Guide:
Fully Online and Blended Courses

A GUIDE FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS (TA)
A Guide for Teaching Assistants (TAs) in an Online Environment

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Fully Online Course

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Blended Course

By 2020, the University of Ottawa foresees the conversion of 1,000 blended courses. As Teaching Assistant (TA) you will likely have to guide student progress for the online autonomous portion of these courses.
As a result, it is essential to be in regular contact with the professor to clarify your role with respect to the desired level of interactivity with the students. Share with him/her the challenges you are facing, the kinds of problems the students are experiencing, and ask for clarification along the way if you have questions about certain aspects of the course. If other TAs are assigned to the course because the number of students warrant it, make sure you are in touch with them as well. In fact, you can create a discussion forum for the exclusive use of TAs and the professor.

**Encourage Students to Participate Online**

The following tips and suggestions are intended to help you get students to participate and be fully engaged online, whether it be for fully online or blended courses.

It is important to maintain an online presence by logging in to the course website regularly. Be aware of ongoing material being presented and issues raised during discussions, this will enable you to better engage the students within their online learning environment.

**Promote student engagement**

New communication technologies have enormous potential to increase student participation and engagement. Students are already avid users of social networks because they promote discussion, sharing and communication.

Even so, for certain students it may be the first time they learn within this type of online platform. It will be important for students to explore their new learning environment as soon as possible, so make sure students have access to the help files for logging in and navigating. This basic help information concerning how to log on to the course should be provided in the course outline/syllabus or emailed to students directly before the course starts.

**Be There!**

The biggest advantage to maintaining a regular online presence is that it promotes regular “attendance” from students. For example, if students expect a weekly question that summarizes the lesson or readings at hand, they will readily go online to respond.

However, for maximum interaction, students need to take an active role and have some latitude concerning what they discuss. This can be achieved by allowing students to determine, in part, the subject of their virtual meetings.
With fully online courses, it is important that students perceive your online presence to prevent them from feeling that they are all alone in this type of environment. You can make your presence known by asking individualized questions, initiating discussions, suggesting topics for additional forums, etc.

On a platform like Blackboard Learn accessible through the virtual campus, it is not only possible, but a good idea to give students the opportunity to identify discussion topics, as well as solicit their ideas and opinions by asking them questions that encourage them to share and participate. It is even possible to have a student moderate or facilitate an online discussion. Make sure, however, that you provide students with specific guidelines concerning their role ahead of time.

Your presence online will be particularly important to get discussions going and encourage participation. You will also need to help students adjust to the blended mode, as well as provide assistance when needed as they navigate the virtual campus.
Online Availability for Fully Online and Blended Courses

Whether it be for fully online or blended courses, there is a possibility that you will be asked to be available to students online. These online consultations or tutoring hours have advantages and disadvantages worth considering.

Virtual Campus

There are numerous ways of supporting students. We recommend that you limit yourself to a single virtual meeting space: Blackboard Learn. It will make it easier for students to know exactly where to reach you. While Facebook, Skype and others are very popular, none of them have the technical support offered by the team responsible for Blackboard Learn at the Centre for Mediated Teaching and Learning.

- Fully Online Course
  
  Online courses can generate more student participation than face-to-face classes. There are some who find this environment less intimidating than a traditional classroom setting and take advantage of this learning platform to ask questions they might not have otherwise asked.

- Blended Course
  
  In the case of blended courses, professors are likely to provide face to face office hours with students. However, much coursework will take place online within a blended course. As such, you may be asked to facilitate discussion forums where you have to respond to questions, provide clarifications concerning assignments, guide students in their learning, etc.

More flexibility

- Fully Online Course
  
  Online consultations provide increased flexibility allowing students to reach you at a time that suits them best. This may mean evenings or weekends, depending on the students’ needs. If you need to deviate from this schedule for any reason, make sure you announce the changes at least one week in advance.

- Blended Course
  
  Within blended courses students will complete the online portion of the course under a flexible schedule. This means that you will need to adapt your own schedule to respond to students in a timely manner.
Setting up your Work Station

When you are online with students, we recommend that you sit at a computer located in a room where distractions are kept to a minimum. Your work online requires just as much care and commitment as face-to-face tutoring. In the absence of non-verbal communication (e.g. : body language, tone, pitch), an online TA requires additional effort to concentrate in order to be clear and concise. As such, public and noisy rooms are to be avoided when you provide online tutoring.


Prepare for Your Online Interactions

• Connecting to Blackboard Learn

Connect to: www.maestro.uottawa.ca/en/ and choose the link or login button corresponding to Blackboard Learn.

» You must use your InfoWeb login information to access the system:
  ~ Username: A lowercase e, followed by your employee number, for example: e123456
  ~ Password: InfoWeb Password CAPS,

» If you need to inform a student on how to connect here is the information that should be used:
  ~ Username: student number
  ~ Password: same as uoZone

Once students are online, you will want to maximize their consultation time with you. How? Prepare for the consultation. For example, complete the homework yourself and look over the evaluation rubric again before your online tutoring hours so that you can provide students with detailed information or discuss grades with them, etc. We encourage you to contact your professor to agree upon the approach you will take during your consultations. Think about strategies that might help students deal with the kinds of problems they are having.

Make sure you guide them through the steps they need to master the process. Providing them with the right answers without any guidance will not benefit them in the long run.

There may be a student who consults you because he is having difficulty, but does not know where he went wrong. As you review the material or homework in preparation for your online consultation hours, group together any similar questions or problems you have come across or received by email. Among these questions or problems there could be useful information you may want to share in a “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) discussion forum. Pinpointing where students had difficulty will help you understand problems, allowing you to focus your attention on the issues that are the most useful and relevant to them.
Using Discussion Forums and Moderating Them

Ideally, whether it be a fully online or blended course, you would use the discussion forums to ask a question directly related to current course content or summarize the material looked at and/or discussed by them.

To promote student reflection and participation, ask a question directly related to current course content or summarize the material looked at and/or discussed by them. Better yet, have them do it! Give them the opportunity to ask questions or discuss a topic that is of interest to them.

Similarly, preparing topics in advance for online discussions is also a good way to encourage online participation.

You can also use your online presence to ask for informal feedback from the students on how the course is going and on how you might better support them. Students will appreciate the fact you are taking the initiative to improve their learning experience, and this type of feedback can prove useful to professors and TAs alike. We suggest you do this early in the semester (by about the third or fourth week).

Netiquette and Emails

Make sure all contact information for getting in touch with you is made public and easily accessible to students (email address, tutoring hours, etc.).

Response time to emails is important. For the first two weeks of the course, you may want to try to respond within a period of twelve (12) hours. After this initial period, let your students know that you will respond within 24 to 48 hours upon receipt of an email. To address students’ expectations with respect to response times, you may want to add the following message to the course outline/syllabus, the Virtual Campus or your email signature:

“Any questions sent via email should receive a response within 2 business days. Please note that we reserve the right not to answer an email if the level of language is disrespectful.”
Be Clear and Concise
Avoid dealing with numerous topics in one email even if these issues relate to the same recipient, because too much information creates confusion. Asking several questions at once usually results in incomplete answers, because the reader can easily forget to respond to one of the questions. If you find you do need to include several questions, put them in a numbered list so that you can easily refer back to them.

Avoid Emotionally Charged Emails
It is possible to have to write emails that deal with sensitive subjects, for example when responding to an aggressive message, when you need to convince or motivate a learner, or relay unpleasant news. Although email allows us to reflect and focus on the intended message, sometimes emotional undertones surface.

To avoid unpleasant exchanges, pay particular attention to the tone you use. Aim to be as positive as possible.

Some rules to follow for both email and discussion forums:

• The use of abbreviations, especially those used in text messaging (e.g. LOL, TTYL), and emoticons is unprofessional.
• While email has made written communication more ubiquitous, it has not changed our need for correct spelling and grammar or punctuation.
• To emphasize something in your message, try using *asterisks*. Using capital letters is equivalent to shouting. Ask yourself: Is this how I would speak to the person if he/she were standing here in front of me?
• Some applications do not recognize bold, italics and underlined features (“text only”). Underlining and italics should be kept to a minimum. One underlined or italicized word is acceptable, but an entire paragraph can make the text difficult to read.
• Do not send chain letters, advertisements or messages from dubious sources that may contain viruses.
• Do not forward a personal message without asking permission from the other person first.
• Do not modify the content of an email you are forwarding to someone else. You can, however, copy and paste an extract.
• Do not respond to messages that are not directly addressed to you (“To:” primary recipient).
• If you cannot answer an email within the timeframe announced (e.g. 2 business days), it is strongly recommended you acknowledge receipt of the email and indicate when you will be able to respond. This simple practice will reassure the sender that you received the message and in this way curtail subsequent ... and often impatient, inquiries.

Whenever possible, it is good to take the time to read an email one last time before sending it, even if this means delaying the response by a few hours. Giving yourself time to reflect on what you wrote, will allow you to focus on rendering a clear message rather than getting carried away by emotion.
Before hitting: “Reply All”, consider who really needs to receive the information you are about to send.

To reduce the effects of “Reply All”, you can use “BCC” (Blind Carbon Copy) for recipient addresses when sending a message to a large group. You will be the only one to receive responses and you will respect the anonymity of the other recipients.

Use the high priority option sparingly. Some people consider all their messages urgent, which reduces the sender’s credibility - so use this option in moderation.

Discussion Forums

The first step before you initiate any online communication is to establish guidelines on an acceptable code of conduct. Better yet, let the students come up with their own guidelines! They will be able to monitor lack of respect, abusive language, intolerance of differing perspectives better than an instructor could. So as to avoid this kind of behaviour, which can lead to real problems, it is better to establish communication rules or “netiquette” right at the onset, so that everyone can follow and enforce them from the start.

It is important to remain vigilant when it comes to comments posted on discussion forums or online communication in general. Things to watch out for include:

1. Failure to respect the agreed-upon netiquette: Not being able to see the person you are speaking to online has been identified as one of the leading causes for unacceptable electronic communication. This kind of problem could damage the integrity of the forum, or the course as a whole, if you are not able to rectify the situation.

2. Changing the topic in a discussion forum: Of a less serious nature than failing to comply with the netiquette guidelines, this can nonetheless cause some friction and confusion. It consists in introducing a new topic in a discussion that is already underway in order to take advantage of its momentum. This misstep can be quickly corrected by notifying the person at fault and suggesting, if necessary, that they start a new discussion topic.

Best Practices for Moderating Discussion Forums

Here are some best practices to follow:

- **Thank participants for their relevant contributions!** Do not hesitate to give participants full credit for having a positive impact on their classmates and adding value to online discussions. This will motivate them to further contribute to the forum and they may even become interested in moderating a discussion themselves.

- **Encourage participants who don't often contribute, but invariably make an effort to participate.** It is important to not just acknowledge frequent contributors in a forum, but to also encourage participants who make an effort. Sometimes it takes a little extra encouragement and support to help a student overcome shyness issues or help them go beyond their comfort zone and successfully engage in meaningful dialogue.
• **Prevention is better than censorship**: If you observe an offensive or inappropriate comment or if a student flags you, the moderator, with a comment they deem inappropriate, a polite warning is often sufficient to correct the situation. If you opt to remove the comment altogether then it helps to have the support of the others who witnessed your initial, polite warnings.

• **Justify your decision to remove a message**: Ultimately, if you have no other choice but to remove a message, take the time to privately email the author to explain your decision or post a message in the forum if you think it is important for the other participants to be informed of your decision.

Forum participants whose postings have been moderated or removed may become disgruntled and may decide to stop taking part in the online discussion or even try to adversely affect it.

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**Grading Assignments**

For fully online courses and sometimes blended courses, students will submit their work using various tools like “Assignments” and “Assessments” available in the Learning Management System (LMS) Blackboard Learn. Communication tools, such as blogs and wikis, can also be assigned a grade.

Regardless of what needs to be graded, using an evaluation rubric allows for clear evaluation criteria and insures uniform grading for all students. This becomes especially important in large enrollment courses with multiple teaching assistants. If everyone uses the same evaluation rubric or criteria to evaluate the students’ work, it will provide better scoring reliability (agreement between professor and TA).

**Homework:**

The “Assignment” and “Tools, Surveys, and Pools” tools can be used to provide students with a detailed description of the homework to be submitted online, such as: availability, deadlines for submission, rubrics, grading, etc.

Depending on the nature of the homework and the instructions provided by the professor, students can either submit their work directly in the space provided in the Blackboard Learn tools or in an electronic format like Microsoft Word or a PDF. The “Assignment” and “Tests, Surveys, and Pools” tools in Blackboard Learn allow you to add additional comments directly in the interface (for example, the objectives or what they should be able to do or know once they complete the homework assignment). Using “Track Changes” in Word or the annotation feature in a PDF, you can add comments (e.g. suggest how their assignment can be improved) right in the document they submitted. The grades you assign will be automatically added to Blackboard’s “Grade Centre”, which students can then view provided access is set up this way.
Tests or Exams:

The “Tests, Surveys, and Pools” tool allows you to create different types of questions. Some can be graded automatically by Blackboard, like multiple-choice questions for example, while others, like essay questions, do require someone to mark them. You may want to get familiar with this tool, given its time-saving nature.

Resources:

Remember the professor is your primary resource person when it comes to the general functionality of these tools. Online help files are another source of information and accessible by clicking on the “Help” link in the course website. Ultimately, if you need further assistance or more personalized support, the Centre for Mediated Teaching and Learning offers workshops on all Blackboard features. Visit: http://www.saea.uottawa.ca/ceam/index.php?lang=en for details.
# Services and Resources That Can Be Accessed Online

Whether you are TA for a course that is hybrid or entirely online, this list might come in handy.

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<th>NAME</th>
<th>SERVICES</th>
<th>WEBSITE ADDRESS</th>
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<tr>
<td>uoZone</td>
<td>• All student Web tools and information are centralized in uoZone.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.uottawa.ca/en/students">http://www.uottawa.ca/en/students</a></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• List of courses</td>
<td>Telephone: 613-562-5800, ext. 6555 or toll free at 1-877-868-8292, ext. 6555</td>
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<td>» From the “Subject” drop down menu, choose the “Blackboard/Virtual Campus” option</td>
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<td>Technology Support</td>
<td>• General computing help</td>
<td>Telephone: 613-562-5800, ext. 6555 or toll free at 1-877-868-8292, ext. 6555</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Password changes</td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:cybersos@uOttawa.ca">cybersos@uOttawa.ca</a></td>
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<td>InfoWeb</td>
<td>• Password Management&lt;br&gt;• Evaluation Web-Based Courses&lt;br&gt;Online Scholarships and Bursaries&lt;br&gt;• Etc.</td>
<td>• <a href="http://www.infoweb.uOttawa.ca">http://www.infoweb.uOttawa.ca</a></td>
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<td>Library</td>
<td>• Books&lt;br&gt;• Articles&lt;br&gt;• References&lt;br&gt;• Course reserve&lt;br&gt;• Videos&lt;br&gt;• Databases</td>
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<td>ReproBoutique</td>
<td>• Purchase your Course Packs online</td>
<td>• <a href="http://www.uottawa.ca/print/course-packs/">http://www.uottawa.ca/print/course-packs/</a></td>
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<td>Bookstore</td>
<td>• Purchase your textbooks online</td>
<td>• <a href="http://www.bkstr.com/ottawastore/home">http://www.bkstr.com/ottawastore/home</a></td>
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<td>SASS (Student Academic Success Service)</td>
<td>• See the online resources available</td>
<td>• Documents available online (referencing, grammar, the writing process, the structure of a paper): <a href="http://sass.uottawa.ca/en/writing/undergraduate/online-document.php">http://sass.uottawa.ca/en/writing/undergraduate/online-document.php</a>&lt;br&gt;• Questions via email: <a href="mailto:awhc@uOttawa.ca">awhc@uOttawa.ca</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
<td>• There are many possibilities when it comes to financing your studies: scholarships, government loans, work-study program, etc.</td>
<td>• <a href="http://www.uottawa.ca/strategic-enrollment-management/home">http://www.uottawa.ca/strategic-enrollment-management/home</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching Evaluation</td>
<td>• Provide feedback on a course and an instructor’s teaching by filling out a questionnaire.</td>
<td>• <a href="http://www.evaluation.uottawa.ca/index-e.html">http://www.evaluation.uottawa.ca/index-e.html</a>&lt;br&gt;• Accessible through InfoWeb</td>
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<td>Accessibility</td>
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