Department of Economics

TA Handbook

2018 – 2019
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Introduction

Teaching assistants are essential to undergraduate education at McMaster. This employment opportunity with McMaster as a teaching assistant offers you unique opportunities and experiences. You will fill a number of important roles, from leading class discussions and marking assignments, consulting and corresponding with students, facilitating help sessions and invigilating tests. Whatever role you fill, your work is very important to the success of the students and instructors you work with. So that you may confidently fulfill your role, this guide aims to provide you with some strategies for fostering an inclusive and dynamic teaching environment and familiarize you with McMaster policies.

Department Contacts
Graduate Administrator
905 525-9140, ext. 24731
econgrd@mcmaster.ca

Alok Johri
Graduate Chair
905-525-9140 ext. 23830
econgrdchair@mcmaster.ca

Before You Begin

Please arrange a meeting with your course instructor before or at the start of the course. Ensure that you have provided the instructor with up-to-date contact information. The instructor will explain your specific duties, the relationship between tutorials and lectures, assign specific tutorial times, and outline the expectations for your contract. At this time an Hours of Work contract will be completed and signed by you and your supervisor (the instructor). See Appendix 1 for the Hours of Work form. The contract outlines what you are expected to do in the expected hours of work for which you are being paid each term, and also when during the term you should expect to be working more than the average of 10 hours per week.

If you are having difficulty completing tasks in the time assigned in the contract, you must contact the course instructor immediately. He or she will offer advice or, in some cases, adjust your contract. If you are not satisfied with the response, you should contact the Chair of the Graduate Studies Committee. It is important that you talk with your course instructor to discuss expectations and purpose for the upcoming year. For example, what
are the instructor’s expectations for your role? In addition to the grading deadlines, what other responsibilities do you have as a TA in this course? It is important to identify the instructor’s expectations of YOU as a TA. These may include, for example, exam invigilation, tutorial preparation, extra tutorials or tutoring, attending specific lectures or providing input (proof reading or contributions) into the design of assignments. The answer will influence what you do, your teaching style and choice of teaching methods.

Please ensure that you will be available on the specific days at the specific times your supervisor will need you. Do not wait until the last minute to inform your instructor that you are unavailable to lead tutorials, conduct test reviews, and invigilate, etc. because you have class at the same time. If you are assigned to a particular course but cannot meet the availability requirements, you may have to be reassigned to a different course; this needs to be done early in the term before most TAs begins their duties. In some cases, if you cannot meet your responsibilities, you may be given different tasks to perform to meet your required hours compared to other TAs for the same course.

**Regulations and Procedures**

**Conduct/Professionalism**

- Your Hours of Work form is a contract, so please uphold it as a legal document and refer back to it when necessary. As a TA you have an employment relationship with the Department and University, governed by a Collective Agreement between the University and the Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 3906, Unit 1, that outlines your rights and responsibilities. If you are in doubt of your rights as an employee you should consult the collective agreement or a union representative.

- Respond to emails promptly. You must use your McMaster email address in all email communication with your supervisor and with students.

-Courtesy is important when communicating with students, your supervisor, other instructors, or office staff.

- There is no dress code policy; however, professional attire is expected.

- Students will find you approachable since you are a student yourself, but it is important to maintain boundaries and behave professionally.

**Health and Safety**

Your Hours of Work form will reveal that you need to complete health and safety training before you can begin working as a TA or invigilator. There are SIX required training modules that you must complete. The training is available online, and involves following a set of PowerPoint slides, and printing a form which includes a brief test and a place for
signatures. The key to health and safety is that employers must be able to document that employees have taken the appropriate training, should there be an audit or a mishap. It takes an average of 20 minutes per module (at the most), except the orientation, which might take 30-40 minutes. In total, this training (140 minutes) will be credited on your hours of work form.

2. Office WHIMS [http://cll.mcmaster.ca/eohss/officeWHMIS.htm](http://cll.mcmaster.ca/eohss/officeWHMIS.htm)
4. Ergonomics [http://cll.mcmaster.ca/eohss/ergonomics.htm](http://cll.mcmaster.ca/eohss/ergonomics.htm)
5. Asbestos Awareness [http://cll.mcmaster.ca/eohss/asbestos.htm](http://cll.mcmaster.ca/eohss/asbestos.htm)
8. Due Diligence [http://cll.mcmaster.ca/eohss/dd.htm](http://cll.mcmaster.ca/eohss/dd.htm)

**TA Evaluations**

In accordance with the collective agreement, supervisors and TAs will meet to discuss this written evaluation. At the end of this discussion, each will sign the completed form. The signed form will be submitted to the graduate administrative assistant. The TA will receive a copy of the signed evaluation form (within 8 weeks of submission) and the original will be placed in the TA’s employment file. These evaluations will not affect a student’s academic standing.

Note that if supervisors wish to evaluate TAs during a review session, tutorial, workshop or some other in-class session, the supervisor must give the TA at least 3 days’ notice.

See Appendix 2 for a copy of the Teaching Assistant Evaluation form.

**Invigilating Tests**

Invigilating is an important responsibility. Please remember that students are writing under stress. You should discuss expectations with the course instructor before the test begins. Some potential questions include:

1. When and how can students enter the room?
2. How are test papers to be placed on the desks?
3. How much time do students have?
4. Any special instructions?
5. What to do if there is a problem with the test: how can the instructor be reached during the test, will there be a seating plan, etc.?
6. How does the instructor define “academic dishonesty?”
7. What to do if I identify cheating?
8. Will the instructor follow up on the cases that you find, or will this be your responsibility?

The most important part of your job as an invigilator is being observant for any possible cheating or academic dishonesty. There are a few things you can do in the exam room to discourage cheating and catch cheating when it occurs:

- If you can’t set up the test room beforehand, hand out papers row by row and watch to ensure students don’t rummage through the papers looking for particular version numbers. Have students remove covers from calculators and remove pencil cases from desks. Make sure they place these well out of access.

- If a student asks to leave to use the bathroom, make sure they do not have a cell phone on them. Record their name, the time they leave the room, and the time they return (announce the bathroom policy at the start of the test). Only one student should be absent from the test room at a time.

- We try to ensure that there will be more than one invigilator in every room. If you are temporarily left on your own, wait until your colleague returns to answer any student questions (cheaters will often wait for invigilators to be distracted before they make their move). If you are the only invigilator, try not to turn your back to the majority of students and don’t spend too much time with any particular student.

- Circulate through the room – the best way to detect cheating is from the back.

- Scrutinize authorized exam aids (calculators, etc.)

- Confiscate and do not return unauthorized aids with writing on them. If the student has written on his person or clothing, copy down what you can before it can be washed off. If you have a cell phone, take a photo of the evidence. Get their name and student number immediately (sometimes they try to sneak out rather than face the consequences).

- Document suspicious behaviour in as much detail as possible and report it to your supervisor.

- Do not prevent students suspected of cheating from completing the test. Rather, have them physically move and allow them to finish. The investigation and decision regarding the suspected cheating may be conducted following the test.

- Pick up tests from students’ desks where possible (otherwise wait for them at the end of their row and collect their paper there – this minimizes disruption of other students)

**What to Look For**

- Extreme physical stress, constantly looking around anywhere but at their paper
- Overdressed for a very warm room (places to hide cheat sheets)
- Long bathroom breaks (if possible check bathrooms ahead of time for hidden notes; take their phones from them before they leave the room and always escort them there and back)
- Lap activity (some students use their calculators on their lap but this is also a good place for phones)
- Constantly lifting up test pages (there could be a cheat sheet hidden between pages)
- Constantly taking off and putting a hat back on (it could have notes in it)

**How to Grade Tests/Papers**

You should discuss expectations with the course instructor before the course begins. Some potential questions include:

1. What is the overall weighting scheme for the course?
2. What software (if any) will be used to tabulate grades?
3. When must marks for labs and/or assignments be submitted?
4. Will you be responsible for entering the grades and for making grade changes?
5. How should you deal with grade complaints?
6. How should you weigh factors such as neatness, grammar, and clarity of writing in grading assignments and/or lab reports?
7. Does the instructor have an expected average (i.e., class average of 65%) or a specific distribution of grades (i.e., normal distribution)?
8. What is the purpose of the assignment/lab? (If you know WHY students are doing a particular activity, you can assist them beforehand more easily, and it provides you with a basis for deciding unclear grade issues).
9. What is the policy for late or missed assignments?

**McMaster Grading Scale**

McMaster University operates under a 12-point grade scale. You may be required to give grades as a percentage out of 100 or as a letter grade. Check with your course instructor before you begin grading to ensure that you are using the preferred method. Use this chart if you need to convert percentage grades to letter grades (or to check how the percentage or letter converts to a grade point):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Equivalent Grade Point</th>
<th>Equivalent Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>90 – 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Academic Dishonesty during Grading

The most common form of academic dishonesty is plagiarism. In order to more easily detect academic dishonesty while grading assignments, be specific about citation expectations and refer students to related library resources. For instance, the McMaster University Library has created electronic guides pertaining to some of the more common citation standards:

http://library.mcmaster.ca/guides/apa-style-guide,
http://library.mcmaster.ca/guides/mla-style-guide,

Provide guidelines as to the types of electronic resources that are acceptable for use in course work (i.e. no Wikipedia, only specified databases or scholarly journals, etc.)

You can make use of instructor resources such as Turnitin.com, the plagiarism detection software service to which the University subscribes, but be sure to contact the Office of Academic Integrity first for account details and instructions. If you have any other questions, you can refer the class to the Academic Integrity Office’s student portal for information about what constitutes academic dishonesty and tools to test one’s Academic Integrity IQ: http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity/students/index.html

Effective Feedback is....

1. Prompt: If you want your feedback to feel relevant to your students you will need to provide them with it as soon as possible. Providing students with quick feedback gives them time to think about your suggestions and talk to you about them before they begin working on their next assignment; it also gives you ample opportunity to teach skills or techniques you noticed everyone seemed to have trouble with.

2. Specific: When suggesting something a student should work on and when praising, feedback should be specific. If you tell a student that something is “good” or “bad” they will likely be unsure about what exactly they have done well or poorly. In contrast, by
specifying what specifically they have done the student will either know what to correct or repeat for next time.

3. Constructive (or Future Oriented): There is nothing wrong with advising students that they have completed an assignment incorrectly or misused a formula or theory. However, when you alert students to a mistake it is important to let them know what they should do differently next time, or what steps they can take between this assignment and the next one, if they want to achieve a better result.

4. Objective: To ensure that you are not biased one way or the other when marking a student assignment, it is a good idea to ask students to use their student number to identify their work. Describing what was done (or not done) rather than why the student did it is another important aspect of objectivity. Likewise, feedback that focuses on what the “assignment did” or the “essay did not do” rather than what “you did” or what “the student did not do” will help prevent defensive reactions when students read your feedback.

5. Relevant: Some assignments you mark will have dozens of things “wrong”. It is important to focus on one or two aspects of the assignment that you think the student needs to work on immediately, rather than cataloguing all of the errors. This is important both because you do not have time when marking to give detailed and constructive feedback on all the errors, and because your student may feel overwhelmed by suggestions if you list everything. Similarly, make sure you are evaluating the aspects of the assignment that you told students you would be marking. If you told your students you would not be marking their use of citations, then feedback on their citations is irrelevant (for that assignment).

Grading Quickly and Fairly
Now that you know what qualities make feedback effective it is worth considering how to give this feedback quickly and fairly.

1. Start by skimming 10-15 tests to get a sense of how students have answered the questions.

2. Grade one question (or one page) at a time – it is easier to be consistent this way.

3. Go over the answer key carefully before you begin. If you notice that a disproportionate number of students are giving the same wrong answers, check the answer key to ensure it is correct.

4. If they leave space after their answer, draw a line through the space. This will prevent students adding to their answers after tests are returned and bringing them back for more marks.
5. Use a rubric or sample assignment. Work through the rubric as you mark and total the marks to determine the overall grade. By using a rubric you will have an easier time explaining to students why they received the mark they did as you can clearly show them the parts of the assignment they had trouble with or did well on. Finally, using a rubric will help ensure that you mark consistently.

6. Part Marks: Your rubric or sample assignment may detail what you will give marks for, but it may not clearly explain under what conditions you will give “part marks.” Consider this before you begin marking and assign “part marks” consistently.

7. Group Assignments or Questions: If you are marking essays, group essays according to topic. Mark all of one topic at one time. This will help save you time and will also ensure that you grade the problems fairly as you will more likely remember under what conditions you gave out part marks or deducted marks. You may also be more likely to detect academic dishonesty by grouping assignments and problem sets.

8. Class Feedback: If you notice that more than three students have made the same error or the same kind of error, you might stop writing specific and constructive feedback and simply note that you will discuss the particular problem with the class. When you address the class point out the error was common and then given detailed instructions on how to improve for next time.

9. Use a timer: As a teaching assistant you work 130 hours a term, depending on how much of this time has been allotted to marking you may find you need to mark very quickly. If you use a timer you can ensure that you give each student as much time as you can, while adhering to your 130 hours. If the timer goes off and you have not reached the end of the assignment you might stop writing feedback and work as quickly as you can to reach the end of the assignment and assign a grade.

How To Conduct Tutorials

Most economics courses do not have tutorial sessions, but some do. Discuss the format of the tutorial with the course instructor – will you be primarily teaching, leading discussion sessions, or reviewing problem sets? You can also request that the instructor sit in and supervise one of your first tutorials and give helpful feedback for improvement.

Some steps to effectively prepare for your tutorial:

1. Read the assigned material and make note of any difficult passages or concepts.
2. Determine what the key concepts or skills are that you will teach or discuss in the tutorial.
3. Prepare an explanation of difficult ideas or write down a question that relates to key concepts that you could use to start a discussion.
4. Write a lesson plan that includes what instructional activities you will use in the tutorial and how long each activity will take.
5. Arrive to your tutorial early to make sure you have all necessary materials ready.

Some steps to effectively lead your tutorial:

1. Learn student names and use them to invite students to join the discussion or to give a response to a question.
2. If possible, arrange the classroom furniture in a way that helps facilitate a discussion (i.e. a circle of chairs is more conducive to conversation than rows).
3. Begin each tutorial with a brief outline of what you will cover in that particular session. If you let students know what to expect they will likely relax and more freely participate.
4. If a student gives an incorrect answer to a question try to avoid telling them they are “wrong.” Instead advise them the answer they have given is incorrect, but that you are interested in finding out how they arrived at that answer. This will encourage students to participate even if they are not sure whether their answer is “right” or not, because they know that you are interested in finding out their thought process, and not just the end result.
5. Aim to begin and end your tutorial on time.

**Holding Office Hours**

When you complete your “Hours of Work: form you will determine, along with your course instructor, whether and how often you will hold office hours. The instructor may determine the time and location of your office hours, or you may decide for yourself. Once you have determined where and when your office hours will be held announce your office hours to your class, distribute a handout with your office location and hours, post them on the Avenue course website, post them on your office door and send the hours out to your students by email (see Emails). You may need to occasionally adjust your hours or agree to meet students “by appointment” if there are students who cannot attend your scheduled hours.

You may notice a sharp increase in office hour attendance immediately before and after a test or an assignment is due. Advise students whether or not your office hours will be extended during these busier periods. Only extend your office hours if you have allotted the time to do so in your Hours of Work form.

During your office hours keep your office door open. When a student arrives greet them warmly and invite them to sit down. Once they are comfortable, ask them what brings them
to your office. Listen carefully to their concern or question and respond appropriately. If you do not know an answer to a question advise the student that you will find out and let them know. Schedule your office hours in a location with frequent foot traffic and be sure to set your office hours during normal business hours.

If you feel uncomfortable during your office hours for any reason, you may ask the student – politely – to leave and schedule a meeting with the student, the course instructor, and yourself at a later date. If you feel threatened, call Campus Security 905-525-9140 x24281 or dial 88 from a university phone.

These are some topics you may cover during your office hours:

- Explanation of an assignment grade or grading criteria
- Clarification of a course concept or research method
- Discussion of professional development in your field (i.e. how can the student become an economist??)
- Discussion of the teaching methods used in tutorials
- Conversations about the structure and format of an assignment
- Discussion of thesis statements and essay outlines

These are some topics that are inappropriate for discussion in office hours:

- Other students’ work or behaviour
- The course instructor or his/her teaching style or his/her organization of the course or his/her assignment schedule
- The content/format of the exam (unless specifically directed by the course instructor)
- Editing or proof-reading of upcoming assignments

These are some topics that are discretionary:

- Your personal experiences related, or unrelated, to the subject matter
- The student’s personal experiences

**Email Communications**

Emailing students can take a lot of time. To save time and frustration set an email policy before the term begins. If you are unsure about your policy, check with the course instructor. Advise students of your email policy in the first class and distribute this policy on a handout.
Your email policy might include:

- When you will respond to emails: advise students when you will check the course email (e.g. Tuesday and Thursday) and that they can expect a response from that point within two business days.

- When you will not respond to emails: You may decide not to respond to emails 24 hours before an assignment is due or 24 hours after an assignment is due in order to avoid last-minute or emotional emails. You must tell your students if this is your policy, and remind them well before the assignment is due and when the assignment is handed back.

- What kinds of questions you will respond to by email: You may advise students that you will only answer “yes or no” questions by email and that if they require a detailed response or discussion they should come meet with you during your office hours. Or you can include a “five sentence rule” which states that you will only answer emails that can be responded to in fewer than five sentences.

- How you will protect the privacy of student email address: Assure your students that you will use the “Blind Carbon Copy” (BCC) function when sending group emails. This function ensures that only you see individual student email addresses.

- McMaster Addresses: McMaster University’s communication policy stipulates that all academic correspondence must originate from a McMaster email account. Advise students that you will not respond to emails that originate from non-McMaster addresses (e.g. butterfly_friend@hotmail.com).

- You may instead wish to answer student emails using the Avenue email system (if your instructor uses Avenue for their course). Avenue is McMaster’s learning management system – the course website. Ask your instructor to add you the Avenue. There you can see the course from a TA’s perspective and this can help you prepare weekly for tutorials, office hours, etc.
### Additional Resources

- **MacPherson Institute**
  - [http://mi.mcmaster.ca/](http://mi.mcmaster.ca/)

- **CUPE 3906**
  - [http://www.cupe3906.org](http://www.cupe3906.org)

- **Graduate Students Association**
  - [http://www.mcmaster.ca/gsa](http://www.mcmaster.ca/gsa)

- **Accessibility at McMaster**
  - [http://www.mcmaster.ca/accessibility](http://www.mcmaster.ca/accessibility)

- **Centre for Student Development**
  - [http://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/](http://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/)

- **International Student Services**
  - [https://iss.mcmaster.ca/](https://iss.mcmaster.ca/)

- **Classroom Audio Visual Services**
  - [http://library.mcmaster.ca/cavs](http://library.mcmaster.ca/cavs)

- **University Technology Services**
  - [http://www.mcmaster.ca/uts](http://www.mcmaster.ca/uts)

- **Ombuds Office**
  - [http://www.mcmaster.ca/ombuds](http://www.mcmaster.ca/ombuds)

- **Human Rights and Equity Services**
  - [http://www.mcmaster.ca/hres](http://www.mcmaster.ca/hres)

- **McMaster Libraries**
  - [http://library.mcmaster.ca](http://library.mcmaster.ca)

- **English as a Second Language Support**
  - [http://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/students/academic-skills/english-language-support.html](http://studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/students/academic-skills/english-language-support.html)
Appendix 1

APPENDIX “B”: HOURS OF WORK FORM

The parties agree that this Appendix sets out the fields of information to be included in the “Hours of Work” Form.

The course instructor and the employee are to fill out this form in accordance with 12.03. If changes are required to this form or additional hours are required they are to follow the process in Article 12.04.

Academic Term(s): ______________ Start Date: ______________ (if not beginning of term)

Department/School/Unit of Employment: ______________ Course Name & Number: ______________

Employee Name: ______________ E-Mail Address: ______________

Employment Supervisor: ______________ E-Mail Address: ______________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Check Classification</th>
<th>&quot;A&quot; Employees holding an Undergraduate Degree</th>
<th>&quot;B&quot; Employees not holding an Undergraduate Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Details - Include nature of tasks and expectations of grading indicate any weeks where the projected workload is likely to vary from an average of 10 hours.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Leading Tutorials/Overseeing Laboratories/Field Trip Supervision
2. Student Counselling (Email, Office Hours)
3. Grading (Marking, Entering Marks)
4. Preparation (Reading, Attending, Lectures, Meeting with Instructors)
5. Invigilating
6. Other

Hours of Work (check one)
- ☐ 32 - 130 specify number _______ = 3 (Health and Safety Training and Orientation as per Letter of Understanding)
- ☐ 131 - 260 specify number _______ = 6 (Health and Safety Training and Orientation as per Letter of Understanding)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Required Health and Safety Training Courses</th>
<th>Completed? Y/N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asbestos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ergonomics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire Safety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHMNS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slip, Trips and Falls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We acknowledge that we have discussed duties and anticipated hours of work as above.

Employee’s Signature: __________________ Date: ______________

Employment Supervisor’s Signature: __________________ Date: ______________

In the event of a conflict between the contents of this form and the Collective Agreement, the Collective Agreement shall prevail.

Comments: Original forms for employees, copies to Department (in Health Sciences, “Department” is the Health Sciences Graduate Student Office, CSWE, and supervisor). A hard copy must be sent to the Union office, normally on or before October 15th for assignments in fall term; February 15th for assignments in winter term; May 15th for assignments in the spring/summer term. If the commencement of duties is later than the above, the HOB form will be sent to the Union office within 3 business days after completion by the employment supervisor and employee.

If you require this information in an alternate/accessible format, please contact Nina Bovair, Employee/Labour Relations Administrator at extension 23850.
### Teaching Assistant Evaluation

**McMaster University**  
**Department of Economics**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Behaviour</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Knowledge of Content</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Demonstrates authoritative, leader-like qualities  
Examples and comments: | | 1. Comprehensive knowledge of subject area and effectively communicates content to students  
Examples and comments: | |
| | | | |
| 2. Demonstrates appropriate interactions with students: courteous, enthusiastic, patient, respectful, fair, and confidential  
Examples and comments: | | 2. Able to provide clear explanations in response to student questions and if unable to answer question, responds in a proactive manner (they will look into it, get back to them)  
Examples and comments: | |
| | | | |
| 3. Organized  
Examples and comments: | | | |
| | | | |
| Other Duties | Evidence | | |
| 1. Competently grades student work and in a timely fashion  
Examples and comments: | | | |
| 2. Timely email correspondence  
Examples and comments: | | | |
| 3. Follows protocol during test invigilation  
Examples and comments: | | | |
| 4. Available for assigned tasks  
Examples and comments: | | | |

### B. Overall Comments

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

TA’s Signature: ____________________________________________________________  
Instructor’s Signature: ________________________________________________________  
Date: ____________________________