

# **Teaching Assistant Handbook**

Department of Comparative Literature

Brown University

Revised May 2025

## **Introduction: Teaching Assistantship in Comparative Literature**

This handbook is meant as an overview of useful resources and good questions that you may find useful during your years as Graduate TA in the Department of Comparative Literature. It is meant to be supplemented by a Google drive ("Graduate TA Google drive") administered by Tracy Miller; and read in conjunction with the Graduate Student Union Collective Bargaining Agreement.

The main responsibilities of a Graduate TA in Brown's Department of Comparative Literature are as follows:

- Communicate regularly with the professor running the course
- Attend course lectures
- Run undergraduate sections
- Hold office hours for one-to-two hours per week during the semester
- Grade undergraduate assignments and provide constructive feedback
- Miscellaneous course support as needed, e.g. photocopying, assisting professor in producing exam questions, updating the class website, putting books on reserve at the library, etc.

At least two years of work as a teaching assistant are required for the Ph.D. As a rule, other than in exceptional circumstances as referenced in the department's Graduate Handbook, the Graduate Program in Comparative Literature does not waive the teaching requirement.

A teaching assistantship should not require more than twenty hours of work per week. Most professors evaluate their TAs' workload to be between ten and fifteen hours most weeks, with potential peaks when mid-term and final papers are due (as applicable). Most graduate students report an effective working time between fifteen and twenty weekly hours, still within the graduate school's standards. It is recommended that graduate students monitor the time they spend on class preparation and grading each week.

The faculty member may ask you to deliver a lecture or two, help plan the syllabus, enter into dialogue with them in the classroom, participate in a planned panel or debate, or develop some new material for the course. Additionally, it is your responsibility to ask the faculty member running the course when the heavy-duty periods of the semester come and to plan your work accordingly.

Prior to the beginning of the semester, your faculty supervisor should:

- Provide you with a copy of the course syllabus (including course objectives)
- Provide you with required textbooks, or let you know how to access them
- Meet with you to communicate expectations, including how often you will be meeting, and answer your questions
- Give you an idea of what they expect to happen in section

Offer advice on getting started (see also the “Sample Checklist for a First Section” and “Facilitating Effective Group Discussion” documents in the Graduate TA Google drive).

Also note that you are *not*:

Expected to do all of the grading. This work should be divided equitably between all members of the pedagogical team (the TAs and their faculty supervisor)

Expected to lead more than one section per semester

Finally, final grades are ultimately the faculty member’s responsibility, so there should be a clear understanding between you and your supervisor as to how your authority is supposed to interact with theirs. See also “Grading” on this point.

\_\_\_\_\_ International graduate students whose native language is not English may choose to be tested upon their arrival for English proficiency in order to enroll in non-credit ESL courses (listed in CAB as EINT courses). To schedule a placement interview and for more information, please contact [Jill Stewart](mailto:Jill_Stewart@brown.edu) ([Jill\\_Stewart@brown.edu](mailto:Jill_Stewart@brown.edu)).

### ***Grievance Procedures***

Students having trouble with a faculty member should consult the DGS. The Graduate School has adopted a university-wide grievance procedure, to which you may turn if these less formal and local measures fail. If you want to discuss your situation with someone outside the department, contact the Dean of the Graduate School.

If one of your students complains about your teaching and you cannot resolve the problem yourself, you should consult with the course supervisor or faculty evaluator. If the issue cannot be resolved at that point, you should take the matter to the DGS. In cases where there is some disagreement between you and the faculty member or between either and the DGS, the Chair will review the evidence, discuss the matter with everyone involved, and report her or his conclusions in writing to you. If you are dissatisfied with the outcome of this process, you are always free to pursue the Graduate School’s grievance procedures.

### ***Faculty Perspectives***

Contrary to what may happen in other departments and at other colleges, professors in the Comparative Literature department never have a more experienced TA in charge of organizing the team and/or assisting others (“Head TAs”). This is rare at Brown in general, so you should not expect to encounter the situation, but you should be aware that our department does seem to be distinctively invested in giving TAs a lot of freedom to organize their own classes or sections. Professors do not impose lesson plans, nor do they generally ask to see yours. Because sections are generally simultaneous and professors teach one of them, they will also not usually observe you in the classroom. This is a level of both autonomy and responsibility that you may not

encounter in other departments and it will therefore be important for you to be well organized.

Professors who answered the survey for this handbook expect you to base your sections on the material covered in class. Most organize short weekly meetings between professor(s) and TA(s) to go over what they absolutely want discussed in section, or to generate topics for discussion. You are not expected to do readings beyond the syllabus to prepare for section, although if the subject matter is completely new to you, it may be worth consulting a good critical introduction or teaching reference to help you plan and manage your section. You are however emphatically *not* expected to be a specialist by the time section begins, nor to pass for one. It is fine to table questions for the next section or to suggest resources for students to do further research by themselves.

Professors will also occasionally offer TAs the opportunity to teach a class (i.e. to lecture), but they do not generally impose it. The offer is not systematic and if you are particularly interested in doing so, be sure to let the professor know.

The same human qualities were generally emphasized by all professors: first and foremost, they expect their TAs to respect students, and to encourage their love and interest for the class and for literature more broadly. One professor nicely summed it up as “love of literature, interest in young people, pleasure in getting them excited about books, and in having them develop writing and critical skills.” The emphasis on “writing skills,” however, varied from professor to professor, and class to class: an advanced seminar for a concentrator is likely to require more attention to good writing than an introductory survey with a varied student body. At the beginning of the semester, it may therefore be valuable to clarify with your supervisor how much importance they give to things such as a paper’s technical aspects (grammar, word choice, organization) or research skills (references, proper citations, etc.). Be clear with your students about your expectations from the start of the class, and let them know in advance how you will be assessing their work. Finally, you can also take advantage of the freedom you have in section to organize mini-tutorials on aspects of reading and writing for the course if the need arises (see “Resources” for more information on this point).

## **Other Teaching Opportunities**

The Department of Comparative Literature offers its graduate students many opportunities to accrue teaching experience beyond that of holding a teaching assistantship in a Comparative Literature class. Some of these opportunities are the results of university-wide programs, and some are located within the department. Below is a survey of such possibilities; if you discover or want to suggest additional ideas, please bring them to the DGS for discussion.

### ***Teaching in Another Department***

You may, for a limited time during your period of study, hold a teaching assistantship in another department or program. For instance, it is relatively common for graduate students in Comparative Literature to hold language instructor positions for a semester or two, or to TA in MCM, English Studies, or other affiliated departments. Such positions can make your resume more appealing on the academic market, especially if they give you a chance to lead your own classrooms or to gain experience in a department for which you may apply in the future. Of course, even when teaching in other fields is important to your training, you should do a significant portion of your teaching in the department, and departmental needs may occasionally take priority over graduate student wishes. Nonetheless, be sure to let your faculty mentor or DGS know your preference and interests if you have them. The department always does its best to accommodate them.

When arranging to work in another department, please contact the department ASAP to find out if they have requirements for teaching in their department. Some departments hold mandatory TA instructor orientations, or may request that you take a pedagogical class before teaching for them. These requirements are department-specific, or sometimes class-specific, so be sure to check.

### ***Teaching Exchanges***

Graduate students can benefit from several teaching exchanges:

**Brown/Wheaton Faculty Fellows Program:** Brown University graduate students in their third, fourth, and fifth years may apply to teach courses at Wheaton College. The application process takes place a year prior to that in which selected applications begin teaching. All applicants must have advanced to candidacy stage and have taught at Brown for a minimum of two years. Each year, Wheaton requests proposals for courses in several departments from which it selects a few that the fellows develop with Wheaton faculty mentors. In addition to their classes, fellows are integrated into the department's administrative life for the year, making the program a chance to experience the atmosphere of a teaching-oriented institution. See

<https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/academics-research/teaching->

[fellowships-advanced-students/brownwheaton-faculty-fellows-program](#) for more information. Note that applications must be submitted to Wheaton College by the last Friday in January.

Brown graduate students may apply to teach for one semester at Tougaloo College through the Brown-Tougaloo Partnership. Deadlines are February 15 (for fall) and October 15 (for spring). For more information, see <https://tougaloo.brown.edu/>

### ***Teaching Your Own Class at Brown***

#### **Summer Teaching**

Graduate students are eligible to propose courses for Brown's Pre-College Programs. More information and forms are accessible on the website. Applications are generally due in October for the following summer: <https://precollege.brown.edu/instructors>.

#### **Teaching Your Own Class in the Department**

Advanced graduate students who have made substantial progress on their dissertations, who can document their success in the classroom, and who have the support of a faculty member willing to serve as a classroom mentor, are invited to submit a proposal to teach an undergraduate course (below 1000-level) in the department. The proposal consists of a 100-word course description, a syllabus, a C.V. that includes a listing of teaching experience, and notes of support from the dissertation adviser and a faculty mentor. It is due to the Director of Graduate Studies no later than October 31 of the academic year before the class is taught. The department's Graduate Committee will evaluate the proposal. No more than two proposals will be approved in any year and a final approval depends on the curricular needs of the department as determined by the Chair.

#### **Pedagogical Training**

The department offers this handbook, in addition to a short orientation before your first semester of teaching. You can also obtain supplementary pedagogical training through a number of campus centers and resources. Some of them, like the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning or the Writing Center, also offer opportunities for paid work on campus.

### ***The Harriet W Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning***

The Sheridan Center offers a range of services and resources to graduate students and faculty seeking to improve their teaching effectiveness. See the [Sheridan Center's website](https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/) (<https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/>) for additional information.

**1. Teaching Essentials for Graduate TAs** is an online, asynchronous, self-paced program that takes 4 - 6 hours to complete. Registration opens in mid-August. Students in the Comparative Literature Department are required to complete this

orientation before teaching their first class.

## **2. Consultation Services**

A range of consulting services is available to all graduate students, regardless of whether they are involved in Sheridan Certificate programs. See the Sheridan Center website for more details.

## **3. Certificate Programs**

The Sheridan Center offers a number of certificate programs in which participants develop and reflect on their teaching practice and prepare for professional careers. TAs are encouraged to take advantage of these offerings.

## **4. Events and Workshops**

The Sheridan organizes talks and workshops throughout the year, at which different aspects of teaching are discussed. Recurring In the past, topics have included include grading, interactive teaching, supporting student study habits, etc. These workshops are generally advertised in Morning Mail, but you can [sign up for the Sheridan \(roughly\) monthly newsletter](https://confirmsubscription.com/h/r/1E19758416DF465E) for more targeted information (https://confirmsubscription.com/h/r/1E19758416DF465E)

## ***The Center for Language Studies***

The Center for Language Studies offers a Doctoral Certificate in Language Pedagogy and Engagement, as well as frequent workshops on language pedagogy. Most Spring semesters, the CLS offers a graduate seminar on language pedagogy and second language acquisition. Taking this class may be mandatory for teaching in certain language departments, especially if it is your first time teaching (some language departments may waive that requirement for students who have teaching experience and/or education degrees).

## **Resources for New (and Not-As-New) TAs**

### ***Pedagogical Support***

Among the challenges that you may encounter in any given section, research, close-reading, and writing deficiencies may be the most common. While you may need to address these in your sections, there are some resources that you can use if you do not have the time to talk to these issues in the classroom, or if the problems are limited to some students only.

### **Research-related support**

Your subject librarian can help in several ways:

As research support for your students: you can simply include their name in your syllabus, or refer students in difficulty to them (to help them create a bibliography and evaluate their sources, for instance). You can also invite them into your classroom to discuss proper research methods at the college level.

To centralize resources research resources for your class: librarians can create Course Guides, i.e. class “capsule” websites with research resources specially adapted for your class, or can come to your section to discuss research resources and methodologies. You can see [examples of Course Guides](#) on the library website.

In all cases, of course, remember your professional courtesy and be in touch with the librarian before they are contacted by students, so that they can prepare to answer in line with your objectives for the class. A [list of subject librarians](#) can be found on the library’s website.

### **Writing-related support**

You can always refer students with writing difficulties to the [Writing Center](#): upon appointment, Writing Center Associates can help them deal with every aspect of the writing process, from deciding on a topic to editing a final draft.

The Writing Center also offers specific support for ELL students (English-Language Learners, or students for whom English is not their first language). Information is posted at [on the Sheridan Center website](#).

### ***Other supportive campus agencies***

The Department is committed to supporting students representing all sorts of diversity in the classroom, including (but not limited to) students of colors, LGBTQ+ students, first-generation students, international students, and more. There are a number of Centers on campus that can provide you with assistance and training to live this commitment in the classroom. Do not hesitate to consult with them if you encounter difficulties in the classroom as you work through what it means to create an environment respectful of student diversity.

In particular, the LGBTQ centers periodically holds Safe Space Trainings throughout the year (you can [contact the LGBTQ Center](#) at [lgbtq@brown.edu](mailto:lgbtq@brown.edu) to find out about next trainings), which can provide a template to think about diversity issues. You can also consider including a Diversity Statement in your syllabus. A document presenting a few examples of Diversity Statement is included in the Graduate TA Google drive under “Section Syllabi.”

Additionally, if one of your students requires accommodations linked to



disabilities in one of your classes, such as extended time on in-class tests or note-taking, you may [contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services](mailto:seas@brown.edu) for help ([seas@brown.edu](mailto:seas@brown.edu)). They can provide proctors for tests taking place outside of regular test hours, help you recruit note-takers, or provide class material in accessible format (for instance by scanning books for students who need readers). The Google drive contains a brief presentation of the ways in which SEAS can help you support students with disabilities (“Accessibility Support”).

### ***On-Campus Space***

If you need on-campus space to meet with students, but would prefer a venue other than the department’s graduate student space, you do have a few possibilities on-campus:

**The Sarah Doyle Women’s Center** lets graduate students use one of their room (room 204) for office hours. If it is free at the time that you want it, you can place a weekly reservation on it at the beginning of the semester. You can contact them at [sdwc@brown.edu](mailto:sdwc@brown.edu) to inquire about the room. They are located at 26 Benevolent Street. Remember not to close the door (for liability reasons). Note that the room is up one flight of stairs and may not be accessible to students with certain disabilities, so adjust as necessary based on the composition of your class.

**Study rooms at the Rockefeller Library and Science Library** can be reserved for up to two hours. They are a good solution for working groups and extra study sessions, as they require at least three students to be made. To learn more, see <https://library.brown.edu/create/libnews/reserve-group-study-rooms-fall-2023/>

The Rock and the SciLi both have individual tables in their front areas; these, as well as coffee shops, are popular with some TAs who do not mind a busy space as long as they have an individual meeting area.

### ***Helpful Documents***

As a TA, you are not required to hand out a syllabus, but we recommend that you consider putting together a simple document—that we’ll call a “section syllabus”—summarizing information that your students are likely to ask you again and again, like your office hours, or your email policy. You should also consider including any type of classroom or assignment policy that will be specific to your section: for instance, if you want to ban laptops or make your cellphone policy explicit, a section syllabus will provide you a space to do so. Resources that you think may be useful to students, a Diversity Statement, and an indication of your attendance and make-up policies will not go amiss either.

Several section syllabi put together by graduate TAs in recent years are available in the Graduate TA Google drive to provide you with inspiration.

## Grading

### **Procedures**

As mentioned above, all TAs will be called on to grade during the course of their assistantship. Grading must be shared evenly between the professors and all TAs for a class. Depending on the professor with whom you are working, you may be called on to enter grades in the Canvas grade book and/or Banner yourself, or you may be requested to transmit the grade to the professor. Consult with them to know what will be the case and, *especially at the end of the semester*, what deadlines you will need to abide by for sending the grades to the professor or entering them in Banner (the grading function is available under the “Faculty Services” tab). Be especially wary of deadlines for your graduating seniors, which may be earlier than for your other students.

Some professors systematically oversee grading, and will give you feedback on it, some organize grading sessions where TAs share a few examples of their grading (to encourage consistency across sections), while others leave their TAs entirely in charge of their evaluations. If grading is unsupervised and you are uncomfortable with that fact, it is always appropriate to request further help from the professor or other TAs. For instance, TAs have requested to sample a few graded copies from their professors or shared a few of their own graded copies to calibrate their assessments and check what constitutes appropriate feedback. They have also occasionally organized communal grading sessions independently of the regular teaching team meetings. In these situations, always make sure to protect your students’ confidentiality. It may be a good idea to meet in a private location, or at least not in an overly busy space.

### **Grade Options at Brown**

[lightly adapted from:

<http://www.brown.edu/academics/college/support/faculty/grades>]

When registering for courses, Brown students must indicate whether they are taking a course for a grade (G) or satisfactory/no credit (S/NC). Students may change their grade option for a course during the first four weeks of the semester. No grade option changes are allowed after the first four weeks of any semester.

Students use the S/NC option for a variety of reasons, but most students agree that S/NC allows for exploration of a particular topic without the stress and pressure that a graded evaluation may impart. You may encourage a student who is concerned about your course to choose this option: they can do better in S/NC courses simply because they are intrinsically motivated and less afraid to be more creative in their writing without the pressure of a grade.

*N.B. If a student has done extraordinarily well in a course taken S/NC, faculty*

have the option of adding a "distinction" to the S-grade to indicate the high quality of the work done. Academic honors such as *magna cum laude* and *Phi Beta Kappa* are awarded on the basis of the number of grades of "A" or "S with distinction" in a student's record.

### **Changing Course Registration**

Students can (and do) drop and add courses using the online registration system for the first two weeks of a semester without charge (Brown's "Shopping Period"). Course additions made in weeks 3 and 4 are rarer, since they require the instructor's signature and are assessed a fee. Students are not allowed to add a course to their schedule after the first four weeks of the term.

### **Grading Rubrics**

A useful tool for grading is a teaching rubric (a few examples are included at the end of this section). Grading rubrics request a time investment upfront, as you have to design them, but can have advantages:

- They encourage consistent grading;
- They help a teacher make their evaluation criteria explicit to themselves and their students, saving everyone time and headaches;
- If communicated to students *before* they write their papers, they can help them improve the quality of their writing;
- They can also constitute a sort of "contract" between teacher and students, limiting the amount of *ad hoc* negotiation susceptible to happen;
- They can speed up the grading process;

And finally, by making your grading criteria more visible to yourself, rubrics can help you diagnose where your students are excelling or falling short (either individually or as a group), which in turn is useful knowledge to adjust your subsequent classes.

An objection occasionally made to rubrics (other than the time they take to prepare) is that they can decrease flexibility in assessment, and bias the teacher towards technical criteria at the expense of the students' creativity—in short, they can be reductionist. If you decide to use rubrics, be aware of this potential pitfall and sure to give yourself enough leeway to recognize excellent work in all its forms, even the most original. That can be achieved by using more holistic / less analytical rubrics as well as by including originality among your criteria, or other solutions your own creativity may suggest.

We have included some rubrics used by former graduate TAs in the Graduate TA Google drive.

### **Troubleshooting Student Assessment**

Some students will occasionally bring concerns regarding their grades to you. Always welcome them with an open mind, and be ready to be explicit about your

grading. Try to resolve the situation in consultation with the student first. If, however, a disagreement remains, let the student know that you will consult with the professor supervising the class and discuss the situation with them. If the situation still does not resolve at this point, refer the student to your supervising professor.

A more serious concern occurs when you observe a student violating Brown's Academic Code (such as fraud, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct). Always discuss the situation with the professor in charge of the class, who bears primary responsibility for reporting incidents to university authorities.

### **Getting Feedback on Your Teaching, and Building Your Research Portfolio**

While you are teaching in graduate school, it is easy to forget that teaching is part of the skills that you are building for the job market, and that you should be documenting your successes to make building your teaching portfolio easier when the time comes. Obtaining feedback on your teaching throughout your graduate school career is therefore important for your personal improvement and for your portfolio. As far as the latter is concerned, we recommend that you try to obtain as much feedback as possible, using it both to know your teaching style better—and be able to describe it compellingly—and be able to provide solid, well-informed teaching references when necessary. You can also obtain feedback on your teaching from students, professors, and the Sheridan center's teaching consultants.

Because you will be building your portfolio from the feedback obtained throughout your graduate student years, we include together in this section both “getting feedback” and “building your portfolio.” We strongly recommend that you conduct both in tandem over your graduate school career. Separating both activities may leave you stranded for material when the time to finalize your portfolio comes.

#### ***Student feedback***

The department, like all departments at Brown, requests that students fill out Teaching Evaluations at the end of each class that they take. These evaluations serve several purposes: to monitor the quality of teaching at Brown, help the department make staffing decisions, and help you improve your teaching. In this respect, you are no different from the regular faculty, who are required to collect confidential student evaluations near the end of each course. The department now has a standard evaluation form for this purpose, which students access online. A section of this evaluation refers to TAs, who are strongly encouraged to review their evaluations each semester. They are available through <http://selfservice.brown.edu>.

When you get your evaluations, we recommend that you save them for the teaching portfolio that are now almost systematically requested on the academic job market. Coming from students, a few evaluations representative of your strengths as a teacher will be an asset to this portfolio. You can also note how students grade you, and

photocopy samples of student work together with your comments and grades on them (with the student assent, of course, and anonymizing as necessary). Finally, picking a point or two of what you judge is legitimate criticism, and working to improve on it in your next assignment, will both improve your skills and allow you to concretely speak to your development as a teacher when the time comes.

Of course, you are not obligated to wait until the end of the semester to collect feedback from your students, nor should you! From least informal to most informal, you can for instance use chats with your students at the end of class, exit or entrance tickets, or a structured mid-semester request for confidential feedback to gather this information—and act on it.

### ***Getting Feedback from Faculty***

All faculty are required to write a TA Evaluation at the end of each semester. These are held on file in Tracy Miller's office, and you may request to view them.

At some point during your graduate career, you may ask a member of the faculty, or the faculty member lecturing the course you are assisting, to visit one of your classes and offer feedback. Prepare him or her with copies of your syllabus, if appropriate, or a good description of what you have been doing in discussion section and your teaching objectives in both cases. Such a visit can help jump-start your teaching if you feel you are not doing as well in the classroom as you would wish. Toward the end of your graduate career, you might also benefit from inviting a faculty member to visit your class and write a teaching letter for your dossier in preparation for your venture onto the job market.

If the faculty member whose visit you would like is teaching at the same time as you, you can also request a Sheridan Teaching evaluation (see below): it will provide you with a video of your teaching. You can ask for the faculty member of your choice to review the video and give you feedback based on it.

### ***Sheridan Center Teaching Consultations***

The Sheridan Center offers confidential teaching consultations to members of the Brown teaching community. See the [Sheridan Center Website](#) for more information.

### ***Other Portfolio-Building Resources on Campus***

The Rockefeller Library is equipped with a [Digital Studio](#), in which you can record a presentation; if you wish to include a polished video of your teaching, or at least of your public speaking, as part of your teaching portfolio, you may request to book the Audio/Video Recording Suite, which is openly accessible.

### ***Awards***

Every year, the Graduate School recognizes up to four outstanding graduate

teachers by giving them an Excellence in Teaching Award. You cannot control nomination by the department, which is a condition of receiving the award, but you can make sure to request the “first-hand account of a class visit by a faculty member from the program or from another independent observer” that will be necessary for your nomination (and to inspire someone to nominate you in the first place!) Be discerning about this, but consider this possibility once you feel secure in your teaching. You can find [more information on this award](#) on the Graduate School’s website.