

Undergraduate TA Handbook

CUPE 3906, 2023-2024

Welcome to CUPE 3906!

As a teaching assistant employed by McMaster University, you are now a member of one of the largest unions on campus. You are now a part of Unit 1: TAs and RAs in lieu. This handbook is designed to answer 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.

If you have any questions please visit our website, or see our contact details at the end of this document.

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 700,000 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

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 do you get from being in the union?

- **Your wage:** through collective bargaining, we can fight for fairer wages that would otherwise be decided by the university. TA wages are the sole financial support that exists for many graduate students, so a living wage is not a want, it's a **need**.
- **Benefits:** the union provides benefits in the form of healthcare and childcare coverage, and more!
- **Protections:** the union provides support for students dealing with missing wages, mistreatment by the employer, overwork, and many other common issues that union members deal with.
- **Collective power:** there is strength in numbers!

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**. 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) quarterly and an Annual Membership Meeting (AGM) once per year.

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. 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.

The **Undergraduate Committee** is a new committee that any undergraduate student may join. It's a place for undergraduate TAs to voice their opinions and have a consistent stream of communication with CUPE 3906. Additionally, it will also oversee organizing socials, workshops and other initiatives for undergraduates. If you are interested in joining, please email the undergraduate Officer at undergrads@cupe3906.org.

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, 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 **before** you begin your duties as a TA.

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.

Finally, you have the right to prioritize your own studies. If you have a major academic deadline of your own, you have the right to request extensions, which should not be unreasonably denied. Also, you have the right to request to work for someone other than your own supervisor. See the Collective Agreement (Article 12) for more details, or contact a union rep for help.

What do I do if I work over my hours?

Make sure to **track your hours** on your own log so that you are getting compensated fairly!

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.

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 number 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 they have 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 have been 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 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. They can be reached at 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 social media?

As a TA, you can be held responsible for the content you post on social media sites including Twitter and Facebook posts. 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, your co-workers, 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 childcare rebates, as well as a hardship fund for TAs.

- **Health Spending Account:** You are entitled to \$350 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 \$250 per academic year. This is only available to International Students who have paid UHIP premiums.
- **Childcare Rebate:** You are entitled to \$450 per year for childcare. You may file a claim if you are currently a TA or have been in the last two academic terms.
- **Gender Affirmation Fund:** Members identifying as trans, two-spirit, and/or non-binary may receive up to \$2,000 for costs associated with gender affirmation
- **Reproductive Health Fund:** You are entitled to \$150 in reproductive health related expenses per academic year. These expenses include but are not limited to, menstrual products, HPV vaccines, prenatal vitamins, OTC Plan B, IUD insertions, transportation to and from reproductive healthcare services etc.

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 to fulfill your TA duties. They also cannot require a key deposit for your office space.

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.

Contact Us

Drop by the office

Kenneth Taylor Hall B111

Call us

905-525-9140 x24003

Email us

info@cupe3906.org

general inquires: staff@cupe3906.org

undergraduate specific: undergrads@cupe3906.org

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