

# Faculty-TA Communication Checklists

Frequent, efficient communication between instructors and teaching assistants (TAs) is essential to our teaching and working lives. We recommend scheduling meetings between instructors and TAs at least three times per term in order to facilitate teaching and course management, support TAs' professional development, and enable open communication throughout the term. Below are three checklists to help make the most of these meetings at the start, middle, and end of the term.

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## I. Initial Meeting Checklist

It's important for instructors and TAs to meet at the start of the term—ideally before classes begin, and certainly before the first discussion sections take place. The first meeting is an opportunity to set expectations for course goals, communication, and division of labor for the quarter and to anticipate problems that may come up.

### A. Introductions

- What are your research interests and/or career goals? How does teaching and TAing fit in with those?
- What prior teaching experience does the TA have? What skills do they bring? How familiar are they with the course management system or other programs used in the course?
- What else are you each working on this quarter?

### B. The Course

- What are the goals of the course? What are the desired learning outcomes for students?
- Does the course have a guiding methodology or structure that the TA and students should be familiar with (e.g. problem-based learning, flipped classes, etc.)?
- What role do discussion sections have in the organization of the course? Is student attendance required? What should take place in discussion sections?
- What are the major assignments in the class (exams, term papers, etc.)?
- Where can students and TAs find course information? How are the syllabus and course website organized?

### C. TA Roles and Responsibilities

- What are the TAs' responsibilities in the course (planning and leading discussion sections, proctoring exams, grading assignments, taking attendance, holding office hours, etc.)?
- Will the TA be expected to attend lectures?
- Should TAs prepare syllabi or information sheets for their own discussion sections? What should these include?

- If there is more than one TA, how will these responsibilities be divided (especially grading and lesson planning)? How will discussion section assignments be scheduled among TAs? Will there be one TA in charge of coordinating the work of other TAs?
- How much leeway does the TA have in designing and executing these tasks?
- How should TAs prioritize these tasks?
- If TAs find they have too much work (e.g., the workload regularly exceeds established maximums or is unfairly distributed across TAs), how will the instructor address the problem?

#### **D. Course Management Protocols**

- Where and how can TAs access photocopiers, Scantron machines, and other equipment? Do they know how to use it?
- In what situations should students contact TAs, and when should they contact the instructor? What contact information will be listed in the syllabus?
- Exactly how will grades be determined? What kind of rubrics will be used? How will grading parity be ensured across different graders and sections?
- What system (Canvas, Excel, etc.) will you use to keep track of grades and attendance? How will grades be stored and shared?
- When will TAs be expected to turn in grades for major assignments?
- What are the procedures for handling student complaints, cheating, or plagiarism?
- What are the procedures for handling classroom emergencies?
- If TAs notice students failing or otherwise struggling in the course, how should they address it?
- How will the instructor handle TA absences, expected or unexpected?

#### **E. TA Professional Development**

- Is the instructor available to sit in on TA-led sections and offer teaching feedback? Is the TA open to this teaching observation and feedback?
- Is the instructor open to feedback from TAs on what is and isn't working well in the course? How can this be addressed throughout the term?
- Are there any additional texts, programs, or materials that would help the TA be better prepared for this course?
- For advanced graduate students, are there opportunities to give a guest lecture or create other pedagogical activities relevant to their research?

#### **F. Communication Plan**

- What are the preferred media to contact each other, for urgent and non-urgent matters (email, phone, text)? What kind of response time should you each expect?
- How often will you plan on meeting during the quarter? Will you have a standing weekly meeting, or meet before and after exams or major assignments?
- How often will you plan to check in about grading, lesson plans, and other matters? Who is expected to initiate check-ins?
- When can you schedule to meet next?

## II. Midterm Meeting Checklist

While ideally faculty and TAs are able to meet regularly throughout the term, sometimes it's not possible or expedient. Nonetheless, we recommend scheduling at least one longer meeting mid-term to check in about how the course is progressing, triage any problems, review students' midterm feedback, plan for grading major assignments, and revise course protocols as needed. We recommend circulating midterm course evaluations to students as well.

### A. Self-Evaluation (for Instructor and TAs)

- What, specifically, is going well? What has been challenging? Consider:
  - o Lecture format
  - o Discussion section format
  - o Readings and assignments
  - o Grading procedures
  - o Communication between instructor and TAs
  - o Communication with students
  - o Online course management systems
  - o Overall student engagement
  - o Specific student challenges
  - o Overall workload
  - o Other
  
- What can we change? What can't we change?
- Is there anything else the instructor can do to make the TA's job easier? Is there anything the TA can do to make the instructor's job easier?

### B. Student Evaluations

- What are the main points of positive feedback in students' midterm course evaluations? What are the main points of negative feedback?
- How do these align with or differ from our self-evaluations (above)?
- What can we change? What can't we change?
- What is the plan for communicating these changes to students?
- Are there any students in danger of failing the course? How will this be addressed?

### C. Upcoming End-of-Term Assignments

- What major assignments or exams are coming up at the end of the term?
- What scaffolding will students need to successfully complete these? What role will the instructor and TAs have in preparing students for these tasks?
- What can you do now to anticipate and prepare for the end-of-term grading rush?
- When can you schedule an end-of-term meeting?

### D. TA Professional Development

*If a TA gave a guest lecture, or the instructor gave a teaching observation for a discussion section, consider scheduling a separate meeting to provide feedback. Institutional centers for teaching and learning often have resources and templates for teaching observation and feedback.*

### III. End-of-Term Meeting Checklist

Although the end of the term is always hectic, making time for a final meeting can be very valuable for both the instructor and the TA(s). This end-of-term meeting is a good opportunity to plan ahead for the grading rush, address last-minute problems, and reflect on lessons learned throughout the course.

#### A. Self-Evaluation (for Instructor and TAs)

- What aspects of the course were most successful? Least successful? Consider:
  - o Lecture format
  - o Discussion section format
  - o Readings and assignments
  - o Grading procedures
  - o Communication between instructor and TAs
  - o Communication with students
  - o Online course management systems
  - o Overall student engagement
  - o Specific student challenges
  - o Overall workload
  - o Other
- What would you change if you were teaching or TAing for this class again?
- What warnings or suggestions do you have for someone teaching or TAing for this class in the future?
- What skills or prior knowledge do graduate students need to be effectively TAs for this course? What could be done to modify the course or better prepare TAs in the future?

#### B. Final Grades

- Exactly how will grades be determined? What rubrics will be used?
- How will the grading workload be divided among TAs and the instructor?
- How will grading parity be ensured across different graders and sections?
- By what deadline must TAs submit grades to the instructor?
- How will the final exam and grading workload fit in with TAs' own end-of-term deadlines?
- How will you handle disputed grades, cheating, or plagiarism?
- What is the plan for returning, retaining, and/or disposing of student papers, bluebooks, and other student materials in accordance with FERPA standards?