A Glossary of Harvard Terms

**Academic Adviser:** A member of Harvard’s faculty or staff assigned to help you navigate academic decisions in your first year. You will meet with this person at least once each semester to discuss which courses you plan to take. Many students meet more frequently with their academic adviser and may have conversations about potential concentrations, career aspirations, and their developing social life at Harvard. You should go to your academic adviser with questions about placement exams and course selection. Most students meet with their academic adviser at the beginning of the semester.

**Academic Coach:** A member of Harvard’s Academic Resource Center who can provide you with support as you navigate your courses. Academic coaches meet one-on-one with students to discuss time management, study strategies, goal setting, and more. They also run workshops on these topics that are open to all College students. Many students meet with academic coaches throughout the semester.

**Course Head:**  The main instructor for a course. In smaller courses, the course head is often the only instructor. In larger courses, course heads typically run or design the lectures, and a teaching fellow (TF) or course assistant (CA) runs section or lab, which are generally interactive or hands-on.

**Professor:** A member of Harvard’s faculty who either has tenure or is eligible for tenure. Professors are usually course heads. While professors have teaching responsibilities, they are also conducting research. Teaching is takes up only a portion of their time and energy.

**Lecturer/Preceptor:** A member of Harvard’s faculty whose primary responsibility is teaching. Lecturers and preceptors are usually course heads. Many lecturers and preceptors also conduct research outside of the classroom or hold additional administrative positions at Harvard.

**Head TF:** The head teaching fellow is responsible for coordinating the teaching fellows for a particular course and may field communications for the course head. Head TFs are usually responsible for section assignments.

**TF/TA**: A teaching fellow or teaching assistant is a person, usually a graduate student, who teaches at Harvard but is not on the faculty. Usually, TFs and TAs provide support for course heads and run sections and labs to supplement lecture. Your TF or TA in a course is usually your main point of contact in that course. Occasionally, TFs and TAs teach their own courses, but these are almost always seminars and are usually for upper-level students within a concentration.

**CA**: A course assistant, usually an undergraduate student, provides various kinds of support for a course. Course assistants typically have taken the course in the past and performed well in it. They may assist a course head directly or provide additional support for a TF or TA.

**Lecture**: Typically, lecture is when large numbers of students come together to hear the course head provide information on a particular topic. However, in some classes you may be asked to watch videos or read material ahead of time that provides such information, and lecture may be devoted to actively applying concepts in real time. Either way, lectures usually occur twice a week, whether they are in-person or online. Compared to a seminar, there is generally less interaction between the course head and students during lecture, although lectures do sometimes include discussion or a hands-on component.

**Section**: Sections supplement lecture by providing students with a space to work on or delve more deeply into course concepts. Sections are small (usually under 22 students) and typically require active participation. Interaction with the section leader (usually a TF or TA) tends to be more robust, and grades are usually determined and distributed by the section leader unless there is an automated process for assessing students in the course.

**Seminar**: Seminars are small courses (usually fewer than 22 students) that involve active student participation. They may have a lecture component, but it will happen within the scheduled seminar time, and there is no section for such courses. Students typically interact frequently with the course head, who is responsible for determining and distributing grades. Many seminars are upper-level courses, but some departments run seminars for every level of instruction. Some seminars, like freshmen seminars, are only open to students at particular times or stages in their education.

**Office Hours**: Office hours are a time when course instructors make themselves available to students to answer questions about course material. The format for office hours varies significantly across courses. Some course heads hold office hours for students, while others do not. Typically, section and seminar leaders will hold office hours weekly. Office hours may be virtual or in-person; they may consist of groups of students or individual meetings; and they may involve sign-ups or open sessions when you can come at any time. Students should plan to attend office hours at least once for each course they have enrolled in.

**Placement Exams**: Placement exams are tests designed to help students determine what level of instruction is right for them across a variety of disciplines. Placement recommendations are usually not binding (in other words, you can enroll in whatever level you’d like regardless of your score), but they do provide students with information about how their previous knowledge on a subject aligns with expectations within the Harvard curriculum. There are always advising options available where students may discuss their placement recommendations and any concerns they may have about what level of instruction is right for them. Given the depth of understanding required in Harvard courses, it’s usually best not to study for these tests but rather to try to get the most authentic result possible based on your current knowledge of a particular subject.

**Language Requirement**: All students at Harvard must complete a language requirement, either by obtaining a particular score on their placement exam or completing a series of language classes at Harvard. Look out for information on placement exams and explore different course offerings, as Harvard offers instruction in many languages that are not available to most high school students.

**Expos [Expository Writing]**: All Harvard first-year students must complete the writing requirement, either by taking Expository Writing 20, Expository Writing Studio 10+20, or Humanities 10a+10b. Only Expos 20 is a single-semester course. Humanities 10 must be taken for a full year to fulfill the requirement. Students taking Expos Studio 10 in the fall semester must take either Expos Studio 20 or Expos 20 in the spring. All students will take a writing placement test to determine which level of Expos is appropriate for them. Students interested in Humanities 10 must apply to take the course upon arrival on campus in the fall.