

Navigating the Classroom with Confidence as a Teaching Assistant

An Introduction to Accessibility and Academic Accommodations



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Part 1: Understanding the Context at Queen's

Introduction

Teaching assistants (TAs) are an essential link between students in the classroom and the course instructor; your role as a TA will often position you as the first point of contact for students in tutorials, labs, and seminars. You will have an important role to support student learning by working to create an accessible and inclusive classroom environment.

At Queen's, all educators have the responsibility to *"work collaboratively with students with disabilities, QSAS staff, SGS or Faculty/School colleagues and administration, and other university employees, to implement academic accommodations in a manner that meets essential academic requirements and standards, and protects the dignity and privacy of students"* (Queen's [Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities Policy](#))

Your role as a TA comes with these same responsibilities. TAs often support course instructors by implementing academic accommodations in the classroom, tutorials, labs, through exams and assessment, and when grading. Regardless of what role you have as a TA you will likely be supporting students with accommodations.

We all have a role in supporting students! Read the section for Educators under Section E of the [Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities Policy](#) for a full list of all the responsibilities that educators and TAs have in supporting academic accommodations at Queen's.



What will you find in this guide?

This guide was created to encourage you to think about inclusive teaching practices and to better understand how to create an accessible learning environment. The guide will introduce the accessibility and accommodations processes at Queen's and how you can implement strategies in your role as a TA. This guide doesn't contain all the information and won't make you an expert! Instead, it offers a resource that introduces you to key concepts, common questions, where to find more opportunities for learning, and other resources on campus. As a graduate educator (either a TA or Teaching Fellow (TF)) you have

a duty and responsibility to understand academic accommodations. This means learning how to enact academic accommodations in both classroom and assessment contexts.

If you have one main take away from this guide it should be that you are part of team of people at Queen's who have a role in supporting students. If you are unclear about how to navigate academic accommodations or implement them in the course, reach out to the course instructor for help!



An important note about privacy and confidentiality

It is essential that you maintain the privacy and confidentiality of students. Regardless of your role in supporting academic accommodations in the course, it is your responsibility to understand how to maintain the privacy of students while supporting them in their learning. A few examples of what this means:

- **Academic accommodation information is confidential.** Only the TA and the course instructor should discuss student accommodations. Do not share information in class, with other students, or outside the course context that would identify which students may have accommodations.
- **Discussions should focus on how to support implementing accommodations in the classroom.** If you are discussing with a student how you can support their academic accommodations, ground the discussion on what you can do to help them succeed in course activities and assessments. It is not appropriate to ask students about their disability or why they have a need for academic accommodations.
- **Professional communication.** All communications for your role as TA should be through your Queen's staff netID to maintain an appropriate and secure point of contact.
- **Ask for help if needed.** If you have concerns or questions about how to handle accommodation information appropriately, don't guess – go ask the course instructor for guidance. If you need additional support or have concerns you can also reach out to the undergraduate chair in your department.

Understanding important terminology and definitions:

Here are a few terms and definitions that might be helpful as you navigate the policies and procedures around academic accommodations at Queens’:

Inclusive Teaching:

- **Inclusive teaching:** Inclusive teaching refers to intentional approaches to curriculum, course design, teaching practice, and assessment that create a learning environment where all students feel that their differences are valued and respected, have equitable access to learning and other educational opportunities, and are supported to learn to their full potential.¹
- **Educational Equity:** Equity in an educational institution is achieved when all members of our society have fair and equal opportunity to participate in and enjoy the benefits of an education, including the opportunity to experience success and human dignity while developing the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to contribute as leaders and citizens in society.²
- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** UDL is an educational framework for designing courses that removes barriers to learning wherever possible, advances teaching and learning for all individuals, and moves beyond the physical concerns to consider all aspects of the learning environment.³ UDL addresses accessibility at the course design stage and can minimize (but may not eliminate) the need for some individual academic accommodations.⁴

Accessibility and Ableism:

- **Disability** : “Disability” means, any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical co-ordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device,
 - a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability,
 - a learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language,
 - a mental disorder, or
 - an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act 1997.⁵

- **Accessibility:** A general term for the degree of ease that something (e.g., device, service, physical environment and information) can be accessed, used and enjoyed by persons with disabilities. The term implies conscious planning, design and/or effort to make sure something is barrier-free to persons with disabilities.⁶
- The **Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA):** is a provincial legislation created with the intent of achieving accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities by 2025 in five areas: customer service; design of public spaces; employment; information and communication; and transportation.⁷
- **Ableism:** Ableism can be defined as a belief system, analogous to racism, sexism or ageism, that sees persons with disabilities as being less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute and participate, or of less inherent value than others. Ableism may be conscious or unconscious and may be embedded in institutions, systems or the broader culture of a society.⁸



Understanding language specific to Queen's:

- **Queen's Student Accessibility Services (QSAS):** provides academic accommodations to students when functional impacts arise from a disability and create a barrier in the academic environment. QSAS's goals is to support inclusive and accessible educational experiences that foster independence and autonomy for all students with disabilities.⁹
- **Academic Accommodations:** Accommodations are designed to remove barriers while upholding essential requirements of a course.¹⁰
 - Types of Academic Accommodations:
 - **Classroom:** Accommodations that affect the learning environment within lectures, tutorials, labs and seminar. They may include: physical space, adaptive technology needs, not takers, breaks, alternate material formats, etc.⁴
 - **Assessment:** Accommodations needed for quizzes, test, or exams which may include: extra time, private writing space, scribe, etc.⁴
 - **Placement:** Accommodations that support students for integrated learning experiences such as practicums, clinical placements, or field work.⁴
- **Duty to Accommodate:** The right to be accommodated, and the corresponding duty of the University to respond quickly and appropriately to requests for accommodation. The Ontario Human Rights Code requires an effort to the point of undue hardship to accommodate the needs of persons who are protected by the Code.¹¹
- **Ventus:** is a management system that allows students, instructors, QSAS and other University stakeholders to easily communicate about accommodations for students with disabilities.¹²
- **Academic Considerations:** Academic considerations are an action or actions taken by an educator or Faculty/School Office, in response to a student with a short-term extenuating circumstance. An extenuating circumstance means a personal circumstance beyond the student's control that has a direct and substantial impact on the student's ability to meet essential academic requirements or standards.¹³ Academic considerations are **not** the same as QSAS academic accommodations.

Part 2: Preparing for your TA Role?

Key Questions to Ask the Course Instructor:

TA Tip: Use this page to brainstorm your own questions or print this page to bring to a meeting with the course instructor!

1. Questions to ask **before** the course starts?
 - Who has the responsibility in this course for managing accommodations?
 - Who should students email about academic accommodations?
 - Who has access to Ventus?
 - Who will access Ventus to manage accommodations? (ie. this may be the course instructor, head TA, or part of your TA role)
 - Managing confidentiality as a TA
 - What steps can be taken in my TA role to protect student privacy?
 - I.e. We will not store any student information on personal devices, not communicate via student email address for TA responsibilities
 - How will we ensure that all TAs in the teaching team are managing accommodations in the same way?
2. Questions to ask about course **participation**
 - How do I assess participation as a learning outcome in my tutorial when there is an accommodation?
 - For example: what are alternative forms of participation? What can I do as a TA to support students that need materials in advance or notetakers?
3. Questions to ask about facilitating **tutorials, seminars** and/or **labs**?
 - How can you prepare your tutorial/lab to ensure you meet all the accommodation needs for students in the class? (ie. navigate discussions, group work, activities, technology use, physical space)
 - What materials can I expect from you (the instructor) to help meet accommodations?
4. Questions to ask about assessments and grading?
 - When do I start grading assignments (do I wait until all assessments are submitted)?
 - How do I know when a student has extra time or will be handing in an assignment on a different date? Will I see this information in onQ?

Strategies to Build an Inclusive Teaching Practice:

TA Tip: Although your TA role may not have a direct responsibility to coordinate or implement academic accommodations, there are many things that you can do to build an inclusive and accessible learning environment for your students. Here are some examples of how you can increase accessibility in the classroom.

1. **Get to know your students!**

If you are comfortable share a bit about yourself or your research. Work to learn students' names and offer opportunities for students to meet with you during office hours to share anything that

would help their learning. You may want to ask students to introduce themselves – this offers a chance for students to use a name that might be different from your class list and share their pronouns if they choose.



2. **Build community.** Work to create an environment in the classroom that encourages students to learn with and from one another. It can be helpful to discuss with students what respectful discussions and interactions look like in the course. Consider working with students in the first tutorial or lab session to co-create [community agreements](#) to help set up expectations for classroom engagement and activities. This might include what you will collectively do if there is an issue or disrespectful comments are made. Community agreements can be revisited during the term as needed to give everyone a reminder of what the learning community set as important goals.

3. **Provide materials in accessible formats.** When developing course materials consider:

- Accessible fonts and colours (to ensure you are selecting sans-serif fonts and high contrast colors)
- Include alt text for all photos and graphics.
- Use videos that have captions and transcripts available.
- Embed hyperlinks with descriptive text.
- Use accessible slide formats. PowerPoint also has a feature to enable live captioning for presentations in tutorials or lectures.

- Take some time to learn about the accessibility tools in Microsoft Word and PowerPoint as they offer some great ideas for improving your materials!

For additional help on making your course materials accessible, reach out to the [Accessibility Hub](#) or the [Adaptive Technology Centre](#) for more guidance.

4. **Language choice matters!** Choose to use language that is gender-neutral and culturally-sensitive. Avoid using analogies and don't perpetuate stereotypes. Consider examples that come from different perspectives and offer opportunities for students to contribute examples that might be relevant.
5. **Be proactive in applying academic accommodations.** You will likely have students with academic accommodations in your class and it is important for you to have a plan of how you will ensure their accommodations are met. Before you know your students you can be proactive and learn about Universal Design for Learning! UDL doesn't replace academic accommodations but it creates more access for all students in the course, whether they have formal accommodations or not.
6. **Encourage participation in multiple ways.** Offer multiple ways for students to engage and participate. That could be through oral discussions in class, online discussion forums, individual written activities, anonymous polls etc. Remember that students can also be participating by actively listening and notetaking!
7. **Be aware of your own biases.** We all have implicit biases and it is important for us to reflect on these and take action to learn and grow. Focus on grounding your teaching in the course materials and not opinions. Be open to new perspectives.
8. **Look for opportunities for feedback and future learning.** Seek feedback on your teaching throughout the term so that you have an opportunity to change and try new things. This can be done with quick anonymous surveys or exit tickets! There are many opportunities for you to pursue professional development of your teaching skills including workshops with [SGSPA](#), the [Centre for Teaching and Learning](#) (CTL), a credit course on teaching and learning in higher education ([SGS 902](#)), and independent activities such as the Professional Development in University Teaching and Learning ([PUTL](#)) modules.

Common Questions and Areas of Confusion:

- I still don't understand the difference between an academic accommodation and an academic consideration.
 - An academic accommodations is an adjustment or change in the course to remove or reduce a barrier for a student with a disability. They are managed by a QSAS advisor and are communicated to the teaching team using Ventus. An academic consideration is a short-term request due to an extenuating

circumstance (ie. physical or mental illness, family emergency, bereavement etc). Considerations are managed at the level of the department or Faculty.

- What can you ask students about their accommodations?
 - You can **not** ask students about why they have an academic accommodation or the reason for the accommodations. If you have questions about how you can best support students and enact accommodations in class, you can discuss this with the course instructor.
- What is the difference between classroom and assessment accommodations?
 - Classroom accommodations affect the learning environment within lectures, tutorials, labs and seminars. They may include aspects of the physical space, adaptive technology needs, note takers, breaks and standing, and alternate format materials just to name a few. Assessment accommodations refer to accommodations that need to be considered for exams and course assessments, for example, additional time, private writing space, scribe, etc.
- Is the process of implementing academic accommodations the same in all courses?
 - No, the way academic accommodations are managed at the course level is at the discretion of each individual instructor. This means your roles as a TA might have different responsibilities when it comes to accommodations. In every course you can work towards implementing strategies to inclusive inclusion and access for all students!

Part 3: Campus Resources:

Who should I reach out to with more questions?

- Your course instructor, department, and Faculty offices are great resources for questions specific to how things might be managed within your department.
- [QSAS](#) (Queen's Student Accessibility Services)
- [Adaptive Technology Centre](#)
- [Accessibility Hub](#)

Asynchronous Resources:

Centre for Teaching and Learning

- [TA Essentials Modules](#)
- Web Resources: [TA Toolkit](#), [Inclusive pedagogy](#) and [I-EDIAA](#) web pages
- Professional Development in University Teaching and Learning: [Module 5 Accessibility, Disability Justice and Intersectionality](#)

Human Rights and Equity Office (HREO)

- [Queen's Accessibility Hub](#)
- [HREO Modules: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Pedagogy and Practice](#)
- [HREO: AODA training](#)

Important Policies and Documents

- Queen's [Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities Policy](#)
- Queen's [Academic Considerations for Students in Extenuating Circumstances Policy](#)

References for Terminology and Definitions:

- ¹ "Inclusive Teaching @ UBC". University of British Columbia, n.d., Retrieved June 6, 2025 from <https://inclusiveteaching.ctlt.ubc.ca/>
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- ³ "Accessibility, Universal Design for Learning". Centre for Teaching and Learning, Queen's University, n.d., Retrieved June 6, 2025 from <https://www.queensu.ca/ctl/resources/accessibility>
- ⁴ "Queen's University Accessibility Services: Faculty", Student Wellness Services, Queen's University, n.d., Retrieved Sept 12, 2025 from: <https://www.queensu.ca/studentwellness/accessibility-services/faculty>
- ⁵ "In-Sight Glossary of Terms". Human Rights Advisory Services, Queen's University, n.d., Retrieved June 6, 2025 from: <https://www.queensu.ca/humanrights/in-sight-glossary-terms>
- ⁶ "Glossary of human rights terms". Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d., Retrieved June 6, 2025, from <https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/teaching-human-rights-ontario-guide-ontario-schools/appendix-1-glossary-human-rights-terms>
- ⁷ "AODA". Accessibility Hub, Queen's University, n.d., Retrieved June 6, 2025 from <https://www.queensu.ca/accessibility/across-campus/aoda>
- ⁸ "Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Indigenization: Key Terms" Human Rights and Equity Office, Queen's University, 2017, Retrieved June 6, 2025 from https://www.queensu.ca/hreo/sites/hreowww/files/uploaded_files/20201210KeyEDIIterms.pdf
- ⁹ "Queen's Student Accessibility Services (QSAS)". Student Wellness Services, Queen's University, n.d., Retrieved Sept 12, 2025: <https://www.queensu.ca/studentwellness/accessibility-services>
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- ¹¹ "Accommodation". Human Rights Advisory Services, Queen's University, n.d., Retrieved June 6, 2025 from <https://www.queensu.ca/humanrights/advisory-issues/accommodation>
- ¹² "Ventus". Queen's Student Accessibility Services, Student Wellness Services, n.d., Retrieved June 6, 2025 from <https://www.queensu.ca/studentwellness/accessibility-services/ventus>
- ¹³ "Academic Consideration for Students in Extenuating Circumstances Policy". University Secretariat and Legal Counsel, Queen's University, 2017, Retrieved June 6, 2025 from <https://www.queensu.ca/secretariat/policies/senate/academic-consideration-students-extenuating-circumstances-policy>