Teaching Assistant Guide for Remote Teaching

The MacPherson Institute is here to support you as you prepare for, and engage in, remote teaching in the Summer 2020 term.
Getting Started

The MacPherson Institute is here to support you as you prepare for, and engage in, remote teaching in the Summer 2020 term.

As always, when you receive notice of securing a Teaching Assistant (TA) position, your first step should be to reach out to your supervisor so you can discuss your position and fill out the Hours of Work Form – this virtual meeting should take place within five days of your start date as a TA. The Hours of Work Form not only specifies what duties you will perform, but also how many hours you will devote to each task. Your meeting with the instructor should be included in your contract hours. A copy of the Hours of Work Form can be found online on McMaster’s Human Resources Services website (https://hr.mcmaster.ca/employees/labour-relations/). Some key questions you may want to ask at your first virtual meeting include:

1. What will my TA duties entail?
2. What technologies will I be expected to know how to use to conduct my duties?
3. What training would you like me to engage in in preparation for my work (e.g., online training on TA Professionalism and Good Practices, Avenue to Learn, web conferencing technologies)?
   - It may be helpful for you to have a list of the training options available, with some possible suggestions.
   - Any training that you are asked to complete should be accounted for in your hours of work.
4. If I feel I need to engage in additional training in order to be equipped to conduct my duties, will I be paid for that training? If so, what is the maximum number of hours of training for which I will be paid?
   - Although there will certainly be variation from one supervisor to the next, it is anticipated that for most supervisors, paid training on the whole (any training that they request you complete combined with any training you feel you need to complete) will not account for more than five paid contract hours.
5. What are the expectations regarding my online availability?
6. Will any of my duties require that I be recorded?
   - If you feel uncomfortable being recorded and the answer is “yes”, you should discuss this with your supervisor so the two of you can come up with an alternate option that will work for both of you.
7. How frequently should I communicate with you, and what is the best way for me to do so?
8. How will my hours of work be distributed across my training and duties?

Educational Technologies

Some commonly used technologies that are supported at McMaster include:

- Avenue to Learn
- MacVideo
- Echo360
• WebEx: Web Conferencing
• Zoom: Web Conferencing
• Microsoft Teams
• Camtasia Screen Recorder and Video Editing
• PowerPoint – Present Live

A description of each of these technologies, as well as related resources, can be found on the Supported Tools tab of MacPherson Institute’s Teaching Remotely website. Recordings of staff-facilitated online workshops are available for many of these technologies via The MacPherson Institute -Teaching Remotely Resources channel on the MacVideo website.

If you are unfamiliar with teaching and learning in an online environment, take some time to familiarize yourself with MacPherson Institute’s Teaching Remotely Guide. As an introduction to teaching remotely, the guide shares best practices, tips, and links to resources for teaching in virtual or online classrooms (please see the Teaching Remotely tab of MacPherson Institute’s Teaching Remotely website for definitions of these terms). If you have the opportunity to choose which educational technology you will use in your role as a TA, the guide includes a comprehensive overview of key features for each of the educational technologies noted above (see page 4). If you know that your supervisor or the program is already using a particular technology to engage with students, if possible, try to use that same technology when you engage with students as well, for this will help to streamline students’ learning experiences.

It is likely that you will need to know how to use Avenue to Learn, McMaster’s Learning Management System. Avenue to Learn often serves as the course home where TAs and students will be able to find announcements from the course instructor, course content (e.g., the course syllabus, lesson materials), discussion forums, assignment submission folders (where you will access and provide feedback on students’ assignments), the grade book, and much, much more. Great resources regarding how to use Avenue to Learn can be found on the Support tab on the Avenue to Learn login website.

Netiquette and McMaster’s Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities

Whether teaching in face-to-face or online settings, at McMaster the principles of mutual respect, responsibility, dignity, and consideration for the well-being of others must be upheld. For example, if teaching online, online etiquette known as netiquette should be followed. Netiquette is the standard for communicating and good behaviour on the internet, which applies to all online communication—from email to the online classroom to social media platforms. Individuals are encouraged to think before they type, treat others with respect, and to act online as they would in person. If a course requires an individual to connect with others via video or web-conferencing, they should ensure that they are dressed appropriately and that their background is free of any offensive materials.

A person’s ability to understand and interpret what someone thinks, means, or feels is limited when communicating online. To facilitate effective communication online, here are some tips that you can follow and share with your students:

• Avoid writing in all capital letters - it is often perceived as aggression
• Avoid using sarcasm or humour that could be misinterpreted.
• Ask for clarification if you would like help in understanding what an individual has written.
• Be respectful when you encounter an individual who has opposing viewpoints to your own. Don’t insult them or make personal remarks. Take a break if you feel you need time to calm down, and respond at a later time, asking for clarification regarding intent.

Using technology to target, humiliate, harass, threaten or embarrass another person, commonly referred to as cyber-bullying, is unacceptable. These actions can include making insults, trolling, cyber-stalking, excluding others from discussions or posting images online without permission. Cyber-bullying may not only violate University policies, but it can even be against the law. To prevent cyber-bullying, individuals should simply treat others as they would want to be treated. In keeping with McMaster’s Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities, all students share responsibility in maintaining a positive environment for the academic and personal growth of all McMaster community members, whether in person or online.

As a TA, your role goes beyond simply reminding students of expectations of netiquette and McMaster’s Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities. You also need to be aware of the privacy and security settings of any virtual platform you plan to use in your teaching so you can work to prevent opportunities for unwanted, disruptive behaviour, and know how to take appropriate action if and when it occurs. For example, you should know how to mute the virtual class, mute an individual student, remove an individual student, and abruptly end the session for all students if need be.

If a student makes a problematic or inflammatory comment in your learning environment, consider the ACTION model (Souza, 2018) as a means of addressing it.

- Ask clarifying questions to help with understanding (e.g., “I want to ensure I understand what you were saying. Were you saying that…”)
- Come from a place of curiosity rather than judgment. Listen to their response. If they disagree with your paraphrase and clarify a different meaning, you may be able to end the conversation there. If not and they stand by their original comment, explore the intent behind their meaning to encourage learning (“Please tell me what you meant by that?”).
- Tell the student what you observed as problematic in a factual manner (e.g., “I noticed that…”).
- Impact exploration - Ask for, and/or state, the potential impact of such a comment on others (e.g., “How do you think other people feel when they hear a comment like this?”).
- Own your own thoughts and feelings regarding the impact (e.g., “When I hear a comment like this I tend to think/feel…”).
- Next steps – request that appropriate action be taken (e.g., “At McMaster the principles of mutual respect, responsibility, dignity, and consideration for the well-being of others must be upheld. In the future, please refrain from making comments that are disrespectful to others.”).

Regardless of whether you choose to use this model, if a student breaches netiquette or McMaster’s Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities guidelines, be sure to respond quickly to the situation, and let the instructor know immediately so you can document and follow-up on the incident. For disruptions that are particularly egregious, you may also want to consider emailing
McMaster Student Support and Case Management at sscmo@mcmaster.ca for support. This will provide you with an opportunity to consult with a case manager who can address your concerns.

Teaching Resources and Supports

Beyond technology, you may have many other teaching- and learning-related questions as you prepare for, and engage in, your work as a TA this Summer. Some key resources and supports that you should be aware of include:

- **McMaster Teaching Assistant Guide**: This guide covers the basics, from TA roles and responsibilities at McMaster to how to teach in an accessible and inclusive manner, plan a lesson, engage students in active learning, assess and provide feedback on student learning, and document your teaching effectiveness. One section that TAs tend to find particularly helpful is the section on common TA-related questions and challenges.

- **TA Drop-In Question and Answer Sessions with an Educational Developer**: These are an opportunity for TAs to connect with an Educational Developer and ask any teaching-related questions they may have. Sessions are taking place over the first two weeks of the Summer term. Register at: [https://taqa2020.eventbrite.ca](https://taqa2020.eventbrite.ca).

- **Online Workshops Available on the Professional Development for Teaching Avenue to Learn Site**: McMaster instructors, students, and staff can self-enroll in this course site to complete online workshops. Some workshops that are of particular relevance to TAs include:
  - **Teaching Assistant (TA) Professionalism and Good Practices**: This workshop will provide an overview of what the TA role generally entails, as well as instruction on how to fulfill the role effectively. [Release Date: Friday, June 26]
  - **An Introduction to Avenue to Learn**: Via this workshop, TAs will learn about the basic functionality of Avenue to Learn from the instructor and TA perspective. More specifically, they will learn how to add Announcements, Content, Discussion areas, and Assignment Submission folders, as well as how to provide students with electronic feedback on their assignment submissions and utilize the grade book. [Release Date: Friday, June 26]
  - **Active Learning**: What is active learning? Why is it important? What are some active learning strategies that one may use in their teaching (both face-to-face, and online)? What things should one consider when selecting a strategy? This workshop will shed light on these questions, and many more. [Release Date: Friday, June 26]
  - **Marking Efficiently and Effectively**: This workshop will share good practices that will help TAs to improve their effectiveness and efficiency in evaluating student success on various types of assessments. TAs will explore various methods for assessing student work and for providing feedback (in-person, and online). They will also reflect on the valuable role that quality feedback plays in student motivation and learning and consider strategies for overcoming some common marking challenges. [Release Date: Friday, June 26]

- **Other Online Training**: As a TA, you are also welcome to register for any upcoming online workshops noted on the Training tab on MacPherson Institute’s Teaching Remotely website.

- **Forward with FLEXibility: A Teaching and Learning Resource on Accessibility and Inclusion**: Modules 1, 2, 3, and 5 are particularly relevant to TAs. They will teach you about the
foundational principles of inclusive instruction/accessible education and how to apply those principles in your teaching/TA duties.

- **E-Learning Section of McMaster’s Accessibility Hub**: Here, TAs will find accessibility support in developing accessible content for digital media, including Word, PowerPoint, Email, and some presentation techniques for recording presentations accessibly. Additionally, there is accessibility-related information for McMaster’s supported tools, and a remote teaching and captioning guide.

- **University Library Support for Remote Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic**: This website provides an overview of how you can still access the Library’s rich course content, robust technological tools, and expert assistance – though sometimes delivered in new ways.

If you plan to engage in any of the above training opportunities, it is recommended that you ask your supervisor in advance whether they will count towards your hours of work.

If you are interested in further enhancing your teaching come Fall, consider checking out MacPherson’s annual Teaching & Learning Forum (an opportunity for you to complete online teaching and learning workshops as early as August 20th) or the five EDUCATN courses that comprise the Teaching and Learning Certificates of Completion Program. All courses are free, zero-unit, pass/fail, graduate-level courses that can be completed during your studies.

Finally, the [CUPE 3906 Unit 1 website](https://example.org) has a wealth of resources that will be of value to you in your role as a TA (e.g., the current collective agreement). As a member of CUPE, you are eligible to access to the Employee Family Assistance Program through [Homewood Health](https://example.org). If you have questions that you would like to ask the Union, email [staff@cupe3906.org](mailto:staff@cupe3906.org).

**Please remember that if you require academic and/or workplace accommodations as you work to fulfill your TA duties, support is available to you.**

**Although courses are taking place in a remote teaching format, please remind students that most of the regular campus supports are still available to them, though possibly in an alternate format. For example, if your students are looking for extra attention to build their writing and study skills, The Student Success Centre’s Academic Skills team is facilitating one on one appointments in the following areas: 1) The Writing Centre - offers writing assistance for both undergraduate and graduate students, and 2) Academic Coaching - mentorship is offered with respect to study, time management, and critical thinking skills for undergraduate students. The Student Success Centre also offers group workshops and customized sessions (by request) year-round. Students can book all services on OSCARplus. Questions can be emailed to: skills@mcmaster.ca.**