

# Crash Course: TA'ing for the Philosophy Department at Western University

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September, 2013

(Adapted for online posting)

# Ice Breaker

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- Name
- Program (PhD (year), MA)
- GTA Assignment
- An exciting, *non-academic*, thing you did this summer?



# Agenda

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- Role of the Lead GTA
- The Basics: Being a GTA for Philosophy
- What to Talk to Your Instructor About
- Anonymous Grading
- Effective First Day of Tutorial
- Professionalism
- Looking Forward: 2<sup>nd</sup> Tutorial, Grading

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**What is the Role of the Lead GTA?**

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# What is a Lead GTA?

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- History: Pilot Program from TSC, Union, and SGPS
- Why So Exciting?!
- Goal: Teacher Professional Development
  - Workshops
  - TA Consultation
  - Resources
  - Variety of Course Specific Assistance
- “In House”, discipline-specific resource vs. ...

# Western Teaching Support Centre

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- **Western Certificate in University Teaching and Learning**  
Info Sessions: Sept 18<sup>th</sup> (Wed) or 19<sup>th</sup> (Thurs) 12-1pm
  1. TA Training/Microteaching Requirement
  2. 10 workshops in the Future Professor Series
  3. The Teaching Mentor Program for Graduate Students
  4. Teaching Portfolio
  5. Written project
- Graduate Studies 9500
- Lots of Workshops and Lectures
- Tons of Online Resources

<http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/>

- Recently Launched



- Provides info on resources at Western that will help you develop these 8 competencies

<http://gradpath.uwo.ca>

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# The Basics: Being a TA for Philosophy

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# GTA Contract Logistics

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- Information specific to department grading policies and university TA union excluded for online posting.

# Resources

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- **Chris Viger, Philosophy Undergraduate Chair, [cviger@uwo.ca](mailto:cviger@uwo.ca)**
- Undergraduate Philosophy Department Policies  
<http://www.uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/policies.html>
- Undergraduate Appeals Procedure  
<http://www.uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/academic%20procedures%20.html>
- Student Development Center  
<http://www.sdc.uwo.ca>
  - Writing, Study Skills, Psychological, Disabilities, etc
- Student Success Center <http://www.success.uwo.ca/careers/>
- International Student Services [http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/int/services/?services\\_main](http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/int/services/?services_main)
- Indigenous Services <http://indigenous.uwo.ca>
- Office of the Ombudsperson <http://www.uwo.ca/ombuds/>

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# What to Talk to your Professor About

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# Tips on What To Ask About

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- Clarify Expectations with the Instructor (Duties Specification letter)
  - Are you required to attend lecture?
  - Are you required to hold office hours?
  - How much time should you spend prepping for the class?
  - What will the assignment grading schedule look like?
  - How long should you spend on grading each assignment?
  - Protocol for grade complaints
- Will we be practicing anonymous grading in this course?
  - If not, and you would like to, let your professor know you would like to and why.
- Are you planning to introduce the TAs/Graders on the first day of class? (Very Important!!)
- Others?
- See TA / Instructor Checklist for more points of discussion

# Advice From Others

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- Maintain open communication with the person you TA for.
  - Students progress, problems, e-mails, hours, etc.
- “One of the best things from my experience was the professor and I presented a united front. Students couldn’t play one of us off of the other.”
  - Talk to your professor about the grade change procedure for undergraduates.
- Communicate with the other TAs about what you each are doing.
- Don’t be afraid to ask the professor for direction or guidance.
- Find out who has TA’ed or Graded for the class/professor before and chat with them.

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# Why You Should Practice Anonymous Grading!

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# Implicit Bias

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The psychological occurrence in which human beings are strongly influenced by a range of subconscious biases and dispositions related to categories like race, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, etc.

- The existence of implicit bias is a scientifically robust empirical result in psychology.
- Implicit biases are said to be automatic, inaccessible to introspection, and unconscious.
- These biases can favor, or disadvantage a group.

Online Implicit Bias Tests: <http://www.projectimplicit.net>

# Implicit Bias in Academia

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- There are many ways in which implicit bias disadvantage groups in academia.
  - Grading, Recognized Student Participation, Encouragement
- As instructors, we should work to mitigate IB to make the “playing field” as level and fair as possible for our students.

## How?

- One way: anonymous grading mitigates implicit bias and promotes fairness in the grading of student assignments.
  - Common practice in UK, France, and Australia
  - And now in our philosophy department



# Why is it important in philosophy?

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- There is very good reason to believe that philosophy is stereotyped as white-male (Haslanger, 2008).
- If evaluation (such as grading, job hunts, etc) is not anonymous, research shows that men are likely to be given higher grades, jobs, etc than women even when there is the same quality of work (similarly for other groups that are underrepresented in philosophy).
- Anonymous grading can help create a better environment for women and underrepresented groups (who currently make-up only ~20% of the discipline).

(APA Data, <http://www.apaonlinecsw.org/workshops-and-summer-institutes>)

# Benefits for the Students

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- Reduces grader bias that might affect their assignment's grade.
- Creates a safer workspace for the student.
  - It mitigates students thinking the instructor is “playing favorites” or that they received a poor grade because the instructor doesn't care for them (personally, or because they belong to a certain group).
- Students from science and math often come to philosophy classes feeling certain that there's no objective basis for grading their essays.
  - They're less likely to attribute bad grades to favoritism or something worse if they know that you're making an effort to screen those things off.

# Benefits for you as the Instructor

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- Gives you peace of mind regarding your possible implicit biases
  - Less of a need to worry if you were fair, or if you were subjective in your grading.
  - Avoids any expectations of what level an individual student's work *should* be influencing your grading.
- A way to protect yourself...
  - From arguments with students about favoritism or bias (or at least make them shorter).
  - From student papers that may say something personally offensive to you.
- Improves scores student evaluations.

# How?

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- Talk about the importance of anonymous grading.
- Talk to your students about why anonymous grading is important.
- Ask your students to submit typed assignments with no names, just their student ID
  - That's all there is to it if you grade hard copies!
- If you grade online ... \*OWL direction handout available!
  - Make sure students have only their student number in their file name as well.
  - There is an easy procedure in OWL to download all
  - I'm also available to help you figure out the quickest practice
  - At most, this practice adds 10-15 minutes of worthwhile work!

# Common Concerns

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- “I want to be able to track my student’s progress”
  - You still can!
- “Students don’t like it because they feel the feedback I give them is less personal”
  - You can make it personal **after** you’ve given a grade
- “Sometimes I’ll have talked with the students about the problem assigned, and I want to give the student the benefit of the doubt”
  - Assignments are about what the student did write, not about what they did not write
- “I won’t be able to read over drafts for my students if I have to grade anonymous”
  - You still can!
- Others??

# Citations

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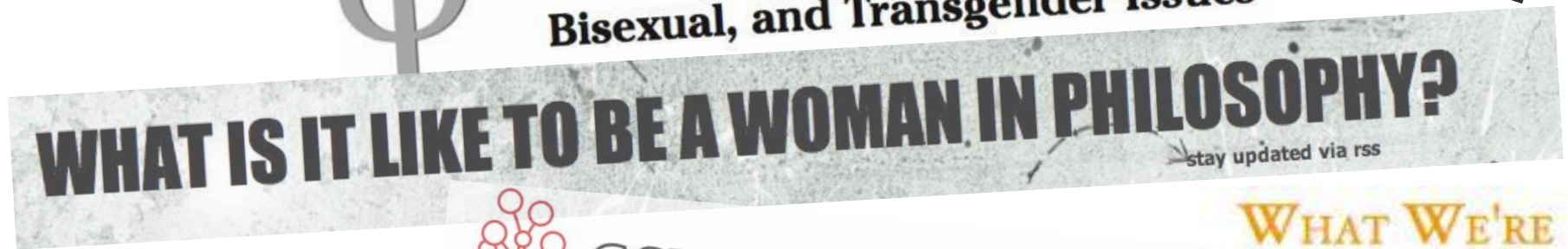
Links to citations, additional readings, and other online discussions are available



[BiasProject.org](http://BiasProject.org)



Philosophy and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues



CSWIP | Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy



WHAT WE'RE DOING ABOUT WHAT IT'S LIKE

MAKING THINGS BETTER FOR WOMEN IN PHILOSOPHY

# Effective First Day of Tutorial

# What to Do on the First Day?

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0. Visit the Classroom!
1. Introductions!
2. Aims and Goals of Tutorial
3. Setting Expectations



# 1. Introductions

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- What is the Point of Ice Breakers?  
(Why have I tortured some of you so?)

What are some of your favorite/most hated Ice Breakers?

- Name, email, year, major
- Why are they taking the course
- “Something you might not know about me is...”

- Introduce yourself!



## 2. Aims and Goals of Tutorials

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- Why is this philosophy course important?  
<https://sites.google.com/site/whystudyphilosophy/>
- What skills will they learn or develop?
- What are their own objectives for this course?
- What is the point of a Tutorial Section?

# 3. Setting Expectations

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Activity!

① What can your students expect from you?

Things to think about:

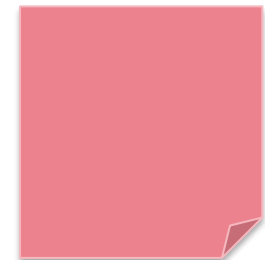
- Professionalism?
- In tutorial?
- In their assigned work?
- Interactions (in class, e-mails, group work, etc)



② What are some things that you expect from your students?

Things to think about:

- Before they come into your tutorial?
- During tutorial?
- In their assigned work?
- Interactions (in class, e-mails, group work, etc)



③ Turn it over to them! Ask your students what they expect from you.

What is the point of doing this?

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# Professionalism

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# The Basics



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- Respect
- Foster a Respectful Environment
- Be Prepared
- Integrity / Ethics
- Show Up / Be Responsive
- Recognize Your Capabilities
- Professional Appearance & Dress
  
- UWO Code of Student Conduct  
<http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/board/code.pdf>

# Professionalism in Action!

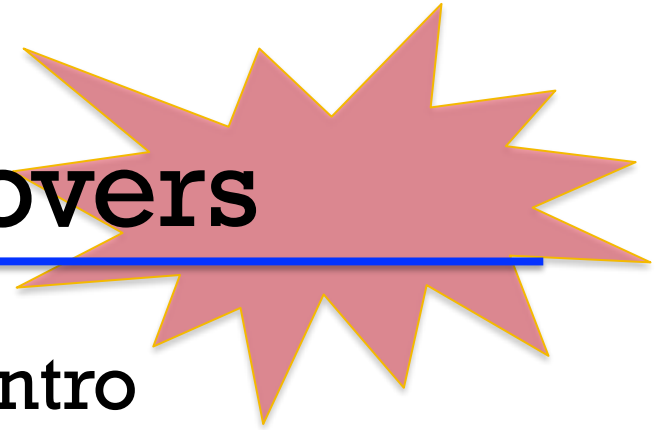


## Activity: What Would You Do?

- I'll hand out a case study to each table.
  - Read your case with your group and discuss how you would choose to handle the situation.
  - Be sure to consider the “things to think about” on each sheet.
  - We'll then come back together to discuss each situation.
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# Case: Star-Crossed Lovers

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Rick is a TA (or Grader) for an intro philosophy class. During the first month of Rick's Tutorial (or grading assignment) he has a student, Tracy, who comes into his office hours frequently to discuss the material from the class in more detail. It becomes clear to both Rick and Tracy that they are developing romantic feelings for each other. It's clear to both that they would like to engage in a relationship, but there are 3 more months in the course.

# Case: A Night At the Bar // **Friendened!**

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Elise and Donald are graduate students enjoying an evening drink at a local bar. Earlier in the evening they proctored a mid-term test and tomorrow they will begin marking. A group of six students from the class is also at the bar and recognizes them and invites them to join their table.

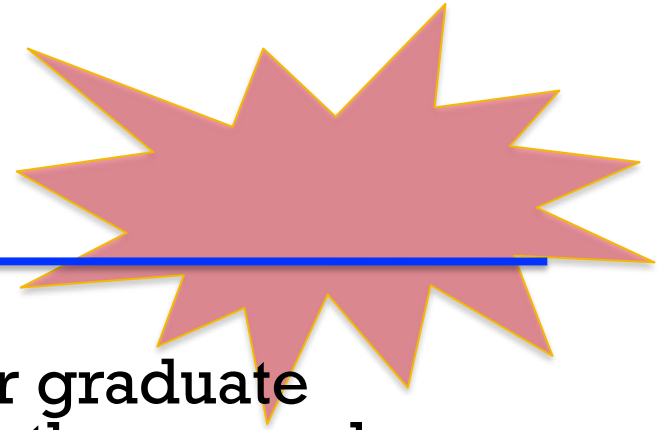
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Carrie is a TA for a small class, and meets frequently with the students in the class to discuss their papers and writing. Half way through the semester Carrie gets a Facebook Friend Request from one of her students with whom she has established a good rapport.



# Case: Your Fellow TA

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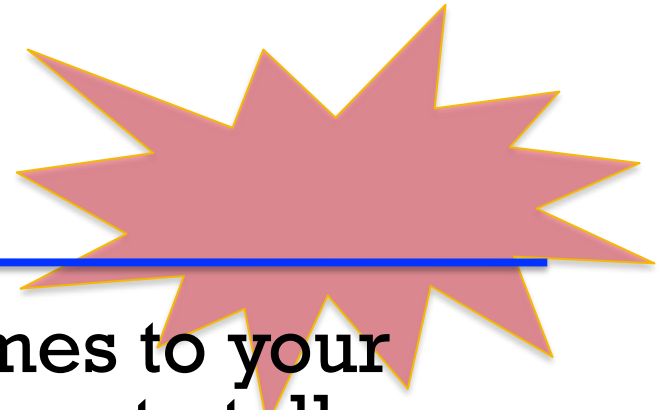


Aisha shares an office with three other graduate students, and all four of them TA for the same class. Aisha has noticed on several occasions that one of other students frequently mentions how they do not prepare for tutorial, and cannot get the students to engage in discussion, so they often let the class out early. Aisha thinks this is unfair to the students.

Aisha has also overheard her fellow TA speaking ill of the Professor in front of students. Aisha thinks this behavior is damaging to the professor. However, when Aisha tried talking to her fellow TA about her concerns, they told her to "mind her own business." Given that Aisha has to work closely with this student she is worried about the repercussions of reporting their behavior.

## Case: T.M.I.?

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One of your students, Allan, comes to your office the week of the final exam to tell you that he cannot write the exam because he has been suffering from depression for the last two weeks. Allan is close to tears as he tells you that he has not been able to focus and unable study, and begins to go into lengthy detail telling you how his Dad has been fighting cancer, and how he and his significant other of four years recently broke up. Allan wants you to give him permission to write the exam in a couple of weeks, once he is feeling better, and able to focus.

# Case: !?



Lola is a TA for a first-year intro philosophy course. After the first semester of facilitating tutorials, Lola notices that one of her students tends to challenge her authority during every class in some form or another. The student also exhibits very threatening behavior and body language meant for intimidation. With the first paper deadline approaching, Lola will be meeting with each student for a one-on-one discussion about his or her first paper. Lola is very nervous about meeting with this particular student. While the student has never threatened Lola, she is very nervous about him coming into her office hours, and having to be along alone with him.

[http://www.uwo.ca/equity/docs/dealing\\_with\\_behaviour.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/equity/docs/dealing_with_behaviour.pdf)

<http://westernpgsa.ca/wumgasp/>

# Questions?

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Contact: [mjacquar@uwo.ca](mailto:mjacquar@uwo.ca)

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# Thanks!

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