

Questions to Ask as a Teaching Assistant at Northwestern

Given the wide range of teaching assistant roles at Northwestern University, it is important to understand your responsibilities. We recommend you meet the faculty member in charge of the course *before* the beginning of the quarter. The following list of questions is intended to guide your discussion. Not all may be relevant to your context, and you may need more than one meeting to address them.

TA Responsibilities

It is important to be aware of any potential scheduling conflicts you may have with key events in the course. Be prepared at your first meeting with the course instructor to highlight any potential schedule conflicts you may have. The quicker you address possible conflicts, the easier it will be to resolve them.

Some questions about teaching responsibilities to consider asking at your meeting:

- Will we meet regularly to discuss students and/or the course? If so, how often?
- What is the expected time commitment?
- How many office hours should I hold each week?
- Do I need to attend class?
- Will I be expected to lead review sessions for midterms/final exams?
- Do I need to help write exams or quizzes? Will I be expected to proctor exams?
- Do I need to manage (or have access to) the course Canvas site?
- Will I be asked to present lectures? If not, can I request this opportunity?
- Will I need to lecture in your absence if you miss class? Will I be given any guidance?
- Will I be evaluated? By whom? How will I be informed of the results of any evaluation?
- What would you like me to get out of my TA experience? Do you have any particular goals for me?

Class Format

Note: Even if the course has a syllabus, it can be helpful for the TA to provide their own brief section syllabus or handout to articulate expectations and section policies. For example, if you are responsible for participation, how will you assign points?

Make sure to receive clarification from the instructor as to the following:

- Do I need to develop my own syllabus or will one be provided? Will the faculty be designing and planning the content of sections or will I be expected to do so?
- If there are multiple TAs, do you want all the sections/labs to be similar in format/content? If so, who will be providing guidelines?
- If students work in groups, should they self-organize or should we assign them?
- What role would you like me to play during class (lecture/main class meeting)?
 - Would you like me to observe or gauge the interest/reaction of the class?
 - Would you like me to participate in discussions during class?
 - May I offer my ideas during lecture?
 - Should I be a liaison between the students and you?
- Will I be teaching labs?
 - Will the lab lectures be provided to me?
 - If I cannot vary the content, may I vary the format of the labs? For instance, could I bring in real-life example or ask some higher-level questions during the lab?
- Will I be leading problem-solving sections?
 - What role does the section serve in this course?
 - Will I have an opportunity to apply theory to problems? To address student questions? To review material for exams?
- Will I be leading discussion sections?
 - What role does the discussion section serve in this course?
 - Will I be expected to recap lectures? Adding supplemental material? Address student questions?

Learning Goals

- What are the learning goals for the course?
- Will I be involved in reviewing/modifying the course goals? The course syllabus?

- Are there any goals for which I will be primarily responsible as the TA?

Grading Strategies

- What is the grading breakdown for the course? What is the grading/scoring system?
- Is there a particular portion of the course grade that I am responsible for as a TA?
 - Will participation in the lecture and/or sections be assessed? How?
 - Will I be responsible for grading homework? Essays? Journals? Lab reports?
 - Will I be responsible for grading quizzes? Midterms? Exams? Final Projects?
 - Are there any particular formats/special instructions for the material that I am grading?
- If there are multiple TAs, do you expect grading to be consistent across sections? If so, how?
- Will I be given answer keys/rubrics or will I have to prepare them?
 - When grading homework, should I be concerned with the student's approach to the problem or simply the final answer?
 - Should we grade anonymously (using Student ID number rather than names)?
- How will grading be delegated or divided between TAs? Between TAs and faculty?
 - Should the same instructor always grade the same students to track progress or should instructors swap students after each assignment?
- Can we discuss grading after I receive the first assignment?
- Who records the grades?
- How should I handle students' grading concerns?

Assignments/Feedback

- How involved should/can/will I be in creating projects and assignments?
- Are there any group projects? If so, how will we assess group work?
- Should I give students written or in-person feedback?
 - When should I give students feedback on assignments?
 - Do you have a preference for the type or amount of feedback I give?
 - How many hours do you expect me to spend on written feedback?
 - How much attention should I pay to spelling, grammar, style, and presentation?
- How do we handle student deadlines?
 - Under what circumstances can extensions be granted?

Addressing Student Integrity and Issues

- Can students collaborate on homework/lab reports?
- How does the honor code pertain to your course?
- What steps would you like me to take to detect instances of plagiarism?
 - What do I do if I suspect someone of cheating?
- What do I do if I have behavior problems in my section?
- What do I do to address absences or missed work?
- What do I do if I suspect mental health issues with one of my students?
- What do I do if I suspect substance abuse with one of my students?
- If students have questions or issues they want to resolve, should they come to me first or you? Are there exceptions for any particular questions or issues?

Course Materials

- Will you provide me with a textbook and/or other reference materials for the course?
- Where do I get supplies that I may need (e.g., copies)?
- Do I need to put materials on reserve/electronic reserve?
- Do I need to put together the course pack for the course?
- Do I need to make photocopies for the course?
- Has my name & NetID been added to the CTEC evaluation site by the department assistant so I can get access to my TA-specific comments?

Adapted from Vanderbilt University's 'Possible TA Questions for Course Heads' handout, NU Linguistics Department's 'Outline of TA Responsibilities' worksheet, and NU Learning Sciences' Department 2007 New TA Training workshop.