course work is efficient. In addition to the suggestions listed under #4 in [Appendix A](#), here are additional ideas:

- During office hours, be fully available: try to be in a quiet working environment, have a warm and welcoming demeanor, and be sure you are fluent with the course content.
- If possible, make yourself available at the beginning and the end of class sessions, so you can answer any quick questions students might have.

Let the professor know about common difficulties among students and, instead of dealing with them individually, offer to put together a brief handout or presentation to address these issues.

3. Build rapport with students

You can build rapport with students by asking the student their name, responding to emails promptly, expressing commitment to student success, being an active listener, giving advice to your students when appropriate, conveying enthusiasm for teaching, and conveying flexibility and support.

4. Avoid solving the problem for students

When working with a student on an activity, you may be tempted to *show* them how to solve the problem. However, this is a passive activity for students; they have likely already seen you or the instructor work through example problems in class. Instead, ask students to do the typing or take notes as you ask questions and guide them. This practice allows you to identify misconceptions the student may have about the problem, and keeps the student engaged as they practice new skills.

5. Increase dialogue with students

- *Paraphrase* - To show the student that you understand what s/he said and to clarify and identify any misconceptions, summarize his/her question or explain in your own words.
- *Invite the student to elaborate* - Give the student the responsibility for thinking through a problem: “Tell me more about...” or “Give me a specific example of...”
- *Talk-aloud* - For problem-solving sessions, ask the student to talk through how they would approach a problem before they write anything down. Ask them to describe the process



they would take to solve the problem, and provide suggestions or corrections to their plan as necessary.

6. Ask students incremental, guiding questions that model problem-solving skills

Asking questions allows (and helps) students to articulate what they need and keeps them actively engaged in the learning process. For example, to help a student with a particular problem, you could ask:

- What is the question asking (e.g. what is the deliverable)?
- What are the important pieces of information given? What information is extraneous?
- What information is missing, but is needed to solve this problem? How will you get it?
- What are the assumptions you need to make? Are they reasonable?
- What course concepts are relevant to this problem? How will you apply them?
- How does this relate to [*insert concept here*]?
- What is the first step/how would you set up the problem?
- Look at your answer. Does it make sense? ...or is it unreasonable?

If you are unsure of the student's current ability, start with fairly simple questions and then gradually work up to deeper-level concepts until you identify where they are struggling.

7. Use supportive language with students

Avoid saying things like, "*Come on, you should know this!*" or "*This should be easy.*" These remarks can add unnecessary pressure or anxiety for students. It's possible that they *do* know the answer to your question, but may not be making the appropriate connections. At the same time, it is beneficial to communicate that students have the ability to do the task (ex: "*This is challenging, but I know you can do it*").

8. Assess your effectiveness

Ask students, "Have I answered your question or resolved the issue?", or, "What is still confusing, at this point?" Ask for more formal feedback on a course evaluation or early course feedback. You can also use [Qualtrics](#) to collect feedback via an anonymous survey.

Appendix D: Working With the HKS Communications Program (CP)

Teaming up with the CP is an excellent way to help your students communicate more effectively in the written and verbal work they do for your course. A full list of the CP offerings (including workshops, resources, and consultation services) can be found at www.hkscommprog.org. Check their website for a list of just some of the relevant workshops they are offering this semester.

Appendix E: Request a Course Librarian from the HKS Library

- Embed a librarian into your course site(s) on Canvas and/or discussion channels such as Slack to field library-related questions as they arise.



- Provide students with customized research consultations, in person or virtually.
- Librarians can lead discussions on research topics and notify students about upcoming library workshops and services across Harvard Library that will be useful for student assignments.
- Request a library guide specifically created for your course(s), similar to the HKS Library topical [research guides](#). The guide can easily be integrated into your Canvas site, and librarians can work with the teaching team to determine what kind of resources and content to highlight.
- Invite an HKS Librarian to visit one of your class meetings to either briefly introduce themselves to students or to demonstrate some of the most relevant library resources.
- Request a customized workshop to be held outside of class time.
- Help the teaching team locate specific publications for a course syllabus.

Email [Daniel Becker](#), Curriculum & Instruction Librarian, to request a course librarian or to get more info on the course librarian role.

Appendix F: A User-Friendly Snapshot of Learning Theory

- 1. Engage preconceptions:** students are not blank slates; students' prior knowledge must be made visible, such that misconceptions can be identified and corrected and that correct knowledge can be engaged and built upon
- 2. Privilege depth over breadth:** knowing extensive facts and procedures is necessary, but not sufficient, for expert practice; students need a deep understanding of complex concepts; they also need many opportunities to practice applying this knowledge flexibly and creatively
- 3. Provide appropriate scaffolding:** people learn best when they are challenged but not overwhelmed; scaffolds support learners as they try to construct new knowledge; a scaffold should fade away when it is no longer essential
- 4. Provide frequent and timely feedback:** students create knowledge more quickly and robustly if they are given frequent and timely feedback on their performances; receiving feedback is an important means of fostering metacognition (see below)
- 5. Utilize working in groups:** benefits of working in groups are very well-established; some reasons for its effectiveness: requires active learning, engages preconceptions, provides scaffolding, and generates frequent feedback
- 6. Establish real-world connections:** leveraging real-world connections tends to increase student engagement, help with knowledge acquisition, and increase the likelihood that students can and will apply knowledge in diverse contexts



7. **Foster metacognition:** metacognition includes knowing your own learning strengths and weaknesses, monitoring your ongoing understanding and performance, and regulating your actions in an effort to maximize effectiveness; these skills are essential for completing complex tasks, as well as for being self-sufficient learners
8. **Create an encouraging environment for learning:** a learning environment that is not a safe place to take academic risks will hamper many of the above tenets, particularly sharing preconceptions, working productively in groups, and being open to feedback

**If you are interested to learn more, a good place to start would be reading Chapter 1 of [How People Learn](#), available for free via [Harvard HOLLIS](#).*