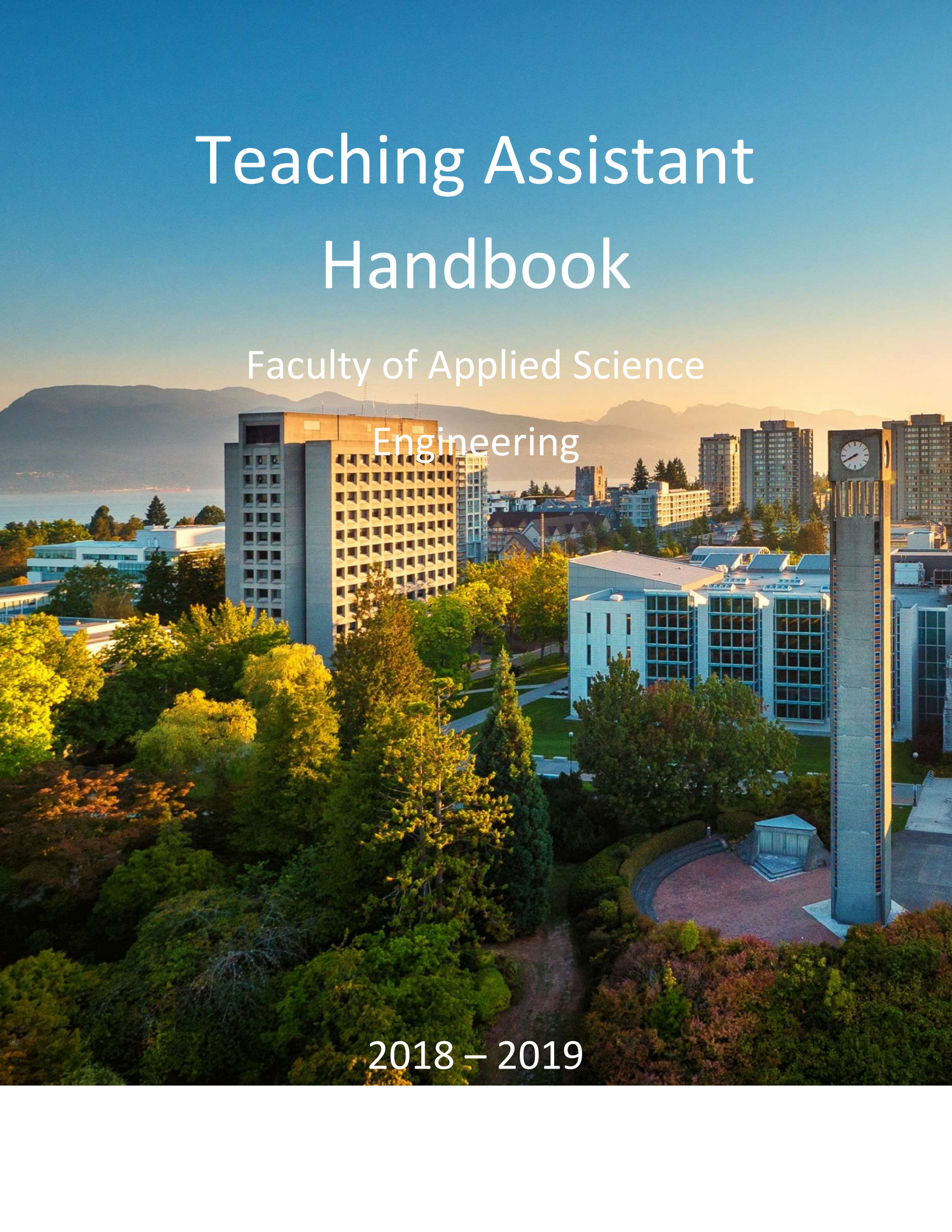


# Teaching Assistant Handbook

Faculty of Applied Science

Engineering

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## A Quick Word...

Congratulations on your Teaching Assistant (TA) appointment within the Engineering Department! As a TA you are often the direct point of contact for undergraduate students and their coursework, and who students interact with most. Whether you are teaching tutorials, marking assignments and exams, facilitating lab experiments, or helping to guide project groups, students are relying on you to make a difference in their education. Although your position can be challenging at times, it can also be extremely rewarding knowing you made a real impact on students' learning.

This handbook is meant to be a quick access guide to help you in some of the more common situations you may encounter, as well as provide easy access to resources should you find yourself in need. UBC's Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Technology has plenty of further resources to support you including a very comprehensive Resource Guide. We did not want to simply reproduce the guide here, but would encourage you to have a look through it, available here:

<http://ctl.ubc.ca/resources/teaching/teaching-assistants/>

All Teaching Assistants at UBC are part of a union, known as CUPE 2278. The union negotiates your working conditions with UBC's Administration and Human Resources, and are regulated through a collective agreement which guarantees conditions such as wages, hours worked, job security, and benefits. If you run into a conflict with the course instructor during your TA appointment, you can contact CUPE 2278 for guidance and assistance. The full details on the collective agreement are available on the website, so won't be addressed in detail here. Please visit [cupe2278.ca](http://cupe2278.ca) for more info.

Good luck, and most importantly have fun! Being a TA can be fun and exciting, and not to mention an excellent opportunity for your own learning and personal growth. Make the most of it!

This handbook is under continuous development, so if you have a suggestion for something that may be missing and should be included in next year's handbook, please email: [gradprog@apsc.ubc.ca](mailto:gradprog@apsc.ubc.ca)

# Difficult Situations

## *Ground Rules*

Otherwise known as 'Group Expectations' or 'Group Agreements', Ground Rules can be very effective at preventing problems before they occur, by agreeing on a set of rules together (teacher and class) during the first day. Students understand they are here to learn, and will often volunteer suggestions for 'rules' that will enhance their learning environment, such as 'respect other people's opinions' or 'no stupid questions'. Give students a chance to come up with some on their own, then try offering up some rules that you feel enhance the learning environment, such as 'arrive on time – this applies to both students and teachers!' and 'quiet when the teacher is talking'.

Try coming up with a set of ground rules on your own, that are important to your own particular TA position, so you have an idea of how these ground rules may look. It is important, however, to construct these rules *with* the students. When students have input and help to make the rules, they are more likely to abide by them, and they won't feel like the TA is trying to restrict them.

Ground rules become particularly useful as the term goes on. If you feel like things are starting to drift from an ideal learning environment, you can revisit the ground rules to remind the students what everyone agreed upon. For example, if students are not arriving on time, and that was one of the rules, you can point out that this isn't fair to the students who are showing up on time, and you can also point out things you have held up as a TA – ending on time, answering student emails within an agreed upon time, etc.

## *Possible Responses to Negative/Discriminatory Statements*

Occasionally students will make inappropriate remarks in class. This can catch you off guard, and how you respond next can really help diffuse the situation and get the class back on track. Often an individual is just looking for a reaction, or may not even understand they are being inappropriate. Below are some examples of ways to respond. Compiled by: Janice Johnson – May 1999.

- Hang on a second – that was potentially hurtful. Let's reflect on this a minute.
- Hang on a second – we have to talk about this – [bring group in – refer to ground rules]
- "Ouch" Rule: Anyone can say 'ouch' when a particular comment may have been hurtful. It can be for themselves or others, and cause everyone to take a step back.
- Is there anyone else here besides me who'd like to comment on / respond to that?
- You are entitled to your own opinion, and you've just shared it with me/us. Thank you. Now I'd like to move on.

## *Resources for Difficult Situations*

### *Cheating/Plagiarism*

*Academic Honesty and Standards:* <http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,54,111,958>

Includes information on the definition of academic honesty, responsibility of UBC students, and consequences of failure to follow the policies.

### *Guidelines for exams*

<http://www.students.ubc.ca/coursesreg/exams/exam-guidelines/>

Includes information for students on what to bring and what not to bring to the exam and how to conduct themselves during and after the exam.

### *Discrimination, Harassment, and Faculty/Student Relationships*

#### *Frequently Asked Questions about Discrimination and Harassment*

[http://positivespace.ubc.ca/files/2010/08/equity\\_d\\_and\\_h\\_faqs\\_20081.pdf](http://positivespace.ubc.ca/files/2010/08/equity_d_and_h_faqs_20081.pdf)

Information on discrimination and harassment policies at UBC, how to prevent and respond to racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination in the classroom. Also provides information about intimate relationships between faculty, grad students, and undergrads.

### *Students in Crisis*

#### *Counselling services*

<http://www.students.ubc.ca/livewelllearnwell/counselling-services/>

Offers confidential counselling services to admitted and registered UBC students as well as group programs to deal with anxiety, depression and stress.

#### *Early Alert*

<http://blog.students.ubc.ca/earlyalert/>

Allows faculty, staff and TAs to identify their concerns about a student's well-being or academic performance well in advance so students can receive timely support from the right resources before a problem becomes overwhelming.

#### *Academic Concession*

<http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,48,0,0>

It is an option for students experiencing circumstances with conflicting responsibilities (such as serving in the Canadian military; observing a religious rite; etc.) or unforeseen events (such as ill health or other personal challenges) that may adversely impact their performance in a course or program. Please note that academic concession is different from academic accommodation for a disability.

# General Practices

## *Marking and Grading*

Most TA's are involved in marking. We spent a good amount of time on marking during the TA Training session, so hopefully you feel like you have a starting point. Below are a few tips to help you, but remember to keep communication lines open with the instructor as his or her expectations for how you mark within the course will be most important.

### ***Rubrics***

Rubrics are an extremely helpful marking tool for every stage of the process. Students should have a copy of the rubric before they even begin an assignment as this will let them know exactly what is expected of them for the assignment, and what qualifies as an excellent versus poor grade. Rubrics also help you when marking. The more clear and concise the rubric is, the easier it is to evaluate where an assignment fits on the marking scale. Additionally, a rubric will also help when students disagree with a mark – which *will* happen! It is much easier to point to the rubric to demonstrate why a mark was assigned, instead of trying to remember why you gave a certain mark, leaving the student to think it was arbitrary or unfair.

### ***Grade the Solution***

Often the instructor will give you a copy of the solution to a problem (particularly for midterms and exams) in order to mark from. Try solving the problem on your own first. This can give you valuable insight as to where some of the trickier parts of the problem are, and where students may get tripped up – these can also be obvious parts of the problem worth marks. Also, you may use a different method to solve the problem which may also be correct. Next, go through the solution and mark it as a perfect score. Remember to take into account any preferences the instructor may have, such as marks for proper problem setup or diagrams. Many times some students will skip steps that you have deemed mark worthy, and still come up with the correct answer. Ask how the instructor wants you to handle these situations.

### ***Time Management***

Marking is an easy way to lose track of your hours. It is easy to spend too much time marking, and run out of hours before the course ends. Ask the instructor how long marking should take for each particular assignment or midterm (either at the beginning of the course, or for each instance). The instructor should give you an idea of how thorough you should be; i.e. is it a completion mark, or are you looking for deep comprehension? With the expected time, you can calculate how much time you should be spending on each paper. Use this as a general guideline, for the average – some will be longer, some shorter.

### ***Sample Set Marking***

It is often a good idea to 'pretend' to mark a small sample set of papers to get a rough idea of how the class performed. Students may have found the question significantly easier or harder than you presumed. If you go through a sample of papers and find that none of the students were able to finish even half of the question, it can be a good idea to adjust your grading scheme before you begin grading, and vice versa if the students did particularly well. Be careful though with this, as it is not your job to 'scale' the marks by adjusting your grading. You are more just looking for ways to differentiate between papers that actually deserve different marks, before you start grading with a grading scheme that would otherwise give the same mark to two very different answers. This method also helps with consistency in your marking – so you don't mark the first and last papers differently.

### ***Feedback***

Feedback is an important part of grading. It is extremely helpful for students to be able to recognize exactly where they made a mistake and why. Returned papers that are covered in red X's are not only unhelpful, but also discouraging. A brief word, or circle around the error can help the student understand where they made a mistake. Written feedback can also help the student improve, especially on written assignments or labs. Depending on how well a student performed, will indicate how much feedback to give. If they obviously struggled, maybe only point out a few key areas that would help them improve the most next time. Feedback can be overwhelming, so having a student focus on the biggest areas for improvement can be the most helpful. Also, pointing out positives can give students confidence and motivate them further.

### ***Notes:***



## Teaching

Depending on your TA duties, you may be responsible for teaching students. Below are six elements that help make lessons more effective for students. Often as a TA you may not be in control of the lesson or the content, but incorporating some of these elements can really help the learners. These elements will also help you outside of TAing, as they can be applied to seminars or presentations. This is just a brief introduction, as these are covered in much more detail in a CTLT Instructional Skills Workshop (see Resource page at the end of handbook).

Six Elements of a Lesson: BOPPPS (Adapted from CTLT ISW content)

1) **Bridge**: This first element of a lesson draws the attention of the learner to the lesson, generating motivation and interest in the topic and establishing the link between the learning objective of the lesson and value to the learner. Also known as a 'hook', and meant to answer the question: 'Why should we be listening to you?'

2) **Objective**: In teaching and learning, this element is a statement indicating what learners will be able to DO at the end of the lesson. Clearly defined objectives guide both the learner as well as the instructor by precisely and concisely stating:

- i. what the learner will have accomplished,
- ii. under what conditions the learner will display mastery of the objective, and
- iii. the quality of performance considered acceptable.

3) **Pre-Test**: The pre-test determines what the learners already know. This formal or informal test of existing knowledge ensures that the instructor is able to teach at an appropriate level for the learners in that specific lesson. This can be a simple raise of hands, or a short quiz or example problem. It can be anything that helps gauge where the class' level of understanding is.

4) **Participatory activity**: The lesson should include the learner as an active participant in his or her own learning. The level of involvement is determined by the lesson, the pre-existing knowledge or skill of the learners, and the external conditions (space limitations, safety concerns, etc). This can often be example problems students work on, or group discussions; anything they are *actively* engaged in.

5) **Post-Assessment:** This element demonstrates to both the instructor and the learner if the learning objective has been achieved. The type of post-test is determined by the performance criteria stated in the learning objective. A post-test can be very similar or identical to a pre-test, but should actually test the learners. A simple hand raise may not be effective, because students may believe they understand, but actually may not.

6) **Summary/Closure:** The summary or closure should wrap up the lesson and allow the learners the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned. Through the summary, the learning objective of the current lesson may be linked to the objectives of the next lesson.

**Notes:**

## *The Importance of Clear Expectations*

Establishing clear expectations is one of the best ways you can avoid problems, and ensure a smooth term. Of course, setting expectations is only half of the equation, the other half is actually meeting expectations, but that is much easier when you know what those are. Expectations exist between you as a TA, and the students, the instructor, and other TA's for the course if there are any. Below are some considerations for expectations you should think about early. If you are concerned about something, you should address the concern early! Unclear expectations only get worse over time!

### *TA – Student Expectations*

Be clear when you will be available to your students, and how long an email reply may take from you. Establish a set of ground rules (see previous section 'Difficult Situations') to govern your classroom. Be sure to clarify what you are asking students to do, so they know what is expected of them before they start a task. Make sure assignment deadlines are clear, and what the penalties are for late submissions. Expectations tend to get stronger as time goes on, so make sure to establish expectations early.

### *TA – Instructor Expectations*

At the beginning of the course, meet with the instructor to go over your role for the course. How much time does he or she expect you to spend on certain tasks, and revisit this early if you are not finishing the tasks in the expected amount of time. How available does the instructor expect you to be to the students? How have things been done in the past, and is it reasonable expect the same from you?

### *TA – TA Expectations*

If you are working with another TA, how are you dividing duties? Is this fair? Is there a more efficient way to divide tasks? Make sure you agree on a common method for tasks that you share. For example how long it should take to mark an assignment. If you are doing things differently, students will be upset at the lack of continuity, and you may be burdened with extra tasks the other TA did not complete.

## *Facilitating Discussion*

### ***Ten tips for facilitating discussion and good interpersonal communication***

During a group process, you want lots of active discussion. Each member's role is to facilitate the flow of comments from others, and ensure that the meaning of the comments is clear to all.

Adapted from: Silberman, M. (1999). 101 Ways to make meetings active. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Pfeiffer.

### ***Paraphrase***

Paraphrase what a participant has said so that he/she feels understood and so that the other participants can hear a concise summary of what has been said. Say something like: "So, what you're saying is..."

### ***Check for meaning***

Check your understanding of a participant's statement or ask the participant for clarification. Try: "Are you saying...? I'm not sure that I understand exactly what you mean."

### ***Give positive feedback***

Compliment an interesting or insightful comment. Say: "That's a great point. I'm glad you brought that up"

### ***Expand***

Elaborate on a participant's contribution to the discussion with examples, or suggest a new way to view the problem. Say something like: "That's an interesting point. I wonder how it would be different from this other perspective?"

### ***Increase the pace***

Energize a discussion by quickening the pace, using humour, or, if necessary, prodding the group for more contributions. For example "Ok, let's try and come up with five more ideas in the next two minutes, then we can move on to the next section"

### ***Devil's advocate***

Disagree (gently) with a participant's comments to stimulate further discussion. Say: "I can see where you are coming from, but I don't think that what you're describing is always true. Has anyone else had an experience that is different?"

### ***Relieve tension***

Mediate differences of opinion between participants and relieve any tensions that may be brewing. For example: "I think that Susan and Mary are not really disagreeing with each other, but are just bringing two different sides of the story"

### ***Consolidate***

Pull together ideas, showing their relationship to each other. Say: "As you can see from these comments, we seem to have the resources and commitment to proceed."

### ***Change the process***

Alter the method for obtaining participation or by having the group evaluate ideas that have been presented. Try: "Let's break into smaller groups to see if we can come up with different solutions."

### ***Summarize***

Summarize and record (if desired) the major views of the group.

# Further TA Skill Development and Resources

CUPE 2278 – UBC Teaching Assistant Union

[cupe2278.ca](http://cupe2278.ca)

Provides details on your rights as a TA, contact information, the most recent collective agreement, etc.

Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) Teaching Assistant Resource Page

<http://ctl.t.ubc.ca/resources/teaching/teaching-assistants/>

This link has a download for 'An Instructional Resource Guide for Teaching Assistants' – a comprehensive 133 page handbook. Worth checking out.

Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW)

<http://ctl.t.ubc.ca/programs/all-our-programs/instructional-skills-workshops/>

A very intensive, 3-day teaching workshop designed for graduate students interested in developing and enhancing their instructional skills, and suitable for all experience levels. They are in high demand, and often require several attempts to be admitted, so start enrolling early!

One-on-one support for Graduate Student TA's

CTLT is hosting 2 hour drop-in sessions (twice a month) for graduate students to help address some of the questions and/or challenges they may be having with regards to teaching or TAing.

These sessions are posted on the CTLT events page: <http://events.ctl.t.ubc.ca/tag/grad-drop-in/>

All graduate students and TAs are welcome to sign up (or drop in) during the scheduled hours.

Academic English Support (AES) Program

<https://cstudies.ubc.ca/student-information/services/academic-english-support>

For UBC students who speak English as an additional language. The AES program offers free, one-on-one support to improve your academic English for success at UBC.

Information sheet on Assisting Students in Distress:

<https://facultystaff.students.ubc.ca/assisting-students-distress>

# Safety Training

As TA's are employees, to be in compliance with WorkSafeBC legislation, all TA's must complete:

- A general UBC safety orientation and training before beginning work:  
<http://rms.ubc.ca/health-safety/safety-programs/new-worker-orientation/>
- A site-specific safety orientation and training with their supervisor (checklist available for download at the end of the previously mentioned course).
- Preventing and Addressing Workplace Bullying & Harassment training:  
<http://rms.ubc.ca/health-safety/safety-programs/personal-safety/preventing-workplace-bullying-and-harassment/>

WHMIS: only required when working with chemicals or chemicals are being stored in the teaching space (link about ½ down the page):

<http://rms.ubc.ca/training-and-general-education-courses/safety-programs-training>

- Workplace Violence Prevention training: <http://rms.ubc.ca/health-safety/safety-programs/new-worker-orientation/#Workplace%20Violence%20Prevention%20Training>
- If there are specific hazards in the classroom that they are teaching, your department or supervisor may also require additional training. For wet chemistry labs, it would mean the RMS Chemical Safety course, for biohazards it would be the RMS Biosafety course, and for laser light hazards the LASER Safety course, etc. [WHMIS](#) is only required when working with chemicals or chemicals are being stored in the teaching space. These are fairly specialised cases and most departments (e.g. CHBE) are aware and already do this.

As TA's are in a supervisory role, and since the above scenario is directly related to it, another requirement is the Floor Warden course You should also be aware of is the location of the nearest AED to your classroom, that First Aid number to call for undergrad students is 911 and for paid Students, Faculty and staff it's 2-4444.

RMS Chemical Safety Course & information: <http://rms.ubc.ca/health-safety/research-safety/chemical-safety/>

RMS Biosafety Course & information: <http://rms.ubc.ca/health-safety/research-safety/biosafety/>

LASER Safety Course & information: <http://rms.ubc.ca/health-safety/research-safety/radiation-safety/laser-safety-general-information-registration/>

Floor Warden Course: (second item in the table): <http://rms.ubc.ca/training-and-general-education-courses/safety-programs-training>

AED information: <http://rms.ubc.ca/health-safety/safety-programs/first-aid/automated-external-defibrillators/>

Active shooter on campus – Run, Hide, Fight: <http://rms.ubc.ca/emergency/emergency-procedures/active-shooter/>