

Working with Teaching Assistants: A Guide for Instructors

Graduate student Teaching Assistants contribute significantly to the teaching mission of UC Santa Cruz. They may conduct discussion sections, recitation sections, laboratory sections, or studios linked to a main course. They may hold office hours, lead review sessions, provide feedback on and grade student work, author exam questions, develop course materials, and assist faculty in the main course.

TAs can also play an important role in promoting student success, accessibility, and educational equity. They are often the members of the teaching team to whom undergraduate students turn when they need more support in a course, or when they are experiencing challenges that make it difficult to keep up with a course.

While TAs have the opportunity to receive multiple forms of professional development through the Center for Innovations in Teaching and Learning (CITL), Graduate Division, and departmental pedagogy offerings, each course presents a new opportunity for mentorship and mutual learning between TAs and Instructors. The experience of working with TAs can be especially beneficial when the responsibilities and relationships between TAs and students, between TAs and the Instructor, and among TAs are approached with intention, care, and transparency.

The First Teaching Team Meeting

It's common practice (and good practice) for the Instructor and the Teaching Assistant(s) to **meet before the quarter begins**. This meeting can be an important opportunity to **discuss the course policies and the instructor's expectations of the TA role**:

- The learning goals and overall arc of the course.
- Major course policies, such as those regarding attendance and tardiness, late work, evaluation of student work (including policies on how to manage grading disputes from students), academic integrity (e.g. how much collaboration or use of sources is allowed on assignments), etc.
- The official Description of Duties forms that the teaching team will need to sign and return before the quarter begins. Anything “checked” on the Description of Duties form becomes a requirement of the TAs' position that academic quarter.
- Attendance policies for TAs during the lecture class. Attending lecture allows TAs to know how the Instructor is teaching a given topic, which then allows them to be prepared to support students in sections, labs, and review sessions to achieve the learning goals of the course in a way that is well aligned with the lecture.
- Roles of the Instructor and TAs during lecture class sessions.
- Roles of the TAs during discussion sections, labs, and/or review sessions, and how those sections/labs/review sessions relate to the lecture class.
- The degree to which TAs will be asked for input on the design of major course assignments, such as written assignments and exams.
- Who's responsible for grading what.

- How grading should be conducted by TAs (if relevant), including any rubrics that the Instructor wants TAs to use or wants to co-design with the teaching team.
- When in the course schedule TAs might expect to have a higher workload, and when they might expect a lighter workload.
- How to effectively keep records of attendance, participation, and grades throughout the quarter.
- How to effectively keep track of hours worked in the course to adhere to [TA union contract](#) (e.g. TAs with a 50% appointment should work no more than 220 hours over the course of the quarter).
- Whether TAs should plan to have office hours, and how many hours per week.
- If there are multiple TAs: how responsibilities will be distributed, and whether there's any hierarchy of authority among TAs, or any expectation for or possibility of collaboration between them.
- How TAs can respond to students bringing Disability Resource Center Academic Accommodations to them (i.e. Instructors have primary responsibility for implementing accommodations; TAs should notify the Instructor, and work with the Instructor to ensure that they understand how to implement accommodations when they relate to section/lab).
- How the teaching team can respond to and prevent intentional or unintentional “triangulation,” which is when interactions with students in the class and the teaching team can place TAs at odds with the Instructors and vice versa (e.g. how to respond when students express dissatisfaction about the approaches of one member of a teaching team to another).
- How the teaching team can practice good professional and safety practices (e.g. meeting with students with office doors open, sharing with the Instructor if any student interactions cause TAs to feel uneasy, etc.).
- The schedule for weekly teaching team meetings.

The first meeting is also an opportunity to discuss teaching philosophy and strategies more generally. Before the quarter begins, the Instructor can give an overview of their educational approach, pedagogical values, and goals for the course, so that the TAs can help reinforce these efforts. Taking the time to discuss these approaches, values, and goals can help ensure that everyone on the teaching team is aligned in supporting students to reach the learning goals of the course. Disagreements between Instructor and TAs can be productive—they can illustrate the range of views on and approaches to teaching that exist in any field—but there's a difference between complexity, on the one hand, and contradiction, confusion, and/or incoherence on the other.

However thoroughly Instructors address expectations at the start of the quarter, it can be helpful if everyone understands that **working together will be a work-in-progress**. It's important to keep meetings going throughout the quarter, as well as lines of open communication between TAs and Instructor.

Regular Meetings Throughout the Quarter

During regular meetings with the teaching team, the Instructor and TAs can address the following:

- Specific learning goals for the week and how those goals align with overall course learning objectives.
- Discussion of how TAs' recent sections/labs went, and how their upcoming section/lab can support students to achieve the learning goals of the week. This can be an excellent opportunity for TAs to collaborate in designing activities and approaches to meet shared goals, or to anticipate where students might encounter challenges with the course topics.
- Effective practices for lesson-planning labs or discussion sections. The Instructor can ask TAs to consider their goals for the sessions, plans for time management, approaches to handling challenging conversations, and so on.
- Discussion of grading rubrics, how to effectively support students to successfully learn from a given assignment, and how to ensure consistency in grading across multiple TAs.

Some teaching teams choose to conduct “grade norming” sessions, in which TAs and the Instructor address the efficacy of the rubric and collaboratively work with any assignments that present more challenges with grading. Sometimes this involves Instructors reviewing a handful of assignments to ensure that the team is consistent and meeting the expectations for evaluating student work.

TA Mentorship

The word “assistant” can lead us to think of TAs as helpers, there to make the current course go more smoothly. However, the experience of being a Teaching Assistant is often an important part of the overall graduate student experience at UC Santa Cruz, and is part of graduate students' professional development in their field of study. Many TAs are contemplating (or actively pursuing) a future that involves teaching, and working with TAs offers an important opportunity for mentorship.

- At regular meetings, the Instructor can openly **discuss their teaching choices and the philosophies** behind those choices. These conversations are also a good time to explore the TAs' immediate and long-term pedagogical goals, strategies, and experiences.
- With the TAs' willingness and consent, Instructors can offer to **observe the sections/labs that TAs conduct**. The Instructor can discuss the TA's specific goals before lab or section, and provide feedback after the observation. CITL has several example [teaching observation protocols](#) that can support both parties to have a reflective, engaged, meaningful experience. Observations are key if TAs ever need a letter of recommendation about their teaching from the Instructor down the road, as it'll give the Instructor first-hand experience to write about.
- TAs can be invited to **observe the Instructor's implementation of a particular instructional technique**, and invited to discuss the method to ensure the TAs understand how to successfully implement that pedagogical approach.
- If members of the teaching team agree and time allows, the Instructor can give the **option for TAs to lead lecture**, or part of a lecture, once during the quarter. If this is an option, it should be clearly indicated on the Description of Duties. The Instructor can observe the lecture, take notes, and reflect with the TA on the experience.

End of the Quarter Feedback and Reflection

In addition to ensuring that TAs feel confident and ready to submit their recommendations for student final grades based on their record-keeping, there are also many big-picture questions to explore with the teaching team at the end of the quarter:

- How did the class go for everyone, including students and the teaching team?
- What were the significant pedagogical choices and moments, and how successful were they?
- In a future version of the class, in what ways would the Instructor keep the course the same, and what changes would the Instructor choose to make?
- How can the TAs prepare to read and interpret their Student Experience of Teaching (SET) survey data with the goal of reflecting on and improving their teaching practice?
- What feedback does the Instructor have for the TAs, and vice versa?

During an end-of-quarter reflection meeting, the Instructor can model a thoughtful process of evaluating the recent course and planning for future iterations; this is yet another invitation to engage in mentorship. It's also a chance for the teaching team to provide feedback to each other on how they think the course went.

Adapted for UC Santa Cruz from:

- Georgetown Teaching Commons' [Guide for Working with Teaching Assistants](#)
- University of Delaware's [Supervising and Mentoring Graduate Teaching Assistants: A Faculty Guide](#)