



Role and Responsibilities of the Teaching Assistant (Short Course)

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Discuss the primary duties of the professional teaching assistant
- ✓ Understand the characteristics of the effective teaching assistant
- ✓ Explain how teaching assistants support pupils in a variety of ways

Role and responsibilities of the teaching assistant

What is a teaching assistant?

Often referred to simply as a TA, the teaching assistant provides a variety of important services in a classroom setting. Employed on both temporary and permanent contracts across the UK, the specific daily duties of the teaching assistant differ from one establishment to the next. However, the overall objective of the services provided by teaching assistants remains the same. That being, to play a key role in the educational, personal and social development of the pupils they work with. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the teaching assistant to ensure every pupil gains the maximum possible value from their time in the classroom.

Effectively, teaching assistants bring an extra pair of eyes, ears and hands into educational environments. Such is the importance of the TA's role that the vast majority of educational institutions in the UK could not function properly without them.

If anything, the title 'teaching assistant' doesn't give these individuals the true credit they deserve. Less assistants in the traditional sense, teaching assistants are expected to serve as inspirational and influential role models for pupils of all ages to look up to. To train to become a teaching assistant is to gain access to an extraordinary array of career opportunities across the UK and beyond.

In this introductory unit, we will be taking a closer look at the typical roles and responsibilities of the teaching assistant, along with the personal skills and industry insights you'll need to pursue a rewarding career in the field.

What does a Teaching Assistant do?

As already touched upon, specific duties vary significantly from one classroom and school to the next. However, teaching assistants are playing a more valuable role in educational institutions of all shapes and sizes than ever before.

Teaching assistants are often required to work with challenging individuals in challenging conditions, nurturing and supporting the growth and development of the pupils they work with. It's often said that the teaching assistant is the glue that holds the classroom together, covering everything from basic admin duties to helping pupils study for important exams.

There are various different types of teaching assistant – the role you assume will determine your primary responsibilities accordingly. Some teaching assistants have a particular specialism, while others cover a much broader range of subjects and educational areas. In order to help pupils reach their full potential, teaching assistants need to build relationships of trust and respect with *every* pupil they work with. You must present yourself as approachable, professional, empathetic and patient at all times.

A teaching assistant will spend some of their working day assisting individual pupils one on one, working with groups collectively at other times. They are expected to identify pupils who may be struggling with specific topics and provide assistance accordingly. They may also be required to provide enhanced support for children with learning difficulties, which could include the organization of after-school activities.

Teachers count on teaching assistants to help plan and prepare for lessons, gathering the necessary resources and setting up the classroom environment accordingly. They support the delivery of the curriculum and continuously monitor the performance and progress of the pupils they work with. They are also routinely called upon to provide feedback and advice, or deal with disciplinary issues where they occur.

Characteristics of Teaching Assistant

Becoming a successful teaching assistant is as much about personal characteristics as it is hard-skills and knowledge. To build a successful career as a teaching assistant, you must possess the following qualities:

Flexibility: Teaching assistants can find themselves handling a variety of responsibilities at the same time, in an environment that is uniquely unpredictable. Flexibility is therefore mandatory.

Dependability: Teachers in many educational institutions are unable to get the job done properly, without TAs to back them up. The TA must therefore be relentlessly dependable and accountable.

Ability to communicate well: Communication lies at the heart of successful education at all levels. The teaching assistant must be able to communicate clearly and professionally with both the pupils they work with and the other teaching staff within the school. They must also play an active role in identifying and addressing potential communication issues.

Empathy: The importance of being a naturally empathetic individual cannot be overstated. Successful teaching assistants are able to put themselves in the position of the students they work with, understand their concerns, answer their questions and become a respected role model.

Approachability: You cannot and will not succeed as a teaching assistant if you are not friendly and approachable at all times. However challenging or high-pressure the situation becomes, you will be expected to conduct yourself in a cool, calm and controlled way.

Personalities that suit teaching assistant jobs

If you believe yourself to have the following personality traits, a career as a teaching assistant could be right up your street:

- Caring
- Kind
- Be a talented communicator
- Flexible and adaptable
- Creative
- Able to take direction
- Inspiring
- Imaginative

What are the skills needed to be a teaching assistant?

While daily duties vary from one classroom and educational institution to the next, the following skills are considered mandatory for the professional teaching assistant:

- Advanced communication skills
- Resilience and being able to take direction
- A flexible and proactive approach
- Plenty of patience
- Empathy at the highest level
- Great organisational skills
- Basic literacy and numeracy skills

What are the most in demand teaching assistant skills?

According to those who work in education recruitment in the UK, the most sought-after skills among potential teaching assistants include the following:

- A passion for people and a desire to support pupils' development
- Exceptional communication skills and a personable character
- The ability to adapt to any situation at any time
- A naturally problem-solving nature and an empathetic attitude

SEN (special education needs) teaching assistants are in particularly high demand, though typically require enhanced knowledge of one or more special educational area, such as autism.

Where do teaching assistants work?

All educational institutions have their own unique policies on hiring and deploying teaching assistants. However, teaching assistants play an important role at a variety of levels within the educational system – all the way from preschool up to secondary education and even college.

The teaching assistant spends most of their time working closely with other teachers and general support staff within the institution. They provide essential support with admin duties outside the classroom, help pupils of all ages get the most out of every class and generally contribute to a safe, enjoyable and beneficial classroom environment.

Some teaching assistants – particularly those in secondary schools – specialize in one specific subject or area of education. For example, some teaching assistants will work exclusively in science labs, while others may support physical education or IT classes.

In any case, it may on occasion be necessary for the teaching assistant to cover the absence of a teacher. In such instances, classes are usually planned in advance and all learning resources/materials prepared ahead of time. Teaching assistants aren't typically expected to 'replace' teachers at short notice and come up with their own lesson plans, but it does happen from time to time.

A teaching assistant may be hired on a fulltime or part time basis, by way of a temporary or permanent contract. It's also common for teaching assistants to work with specialist TA agencies, which are utilized by schools in the UK on an ad-hoc basis, as and when their services are required.

Teaching assistant jobs

There are four different levels of TA positions, including Level Four, which is also known as Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA). There is also SEN TAs who work with children with additional and sometimes complex needs and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) who tend to work more on the pastoral side of things and often within specialist preschool and school settings.

Irrespective of your preferred level, you need to have a genuine passion for people, demonstrate relentless flexibility and have a deep desire to help pupils achieve their full potential. You also need to be a strong communicator and know how to deal with even the most challenging situations in a rational and professional manner.

If you have extensive experience or a specialist interest in one specific area, you could pursue a position as a specialist TA accordingly. Otherwise, you could choose to provide your services across a much wider range of educational areas.

Primary school teaching assistant

What does a primary school teaching assistant do?

Working with younger children, primary school teaching assistants assume a role of enormous responsibility. Typical daily duties in the life of a primary school TA include the following:

- Helping pupils develop reading and writing skills
- Lunchtime and general break time supervision
- Organizing and supervising school trips
- Supporting pupils' numeracy skills development
- Preparing the classroom and learning materials
- Consulting with parents or caregivers
- Providing additional support for children with special needs
- Covering for teachers in the case of absence
- Identifying and addressing problematic behaviour
- Working closely with educators and support staff

Secondary school teaching assistant

What does a secondary school teaching assistant do?

As mentioned, most secondary school teaching assistants provide specialist support in one subject area. A typical example of which being a teaching assistant who works exclusively in a science lab, or a TA who assists with physical education classes.

Some secondary school teaching assistants provide specialist care for pupils with special educational needs. Typical duties may include the following:

- Supporting pupils with personal care
- Helping pupils improve their speech and language skills
- Providing physical support and assistance where required
- Overseeing appropriate feeding and medication use
- Supervising lunchtimes and break times
- Identifying and addressing problematic behaviour

- Monitoring pupils' general performance and development

Learning support assistant

What does a learning support assistant do?

Learning support assistants are often grouped under the same header as the teaching assistant. Duties and responsibilities as a learning support assistant vary between institutions, though typically focus more on pupils' social and emotional development than their formal education. However, there is some overlap between the two positions – teaching assistants and learning support assistants providing many of the same support services.

Teaching assistant roles and responsibilities

The professional teaching assistant covers a wide variety of responsibilities across four primary areas:

- Supporting the Pupils
- Supporting the Teacher
- Supporting the School
- Supporting the Curriculum

Supporting the Pupils

In this capacity, support staff might be required to:

- Ensure the personal needs of pupils are met at all times, which may involve monitoring their physical and psychological health, personal hygiene and general welfare.
- Provide the support pupils need to gain the maximum benefit from every class and educational activity across the board.
- Build relationships of trust with pupils and become an inspiring role model for their immediate and ongoing development.
- Encourage every pupil to participate in discussions/activities and become an important contributor in the classroom environment.
- Support the development of friendships and general relationships between pupils, identifying and addressing conflict where it occurs.

- Get to know the individual learning style of each individual pupil and provide tailored support to suit their requirements.
- Create an environment of empowerment and ownership, giving pupils the opportunity to build self-confidence and a sense of independence.
- Help pupils understand that it is OK to make mistakes and to understand the importance of both accepting and learning from errors.
- Continuously monitor the performance and progress of all pupils, ensuring their continuous educational and personal development.
- Provide additional support for pupils with special educational needs, or those who struggle with specific subjects.
- Encourage pupils to take an active interest in their education, as opposed to learning simply because they have to.

Supporting the Teacher

Offering support to the teacher, a teaching assistant may be expected to:

- Prepare the classroom environment and all required learning materials/resources for lessons, while assisting with the subsequent post-lesson clear-up.
- Continuously monitor pupils' performance and report strengths and weaknesses identified to the teacher.
- Ensure all examples of inappropriate or disruptive behaviour are noted and addressed immediately.
- Liaise with parents and caregivers, organizing parents' evenings and taking part in important discussions.
- Cover an extensive range of daily admin duties, which may include typing, photocopying, preparing emails and so on.
- Help pupils of all ages prepare for tests and exams that could impact their future education and employment prospects.
- Supervise pre-planned lessons and activities in the event of planned or unexpected teacher absence, often with very little notice.
- Promote a culture of honesty and open discussion in the classroom, with heavy focus on communication at all levels.
- Provide accurate and objective feedback on a regular basis, both directly to the pupils themselves and to their parents or caregivers.
- Act in accordance with all internal policies and general conditions as specified by the educational institution itself.

- Identify strengths and weaknesses in pupils' performance, ensuring additional support is provided where required.
- Help create and/or collate learning materials and general classroom equipment for the provision of lessons.
- Contribute to the creation and maintenance of a safe, healthy, hygienic and beneficial educational environment.
- Liaise with the SENCO and teaching staff, to identify the needs of the pupils.
- Assist in the preparation and review of IEPs.

Supporting the School

In supporting the school, a teaching assistant must:

- Play an active role in general child protection within the educational environment, overseeing health, safety, confidentiality and security.
- Understand that every child has a different learning style and provide appropriate educational support accordingly.
- Work as part of a wider educational and administrative team, providing multilevel support in a variety of key areas.
- Attend meetings and workshops on a regular basis, participating in training and development activities to ensure continuous professional development.
- Organizing and playing a role in the supervision of school trips and extra-curricular activities outside normal school times.
- Supervise breaks and lunch periods, monitoring for unacceptable behaviour and generally overseeing pupils' welfare.
- Assist with the training and development of new and existing teaching assistants and other support staff where required.
- Deliver local and national learning strategies e.g. literacy, numeracy, KS3, early years and make effective use of opportunities provided by other learning activities to support the development of pupils' skills.
- Develop a good understanding of the current curriculum and be able to work with appropriate technologies, such as computer systems, scientific calculators and so on.
- Have the confidence to intervene in disputes and conflicts between pupils, even if the pupils in question are not familiar to the teaching assistant.
- Establish strong working relationships with teachers and support staff throughout the institution.
- Develop a strong understanding of the school's ethos, objectives and general approach to the educational services it provides.
- Cover planned and unplanned teacher absences.
- Liaise with parents, caregivers and outside parties in general.

Supporting the Curriculum

To support the curriculum, a teaching assistant should:

- Ensure pupils understand the instructions they are provided with and the requirements of tasks/activities accordingly.
- Support teachers with their delivery of local and national learning strategies e.g. literacy, numeracy, KS3, early years, as required.
- Use the latest technologies and classroom equipment to enhance pupils' educational experience at all times.
- Ensure the classroom environment and all necessary resources are prepared ahead of time and readied for pupils' use.
- Adjust their approach to suit the individual learning styles and special educational requirements of the pupils they work with.
- Contributes to the planning of extracurricular activities and educational school trips.
- Encourage pupils to take part in activities that may benefit their education and their general grasp of the current curriculum.