

Homay King's Unofficial Guidelines for TAs
Bryn Mawr College Department of History of Art and Program in Film Studies
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Note: These guidelines are intended for Professor King's TAs. I hope that the general suggestions here will be helpful to others, but please consult with all appropriate parties prior to each job assignment. Responsibilities and policies vary by instructor, department, and type of course. For official employment-related questions, please contact the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences office or the Dean of Graduate Studies.

TA Responsibilities

1. Read and view course materials, attend class, contribute verbally, assist with in-class exercises
2. Assist with grading papers and exams. For 100-level HART courses: assist with grading a maximum of half of all assignments, papers, and/or exams. For 200-level courses: comment on paper drafts and assist with grading exams. Note that in every situation, the instructor of record has final responsibility for determining grades.
3. Assist with advising students individually, during office hours and by email and/or remotely as needed, no more than 3 hours per week average.
4. Take responsibility for your own sessions of class in one or more of the following forms: 1) lead 2-3 units on your own; 2) introduce screenings; 3) proctor exams; or 4) for classes that meet at least three times per week, lead a Friday review and discussion section. The number, timing, and content of TA-led sessions is determined in consultation with the instructor. Take attendance during any session you lead on your own.
5. Be available to consult with the professor throughout the course of the semester to determine additional responsibilities as necessary, and to receive and give feedback about the state of the course.
6. Work no more than 18 hours per week total on average, including classroom time, meetings, preparation, grading, emailing, etc. At certain times of the semester it may be far fewer hours, at others, slightly more.

TA Evaluation Procedure

- Student Evaluations. These are evaluations of your job performance as a TA completed anonymously by students at the end of the term. The forms are available from the GSAS office. You are responsible for getting the form, making copies, and, in consultation with the instructor, arranging a time for them to be administered during class close to the end of the

term. The instructor is responsible for returning the forms to you after final grades have been submitted, and helping to interpret the results.

I strongly recommend that you familiarize yourself with the form prior to the start of the term. It is important to know what criteria you will be evaluated on. Please note that poor student evaluations may result in ineligibility for future TAs or other consequences. Outstanding evaluations may qualify you for an award or fellowship. Retain copies of your evaluations: some job and postdoc applications require full sets. Contact GSAS staff for examples of the TA evaluation memo and form.

- Professor's evaluation of TA. I will observe at least one of your own class sessions during the term and share comments with you, and I will also share an assessment of your teaching with the Director of Graduate Studies. Additional evaluation opportunities can be arranged upon request, and I am happy to give feedback throughout the semester. I am also happy to go through student evaluations at the end of the term and help you to interpret them. Please do not hesitate to ask questions.

Commenting on Student Work

Note: I will provide you with more detailed instructions for commenting according to the course and assignment type, as well as keys for exams. However, here are some loose principles and guidelines.

- How to comment. Comments should take the form of brief remarks and edits plus a short paragraph at the end of the paper. Make clear, either in your final paragraph or with an announcement in class, that students should speak to you if anything in your comments is unclear. Quality is better than quantity: succinct, directive comments are more valuable than long, ambiguous ones. Your comments should model the clarity of writing that you expect from your students.
- Use the assignment sheet as your yardstick. Comment and grade according to how well the paper completes the assignment according to the prompt. Refrain from using other criteria. You should refer the student back to the prompt if they have not followed it.
- Always give suggestions for improvement. Pointers for future skills development are preferable to statements about what is wrong or poorly executed. Example: "Here are three things you can do to improve this paper: 1) Edit your introduction to reflect the content of your essay; 2) Proofread and spell-check; 3) Rethink the idea on page 2 - see comments there." Students should feel that they are being taught and advised, not simply judged. Still, don't be afraid to say what needs work, and don't praise elements that do not merit praise. Try to include at least one encouraging remark, even for poor papers ("You've chosen a fascinating but overly ambitious topic"). For very strong papers, include a remark that encourages yet more advanced thought: pose a question or give a reference.

- Be a teacher, not just a proofreader. When possible, it's better to identify a writing problem and describe how the student can fix it, than to fix it over and over again. For example, a comment such as, "Use the historical present tense for film as you would for a novel" is more effective than a series of unexplained verb corrections.
- How to deal with severe writing problems. If the writing is exceptionally poor and needs remedial work, correct mechanical errors to the best of your ability for a page or so, but do not spend too much time trying to rewrite the essay. Indicate that the student should meet with you or the instructor to discuss, and urge them to visit the Writing Center. Inform the instructor. The *St. Martin's Handbook* is a good resource for grammar, and *The Elements of Style* offers more advanced advice about essay writing; you may wish to refer students to the appropriate chapters of these textbooks in a 200-level writing intensive course.
- Returning papers. At the end of your final paragraph, write your legible initials or signature and a tentative grade in pencil (if it isn't a draft). Before handing the papers back, create a list of students' names, paper titles, and the tentative grades. Submit this list to me by email, along with the completed papers, in alphabetical order. You should also retain a copy of the list for your own records.
- Protect your working hours. A standard five-page college essay should take approximately 30 minutes to grade, depending on your level of experience. This is an estimate; if this is your first time TA-ing, you may need to allocate more time.

Assigning Grades

Note: Determining grades on student assignments is ultimately the responsibility of the professor. However, learning how to assign grades is a necessary part of your training, so for some assignments, I will ask you to assign tentative grades in pencil. Note that drafts and short assignments are not graded in my courses (credit/no credit only).

- For papers. I recommend reading and commenting on all the essays and "ranking" or grouping them prior to assigning grades, rather than assigning grades as you go. Loose guidelines: If the essay is well written (i.e., grammatically correct, intelligible, more or less well-organized), and follows the assignment, then it gets a B+ (3.3) or higher. If a student has not followed the assignment, and/or if their paper is difficult to understand, the grade should not be higher than a B (3.0), unless the content of the paper is exceptional. I tend to reserve A grades (3.7, 4.0) for papers that are not only well written, but also contain clear, compelling interpretations, and, if required by the prompt, make a persuasive argument and engage with outside sources.
- For exams. I will create a grading rubric and key for each exam. Comments on exams can be minimal, just check marks and a few words, no final paragraph. In-class, timed exam essays should be graded more generously than take-home assignments, but using the same criteria. As

with papers, I recommend reading all the exam essays and ranking or grouping them prior to assigning grades.

Interacting with Students

- Hold office hours in some fashion. Most TAs find that weekly office hours are not well-attended. You can therefore indicate that you are available by appointment, and remind students of this from time to time during the semester. You need not meet unreasonable requests (weekends, evenings, students who repeatedly fail to show up, last-minute requests). You may also choose to hold occasional review sessions. Always refer a student to the instructor if there is anything comes up in office hours that you are unsure about.

- Email. Give students your work email address and endeavor to answer messages in a prompt and professional manner (48 hour turnaround). You need not respond immediately to unreasonable emails (e.g., requests for help at the last minute). Keep in mind that your evaluation form includes a section on whether you were sufficiently available for office hours and consultations, including by email. Email leaves an electronic trail: when in doubt, err on the side of a formal, professional tone, wait before hitting “send,” and, if concerned, consult your professor.

- Absences, extensions, and late papers. I generally expect that students will abide by the Honor Code, and I thus grant reasonable extensions and excused absences without official documentation for illness, emergency, religious holiday, or overwhelming additional obligations, as long as the request is made in advance when possible.

Sometimes a student will inform you that she has been or will be absent from class for one reason or another. Please let me know so that I can make a note of it in my records. Sometimes, a student will ask for a summary or transcription of what happened in class. Tell the student that she should get notes from a fellow student, and consult Moodle for handouts or assignments. Do not feel that you must offer private tutorials or review sessions for students who are absent if you are not able to do so within the structure of regular office hours.

For TAs of HART 200-level WI courses: You may grant or deny extensions on paper drafts at your own discretion: usually an extension of a day or two is fine and can be granted without documentation. Do NOT accept drafts just prior to the final paper deadline even if the student says she is submitting it for credit purposes only (this amounts to submitting two copies of the same paper). In my classes, students who cannot complete drafts within a reasonable window of time forfeit the benefit of comments, and forfeit credit for the draft, even if they have a legitimate reason. Drafts are for the students’ benefit and do not factor strongly into the final course grade.

- Requests to reconsider a grade. Sometimes, students will ask you to reconsider a grade. Please refer these students to me. In general, my policy is that grades are not up for debate. If there is a calculation error on an exam or a transcription error, though, the grade should be corrected. Report any such changes to the instructor immediately.

Although you will not be responsible for handling grade change requests, there may be occasions in which you will have to explain or justify your comments to a student. This is an important part of your training as a teacher. Walk them through the essay and explain your reasoning, comment by comment. Refer back to the assignment sheet as necessary. Many students who express frustration about feedback on their work do so because they have not understood the comments, or find them to be out of sync with their experience of the assignment, or how hard they worked on it. These students often respond well to clarification, combined with affirming words of encouragement about aspects of the assignment there were stronger.

- Requests to read drafts. As a general rule, HART 200-level Writing Intensive courses require paper drafts, and enrollment is capped at 15. In most 100-level courses, though, TAs are not responsible for reading drafts, and high enrollments may preclude it. If a student asks you to read a draft, you may do so or not at your discretion, but keep in mind that if you choose to read a draft for one student, you must be equitable and do so for all who ask. Always inform the student that your suggestions are for consultation purposes only, and following them does not guarantee a high grade. Tell students that they can also have a peer editor read a draft in the Writing Center. An alternative is to offer to read an outline or introductory paragraph only, or simply discuss the ideas in office hours.
- Requests for letters of recommendation. On occasion, a student will request a letter of recommendation from a TA. It is part of your job to write these letters when you can recommend the student with confidence (you need not say yes if you cannot). Be sure to communicate your needs for these letters clearly: how much time you need, any materials it would be helpful to have. As with any official communication, be professional and tactful in these letters; they reflect on you as well as your student.
- Accommodations. All teachers, including TAs, have a duty under the Americans with Disabilities Act to provide reasonable accommodations for students with a verified learning or ability difference. Students who inquire about accommodations should be directed to the Office of Access Services. The accommodations will be specified clearly in a letter, and may include extensions, additional time on exams, or assistance with audio-visual materials. The instructor will handle the necessary arrangements and paperwork, but be aware that you as a TA are bound to this rule as well.
- Disciplinary and similar matters. If you suspect plagiarism, other disciplinary problems, or problems of a serious medical, legal, or similar nature, contact the instructor and/or Department Chair immediately. Students at Bryn Mawr and Haverford have agreed to abide by an Honor Code that forbids plagiarism and cheating, administered by the Honor Board committee. Our deans can also intervene to assist with problems that require counseling, medical treatment, or parental notification. If the problem is of an urgent nature and the instructor is unavailable, contact your the Deans' Office. Do NOT attempt to handle serious problems by yourself.

- Requests to be excused due to course content. In some cases, a student will ask to be excused from class or given an alternate assignment based on concerns about course content, for example, texts that portray violence or sexuality. Please refer these students to me. My syllabi contain a paragraph indicating that it is the student's responsibility to speak with the instructor at the start of the term if there is any concern about the course content, offering to help students find an alternate course if necessary. All students occasionally miss a class or fail to read certain course materials for a variety of reasons; there is always the option to do so and take the consequences. However, each case is unique, so please refer the student to me.
- General guidelines. Keep your interactions with students professional and focused on course content and related fields. Refer students to the Deans' Office for any concerns beyond academic ones. If a student is interested in an area of study outside your expertise, you may refer them to other faculty members in the Trico (but be considerate of your colleagues: bear in mind what sorts of referrals you yourself would appreciate and find fruitful). Always consult the instructor, the Department Chair, and/or GSAS staff if a situation arises about which you are unsure.

Bryn Mawr Grading System

Merit Grades (Counts for curricular requirements, major requirements)

- 4.0 = A = 93.5-100% (there is no A+ or 4.0+)
- 3.7 = A- = 90-93.5%
- 3.3 = B+ = 87.5-89%
- 3.0 = B = 83.5-87.5%
- 2.7 = B- = 80-83.5%
- 2.3 = C+ = 77.5-79%
- 2.0 = C = 73.5-77.5%

Passing Grades (Pass, credit, but does NOT count for major/minor/distribution requirements: class must be retaken or another class must be used to fulfill these requirements)

- 1.7 = C- = 70-73.5%
- 1.3 = D+ = 67.5-69%
- 1.0 = D- = 63.5-67.5%

Failing Grades. Two or more failing grades may result in a review by the Committee on Academic Standing (CAS). Any student whose record is reviewed by CAS may be required to withdraw from the College pending investigation.

- 0.0 = F = 0-63.5%