

Conflict Management

TAGSA Quick Guide



As a teaching assistant (TA), you are likely to encounter conflict—whether it be grade disputes, academic integrity issues, challenging conversations, or “hot” (heated, offensive, tense) moments in the classroom. In this Quick Guide, you will find tips to help prevent conflict from occurring, suggestions for how to mediate these difficult situations as they arise, and actionable steps you can take following a contentious situation.

Reducing the Chances of Conflicts

Students enter our classroom with intersecting identities, prior experiences, and diverse perspectives while facing a multitude of pressures that can result in a range of emotions (Wass et al., 2020). Many times, conflict arises due to factors outside of our control as TAs. The social climate, current events, personal stresses, and inequities may contribute to the growing pressures students experience. As these pressures arise, students may respond with explicit and intense emotions, and TAs must be self-aware and prepared to respond. Creating a transparent teaching space and being proactive in your teaching preparations can help reduce the likelihood of negative conflict.

Setting your teaching environment

- Get to know your students’ names, interests, and expectations for the course through informal conversations or surveys. This can help you identify challenging topics or areas of contention and predict when they might arise.
- Co-create classroom norms, expectations, and ways of interacting with students. Draw on these co-constructed guidelines when you sense conflict is rising.
- Be a leader and model the behaviour that you would expect of students.

Being proactive

- Reflect on course content and previous experiences to anticipate potentially difficult topics, keeping in mind that what you perceive as controversial may differ from your students. Once you have established potential challenging topics, create a plan for how you will navigate these conversations.
- Check in with the instructor or previous TAs of the course to determine if there is a history of conflict in the course.
- Reflect on your own positionality, thinking ahead to what issues might affect you personally and how you might manage them.
- Incorporate content warnings so students can prepare emotionally or decide how to engage with the content.
- If a student wants to meet to discuss a course-related issue, gather as many insights into their concern as possible and create a plan for handling it. For example, consider asking students to send their questions in advance so that you can begin to explore ways of addressing them. If concerns relate to grading, try to review the assignment before meeting with the student or ask them to send through specific questions they would like to discuss in advance to help you prepare. If the concern arises unexpectedly during office hours, you always have the right to ask the student to give you time to review the assignment independently.
- Carefully consider the location of meetings with students, whether to leave the door open, and whether to ask for another person to be present. You always have the right to refer the student to the course instructor.

Managing Conflicts When They Arise

Whether you are leading labs, tutorials, discussions, or other activities, a variety of conflicts can arise. Some of these moments might be “hot”—or heated, offensive, or tense (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). “Hot” moments can be prompted by microaggressions, which are everyday subtle, intentional or sometimes unintentional acts against individuals.

The **R.A.V.E.N. framework** is an approach you may adopt for managing conflict or “hot” moments (refer to Harris & Wood, 2020, for more details).

1. **Redirect the conversation or interaction.** Hit pause to stop conversations from preventing further harm. Consider initiating a moment for reflection where students can reflect on what happened and determine ways forward.
2. **Ask probing questions.** When appropriate, ask probing questions to help individuals understand how their actions may be problematic. For example, consider asking, “What did you mean by that?”. Engage in active listening to understand the situation. Check your understanding and lead with empathy and humility. There may also be situations where it is important to address the issue without singling out individual(s) and creating teachable moments.
3. **Value clarification.** Remind students of the classroom guidelines and indicate when statements or actions do not align with these.
4. **Emphasize your own thoughts.** Use “I” statements to communicate how the situation may be harmful to others and how it made you feel.
5. **Next steps.** After addressing the conflict, take the opportunity to learn and grow from the experience. Determine a series of actions to reduce the likelihood of similar conflicts in the future.

Considerations Following Conflict Situations

- Follow up with the course instructor to inform them of the incident, and when appropriate, check in with student(s) and offer resources and campus support.
- Conflict can be upsetting and nerve-racking. Try not to internalize it or take it personally. If you are feeling overwhelmed, there are often support services available on campus to draw on (e.g., student health, counselling, and wellness services).
- Critically reflect on the situation. How did you respond? How will you respond moving forward? How might you prepare differently?

References

- Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University. (n.d.). *Difficult dialogues*.
- Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo. (n.d.). *Conflict management for instructors*.
- Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning. (n.d.). *Navigating heated, offensive, and tense (HOT) moments in the classroom*.
- Harris, F., & Wood, J. L. (2020). *How to respond to racial microaggression when they occur*.
- Warren, L. (2006). *Managing hot moments in the classroom*. Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University.
- Wass, R., Timmermans, J., Harland, T., & McLean, A. (2020). Annoyance and frustration: Emotional responses to being assessed in higher education. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 21(3), 189–201. DOI: 10.1177/1469787418762462



The quick guide series are concise topic introductions created by the Teaching Assistant and Graduate Student Advancement (TAGSA), a special interest group of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE). The purpose of this guide is to offer some strategies for reducing and managing conflict in the classroom, including considerations following conflict situations. We welcome your feedback and contributions to this guide. Contact TAGSA at tagsa@stlhe.ca and visit our website at stlhe.ca/tagsa-aaecscs. Last updated: June 2024.