

Biochemistry and Biomedical Sciences Teaching Assistant Guide



2021-2022

TESTIMONIALS

Dirk Hackenberger

I've found my teaching assistantship to be one of the best experiences in graduate school so far. Being able to help students learn lessons and new techniques is incredibly gratifying, and along with that, it's helped to improve my written and verbal communication skills. I'm proud to be a part of the education of future doctors, scientists, and other professionals, and I hope to continue this into the future.

Agata Kieliszek

My favourite thing about being a TA is using my experience as a student to guide the way that I teach others. I remember what I found helpful and unhelpful during my undergraduate experience, and use it to help students understand the curriculum. TA's are often assigned to a course that they have some sort of experience in, which makes the experience that much more rewarding for both the TA, and their students.

Mugdha

Given that the courses I was TAing for were completely virtual, I really enjoyed the engagement from the students. They came to my virtual lab section each week ready to learn and determined to make the best of at-home laboratory experiments. Their resiliency along with their love of learning and science served as a nice reminder to me to make the most of a very turbulent time.

Tamina Angel Jose

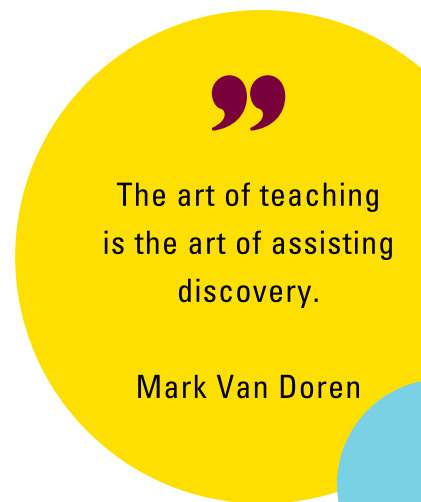
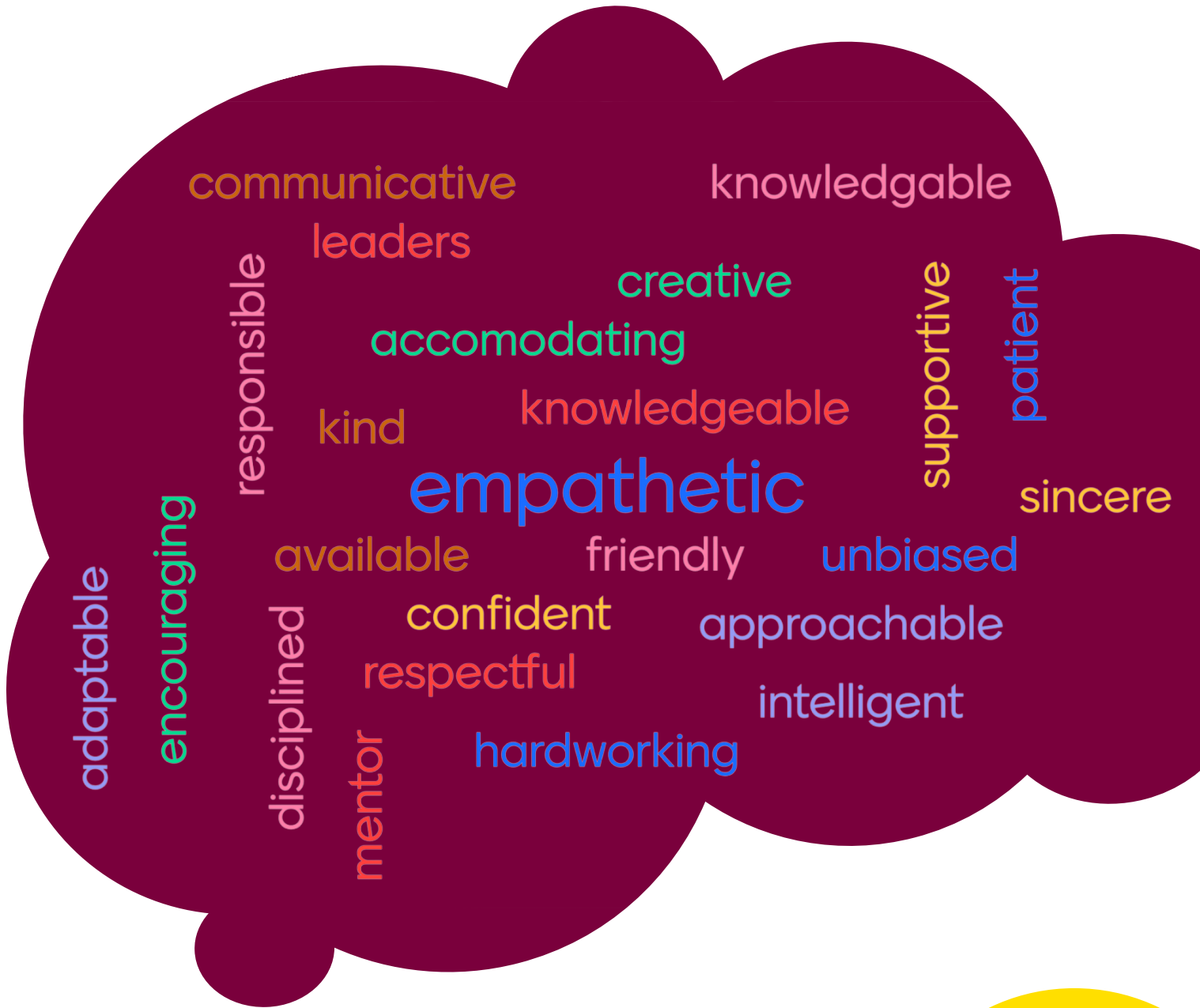
The most amazing part of being a TA is that you learn along with the students... You get a chance to interact one-on-one with students and gives a sense of satisfaction when you are able to answer the simplest of questions from your students. I make sure that I respond promptly to emails of each student and I think that has made a difference... The relationship that you build with the instructor is also very important as that is another connection you make outside of your lab and regular research network. The most frequent challenge I've faced is sometimes not able to answer some of the intelligent questions that you get asked from the students. I take it as a challenge as well as a learning opportunity.

Bashudev

Through TA work, I was able to manage a class, conduct tutorials, and communicate with students. It helped me a lot to build my interpersonal skills. During my very first time, when I was working with TA I was nervous due to having of course work, new students and other factors. But fortunately, my professor helped me a lot in these regards to overcome my problems.

TA QUALITIES

We asked BBS Students to list qualities of a good TA. Please see below for their answers.



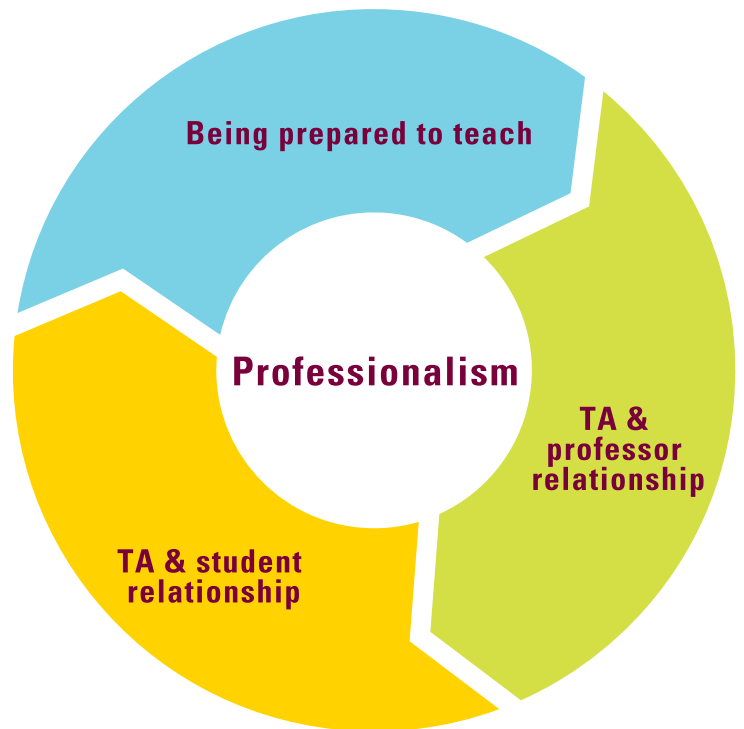
PROFESSIONALISM



Always keep in mind that as a TA, you are representing McMaster and the Department of Biochemistry and Biomedical Sciences.

Being prepared to teach

- Professional preparation starts with:
 - Showing up to lab, tutorial or class on time with enthusiasm.
 - Preparing and understanding the material.
- By familiarizing yourself with the material:
 - You will be much more comfortable to answer questions effectively.
 - You will be able to maintain a high level of professionalism in the classroom.
- Despite being prepared, you may be faced with questions that you are unable to answer.
 - This is okay, even experts don't have an answer to everything!
 - Do not be tempted to make up an answer but rather inform your students that you will get back to them the next day.



TA & student relationship

- It is important that you maintain an appropriate professional relationship with your students.
- You must be respectful, fair and not exploit your position of power over your students.
- If you encounter a student who is angry or upset with you, do not take their feelings as a personal attack.
- Try to approach each problem with a positive and empathetic mindset.
- Be mindful of student behaviour. Concerning signs include behaviour changes, missing tutorials, missing assignments, and being disengaged during teamwork.

TA & instructor relationship

- You will be working with an instructor, and it is important that you understand their expectations for the course.
- You must reach out to your instructor with any issues or concerns about students.
- You must maintain constant communications throughout the course with your instructor.
- If you disagree with the course plan or expectations, you should kindly request to speak with your instructor, and discuss the issue when students and other staff members are not around.
- It is **never** acceptable behaviour to criticize an instructor within earshot of students.



THE FIRST DAY

It is important to set the tone of your lab/tutorial from day one when you meet with students. This can be accomplished by:

- Preparing an introduction of yourself and sharing your professional experiences with them.
- Informing students about your classroom expectations
- Providing students with the opportunity to get to know each other – consider playing a quick ice breaker game or have students discuss a fun topic with one another.

Before the end of the first lab/tutorial:

- Students need to be provided with your contact information – they need to be informed on the best methods to connect with you. Some examples are through email, specified office hours, or discussion boards (Teams, A2L).
- Students should know your response time to emails, discussion board questions etc.
 - For example, you may considering saying “I will respond to your email within 48 hours on weekdays. I will not be checking emails on the weekends.”



**The influence of teachers
extends beyond the
classroom, well into the
future**

-F. Sinoli Jose

For more information check out [The First Day](#).

STRATEGIES TO RUN AN EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM

 Please visit the [Teaching Assistant Resources](#) on the BBS website for more information.

Tips to help facilitate effective discussions

Help students prepare discussions

You can provide discussion questions to students in advance so that they can prepare answers ahead of time. Discussions are often more thoughtful when students come prepared, and have some time to think.

Ask students to discuss in small groups such as breakout rooms

Students often feel more comfortable participating in classroom discussions after collaborating with their peers. This also gives students more time to think about their answers. [Think Pair Share](#) is also a great technique used to encourage student participation.

Have focused discussions

Create a clear list of questions for each discussion. Be aware of when a discussion is getting off-track and steer the discussion back to the main focus. For tips on how to have focused discussions please go to [Writing at CSU](#). This is important to avoid wasting time on discussions that are not relevant to the issues at hand.

Preparation

Prepare lesson plans

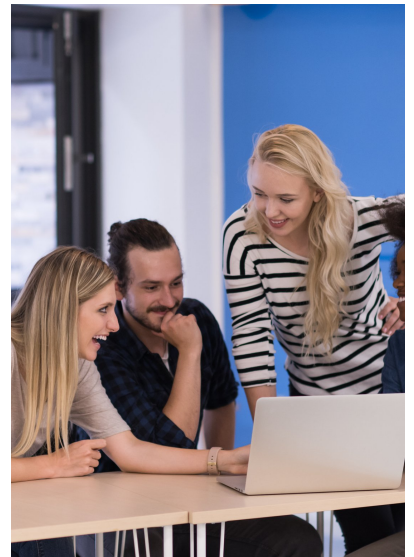
It is important to develop learning objectives to ensure that you are running a focused and effective session. Your plan should include a time estimate for each topic that you will be teaching, to ensure that class ends as expected. To learn how to create lesson plans please review page 28 of the [Teaching Assistant Guide](#).

Practice

It is highly advised that you invest the time to practice your presentation and/or lab techniques that you will be demonstrating to your students. Practice in front of a mirror, record your presentation with technology, or with your friends. Be open to gaining feedback on your presentation.

Prepare your supporting material

Make sure the technology you have chosen to use such as, projector, lab equipment, speaker etc. are all set-up before you begin your teaching session.



STRATEGIES TO RUN AN EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM

Delivering content

✓ Engage students

- Maintain eye contact. Speak to your audience not to the ground or screen.
- Speak loud enough so that everyone can hear you.
- Speak with enthusiasm.
- Smile! Be interested in what you are talking about.
- Encourage interaction, and ask if anyone has a question.

✓ Facilitate active learning

- Use relevant examples to explain difficult concepts. Draw on personal, research or practical examples to help students understand content better.
- Regularly ask questions to the students to ensure that they are actively learning. By asking questions you can quickly determine if students are having any difficulties grasping concepts based on their answers.
- For other methods to help facilitate active learning please go to [Active Learning Activities](#).

✓ Inclusive and accessible environment

Creating an inclusive and accessible environment is also very important to run effective tutorials/labs. For more information, please check out [Teaching in an Accessible and Inclusive Classroom](#) and [McMaster's Inclusive Teaching and Learning Guide](#).

Please refer to the [Teaching Assistant Guide](#) for more tips on how to run a classroom.



How to reduce your fear of public speaking

Practice, practice, practice!

By practicing you will feel more confident when presenting.

Don't read from a script

Jot down a few points on the board or on a piece of paper to help guide you through a presentation.

Positive self-suggestion

This technique involves visualizing yourself providing a successful teaching session. For instance, visualize your students participating and really engaged in your class.

Just be you

By letting your personality shine you will feel comfortable talking in front of students and they are more likely to listen to you if they see you as a leader.

OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM



Office hours

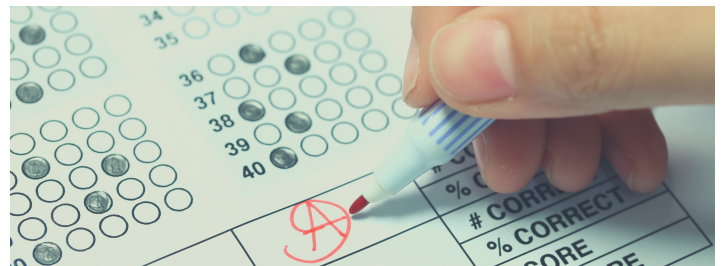
Students often worry about “wasting your time.” It is important to provide your students your undivided attention, listen attentively and express honest concerns to their difficulties. For students who are having major difficulties with the course, you should work with a student to devise a plan to assist them or direct them to the professor if needed.

If students arrive at the end of your office hours, thank them for coming but also let them know that your scheduled office hours are ending, and you have to leave soon. However, inform them that they can make an appointment with you at your next office hour or they can email you their question for a response by a specified time.

Grading

How to grade efficiently

- Utilize your calendar and set goals/limits for the length of time you will spend grading each section of an exam, assignment, lab report etc.
- Create a detailed marking criteria/ rubric before grading.
- Do not rewrite student assignments. Provide effective feedback with concise notes without writing an essay. Students can always meet with you if they have questions about the grading system.



Fair grading

- Do not read student names when grading work. You can consider covering their names up with sticky notes. You can also ask students to write their names at the back of the assignment.
- You should consider marking one section at a time instead of the entire assignment/report, so you are not biased by a student's performance on earlier sections.

CAMPUS RESOURCES

Security Services



If there is an emergency on campus, call Campus Security Services by dialing '88' from any university phone or calling 905-522-4135. If there is an emergency in the hospital dial 5555 from a university phone or call 905-521-2100.

Safety App



Download the McMaster University Safety App to your phone. You will have immediate access to Emergency contacts, Campus Map, Support Resources, Student Walk Home Attendant, and more.

Classroom audio-visual services



For support with audio-visual equipment in the classroom please call 905 525 9140 x 22761 or email cct@mcmaster.ca

UNIVERSITY TECHNOLOGY SERVICES (UTS)

UTS provides technology related support (e.g., Mac ID and software assistance). You can contact them by emailing uts@mcmaster.ca or calling 905 525 9140 x 24357.



ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The Office of Academic Integrity provides students, teaching assistants and instructors with information to avoid problems with dishonesty. To learn how to prevent academic dishonesty please go to [Suggestions for TA's](#).

If you suspect an academic integrity issue with a student, please contact your instructor immediately. Please do not engage or confront the student about their academic dishonesty. Instructors are responsible for handling cases of academic dishonesty and reporting them to the Office of Academic Integrity.

To learn what an academic integrity issue looks like, please go to [What is academic dishonesty?](#)

STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES (SAS)

SAS offers support to students with disabilities. Please direct students who request classroom accommodations to help them with their academic or disability needs to SAS. Students can contact SAS by calling 905-525-9140 x 28652 or emailing sas@mcmaster.ca.



MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES



Recognize intentionally that as a TA you are a leader, not a counsellor. As a leader, you should be mindful of the mental health and well-being of your students and strive to build a psychologically safe environment.

STUDENT WELLNESS CENTRE

The Student Wellness Centre aims to support student's personal and professional success by providing psychological counselling and mental health support. Please direct students who want to learn how to manage their mental health to the Resource section of their website. If students need immediate support, please call 905-525-9140 x27700 for assistance. Go to Crisis Support to learn about emergency resources.

TOOLKIT

The Compassionate Communication Toolkit is intended to help you learn how to best communicate to others with mental health & well-being in mind. This resource will help you build and maintain positive relationships and learn how to become an emotional and intelligent leader.

OKANAGAN MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING TASK FORCE

The McMaster Okanagan Mental Health & Well-being Task Force created a resource website devoted to wellness and mental health . This is an excellent tool for you to utilize and to direct your students to. Please note that there is a "For Leaders" tab, which is intended to aid you in your leadership role in terms of mental health. To learn how to be a good leader by keeping mental health in mind, please also view the resource titled why Good Mental Health is a Leader's Best Friend.

PROFESSOR HIPPO-ON CAMPUS

This student mental health education program has been designed to provide you with the mental health resources available on campus. This program will also teach you how to support student's struggling with their mental health. You will learn how to recognize and respond appropriately to distressed students. Please note that there are specific modules targeted for TA's. You will receive a certificate after completing the course.

While we encourage you to take the course, at the very least, please keep a copy of the following resources created by Professor Hippo-On Campus coordinators:

- [Responding to Students in Distress](#)
- [Mental Health Resources and How to Write Emails to Students in Distress](#)

EMPLOYEE FAMILY ASSISTANCE

TA's have access to McMaster's Employee Family Assistance Program (EFAP), Homewood Health. Homewood offers confidential and professional counselling related to mental health, careers, work-life balance, and health. Homewood Health has developed a website with helpful resources and tools for you to use. TA's also have access to a confidential 24/7 help line:1-800-663-1142.

ONLINE LEARNING RESOURCES

Online communication

Netiquette is the term used to describe communicating appropriately online (e.g., email, discussion posts, MS Teams chat). Below are tips to effectively communicate online with students.



01 Avoid typing all capital letters

02 Avoid using sarcasm as it can be misinterpreted

03 Avoid using abbreviations as they can be misinterpreted

04 Include a kind opening line at the beginning of your message

Re-read your online message in the perspective of your students

05

This will ensure your message is clear and respectful

- "I hope this email finds you well."
- "It's great to hear from you."

TECH SUPPORT

- The University Technology Services (UTS) provides tech support for a range of services. You can contact them at uts@mcmaster.ca or by calling 905 525 9140 x 24357
- If you are new to Avenue to Learn, there are a few resources that will help you get started.
 - [What Can Avenue Do?](#)
 - [Where Do I Start?](#)
- For the online resources available to you and for their possible uses please go to [M365 & Zoom](#)



ONLINE LEARNING RESOURCES

Online office hours

You can hold online office hours using Zoom or Microsoft Teams, as they are free applications available to you.

Zoom



You can set up a personal meeting room and use the same link for all your office hours. You can also set up individual meetings.



Go to Discovering Microsoft 365 and Zoom for more information and instructions.

Microsoft Teams



You can set up one meeting group on MS Teams, which can be used throughout the term. You can also set up individual meetings with certain students.



Unlike Zoom, the chat and any files shared during meetings will be saved in your meeting group and can be accessed anytime.



Please review McMaster's MS Teams instructions for more information.

Quick online learning tips

Please review the Teaching Assistant Guide and Learning Remotely for Students for more information

01

Occasionally post positive messages on your online learning platforms to help generate a positive learning environment

- "We are almost half-way through the term"
- "I am pleased with all the discussion that we had today during our tutorial."
- Acknowledge holidays
 - "Happy Halloween!"

02

Presentation is key

- Look at the camera while you are speaking to your students.
- Smile and speak in an engaging manner.
- Present yourself in the same manner as you would if you were teaching in the classroom.

03

Make Learning Social

- Use breakout rooms to allow students to communicate online in group.
- Ask students to use hashtags when posting on discussion boards.
- Encourage students to use the chat feature on Zoom or MS Teams if they are too shy to speak out loud.
- Encourage students to turn on their camera.



TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCES

As a graduate student you have access to online training offered by the [MacPherson Institute](#). They offer workshops, courses and certificate programs for professional development in teaching. All courses are free, pass/fail, zero-unit and at the graduate level. Please note that registration opens at the beginning of each term and is on a first come, first serve basis.

Example of courses available to you by the MacPherson Institute:

- Learning to Teach Online: A self-paced course to learn the foundational building blocks in creating an engaging online learning experience
- Instructional Skills / Facilitator Development Workshop: An opportunity to work with other educators to learn how to become a better teacher
- Educational Development Fellows Program: An experiential learning opportunity to learn more about educational development

PAYROLL AND BENEFITS



Forms to submit to hr.mcmaster@mcmaster.ca

To get paid, TA's must submit:

- [Employment Contact and Direct Deposit Form](#)
- [Federal TD1 Tax Form](#)
- [Ontario TD1 Tax Form](#)



Deductions

1. Dental benefits will be deducted on the first pay of the semester – this is once per academic year. Visit [CUPE](#) for more details
2. Union dues will be deducted at a rate of 2.5% every pay period in each month you receive TA monies



CUPE 3906: Benefits

- [Dental Coverage](#): Eligibility for the Dental plan runs by academic year (Sept 1 to Aug 31)
- [Childcare reimbursement funds](#): \$300/academic term
- [Employee Family Assistance Program \(EFAP\)](#): Through Homewood Health, you have access to counselling related to mental health , careers, work-life balance, and health



Payment

- Please go to [Payment Schedule](#) to determine when you will be paid
- To learn how to read your stipend please go to [McMaster's New Payment Statement Explained](#)



For more information please go to [Teaching Assistants – Payroll Information](#).

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THE ROLE OF A GREAT LEADER IS NOT TO GIVE GREATNESS TO HUMAN BEINGS, BUT TO HELP THEM EXTRACT THE GREATNESS THEY ALREADY HAVE INSIDE OF THEM.

- MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

