

## Your Relationship with the Course Instructor

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As a staff member and representative of a course, you are also a representative of the course instructor's policies. You are part of a teaching team, and it is important you and the instructor are in good communication regarding course and student issues.

### What exactly should you be communicating about?

- First, you should be clear on what is expected of you. Instructors assign TA duties prior to the beginning of a course, and you should get in touch with the instructor before the term begins to set up an initial course meeting to discuss your contracted duties. You must have a pre-course meeting with your course supervisor before you begin your teaching appointment—this is in the CUPE 3902 collective agreement.
- If your contract does not clearly state your duties and responsibilities, you should ask the course instructor for these details.

### The pre-course meeting

- Make sure at this pre-course meeting that you are aware of all the people involved in the delivery of this course (names of fellow TAs, names of lab technicians, college contacts for audio-visual equipment and photocopying, whom to contact if you have problems with a classroom or lab, etc.)
- Make sure you have all of your teaching materials, or know where to get them.
- Inform your course supervisor at this point of any prior commitments you have in the term to come that may affect your teaching-related responsibilities outside of the classroom. For example, are you attending any conferences that may take you away from the university for a period of time? Are you sitting any exams for your degree during the term? Be clear at this point about your availability for the upcoming term.

### The mid-course review

Many TAs are apprehensive about approaching the course instructor regarding workload issues during the term. Half-way through your appointment, you are to have a “mid-course review”, also required by the collective agreement. This meeting is an important opportunity to “touch base” with your course supervisor and discuss the following:

- **student participation** in your section—is everyone participating equally? are there any attendance problems?
- **common student concerns and questions** regarding the structure of the course, assignments, etc.
- **student engagement** with course content: what concepts are students struggling with in your section and what are they finding easy?
- **grading concerns**: what is the quantity of feedback to be provided to students? does the TA indicate a final grade on the assignment, or should a tentative mark be written in pencil to be confirmed later by the course supervisor? how much time should it take to mark certain assignments (if at all possible, bring along some samples of student work that you have graded already and get some feedback from the course supervisor on how you did)? what is the policy regarding make-up tests? are assignments in multi-section courses returned to students as they are graded or must they all be handed back on the same day? is there a policy regarding assignments that are emailed in attachments?
- what are the **course instructor's plans and expectations for the end-of-term**? is there a set review of

course material or is the structure and content of the review up to each individual TA? how will the exam marking unfold? what are the criteria for grading the end-of-term assignment? is there a marking scheme? what should the response of the TA be to late assignments, missed tests, absent students who suddenly appear at the end of term...?

### **The mid-course review meeting is a good time to discuss your own workload, as well.**

Keep in mind that instructors are typically not responsible for the number of TA hours you are assigned (although they are responsible for assigning duties appropriate to the number of work hours assigned per TA). The number of hours in individual TA contracts is decided at the department level. Therefore...

- You should **not feel awkward** about approaching your course supervisor if you are running short of hours during the term. Often the course supervisor will be able to approach the department and will work with the department to OK an increase in hours for you.
- If you feel that the number of hours assigned is going to come up 'short' given the course size and types of assignments, keep accurate records of your grading time. You can **use these facts to support your request for an increase in hours** when you contact your instructor. The better documented your work is, the more likely you are to receive your requested increase in hours. Also, the course supervisor may use your documented workload hours to adjust the contract for future appointments.
- You can phrase your email or statement to your instructor, not necessarily as a request, but in such a way that it indicates you have "concerns" about whether the assigned number of hours will be sufficient for the rest of the term.

### **Time management and clear communication**

Please note that you should use your time wisely when preparing and grading course materials; be sensitive to the fact that not all departments have sufficient funds to allow for increases in TA contracts, and you should therefore do your best to manage your time efficiently and work within the contract hours assigned to you. As soon as you have a concern about the amount of time you are spending preparing a class or grading an assignment, bring it immediately to the attention of your course supervisor. Informing the course supervisor suddenly at the end of the term when you are half-way through the marking of the final assignment that you are at the end of your contract hours is unacceptable. It is only professional to keep your course supervisor informed of your progress with your teaching commitments on an ongoing basis throughout the term.

### **What if your course instructor is your thesis supervisor?**

- Often thesis supervisors prefer their own students to be their TAs; always remember that the same rules apply, even if the instructor is your thesis supervisor!
- Depending on your relationship with your supervisor, it may be more or less challenging for you to discuss workload issues. Once again, good communication from the start will increase your comfort level when addressing TA issues.
- Finally, know that as teaching assistants, you are really junior faculty and the overwhelming majority of instructors will want to support you in your teaching efforts in every way possible. So don't hesitate to ask for guidance or help!