

## Best Practices for Philosophy Instructors and Teaching Assistants

Composed by the Graduate Studies Committee (Lawlor; Bernasconi; Belle; Miller; Medieta) on September 8, 2019; approved by the Philosophy Faculty on October 16, 2019.

Being a teaching assistant is an integral and required part of the education and professionalization of philosophy graduate students. In this process, faculty members with whom they work, serve as role models and mentors to their graduate student teaching assistants. The spirit of mutual cooperation and support of graduate students thus expressed is central to Penn State's graduate program and its reputation as a superior program for training and mentoring future philosophy teachers.

The experience of being a teaching assistant affords graduate students with the opportunity to develop as teachers. This includes the following skills: designing a syllabus, creating and assessing assignments, selecting and assigning readings, addressing issues of diversity, and overall course design. Instructors bear the primary responsibility for writing the syllabus and designing the course but should include teaching assistants as much as is feasible in discussions of course organization in order to contribute to this skill development. Instructors should keep in mind that teaching assistants provide invaluable work for the success of the course.

Instructors and graduate assistants are expected to always behave in an ethical and professional manner. This includes affording accommodations for students with disabilities, both undergraduates and teaching assistants. Teaching assistants with disabilities should report to the instructor their need for accommodations and what the accommodations are. If the teaching assistant prefers not to report the accommodations to the Instructor; they may instead report it to the Director of Graduate Studies or to the Head of Department, who will then convey the accommodations to the Instructor. (Please see Student Disability Resources (<http://equity.psu.edu/student-disability-resources>))

Note to both instructors and teaching assistants: Graduate students are appointed to a "1/2 time" appointment. See "Terms of Offer and General Conditions of a Graduate Assistantship Appointment." "Half-time" means **no more** than 20 hours per week on average over the 15 week semester. Therefore teaching assistants' assignments are not to exceed an average of 20 hours of work per week. This includes time attending class as well as doing the assigned reading.

Note to both instructors and teaching assistants: In the case of a dispute between the instructor and the teaching assistant in relation to the workload, the instructor or the teaching assistant may consult with the Director of Graduate Studies and/or the Head of Department.

## Requirements and Expectations for Instructors

- The primary requirement for instructors is that the work they assign to the teaching assistant not exceed an average of 20 hours per week. The average 20 hours per week includes the time attending class, holding office hours, grading, and conducting discussion sessions, and meeting with the instructor to discuss facets of the course. It also includes doing the assigned reading and preparing for the course sessions and discussion sessions. Some periods in the semester will require more concentrated work than others (around midterms, paper due dates, etc.), but instructors are to be mindful of the balance of work required of graduate students overall.
- In specifying assignment due dates and grading, instructors are expected to coordinate with teaching assistants in order to accommodate their graduate course schedules and other program obligations. Instructors should keep in mind that teaching assistants generally take 3 seminars at the same time as assisting with the teaching. However, instructors should compose the syllabus that is appropriate for the course being taught. They should also compose the assignments, rubrics for grading, and any document intended for the students enrolled in the course. A conversation between the instructor and the teaching assistant should determine the fair distribution of the grading.
- Instructors are expected to clearly outline for the teaching assistant how the students will be assessed. Instructors should clearly explain to the teaching assistant what the instructor expects when the teaching assistant grades. The explanation may include a grading rubric, and/or a detailed description of the course goals.
- Instructors are expected to visit teaching assistants who are leading discussion groups at least one time per semester. They should provide them with feedback on their performance and suggest ways to improve.
- Instructors are expected to meet regularly with their teaching assistants, particularly those who are leading discussions -- to identify key themes they are to focus on, provide pedagogical advice -- and assist them in dealing with any problems that arise.
- Instructors are expected to provide the Director of Graduate Studies with their review of their teaching assistant's performance at the end of the semester for the composition of graduate student annual reviews.

### Requirements and **Expectations for Teaching Assistants**

- Teaching assistants are required to attend each session of the course to which they are assigned. They are expected to read the texts the instructor assigns to the class. They are expected to hold office hours for 2 hours per week or for one hour per week with flexible by appointment options for meeting with students. They are expected always to make themselves available to meet with the instructor to discuss the grading, course progress, etc.
- Discussion sessions are important since in these sessions the students are able to explore course ideas more deeply, to clarify points from the lecture, to engage in

discussion about the class topics, and to have a more personal contact with an instructor. Teaching assistants who are conducting discussion sessions are required to be present for each discussion session. In the case of illness, teaching assistants are required to a) first attempt to find another graduate student to cover the class and check to see if the instructor of the class is available, and b) if they are not able to find a suitable substitute instructor, they are to email all students in the discussion section through the Canvas system and to email the instructor to inform them of the cancellation of the class. In the case of needing to miss a discussion section because of conference participation, the teaching assistant must first consult with the instructor about the upcoming absence and attempt to find another graduate student who will be able to cover the class. If an appropriate graduate student cannot be located, the teaching assistant should work with the instructor to determine if other options are available for covering the class or whether they should instead cancel the class.

- Like the instructors, teaching assistants are expected to be prepared for each session. They are expected to treat all students with respect and to be sensitive to the needs of each student.