

Supervising and Mentoring Graduate Teaching Assistants

Teaching Assistants are indispensable to undergraduate instruction in History. They enhance the Department's teaching culture and support faculty as leaders of discussion sections, as graders, as guest lecturers, and as the primary contact for students in office hours. Undergraduates benefit from the classroom skills and mentoring of Teaching Assistants. TAs also allow the History Department to expand enrollments in high-demand lecture courses, such as *HIST 192: Global History since 1500*, while still assigning significant writing and holding meaningful discussions of readings and course materials.

Preparation for university teaching is an important part of graduate student education. All PhD students serve as Teaching Assistants in their second year and in the spring semester of their third year. Not until this final semester as TAs do doctoral students take *HIST 705: Teaching History*, which prepares them to offer their own courses. Individual faculty supervisors thus play a crucial role in training and mentoring TAs as they learn to lead discussion, grade, and work with undergraduates.

The role of Teaching Assistant comes with many challenges. Many Ph.D. students have only recently completed their undergraduate degrees and are anxious about their new instructional roles. Many have not taught before or even taken classes that incorporated TAs. Moreover, TAs can find it difficult to balance teaching with their own coursework and preparing for comprehensive exams. They struggle, as do faculty, with work/life balance and with navigating the potentially uncomfortable power dynamic between lead instructor and TA.

These guidelines help facilitate a trusting and mutually beneficial relationship between faculty supervisors and TAs. The Director of Undergraduate Studies is also a useful resource for faculty in all matters relating to instruction and TA training.

Expectations of Teaching Assistants

TAs are expected to act professionally and responsibly in order to represent the Department of History to the larger William & Mary community and to meet the needs of the undergraduates.

1. TAs should recognize that faculty supervisors are the main authority on matters related to:
 - Syllabus design and course content
 - Grading policies
 - Class management
 - All other grading and classroom issues

2. TAs are expected to be present and on time for all lectures and discussion sections. If they have to miss a lecture or discussion, they must communicate with the professor about this as early as possible. Absences should occur only in the case of an emergency; TAs should not make travel plans or take on other optional commitments during class time. TAs are expected to be available on campus throughout the semester and the exam period.

3. TAs are expected to check their email regularly and respond to emails from undergraduate students and from the faculty supervisor in a timely manner.
4. TAs are expected to make themselves available to the students during scheduled weekly, in-person office hours. If they need to cancel their office hours for any reason, they should communicate this to the faculty supervisor and the students as early as possible.
5. TAs are expected to treat all undergraduate students, fellow TAs, and faculty supervisors respectfully and professionally both in person and in writing.
6. TAs are expected to grade assignments in a timely manner by a deadline set by the faculty supervisor when the assignment is due. To grade and lead discussions knowledgeably, TAs must complete all readings assigned to undergraduates in a given course.

Expectations of Faculty Supervisors

Faculty supervisors should encourage a culture of professionalism and respect through their interactions with TAs and undergraduates.

Faculty supervisors are responsible for the continuous and conscientious training, mentoring, and supervising of TAs. The Director of Undergraduate Studies is a useful resource in this.

1. Faculty supervisors are expected to participate in the orientation held for TAs before the start of the fall semester. Led by the Director of Undergraduate Studies, this session should include strategies and best practices for leading discussion and grading exams, papers, and class participation, as well as information about academic integrity and teaching-adjacent matters, such as how to respond to advising inquiries and recommendation requests.
2. Faculty supervisors should consider sharing a draft syllabus with TAs a week before classes start. In some upper-division courses, faculty may have greater flexibility to collaborate with TAs in course design, for example, by soliciting feedback on deadlines or readings.
3. Faculty supervisors should hold weekly meetings with all TAs to discuss course content, grading policies and procedures, and all other matters related to the course. If applicable, these meetings should clarify expectations for weekly discussion sections and identify what discretion TAs have to plan and design materials for their sections.
4. By the day an assignment is due, faculty are expected to provide TAs with well-defined grading policies, procedures, and course standards. Rubrics, guidelines, and grading workshops can facilitate coordination across sections, ensuring a more equitable undergraduate experience.
5. Faculty supervisors are expected to review some of each TA's graded work for each assignment to assure the appropriateness of the grades assigned and the helpfulness of the feedback provided.
6. Faculty supervisors are expected to set deadlines for returning graded assignments. When setting deadlines, faculty supervisors should be mindful that TAs have multiple academic,

professional, and personal responsibilities beyond their obligations to the course for which they serve as TAs.

7. Faculty supervisors are expected to be accessible to TAs over email and/or telephone/text.

Conflict Resolution

In cases where faculty are concerned a TA is not performing to the expectations set out in these guidelines, or when a TA believes a faculty supervisor is not meeting expectations, the matter should first be addressed through a conversation between the TA and the faculty member. If this discussion fails to provide a resolution, the Director of Undergraduate Studies should be consulted as the head of undergraduate instruction in the department. The department Chair is also available for mediation if the conflict cannot be resolved through reference to the standards offered in these guidelines.

Evaluating TAs

Faculty supervisors should provide TAs with feedback on their performance that includes suggestions for improvement. In courses with separate discussion sections, the faculty supervisor should visit a section taught by each TA and write an evaluation that is submitted to the department Chair to be placed in the graduate student's file. If the faculty member thinks that it would be beneficial to the TA, the faculty member may want to meet with each TA to discuss the written evaluation. These evaluations should be mindful that graduate students are new instructors with varying degrees of confidence. The goal of TA evaluation is to improve performance through positive reinforcement and judicious constructive criticism.

In courses without separate discussion sections, TAs should be offered the opportunity to lead discussion regularly or guest lecture once or twice a semester. Faculty supervisors should provide similar written feedback and a follow-up conversation for TAs in these courses, as well.

When possible, Teaching Assistants should receive their own student evaluations. Each discussion section of a blow-up lecture course has its own evaluations, in addition to the evaluations completed for the lead instructor. In large lectures without separate discussion sections, TAs may institute informal evaluations tailored to each TA's specific role in the course.