



Teaching Assistant Handbook Summer 2026

SPH Teaching Assistant Handbook

Important Contacts	3
Position Expectations	4
Training Sessions	4
Blackboard	5
Zoom	5
Academic Policies & Grading.....	6
Academic Support Resources.....	6
Core Course Tutoring Program	6
Peer Writing Coach Program	6
Public Health Writing Guide.....	7
Alumni Medical Library	7
Health & Wellness.....	7
Disability & Access Services.....	8
Leading Discussions.....	8
Providing Meaningful Writing Feedback	10
Resources for Students in Distress.....	11
Safety On Campus	12

Welcome to the instructional team at Boston University School of Public Health!

The education team looks forward to working with you. This document serves as a guide and reference to teaching assistants (TAs) as they move through the semester. If you have any questions about the contents of this guidebook or if you need assistance, please contact spheducation@bu.edu. We are here to help and appreciate your efforts on behalf of our students.

Important Contacts

Office or function	Contact information
Add AV request to classroom reservation	sphregr@bu.edu
AV problems during class	EdMedia edmedia@bu.edu 617-638-3000
Blackboard Help	ithelp@bu.edu
BUMC building and grounds issues	BUMC Control: 617-638-4144
BUMC Public Safety	617-358-4444
General support	spheducation@bu.edu
Graduate Student Life	sphgsl@bu.edu
On Campus Emergencies – BUMC	BUMC Public Safety 617-358-4444
On Campus Emergencies – CRC	BU Police 617-353-2121
Registrar's Office	sphregr@bu.edu
Students in Distress - Non-Urgent Situations	Mary Murphy-Phillips mcmurph@bu.edu 617-358-1750
Students in Distress - Urgent Situations	Behavioral Medicine 617-353-3569

Position Expectations

Teaching assistants are expected to have successfully completed the course or its equivalent in addition to the SPH TA training sessions. General position expectations include:

- Attends on-campus class sessions
- Assists instructor with course management (Blackboard, preparing presentations, copying, distributing, and collecting course materials, etc.)
- Assists instructor with development or editing of course materials
- Holds weekly office hours and/or review sessions
- Arranges for outside speakers and guest lecturers
- Responds promptly and professionally to e-mail requests
- Evaluates student performance on homework sets, quizzes, examinations, and papers
- Refers students to SPH Tutoring and Peer Coach Programs
- Communicates regularly with instructor
- Maintains confidentiality of student records and performance in accordance with FERPA
- Performs other tasks as assigned by faculty

Remote Work Policies

- Teaching Assistants cannot engage in remote work (e.g., attend class via zoom, work out of state, etc.) unless the course is specifically designed to be delivered online and has an OL designation.
- The University is obligated by federal law to review and approve I-9 work authorization documentation in-person.
- International Teaching Assistants engaged in remote work are at risk of violating the conditions of their visa relative to work location.

Whether you are a new or experienced teaching assistant, it is important to have a conversation with your instructor at the beginning of the semester about their expectations regarding your contribution to the course. Each course presents unique challenges, and different instructors may have different expectations. Ensuring that all members of the instructional team are on the same page will result in a better experience for yourself, the course instructor, and your students.

Training Sessions

All TAs are **required** to complete each training session detailed below.

- **Title IX:** Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 requires universities to respond promptly and effectively to complaints of all kinds of sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment and sexual violence. Please review the [Title IX Training Materials and Resources](#).
- **Classroom orientation:** You will become familiar with classroom technology and gain hands on experience before the start of the semester by attending a classroom demonstration/training with Ed Media. Please also review the [Classroom Audio-Visual System Guide](#) for your classroom.

- **Blackboard Ultra training:** If your instructional support role includes Blackboard Ultra management, we encourage you to [register for a Blackboard training session](#) and review the tutorials in the next section. If you have any questions regarding Blackboard Ultra functionality, please contact [Ed Media](#).
- **FERPA:** The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law that protects the privacy of a student's education records. In compliance with FERPA, Boston University does not disclose personally identifiable information contained in student education records, except as authorized by law. [Please carefully review the information included on this website regarding the FERPA policy](#).

Blackboard Ultra

Blackboard Ultra is the course management system used at Boston University. Instructors request the creation of a Blackboard site for their course and are responsible for creating and populating their Blackboard Ultra site. Instructors need a BU email address and Kerberos password to access Blackboard Ultra.

Course information, assignments, and syllabi are posted on a Blackboard Ultra site and faculty can add materials during the semester or communicate easily with students and teaching assistants through the email functions in Blackboard Ultra.

Quick Links to Blackboard Ultra Resources

- [Blackboard Ultra Instructor Guide](#)
- [Sign up for a Blackboard Ultra training](#)
- [Introduction to Blackboard Ally](#)
- [Uploading Zoom Videos via Kaltura](#)
- [Kaltura MyMedia Resources](#)

Zoom

Zoom provides a robust platform for online collaboration and meetings, pairing full video and audio-conferencing capabilities with content sharing and cloud recording. There are features in Zoom that allow instructors to replicate the classroom experience including annotations, breakout rooms, polling to increase student engagement, and virtual whiteboard.

Quick Links to Zoom Resources

- Boston University Zoom portal: bostonu.zoom.us
- [Walk-through Guides](#)
- [Zoom Help Center](#)
- [Zoom FAQs](#)

Academic Policies & Grading

Teaching assistants should discuss grading procedures and expectations with their instructor. If you are new to grading, it may be helpful to grade the initial set of an assignment with your course instructor. When grading, consistency is important. If you are splitting the grading responsibilities for an assignment with your instructor or another teaching assistant, make sure each grader clearly understands the assessment guidelines for the assignment.

Academic policies are available on the SPH Bulletin: bu.edu/academics/sph/policies.

If you are concerned that a student may have committed an act of academic dishonesty at any time during the semester, bring it to the attention of the course instructor immediately. Keep a written record of what has transpired and retain the original work in question.

Academic Support Resources

SPH offers a variety of academic support resources both inside and outside of the classroom to promote academic success. The [Office for Graduate Student Life \(GSL\)](#) centralizes support for current SPH students and acts as a liaison between students and faculty, advocating for student needs and concerns. GSL supports students in need of academic accommodations and [Disability & Access Services](#), to ensure that all students have equal access to educational and professional opportunities on campus. Please contact Assistant Dean of Students, Mary Murphy-Phillips, about any area related to student life at 617-358-1750 or mcmurph@bu.edu.

Core Course Tutoring Program

The [Core Course Tutoring Program](#) is a free peer tutoring program for MPH students who are at risk of not meeting the minimum grade required (B–) in the MPH core courses. Students can be referred to the program by their core course instructor/teaching team or can request assistance by applying directly to sph tutor@bu.edu. Students who are retaking a core course do not need a referral; they will be contacted to be matched with a tutor at the beginning of the semester. Once matched, students can receive up to two hours per week of one-on-one assistance with an upper-class peer tutor. For more information, please contact sph tutor@bu.edu.

Peer Writing Coach Program

The [Peer Writing Coach Program](#) offers student-directed writing and presentation appointments to all students enrolled in SPH classes. Sessions are designed to meet the needs of students at all levels of skill and confidence. Students can make an appointment with a peer coach at any stage in their writing process and can make up to two appointments per assignment. Peer coaches are available both in person and online. Coaches are happy to work with individual authors and teams.

Students must [sign up for appointments](#). During the appointments, students may discuss their writing process, goals for becoming a better writer, or any writing challenges they may be experiencing. Contact sphcoach@bu.edu with any questions.

Public Health Writing Guide

The [Public Health Writing Guide](#) provides concrete strategies for improving prose, increasing productivity, and meeting the specific needs of readers. It offers strategies and best practices that can be useful to for students and over the course of their careers.

Alumni Medical Library

Librarians from the [BU Alumni Medical Library](#) can provide strategies for executing advanced searches using PubMed, Web of Science, Google, and other online resources. They can also assist with utilizing Mendeley and Zotero reference managers, properly citing sources, and avoiding plagiarism. To make an appointment to meet with a librarian to get personalized assistance with a search, contact them directly by email (refquest@bu.edu) or phone (617-638-4228).

BUSPH Teaching Public Health

Boston University School of Public Health has recently launched the [Teaching Public Health \(TPH\)](#) website, an innovative platform to increase public health education for all. TPH is a centralized repository of pedagogical resources developed by BUSPH faculty and experts in the field, designed to support public health students and teachers at every phase. To assist with supporting your role as a Teaching Assistant, we would like to highlight the following resources from this website for your review:

- [Inclusive Teaching](#) - This compilation of inclusive teaching resources is meant to support educators on their lifelong journey of teaching, learning and self-development.
- [Instructional Strategies & Support](#) - To ensure that all learners are prepared for the field, we share evidence-based practices and innovative teaching strategies to support educators.
- [Guides & Manuals](#) - Step by step tutorials for critical public health skills aimed at those new to the field or experienced practitioners.

BU Institute for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

The [Institute for Excellence in Teaching & Learning \(CTL\)](#) partners with faculty to cultivate teaching that is inclusive, centered on student learning, and guided by research and practice. The institute offers workshops, seminars, institutes, and individualized consultations designed to promote critical reflection and experimentation in teaching. They also provide guidance and resources on active learning, student engagement, the purposeful use of educational technologies, and much more.

Health & Wellness

SPH's [Wellness Program](#) is designed to help support students in their health and well-being throughout the graduate school journey. SPH believes that well-being should be inclusive, intersectional, and available to all in our community. Faculty, staff, and students who are queer, black, in a larger body, trans, disabled, anything and anywhere in between- belong.

We know that there's no one right way to feel well, and that taking care of oneself looks very different depending on life circumstances, personal preferences, current stressors, and so much more. We believe that well-being is all encompassing; while well-being includes nutrition and

movement, it also includes sleep, mental health, relationships, sexuality, anti-racism work, relationship to land, and everything in between.

We take care of ourselves, and then that care translates to how we show up in the world for others. Feel free to reach out at sphwell@bu.edu with any questions.

Disability & Access Services

All students face challenges and deserve a fair chance to succeed and to be treated with respect. Some students may require accommodations due to learning or other disabilities. If you believe that a student may have a learning disability, or a student has requested extra time on exams or projects due to disabilities, you may refer the student to the [Office of Disability and Access Services](#).

Students must be approved for these accommodations through this office, and Graduate Student Life will notify instructors if a student has been approved. If you have any questions, contact Mary Murphy-Phillips, Assistant Dean of Students, mcmurph@bu.edu or 617-358-1750.

Leading Discussions

When leading discussion sessions, it is important to consider your audience. The students in attendance are often having trouble with one or more aspects of the course. Remember that you are there to help. Always keep an enthusiastic attitude while leading discussions and be careful not to talk down to students who may not be grasping a concept fully. Try to be conscious of your body language and enunciation. Sometimes the small details can differentiate an engaging and useful discussion from one that leaves students feeling uninspired. Consider the following:

- Students *must* feel comfortable talking to each other. To encourage this, generate a warm climate at the beginning of the course.
- You may have different students from week to week. It may be useful to begin each discussion session by summarizing the topics covered during the previous session.
- Establish criteria for a good discussion at the beginning of the course. Spend a few minutes letting the students generate these criteria themselves. (One way is to have each student introduce themselves by completing this sentence: "When I am in a small group discussion, I usually...")
- Encourage your students to be responsible for bringing good issues for discussion to the session.
- Sometimes controversial events or issues will jump-start a discussion. Go around the room and let every student comment.
- Consider the physical set-up in the room. Can students see each other, or are they sitting side by side in rows facing the front of the room? Is it possible to create a circle or a semi-circle?
- Listen. Respond in a way that indicates that you *heard* and *understood* the question or the comment. Validate questions by either expanding on or challenging them and encourage students to challenge *you*.

- Rephrasing a question or comment is a good way to make sure the other participants understand and are fully engaged in the discussion. It also gives you a little extra time to formulate your response.
- Give students time to respond. A few seconds can feel like a century, but students need that time to process the question.
- Tell the students in advance what the discussion topics will be.
- Prompt students with a variety of questions that require different levels of thinking.
 - Some questions can be answered with information from general experience or from basic knowledge of the discipline.
 - Some questions require that students explain the relationship between different ideas, using this to form general concepts.
 - Some require students to apply concepts and principles to new data and different situations.

Sometimes students may try to use the discussions as a forum to air their grievances with the course or instructor. This is not the best use of your time or the student's time. You can encourage students with grievances to speak with you or the instructor after class.

Providing Meaningful Writing Feedback

What to Look for & Prioritize When Reading a Paper

- Re-read the assignment and the rubric
- Clearly stated objective at the end of the first or second paragraph that responds to the assignment
- Section headers
- Are necessary sections/components in place?
- Flow of overall paper
 - Topic sentences
 - Transitions
 - Subjects & Verbs
- Flow of individual paragraphs
- Clarity of sentences
- Is the technical information presented correctly?
- Does the writer demonstrate a good grasp of course material / objective of assignment?

Other Things to Keep in Mind

- Read generously and compassionately while maintaining rigorous standards for clarity
- Students are coming from diverse academic, disciplinary, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds
- Provide feedback that will help students improve with revision or in next assignment or class

Come up with a feedback plan with the teaching team.

- What is the overall objective of the assignment?
- What are the instructor's feedback priorities and style?
- What are yours? How do they need to be modified to be coherent with the rest of the teaching team?
- What does the group agree to prioritize?
- What problems have come up in the past with this assignment? How to address them?
- How much time should each paper take to mark up? What is too long?
- How to deal with papers that seem overwhelmingly troubled?
- How to deal with papers where the writer's English language ability seems to be a big problem?
- How to deal with verbatim text/suspected of known plagiarism?
- How to deal with the same problems in papers by native speakers? How much editing to do? What is too much? What is too little?

Commenting Meaningfully on Student Writing¹

Meaningful comments engage students' ideas, responding to the thesis, use of evidence, analysis, and organization. They help students understand that grades are not measures of their intelligence, but of a particular assignment's quality. They also help students learn how to self-edit and self-evaluate.

- Respond like a reader—not a grader.

¹ Taken from [How to Provide Constructive Feedback that Won't Exasperate Your Students](#), Columbia University.

- Use the first-person singular. I think.... I read....
- Be positive. You need to strike the delicate balance between truth and kindness. As Somerset Maugham observed, "People ask you for criticism, but they want only praise."
- Suggest how the student can improve.

Resources for Students in Distress

Sometimes life at Boston University can be stressful for students as they face the challenge of a highly competitive academic environment and begin to assume different roles and responsibilities. If at any time you feel a student expresses any feelings of depression, hopelessness, self-harm, or suicide, please contact **Mary Murphy-Phillips, Assistant Dean for Students** at (W) 617-358-1750 or (C) 617-335-9884.

If it is after hours, please call Boston University Behavioral Medicine (881 Commonwealth Avenue) at 617-353-3569. Behavioral Medicine providers are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If a situation is out of control, please call Boston University Medical Campus Public Safety at 617-358-4444 (program this number into your mobile phone), or 911, as appropriate.

Identifying Students in Distress and Crisis

Individuals dealing with personal issues or problems tend to show signs that they are struggling in some way. However, when symptoms of distress are persistent over a long period of time or when they interfere with academic responsibilities and social relationships, it may be a cause for concern. Please review a list of signs that may indicate that a student is struggling here:

<https://www.bu.edu/shs/mental-health/resources-to-help-others/faculty-staff/>

Boston University Resources

- [BU Behavioral Medicine](#): offers a range of mental health services to our students. They strive to keep the BU community healthy and thriving, so students should not hesitate to call if they need:
 - Assessment and diagnosis
 - Brief treatment, including therapy and psychiatry for a variety of mental health issues
 - 24/7 on-call service for mental health emergencies (617-353-3569)
 - Referral to community resources for longer-term care
 - Phone consultation for students, parents, and BU faculty and staff
 - Outreach and prevention programming
- [Mental Health Resources](#): Trouble sleeping? Anxiety getting in the way of daily demands? Access step-by-step guides to make lasting changes to mental health.
- [Terriers Connect](#): The Terriers Connect training program teaches members of the Boston University community to identify signs of distress, develop effective skills for communicating

with and supporting students, and provide accurate information about referrals to mental health professionals. Terriers Connect is committed to creating a community at Boston University that understands the conversations that surround mental health are hard, but necessary. Trainings are offered for faculty, staff, and students who are interested in becoming official “gatekeepers” within the program.

- [Togetherall](#) is a safe space where students can connect with other students from around the world about what’s going on in their life – big or small. The program is:
 - Completely free to use, provided by BU Student Health Services
 - Anonymous, with no judgment or stigma
 - Online for easy access with no waiting lists
 - Monitored by mental health professionals 24/7

Use your BU email address to join. Have questions? [See Togetherall’s FAQs.](#)

Safety On Campus

Boston University has established the BU Alert notification system for the purpose of communicating with the campus community for weather closures, utility outages, emergencies, or situations requiring the response or attention of the University community. The intent of this system is to provide guidance and information on how individuals can secure themselves and make decisions for their own safety.

Notifications are delivered via text, phone, email, and the Everbridge mobile app. The Everbridge app is available on the [App Store](#) or [Google Play](#). Once you have downloaded the app, search for Boston University and sign in with your BU username and Kerberos password. Use of the app is optional, and you will still receive notifications if you do not download the app.

Students may add or update their BU Alert contact information by visiting the [MyBU Student Portal](#) and clicking the “Personal” tab to update “Address and Phone.”

[BUMC Public Safety](#) is located on the 6th floor of 750 Harrison Avenue (B building), Boston, MA 02118.