Teaching Assistant Handbook

McGill Biology Department

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Introduction

Congratulations on receiving a teaching assistantship in the McGill Biology Department! Being a teaching assistant (TA) can be a rewarding part of your graduate student experience, and we hope this handbook will help you make the most of your experience. Whether you are a first-time TA or have years of experience, reading this handbook will help you to:

1. Foster a safe, equitable, and inclusive learning environment.
2. Model professionalism in communication and conduct.
3. Encourage student curiosity and critical thinking.
4. Use rubrics and grading keys to provide effective feedback to students.
5. Encourage academic integrity and report signs of academic dishonesty.
6. Develop your professional skills, including interpersonal communication and time management.
7. Identify support resources for undergraduate and graduate students.

We recommend that you read this handbook at the beginning of each semester and that you consult it throughout the semester as questions or challenges arise.

This handbook is a companion to the McGill Biology Graduate Student Handbook, which includes information about the McGill Biology Department, applying for TAships, and other important topics for Biology Graduate Students. If you are from another department, your home department may have a similar resource.

This is the First Edition of the Biology TA Handbook. We will update the handbook as suggestions are made and as policies evolve. If you have any suggestions or comments for the Biology TA Training Working Group, please fill out this form.

Have a wonderful semester and happy teaching!

Roles in the teaching team

As a TA, you will be working as part of a teaching team. Below is a list of some of the roles that other people on the team may have.

- ***Instructor:*** The member or members of the academic staff (usually professors in the Biology Department) who are teaching the course. They are responsible for lecturing, providing assessments, and granting final grades. When you have questions about a specific part of a course, you should contact the instructor for that part of the course.
- ***Course coordinator:*** The instructor who has the primary responsibility for the course. For a course with one instructor, that instructor is always the course coordinator. For a course with multiple instructors, one of the instructors will be the course coordinator. For courses without labs, they are your main contact for most questions and concerns.
- ***Guest lecturer:*** Sometimes an invited speaker will give one lecture in the course. They do not generally have any other responsibility in the course. You will normally only interact with them if you have questions about the content of their lecture.
- ***Lab coordinator:*** A lab coordinator is assigned to most lab courses in the Biology Department. They are responsible for the technical and logistical aspects of the course, including providing instructions to lab TAs. For lab courses, they are your main contact for most questions and concerns. (For simplicity, we will refer mostly to the course coordinator in this handbook. In a lab course, however, the course coordinator will delegate most TA-related tasks to the lab coordinator, and therefore you will usually first contact the lab coordinator.)
- ***Course technician:*** The course technician assists the lab coordinator in preparing the technical aspects of the teaching labs. You will usually only interact with them if you need technical assistance in a lab course, such as needing more reagents for the students or help with equipment.
- ***Peer mentor:*** Some large 100- and 200- level courses have peer mentors. These are undergraduate students who have previously taken the course and provide mentorship to current students. Peer mentors may come to you for guidance.
- ***Lead TA:*** Some courses with a large team of TAs will designate a more experienced TA as the lead TA. Their role varies from course to course, but generally you can approach them for guidance and advice.

Your responsibilities and rights as a TA

Your responsibilities

Your responsibilities as a TA will be specific to the course you are TAing. The easiest way to know what your responsibilities are is to look at the job posting and your workload form. Make sure you review and sign the workload form before the end of the add/drop period (two weeks after the semester starts). The workload form should outline all tasks that you will have to complete, with a time allotment for each (e.g., grading assignment 1, 15 minutes per student, 5 hours total). If you notice any potential issues with the workload form, such as missing tasks or unrealistic time allotments, discuss them with the course coordinator before signing. You will have the opportunity to ask more questions and to make changes during the mandatory midterm review of the workload form.

In general, your responsibility is to support the course coordinator in the delivery of the course. This could include tasks such as grading, leading labs or tutorials, or providing office hours, to name a few. Your responsibilities usually exclude more administrative tasks like managing absences and granting deadline extensions. Complex situations like student mental health crises or a serious conflict between students should be directed to the course coordinator. The course coordinator is ultimately responsible for delivering the course and will make the final decisions.

Your rights

You are a member of the Association of Graduate Students Employed at McGill (AGSEM) union. AGSEM's collective agreement defines the terms and conditions of your employment. This includes your rights as a TA, such as your right to health and safety, and leaves.

One of your most important rights as a TA is the right to be paid for every hour you work. It is highly recommended that you keep track of your hours in a spreadsheet, precisely recording your hours by date and task. If you anticipate exceeding the total number of hours allocated in your contract, let the course coordinator know as soon as possible. Together, you will need to come up with a plan, such as prioritizing key tasks and dropping other tasks.

If you have concerns about your working conditions as a TA, a good first step is to discuss the problem with the course coordinator. If you need further support, you can also reach out an AGSEM Biology delegate (biology.delegate@agsem-aeedem.ca and biology.delegate2@agsem-aeedem.ca). The delegates can provide you with information, support you during meetings with course coordinators, and/or provide other means of remediation.

Preparing for labs and tutorials

This section and the next section of the Handbook are intended for TAs who are leading lab or tutorial sessions. If this does not apply to you, you can skip ahead to the Grading section.

Preparing for the first session

The first step of preparing to TA is to gather the resources you need to be successful. The course coordinator will provide you with the workload form and the syllabus, and the course coordinator is also required to schedule an orientation meeting. Study the documents before the meeting so that you can raise any questions during the meeting.

You should also receive access to the course on myCourses, so you can orient yourself as to how the learning management system is set up for the course. If you are not familiar with myCourses, TAP (Teaching and Academic Programs) provides guides for both students and instructors. Both types of guides can be relevant, as your use of myCourses will likely vary depending on which class you are teaching. The following links are aimed at students:

- https://www.mcgill.ca/student-learning-resources/use-learning-technology/getting-started-mycourses
- https://mcgill.service-now.com/itportal?id=kb_article&sysparm_article=KB0011163

The following links are aimed at instructors:

- https://teachingkb.mcgill.ca/tlk/faqs
- https://teachingkb.mcgill.ca/tlk/course-implementation

Before the first day of the lab or tutorial, consider making time to visit the lab or classroom. You will see what resources will be available to you, such as AV or lab equipment, and you won't get lost trying to find the room on your first day.

If you wish, you can ask the course coordinator for a copy of the students' class photos. They will be able to access them in the "Instructor" section of Minerva. You can start learning your students' names by studying the photos. For lab courses, after the start of the semester, you can also ask for a lab seating plan (if available), which may help you with learning the names of your students.

On the first day of the lab or tutorial, we suggest starting by introducing yourself. You might tell the students a bit about yourself, such as your research topic and your favourite hobby. Next, have the students introduce themselves. Depending on the size of the group, you may only have time for students to give their names and (if they wish) their preferred pronouns.

Or, you may have time for them to say a bit more about themselves, such as what they are hoping to learn from the course.

Preparing for subsequent sessions

Preparing for your lab or tutorial sessions may involve attending the lectures, attending TA meetings, reading the lab manual, or preparing a pre-lab presentation. Consult your workload form and discuss with the course coordinator to determine what you are expected to do to prepare for each session.

While there will be differences between courses in terms of how to prepare, here are some common themes:

- Ensure that you have a good understanding of the concepts covered in the class. Focus your efforts on identifying the most challenging concepts covered in the upcoming session: those are the topics on which you will most likely be asked questions.
- If you have been asked to prepare a pre-lab or tutorial presentation, ask the course coordinator if slides are available from previous years. Be sure to clarify the expectations, including the length of the presentation and the topics to cover. Remember to allocate time to rehearse your presentation before the lab or tutorial.
- Plan how you will structure the lab or tutorial time. If you are giving a presentation, how long will it take? How long will each activity take? Will you schedule a break for the students? Do you need to plan time at the end to clean up or have a wrap-up discussion? Write out a schedule and consider writing it on a whiteboard at the beginning of the session so the students know what to expect.

During the lab or tutorial

Keeping students safe

Your most important responsibility as a TA is to ensure the safety of the students. If there is a safety issue during the lab or tutorial session, the students will be looking to you for leadership. Your main responsibilities when such incidents occur are to contact the appropriate resources for help and to move the students away from any dangers. Depending on the situation and your training, you may also take other measures such as giving first aid or extinguishing a fire.

The following table lists categories of incidents with the appropriate phone number. We strongly recommend you save the McGill security number on your phone to avoid spending time looking it up during an emergency. In addition to any phone calls, alert the course coordinator, lab coordinator, and/or other lab staff as soon as possible.

Incident type	**Phone number**
Life-threatening emergency	911 Call McGill security after
Public safety incidents on campus (e.g., water leaks, chemical spills, suspicious or aggressive people, strange odours, injuries, etc.)	McGill Security: 514-398-3000
Poisoning	Quebec Poison Control: 1-800-463-5060
Suicidal behaviours	911, if immediate intervention is required Otherwise, Suicide Crisis Helpline: 988

Lab safety

For detailed information about lab safety at McGill, consult the McGill Lab Safety Manual. Here are some general tips for keeping students safe in the lab:

- Make sure your lab safety training, including WHMIS, is up to date.
- Before your first session, familiarize yourself with the lab, if possible. Know where all the safety equipment is located and learn the route to the fire evacuation location. The lab should have an eye wash station, shower, fully-stocked first aid kit, and fire extinguisher. If you are unable find any of these items, tell the lab coordinator.

- If you give a pre-lab presentation, include safety information in the presentation. For example, point out the locations of safety equipment, which chemicals are hazardous, and how to handle chemicals safely.
- Be a good example to the students by always wearing the appropriate personal protective equipment. If you ask the students to wear goggles, but you don't wear them yourself, you may find that they follow what you do rather than what you say.
- If you see a student doing something unsafe in the lab, ask them to stop immediately. Explain why their actions are unsafe; this is a learning opportunity. If you think other students may make the same mistake, make an announcement to the class clarifying how to do the procedure correctly.
- If there is a safety concern that you are not sure how to handle, do not hesitate to ask for help. Talk with the other members of the teaching team, if they are available. If they are unavailable and it's an urgent issue, call McGill Security.
- Report any safety issues to the lab coordinator as soon as possible. They will want to know so they can make the labs safer in the future.

Answering questions

As a TA, students will often approach you with questions. They are looking to you for guidance, so it is important to give thoughtful and factually correct answers.

What to do if you don't know the answer to a question:

Sometimes, you may not know the answer to a question immediately. Whatever you do, don't panic and make up an answer! Giving the wrong answer has a larger negative impact than taking the time to find the right answer: the last thing you want is for students to start thinking your answers are unreliable and stop asking you for help.

If you don't know the answer, sometimes the solution will be to redirect the student to a person or resource that can help them, such as the instructor or course syllabus. Sometimes the solution will be to guide the student in figuring out the answer on their own (more on this below). Other times, you are the most appropriate person to answer their question. In that case, tell the student you will get back to them with an answer later. You can then take the time to think about their question, discuss with other TAs or the course coordinator, review course documents, or look online. Once you have an answer, you can return to the student. If the question isn't time sensitive, you might even email them after the lab or tutorial session or talk to them in the following session.

Helping students find their own answers:

Another important part of answering questions is knowing when to not answer a question! It is often better to take the role of a guide or coach to help the student to find the answer on their own. You will be helping the student learn to be resourceful and independent. This is especially true for questions about course content that the student is currently being evaluated on. For example, students will often ask for clarification about assignment questions. While you want to help the student, you do not want to accidentally give away the answer!

In general, start by determining what the student already understands, and build from there. First ask the student questions to probe their understanding, then ask questions that will lead them in the right direction. Ask questions that will push the student to think through the problem on their own, with as little input from you as possible. You could ask questions such as:

- Can you rephrase the question in your own words?
- What do you already know about this topic?
- Which formula or concept could apply here?
- Have you seen a similar problem before?
- What information do you have and what information do you still need? How could you find the information you need?
- What's the first thing you might try to solve the problem?
- What strategy are you using right now? Why did you choose that approach?

It is okay to end the conversation without the student having found an answer yet. After giving them a gentle push in the right direction, you can ask them to think about it on their own and come back to you later if they still need help.

Although this type of approach is often best for fostering independence and deeper understanding, sometimes it's okay to simply provide a direct answer, especially if the question isn't about the course content or is time sensitive.

Repeated questions:

Finally, if you receive the same question multiple times, consider making an announcement to the whole class. You should also inform the instructor about recurring questions because it will help improve their teaching to know what the students are having trouble understanding.

Being proactive and available

When the students are busy working, it may not be obvious to you what you should be doing. You probably already know it would be inappropriate to work on your graduate thesis or other non-TA work, but what about sitting attentively at the front of the room and waiting for students to come to you if they need anything? The problem with this strategy is that you will only hear from students who realize they have a question and are willing to approach you with it. You will be unaware of many common issues: students who are doing something dangerous without realizing, students who are falling behind schedule, students who have questions but are too intimidated to approach you, etc.

Instead of sitting in one place, we recommend that you walk around the room, observing the students and giving guidance where it seems to be needed. As you walk around, look for students who are:

- Doing something dangerous
- Raising their hands
- Following instructions or protocols incorrectly
- Falling behind schedule
- Far ahead of schedule (Did they skip part of the instructions? Are they paying enough attention to detail?)
- Looking confused or frustrated

By circulating around the room, you are showing the students that you are available if they need anything. You are also helping to ensure the session runs smoothly and students are able to finish their work on time. Furthermore, in a lab environment, being aware of what is happening in all areas of the lab is important for ensuring student safety.

As you circulate the room and talk with students, this is a good opportunity to learn and practice the students' names. For many students, realizing that their TA knows their name builds an important connection that will support their learning. It will also help with your classroom management to be able to address students by name. You should also ensure the students know your name, such as by wearing a name tag for the first few weeks of the semester.

Classroom management

Your students are adults, and so they will generally behave appropriately with very little intervention. However, problems may arise from time-to-time. If anyone's safety is compromised, do not hesitate to contact McGill Security. If the classroom environment is severely disrupted by a student's behaviour, it is appropriate to ask the student to leave the classroom and to call Security if they refuse. In general, you should discuss any classroom management issues with the course coordinator so you can find solutions together.

The most important thing you can do to pre-empt problems and maintain a healthy learning environment for your lab or tutorial is to set the right tone. As a TA, you are the leader in the classroom, so a big part of setting the tone is modeling the qualities you want to encourage in the students. Model curiosity and a joy of learning by showing interest in the subject that you are teaching. Model patience, empathy, and respect by listening to your students and accommodating their needs whenever possible and reasonable. Your students will come from many different backgrounds and will not have the same level of knowledge or abilities. For example, many students will not know what a master's or PhD is. Interacting with the students and asking questions is a great way to encourage a culture of engagement.

Model professionalism by maintaining healthy boundaries with students and acting appropriately for a work environment. It is important to establish these boundaries from the beginning of the semester. There are serious ethical issues associated with forming too close a relationship with your students--especially if it is romantic in nature. This issue and important related issues are covered in your "It Takes All of Us" training, which is mandatory for TAs.

A common classroom management issue in labs or tutorials is students having trouble getting along with their lab partner or group members. Students might come to you to complain about their peers. If that happens, you should listen empathetically to them. Depending on your course's policy, you may be able to allow them to switch teams, or they may have to ask for permission from the lab coordinator or course coordinator. Ask the lab coordinator or course coordinator it you are unsure what to do.

Wrapping up the session

When you are planning your lab or tutorial session, do not neglect to plan the end of the session. Will you end with a group discussion? Will students be allowed to leave after they finish their work, or will you ask everyone to stay until the end of the scheduled time? Will students need to clean anything up? Ensure you pace the session so there is enough time for these closing activities.

The lab or tutorial session should never go beyond its scheduled time. This is important for respecting the students' time—some may have a class, job, or other responsibility scheduled immediately after. It is also important for respecting your own time—you are only paid for the scheduled lab or tutorial session time.

Sometimes, it will be easy to wrap up the session, and other times it may be more challenging. Students may want to stay longer to perfect their assignment answers or to start impromptu office hours by asking you questions. How can you help to ensure that the session ends on time? Here are some tips:

- Provide the students with a schedule for the session (such as on a whiteboard) that includes the approximate times by which students should have completed key tasks. When you reach important points in the schedule, make “time check” announcements to the class. For example, “It’s 2:45, so everyone should have put their sample in the incubator by now.”
- While you circulate the room, check in with students who are falling behind schedule and try to get them back on track.
- Consider developing an end-of-session routine to signal to the students that the session is ending. For example, you could lead a short class discussion about what was learned in the tutorial or walk around the lab to ask each student group whether they have any final questions for you.
- If there is an assignment due at the end of the lab or tutorial, remind the students that the course’s late policy will apply to any work submitted after the scheduled end time of the session.
- It is possible that, despite taking the measures discussed above, you will not have enough time to complete all the activities that were planned for the session. It is more important to end the session on time than it is to complete everything that was planned. Let the course coordinator know which activities were not completed.

You may have additional TA responsibilities after the session ends, especially if you are teaching a lab. Check your workload form and discuss with your course coordinator or lab coordinator to determine your responsibilities. For example, you may be asked to turn off equipment or put away teaching materials. Most TAs, whether they are running a lab or tutorial, will be expected to close the windows, turn off the lights, and close or lock the door.

Grading

Using a grading key or rubric

When grading, your objective is to give each assessment a score that fairly reflects how well the student demonstrated their achievement of the evaluated learning objectives. The score is usually in the form of a percentage, number of points, or letter from A to F.

The course coordinator should provide TAs with a rubric or answer key, which you will use to determine the grades. (If they do not provide a rubric or answer key, they should include time in your workload form for you to develop a rubric or answer key under their guidance.) The first step of grading is to carefully review the rubric or answer key and ask the course coordinator for clarification, if necessary. You want to have a good idea of what an ideal answer is before reading the ones the students submit. Next, read a few of the student's submissions to get a sense of how best to apply the rubric or answer key, and to get a sense of the answers you are likely to encounter. Finally, grade the students' work using the rubric or answer key.

Consistency and fairness are very important values when it comes to grading, so the grading key or rubric should be applied consistently to all students' work. Students should be evaluated on their performance and nothing else, such as their likeability or your mood—which is more easily said than done! Try to grade without taking the identity of the student into account. This might mean asking students to identify their work with their student ID rather than their names. Once you are done grading, it is a good idea to reread the first few assessments to verify they were marked in the same manner as later ones.

If applicable, it can be beneficial to coordinate grading with other TAs that are grading the same assessment. If you start by grading a few copies together, you can see if you have the same understanding of the answer key or rubric. It also gives you a chance to discuss any confusing parts of the assessment as a group and reach out to the course coordinator if necessary. With this knowledge, you can then grade the rest of your copies on your own. This type of coordination will also help make the grading more consistent and fairer.

Providing feedback

In addition to a grade, you will usually be asked to provide written feedback. Good feedback is important for students because it allows them to understand their mistakes and improve over time. It is also useful for you, as it will reduce the number of questions and complaints you receive from students.

Good feedback is:

- **Selective:** Choose one or two things that the student can focus on, rather than writing down everything you notice. In most cases, your feedback should be a few brief sentences, although you should ask the course coordinator what they are expecting for the specific assessment. A long lab report may require more feedback, while a short quiz may not require any. Focus on feedback that is actionable and relevant to the learning objectives of the course.
- **Descriptive:** Describe specific things you see in the assessment, rather than making low-evidence inferences or judging the student. Avoid saying "you", and instead refer to the assessment, especially when saying something critical.
- **Motivating:** If students feel attacked or overwhelmed, they may become discouraged. Keep your tone positive and encouraging and always include a comment about what the student did well.

Using myCourses or Crowdmark for grading

The format of the submitted work will vary from class to class. Sometimes you will be asked to grade paper copies and other times you will be asked to grade files submitted through an online platform, such as myCourses or Crowdmark. Writing a comprehensive guide on how to use these platforms for grading is beyond the scope of this Handbook. However, here are two sections from the information guide provided by TAP that are relevant if you want to learn more:

- Grading in myCourses
  - https://teachingkb.mcgill.ca/tlk/assess-assignments-in-mycourses
  - https://teachingkb.mcgill.ca/tlk/enter-grades-directly-in-the-grades-tool
- Grading in Crowdmark
  - https://teachingkb.mcgill.ca/tlk/collaborate-on-grading-with-crowdmark

PASL and students' rights.

At McGill, the assessment of student learning is governed by the Policy on the Assessment of Student Learning (PASL). For the most part, applying the policy correctly is the responsibility of the course coordinator and outside your responsibilities as a TA. However, you should be aware of its existence and may consider reading it if you are curious.

One PASL policy that may directly impact your work as a TA is the assessment of work in French. Policy 6.5 says,

> *Students shall be permitted to use either English or French in completing any assessment task, except for courses in which acquiring proficiency in a particular language is one of the learning outcomes, and in-class oral presentations.*

Therefore, students are allowed to submit their written work in French in any biology course. If you are fluent in French, then you can simply grade the work as usual. (The feedback can be written in English or French, as you prefer.) If you are not fluent in French, you will need to immediately inform the course coordinator if you receive work in French so they can find a solution. You should not ask someone not associated with the course to grade for you, nor should you discourage students from writing in French.

Managing your time

Timely feedback is easier to understand because the information is fresh in the students' minds, and it allows students to apply the feedback sooner. It is also fresh in your mind, making grading easier.

Usually, you will be expected to finish grading student work within one or two weeks of receiving it, but ask the course coordinator if you are unsure of the deadline. Submitting grades late can cause serious problems for students and the teaching team. If you take too long to provide grades and feedback to students, you may even violate University policies. For example, the students have the right to receive feedback before the course withdrawal deadline (PASL 5.3). Another important deadline is for the final grades of graduating students; their grades need to be in the system by a certain date so they can graduate.

Set aside the time you will need by checking your workload form to see how much time has been allocated to grading the assessment. Once you start grading, we highly recommend timing how long it takes to grade each assessment (Crowdmark does this automatically). Most likely, you will become faster after a few assessments. After grading a few assessments, compare how long it takes you to grade (per assessment) to the time allocated on the workload form.

What should you do if you are spending significantly longer than what is allocated? First, try to improve your efficiency:

- Avoid distractions. Find a quiet place to work, close your email, and put your phone on silent.
- Take regular short breaks to avoid fatigue and maintain focus. For example, try the Pomodoro technique.

- Be more selective with your feedback. Focus on one thing for the student to improve and one thing they did well and avoid writing detailed comments.
- Create a comment bank. If you find yourself giving the same feedback more than once, create a document where you can store comments and copy and paste them into your feedback. Crowdmark offers this feature.
- If the assessment is a series of questions, try grading by question instead of by assessment. For example, grade Question 1 for all students, then grade Question 2, etc.
- If applicable, talk with other TAs grading the same assessment to see if they have found a different way of grading that is more efficient.

After maximizing your efficiency, if you are still taking significantly longer to grade than the time allocated per assessment on the workload form, tell the course coordinator. They will need to find a solution. If a solution is not found or if you want additional support, contact your AGSEM delegate.

Returning work to students

Once you give students their grades and feedback, they will usually have questions. Sometimes they will simply ask for clarification, and other times they will be more argumentative. In the latter case, allow the student to share their concerns and ask questions to ensure you understand. In some courses, only the course coordinator is allowed to regrade assignments, in which case you will redirect the student to the course coordinator. If you are allowed to revise grades, avoid making any changes or decisions immediately, unless you made an obvious error, such as incorrectly adding their points. Tell the student you will think about their comments and get back to them. This will give you time to think without pressure and to discuss with other TAs or the course coordinator.

Avoid engaging in arguments with students; if the situation is becoming heated or the student is unsatisfied with your response, acknowledge their frustration. Remind them you are only able to follow the answer key or rubric given to you by the course coordinator. Let them know that they will need to contact the course coordinator if they want to further pursue the issue.

If a student complains to you about grades given by another TA, you should avoid commenting or overruling their grade. Direct the student to the TA who graded their work or the course coordinator, depending on the course policy.

Email and other contact hours

Setting expectations

Some courses may ask you to be available to students outside of lab or tutorial hours, such as by answering emails, checking the myCourses discussion board, or providing office hours. Check your workload form and talk with the course coordinator to know what is expected of you.

It is very important to ensure early in the semester that your students are aware of the correct process to contact you and what to expect from you. By setting clear expectations, you will avoid pressure from students that have unrealistic expectations, such as students showing up in your office unexpectedly or wanting an immediate answer to an email sent a few hours before a deadline. Provide your availabilities and limits as precisely as possible, for example by letting them know they can expect a delay of up to *x* business days for email responses and reminding them that you have other obligations in addition to TAing.

Not all courses will ask you to be available to students outside of the hours of the class or lab. If that is the case, the course coordinator and you should not give out your contact information, and in the syllabus it should be clear who they should contact instead. If you still receive emails from students, you should forward them to the course coordinator. If the problem is persistent, you or the course coordinator may need to remind students of the course's communication policy.

Answering emails

When you receive an email from a student, the first thing to do is to determine which type of answer is appropriate. In many cases, you can reduce your time spent on emails by simply replying that the student can talk to you during the next lab, tutorial, or office hours. There are also some questions that are beyond the scope of your duties, such as deadline extension requests. In such cases, you should forward the email to the course coordinator. In other cases, you will need to give a more detailed reply. Let the course coordinator know if you are spending more time per week on emails than is allocated in your workload form.

If you feel it would be more convenient or efficient than email, you can ask students to contact you on Teams or another McGill-supported communication channel. Just verify with the course coordinator first that it's okay with them.

Office hours

If you are providing office hours, the course coordinator will usually ask you for your availabilities at the beginning of the semester and provide your schedule on the syllabus. If office hours are not included in your workload form, do not meet with students outside of your designated hours.

To provide office hours, you will need an office. If you do not already have access to an appropriate space, inform the course coordinator. For everyone's comfort and safety, choose a room that is quiet but still in public view. To increase accessibility, consider providing online or hybrid office hours using teleconferencing software, such as Zoom or Teams, with the consent of the course coordinator.

Generally, you are not expected to prepare anything for the office hours. It is your responsibility to simply be available to students, who will come to you with questions. Discuss with the course coordinator their expectations for the office hours.

Student mental health

Students in crisis

It is possible that you will encounter a student in crisis in the course of your work as a TA. It is very important to maintain healthy boundaries by staying within your role as a TA. You are not a mental health care professional, nor is it part of your TA responsibilities to provide mental health care.

Keeping the limits of your role in mind, how should you respond if a student approaches you in distress? If you are faced with a student in need of immediate intervention who is a danger to themselves or others, then call 911 and McGill Security. If the situation is less urgent, inform the course coordinator as soon as possible. Then the course coordinator--or you, if you feel comfortable--will direct the student to appropriate support services (see the Mental Health Resources section below).

In some cases, you may find it helpful to apply the principles of mental health first aid to help a student in crisis. Keep in mind, however, that if no one is in immediate danger it is also entirely appropriate to alert the course coordinator to the problem and not engage further. There are five key actions in the Mental Health First Aid action plan, which you can remember with the acronym ALGEE:

- **A**pproach to determine if they are in crisis. If they may be at risk of suicide or harm, call 911 or 988 immediately.
- **L**isten non-judgementally.
- **G**ive reassurance and information, such as letting them know they're not alone and that you want to help them find support.
- **E**ncourage them to seek appropriate professional help. In many cases, the best option is to encourage the student to make an appointment with a Local Wellness Advisor or Access Advisor at the McGill Wellness Hub. Contacting a case manager at the Dean of Student's Office is also a very good option. You can even offer to help the student book an appointment online.
- **E**ncourage support and self-help strategies, such as helping them identify a family member or friend they can talk to and encouraging them to go home and rest if they are not well enough to finish the lab or tutorial.

You can read more about the ALGEE approach here. The "How to Help a Friend" videos from the McGill Wellness Hub may also be helpful; they provide information about how to recognize distress and take steps to help while protecting yourself. If you are interested, McGill offers Mental Health First Aid training.

Mental health resources

Below are resources for undergraduate and graduate McGill students who are seeking mental health services.

If you or someone else is currently experiencing a life-threatening emergency or crisis, please go to your local hospital emergency room or call 911.

Off-campus resources:

- Suicide Crisis Helpline: 988
- Info-Santé & Info-Social (to speak to a nurse or social worker): 811
- Tel-Aide (Montreal-based bilingual listening line): 1-877-935-1101
- GuardMe is a mental health counselling service, offered to students in partnership with SSMU and PGSS, that provides 24/7/365 access to licensed counsellors through telephone or mobile chat in over 60 languages with a diverse counsellors who understand your experience and the unique needs of your community (including 2SLGBTQ+, BI&POC, immigrant communities, international students, individuals with disabilities, veterans, and more). To access this service, download the TELUS Health Student Support app for Apple iOS or Android.

On-campus resources:

- This link from the Dean of Students Office provides a decision tree for selecting which on-campus resource is appropriate for a student in crisis.
- Student Wellness Hub offers several options for physical and mental health support.
- For mental health support at the Hub, a good starting point is to contact a Local Wellness Advisor (LWA). They are trained mental health clinicians embedded within faculties and serves to orient and connect you with the appropriate support resource –on-campus or off-campus—for your unique situation.
    - Fanny Gutierrez-Meyers is the LWA for the Faculty of Science
    - Devon Simpson is the LWA for Graduate Students
    - For urgent appointments, you may be able to make an appointment sooner with an Access Advisor.

Other common issues

Pre-existing relationships with students

It is possible that you may have a pre-existing relationship with a student (e.g. a friend, labmate, sibling, or romantic partner). Such relationships can lead to conflicts of interest or the appearance of conflicts of interest. Therefore, you should report any pre-existing relationships immediately to the course coordinator. They will then decide what to do, depending on the nature of the relationship and your TA duties. For example, you could be asked to TA a different section of the course.

SAA requests

Students who need academic accommodations, such as due to a learning disability, will register with the Student Accessibility & Achievement Office (SAA). They then make requests to the course coordinator for specific accommodations, such as deadline extensions. The course coordinator will decide what is reasonable and possible for the course and offer appropriate accommodation to the student. The AGSEM collective agreement (11.05) requires the course coordinator to inform you of any accommodations that could impact your responsibilities and duties, and to support you in implementing the accommodations. If a student asks you directly for an academic accommodation, tell them that you do not have the authority to grant accommodations and ask them to discuss their needs with the course coordinator. Any information shared with you about a student's accommodations or medical condition is confidential and must be kept private.

Students may also ask for non-academic accommodations. For example, they may ask you to increase the font size of your slides or to modify a lab protocol due to mobility limitations. Use your judgement or talk with the course coordinator or the SAA. If their request for non-academic accommodation is something you can reasonably grant without compromising the learning objectives of the course, go ahead and do so.

Academic honesty

Issues related to academic honesty, such as cheating and plagiarism, must be dealt with following McGill's protocols. As a TA, it is not your role to penalize students for suspected academic dishonesty. Instead, grade the work as you usually would and inform the course coordinator of any suspicions you may have. You should describe the incident and provide the pertinent evidence to them by email. They will then contact the disciplinary officers who will use the information you provide to decide how to address the alleged academic dishonesty.

You can also be proactive and encourage academic integrity among your students. Especially for 100- and 200-level courses, remind students about the importance of properly citing sources. For exams and quizzes, do what you can to make cheating difficult, such as spacing students apart and staying alert when invigilating.

Generative AI

Use of generative AI such as ChatGPT is not directly regulated by McGill policy and is left to the discretion of instructors. The policy for your course may be provided in the course syllabus. If it is not, ask the course coordinator. Regardless of the course policy, students are always responsible for following McGill's guidelines on academic integrity. This includes providing credit for any ideas that are not their own, including ideas from generative AI.

If generative AI is forbidden by the course policy, you may be tempted to use AI detection software to catch students who are using generative AI. However, such detection software is discouraged by McGill and will not be accepted as evidence by disciplinary officers. If you suspect a student used generative AI, discuss your concerns with the course coordinator. Using generative AI without credit is a form of academic dishonesty, so it is not your role to penalize students.

What about TAs using generative AI to help them grade? McGill has no official policy on this either. However, do not use generative AI to grade without obtaining the course coordinator's permission and carefully considering the risks involved:

1. You would need to consider the students' and course coordinator's data privacy. This risk could be mitigated by using the secure version of Copilot, which is approved for use at McGill.
2. Generative AI can fabricate information, so you would need to verify all content to confirm that it is accurate.
3. To model academic integrity, the best practice is to inform students that generative AI was used in evaluating their work. If students were to find out that generative AI was used without their knowledge, it could seriously undermine their trust in the fairness of the evaluation process and their own commitment to academic integrity.

Leaves and absences

The AGSEM collective agreement governs your right to leaves and absences. You are entitled to parental, medical, and bereavement leaves, in addition to leaves for academic conferences, comprehensive exams, and thesis defences. The collective agreement contains the information that you need to know about requesting these leaves. In general, you should let the course coordinator know at the beginning of the semester or as soon as possible about any leaves you will need.