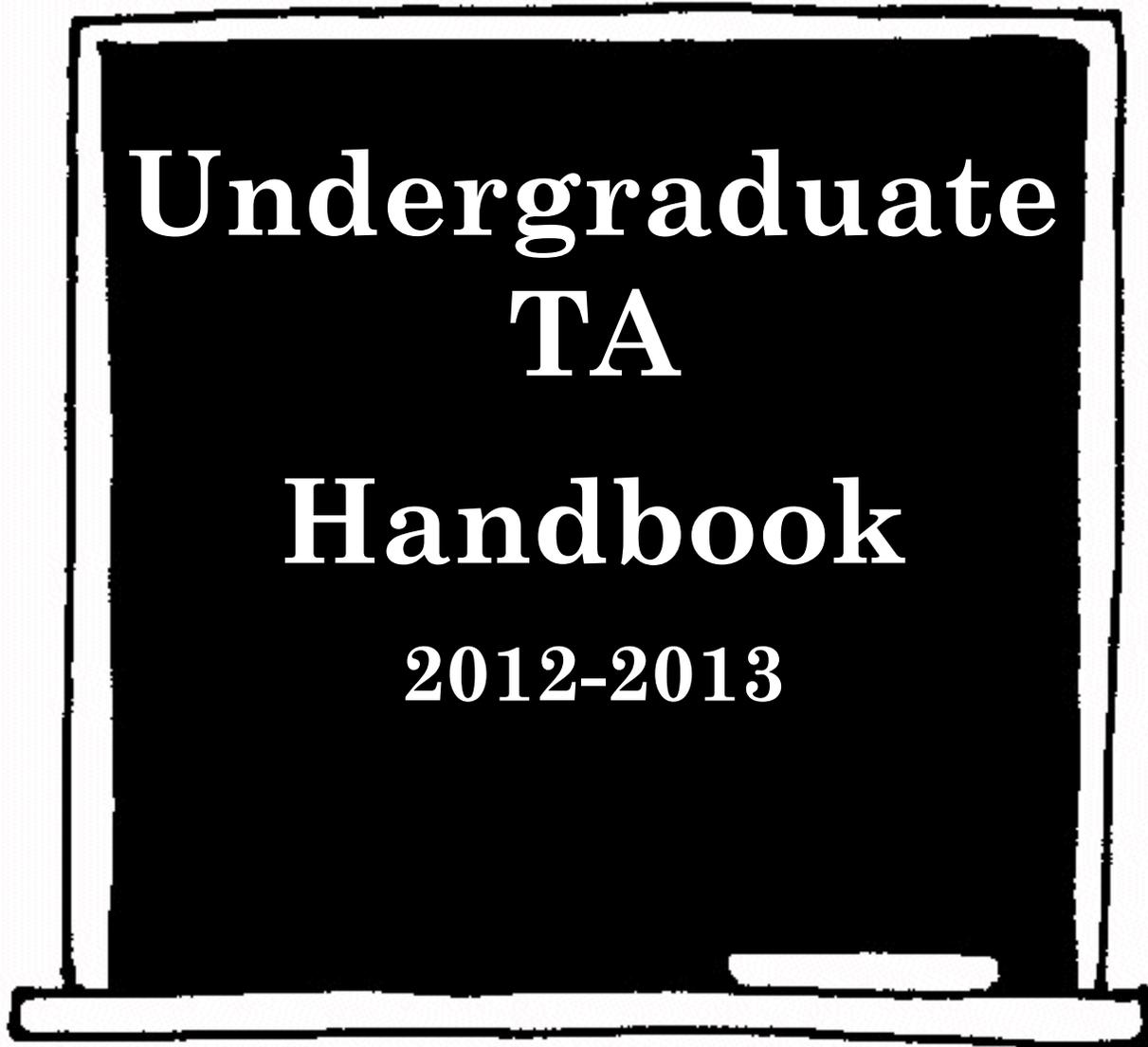


# Unit 1

TAs and RAs in lieu



**CUPE 3906**

Canadian Union of Public Employees



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# Welcome to CUPE 3906!



As a teaching assistant employed by McMaster University, you are now a member of **the largest union on campus**. This handbook is designed to familiarize you with CUPE Local 3906 by answering some frequently asked questions, as well as provide you with some helpful tips for navigating your Teaching Assistantship (TAship).

CUPE 3906 represents undergraduate, graduate, and non-student Teaching Assistants, Research Assistants in lieu of teaching assistantships, Sessional Faculty, and Postdoctoral Fellows. Our local has an elected executive committee of 16 members who, together with the local's Staff Representatives, carry out the day-to-day operations and business of the local.

CUPE 3906 is governed by a set of by-laws **drafted and voted on by all of us**, as well as by the constitution of our national union whose convention we attend biannually. Both documents can be found on our website: *[www.cupe3906.org](http://www.cupe3906.org)*.

If you have any questions please visit our website, send us an email at [cupe3906@mcmaster.ca](mailto:cupe3906@mcmaster.ca), give us a call at 905-525-9140 ext. 24003, or stop by the office (in the basement of Wentworth House, room B108).

# CUPE 3906 - Your Local

## Why Unions?

Unions operate on the principle that **workers have the right to fair treatment in the workplace**. Although there is legislation protecting workers, attempting to protect your rights without help can be intimidating, and for many workers such actions are simply not possible. When there is no union in the workplace, each individual must negotiate their own working conditions and must protect themselves against unfair treatment.

When workers come together and form a union, we no longer have to face issues alone. **A union environment is one of mutual support and cooperation**. There are many active members and staff who can help you understand your rights as a worker and the options available to you if you think your rights have been violated.

Being part of a union also means that we have the power of collective bargaining. Our rights as workers are protected in a legally binding contract between the employer (McMaster University Administration) and the union (us, CUPE 3906) called a “**collective agreement**”. Negotiating a collective agreement can be challenging and time consuming, but by working together as a union, we can increase our ability to get the fair contract we deserve as skilled and qualified workers.

## What is CUPE?

Our local is affiliated to **Canada’s largest public sector union**, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents more than half a million workers across the country working in health care, education, municipalities, libraries, post-secondary institutions, social services, public utilities, transportation, emergency services and airlines. CUPE is highly democratic and is committed to equity and fairness in the workplace and society at large.



CUPE consists of many 'local' branches that represent workers in different sectors, workplaces, and geographic regions. As an **undergraduate TA (what we call a Unit 1 member)**, you are working in the academic sector and the local here at McMaster is CUPE Local 3906. Local autonomy forms a cornerstone of CUPE's democratic principles. This means that decisions and directions come from the membership and their elected representatives. One of the major benefits of CUPE being structured this way is that our local is able to respond to the unique scenarios that arise within our specific workplaces.

For more info on CUPE visit: [www.cupe.ca](http://www.cupe.ca)

## What does my local do?

CUPE 3906 provides support and advice with regards to any work-related issues you may encounter as an undergraduate TA. If you have a question or problem related to your work, **contact the union right away**. The consultation process is confidential and we will work in collaboration with you. Remember that you are likely not the only one who is experiencing, or has experienced, this problem, and we will work to resolve the issue through dialogue or through a formal grievance process.



**The union is in your corner.** Even if you don't want to pursue the matter, or you're not sure if it constitutes a work problem, let the union know as soon as possible, as some options require timely actions. **No reprisal can be taken for contacting the union.**

Common issues include: overwork, unfair hiring or discipline, a work environment you feel is unsafe, and harassment or oppressive behavior. If you feel you have been treated unfairly, tell the union. That's what we're here for!

## How do I get involved?

By virtue of being a TA of McMaster University, you are already a union member and therefore already involved! However, there are many ways to become more actively involved in the union, depending on your time commitments.

- **Attend Meetings:** Our most important decision-making body is the general membership - you can help determine the direction of your local. We have General Membership Meetings (GMMs) monthly and an Annual Membership Meeting (AGM) once per year. They start at 5pm, food is provided, and we often have door prize draws for those who are able to stay until the end of the meeting.

At GMMs, you will hear updates and announcements from various committee and executive members, discuss and vote on motions, amendments to the local's by-laws, and the local's participation in wider community events, as well as elect your representatives on the Executive Committee. You will also have the opportunity to meet and socialize with other TAs. Please keep your eye out for emails from CUPE to indicate the time, day, and location of GMMs.

- **Join a Committee:** we have a variety of committees you can join, including: the Stewards Council, the Political Action Committee, the Equity Action Committee, the Benefits Committee, the By-laws committee, and the Grievance Committee. We also have opportunities to be involved at the Executive Committee level. For more information on our committees and executive positions, please visit our website or stop by the union office.



# Work Basics

## How much do I get paid as an undergrad TA?

As an undergraduate TA, you are paid according to the Unit 1 Collective Agreement. We try to negotiate wage increases every year for our members so wage rates will change from year to year. The Collective Agreement can be accessed at [www.cupe3906.org](http://www.cupe3906.org), and the department that hired you as a TA is responsible to make a copy of your Collective Agreement available to you.

## What is an “Hours of Work Form”?

When you begin your TA assignment, you will be required to meet with your supervisor to talk about how your work hours will be allocated. This meeting needs to happen **within 5 days** of your start date as a teaching assistant.

One of the purposes of this meeting is working together to fill out an “Hours of Work Form”, which you can find a copy attached to the Collective Agreement. You will discuss with your supervisor how many hours you will be required to spend in lectures (if applicable), leading tutorials or labs, marking, invigilating exams, holding office hours, doing prep work, meeting with your supervisor, etc.

**Discuss the time allotments with your supervisor** to make sure you have enough time for things like prep work for your labs or tutorials, and enough time to mark tests, assignments, and essays. For example, you cannot mark a 10 page essay in less than 10 minutes.

**Make sure that this meeting is included as part of your hours** when you fill out the form, as it should be paid time.

## What do I do if I work over my hours?

An example work log can be found on our website and is extremely useful for tracking your hours.

Undergraduate TAs are usually for 130 hours or less (but not less than 32 hours) per semester, depending on the course. If your TA assignment is for a full 130 hours, you will generally be working ten hours per week. While you may find that you are doing less than this amount, you will likely make up these hours when marks for assignments, essays, or exams are due. At these peak times, you may work more than ten hours in one week.

Your supervisor **must notify you at least 5 business days in advance** if your workload is likely to exceed a total of 20 hours in a particular week.

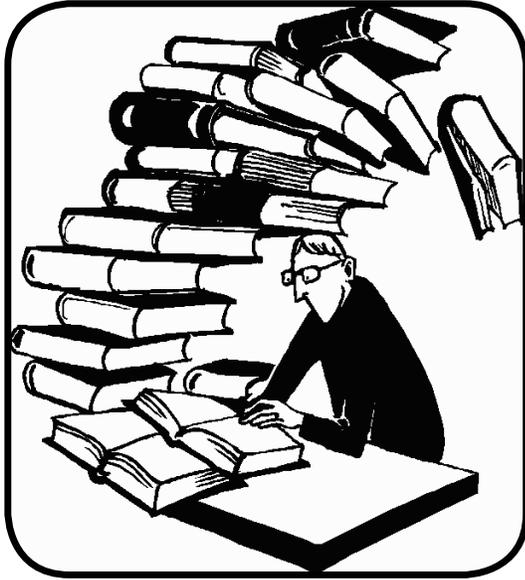
You have the right to stop working if you reach your maximum hours. **If you are approaching your assigned number of hours** for the semester, the following steps should be taken:

1. It is best to **be proactive** and inform your supervisor as soon as possible, and request a meeting with him/her to discuss the situation. Your supervisor must meet with you within 5 business days of your request for a meeting.
2. At the meeting, it is your **supervisor's responsibility to make alternative arrangements** with respect to the work that still needs to be completed. Your "Hours of Work Form" may need to be amended as a result.
3. Generally, TAs only work the amount of hours they were hired for. However, if you are going to work over your assigned hours, you need to **get approval in writing** from your supervisor that you will be paid for any hours worked above and beyond your contract. If you do end up going over without prior approval, you should still consult with your union.
4. If you have requested a meeting with your supervisor to discuss your work hours and s/he has not met with you within 5 business days, **speak to one of the union's staff representatives** as soon as possible (either by phone, email, or by visiting the office).
5. If you have met with your supervisor to discuss your hours of work, but no alternative arrangements were made to address the situation, speak to one of the union's staff representatives.

You are entitled to have a union representative accompany you to any meeting scheduled with your supervisor to discuss hours of work, or any work-related issue.

## What should I do if my workplace is unsafe?

You have to the right to work in an environment free of harassment, discrimination, and workplace hazards. You also have the right to refuse unsafe work. If you are concerned about your workplace safety, there is a Health and Safety officer on the Executive Committee that can assist you. S/he can be reached at [healthandsafety@cupe3906.org](mailto:healthandsafety@cupe3906.org).



At the beginning of your first TA assignment, you will be required to complete 3 hours of health and safety training. The training you will be required to do will vary slightly depending on what department you are working in, and if you will be working in a laboratory.

You will be paid for 3 hours of training. If it takes you less than 3 hours to complete, you will still be paid for 3 hours. If you have previously completed your health and safety training, these

hours cannot be re-assigned to other duties in your “Hours of Work Form” and you still get paid for 3 hours.

## Should I talk about my job on facebook?

As a TA, you can be held responsible for the content you post on social media sites including Twitter and Facebook posts. TAs and students can be disciplined for making inappropriate social media comments.

Avoid making, commenting on, or sharing negative remarks related to the following: students who you interact with as a TA, supervisors and their methods of teaching, and difficulty marking student assignments or exams.

If you are contacted about comments you have made, or if you find derogatory comments online, contact the union for advice or assistance. You have the right to representation if accused or if you are the victim of online comments.

## What benefits do I have access to as TA?

TAs are entitled to a variety of benefits through CUPE 3906. Your union has fought hard at the bargaining table to secure a health spending account, UHIP and child care rebates, as well as a hardship fund for TAs.

- **Health Spending Account:** You are entitled to \$250 every 2 years to cover any health or vision-related expenses. You may file a claim if you are currently a TA or have been in the last two academic terms.
- **UHIP Rebate:** You are entitled to \$150 per academic year. This is only available to International Students who have paid UHIP premiums.
- **Hardship Fund:** The hardship fund exists to help members with a one-time emergency expense that is not covered by other provided benefits. You may file a claim if you are currently a TA or have been a TA in the last two academic terms.
- **Childcare Rebate:** You are entitled to \$100 per year for childcare. You may file a claim if you are currently a TA or have been in the last two academic terms.

Check our website or visit the CUPE office for more information about the claims process and the forms and documentation required to file a claim. For undergraduate TAs, dental benefits and extended health care are covered by the McMaster Students Union (MSU), not CUPE.

Consult your Collective Agreement for information on your entitlements to leaves of absence such as sick leave, pregnancy and parental leave, bereavement leave, as well as vacations and public holidays.

## What university resources do I have access to?

You should be provided with **office space** for the purpose of preparation time, holding office hours, and meeting with students, if these duties have been assigned to you as a TA. The department that hired you cannot charge you for any **photocopying or printing** you must do in order to fulfill your TA duties.

If you have questions with respect to using McMaster resources (for example, office space or use of a lab) for any tutoring you do outside of your TAship, speak to the union or your TA supervisor.

# Helpful Tips and Tricks

This section of the guide offers suggestions to assist you in being an undergrad TA. They're not hard-and-fast rules for being a successful TA, nor are they official positions put forth by CUPE 3906. However, through the experiences of our members over the years, we have been able to compile some tricks that other TAs have found helpful. There isn't one "right" way to TA. You will need to work out what works best for you.

## Your First Tutorial/Lab

**Arrive early** to familiarize yourself with the room set up, as well as any lab equipment you and the students will be using. Tutorial and lab sizes can vary widely, and it is possible you will have a large class. Your supervisor will give you an idea of the number of students you will be responsible for when you meet to fill out your "Hours of Work Form" prior to classes starting.

**Introduce yourself** to the students and tell them what year you are in and what your major or program of study is. Give the students your McMaster email address and office hours, and let them know when the best time to contact you is. Also, describe the structure of the tutorial/lab to the students, what will be expected of them on a weekly basis, and how they will be graded (your supervisor should tell you this beforehand).

The first tutorial is usually a "getting to know you" class to make the students feel more comfortable with one another. Similarly, the first lab gives students the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the lab setting, the materials, interacting with you and their peers.

If you are TAing a lab section, **make sure that you are familiar with the location of the first aid kit, eye wash station, fire alarm**, etc. Your supervisor or the lab technician should provide you with an orientation prior to your first lab, and inform you of the safety protocols and procedures. Review the lab safety (WHMIS) symbols with your class so they are aware of any potentially hazardous and dangerous materials. Also ensure that students wear any applicable safety clothing, for example safety glasses, lab coats, appropriate shoes, etc. Students should read labels on bottles and containers carefully, and should be warned not to touch any chemicals or materials other than the ones being used during the lab. Furthermore, make sure to hold up each piece of equipment you use while demonstrating the

experiment so that the students can follow on a step-by-step basis.

Think about creating some “class rules” with your tutorial/lab. This will outline clear expectations for your students’ behavior for the rest of the semester. Some typical class rules are: put up your hand if you would like to say something or ask a question, be respectful, don’t talk over one another, every contribution is important, do your readings before class, etc. Some TAs will ask their students to create these rules as a group exercise, which allows the students an opportunity to take ownership over the demeanor and atmosphere of the class.

## Icebreakers

If you have been assigned a tutorial as part of your TAship, icebreakers can be useful for the first few classes to help students become comfortable speaking around each other. Icebreakers can be something as simple as “the strangest thing about me”, but when you are doing an icebreaker with students, **always go first** so that they feel more comfortable answering the question and know what kind of answer you are looking for.

Check out this website for icebreaker ideas: [www.icebreakers.ws](http://www.icebreakers.ws)

## Beyond the first tutorial/lab

Your supervisor may have specific activities that s/he requires you to do with your students in tutorials/labs, but many supervisors will leave activities up to you. If this is the case, it is crucial to **spend some time preparing activities**. Being prepared will also prevent you from becoming too nervous, as you will have a clearly laid-out plan. For example, it can be useful to make notes while reading the required readings for that week and brainstorm some discussion questions.



If you have a smaller tutorial, it can be easy to have a spontaneous discussion where everyone can get involved. If your tutorial is larger, it can be beneficial to make a handout of questions for the week to ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to participate.

For labs, it can be useful to find out what could potentially go wrong during the experiment, and the appropriate steps to follow. If possible, have a contact number for your supervisor in case a serious problem or emergency situation occurs. Also, encourage your students to take notes during or shortly after they have completed the experiment to ensure an accurate recording of the results.

If you do not know the answer to a student's question, don't worry - this happens to everyone! Tell the student that you will consult with the professor and get back to him/her. If possible, try to provide an answer to their question at the beginning of the next tutorial/lab. **Do not guess at the answer**, since if you are wrong it could hurt the student on an assignment or exam.

Students will sometimes get restless and start talking while you are trying to answer a question or explain the material. **Calmly ask the students to be quiet** and warn them that if they talk over other people/you again, their participation mark will be decreased for that day. If they continue to be disruptive, **you may ask them to leave**.

## **Email communication with students**

Tell your students when the best time is to email you, so that you can respond in a timely manner. For example, if they have an assignment due on Wednesday, tell them to have questions emailed by Monday to ensure you have adequate time to respond. You may want to link your Avenue (or other online portal) e-mail account to your McMaster email account. If you cannot or are unsure how to answer a question, ask your supervisor.

Inform your students that you may not be able to answer emails on the weekend and to email between Monday and Friday from 8.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m., or whatever time frame works best for you. Make sure to **be consistent with the time frame** and what you tell the students. Setting limitations is acceptable, and can help ensure that you do not work over your assigned hours.

Ideally, emails from students should be sent to you from McMaster University email accounts. Check with your supervisor to see how s/he recommends for emails received from other accounts.

## **Marking**

Your supervisor will give you instructions on how assignments should be marked. Sometimes your supervisor will review a few of your marked assignments to ensure consistency.

It is often useful to discuss assignments with your students ahead of time so they understand what is expected of them. This prevents any ambiguity that may occur later regarding why a certain grade was given.

**Before you begin marking**, read at least three assignments to familiarize yourself with the writing level. For example, if you are used to reading third year assignments, first year assignments may seem unpolished.

**If you have any questions about an assignment**, make sure to ask your supervisor. **If you suspect plagiarism**, ask your supervisor to advise you regarding McMaster's plagiarism policy.

Typically essays and exams are all due around the same time. If you think that your academics are going to suffer from an increase in TA duties (such as large amounts of marking around the end of the year when you need to study for your final exams), you can ask your TA supervisor for an extension on marking assignments. This right can be found in article 12.08 of the Unit 1 Collective Agreement.



## Grade Appeals

Most professors have policies on student grade appeals. Some prefer that appeals be directed to them and not the TA who marked the assignment or exam initially. If the TA is asked to handle grade appeals, the first step will be to review the assignment again. If the student is not content with his/her new grade, or if the grade has not changed, the student may appeal to the professor.

You may want to consider **giving overall feedback at the end of assignments to students**, since this may reduce the number of students who want to contest their grades.

Before an assignment is due, it can be useful to tell your students that **they cannot appeal their mark for 24 hours** after it has been returned. This is not a rule, but it can help prevent conflict with upset or disgruntled students. The “24-hour policy” means that a student can set up an appointment with you to discuss their grade only after 24 hours have passed. If you are going to use the 24-hour policy, tell your students before the assignment is due so it will not come as a surprise to them.

If a student is angry about a grade, use the 24-hour policy as a cooling down period before they speak to you. **It is a good idea to leave the door open when meeting with students.** If you feel unsafe meeting with a student alone, ask your supervisor to accompany you to the meeting.

## Personal Relationships and TAing

As an undergraduate TA, you may be assigned a course that your friends are enrolled in. **Make sure to inform your supervisor if one of your friends is in your tutorial or lab section.** S/he should make alternative arrangements so that you will not have to mark your friend's assignments and exams.

Try to **maintain a work-appropriate relationship** that is not too familiar, as being overly familiar with friends/acquaintances may cause the other students to feel left out or awkward. Also, if you bump into your students around or off campus, it may be best to be polite, but distant.

# How to Contact Your Union

**Drop by the office**  
Wentworth House B108

**Call us**  
905-525-9140 x24003

**Email us**  
[info@cupe3906.org](mailto:info@cupe3906.org)

**Visit the website**  
[cupe3906.org](http://cupe3906.org)

**Like us on Facebook**  
[facebook.com/cupe3906](https://facebook.com/cupe3906)

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