

## Discussion: Planning for a TA Experience

BE REFS

Monday, August 28, 2017

Documents:

- BE TA Responsibilities
- MIT TA Rights/Responsibilities/Rewards
- REFS TA Discussion Guide
- REFS TA Expectations Agreement Guide

Agenda:

- BE REFS program - here to help
- What can go right / wrong in the TA experience?
  - stories about “challenging” experiences
  - mismatched expectations: working many more hours than you expect (or your advisor expects)
- Question to group: what is one hope / one fear?
- Documents: MIT TA Rights/Responsibilities/Rewards + BE Responsibilities
- Discussion guide for Professors and TAs
- Group discussion

## **Summary of TA Responsibilities**

- TAs can be expected to devote up to a 20 hours per week, averaged over the semester, helping to teach a subject. This number, ~260 hours over the course of a 13-week semester, represents the absolute maximum time commitment that is to be required of the TA. It represents total time, including preparing recitations, teaching, holding office hours, and contributing to problem sets.
- TAs attend all lectures, and should take notes, which may be requested by the faculty lecturer.
- TAs are responsible for preparing and teaching recitations.
- Lab course TA's have lab-specific responsibilities that may include set-up of lab equipment, testing of lab experiments, and assisting students during lab course time, among others. The ~260 hour maximum time commitment is applicable to one lab course module.
- TAs hold regular office hours.
- Faculty and TAs proctor exams.
- TAs may grade problem sets and quizzes and may grade exams/term papers/projects with a faculty-provided scoring rubric.
- TAs may play a role in designing problem sets, quizzes, and study problems, under guidance from a faculty member.
- While TAs may make suggestions for exam questions and give feedback on drafts written by faculty, TAs are not responsible for writing exams.
- Answer keys for exams or problem sets are a shared responsibility of faculty and TAs, with faculty responsible for the final content of the answer key and for re-grading exams, as needed.
- As requested by faculty, TAs will take exams before they are given to the class, to improve clarity of the exam and their ability to grade.
- Former TAs are encouraged to mentor and/or help the current TAs, but the responsibility of the TAship stops at the end of the semester, typically after grades are submitted.

## **Additional Faculty Responsibilities**

- Faculty must meet with TAs before the start of the semester in order to establish expectations for each course and plan the arrangements.
- Faculty should meet with TAs on a regular basis throughout the course, to assess performance, hourly time commitment to the course, and to provide a forum for feedback.

## **Issues during the TA**

- Problems that arise during the TA should be brought to the attention of: (1) BE REFs, (2) the BE Graduate Program Chair, (3) the Head of the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, or (4) the Head of the Department.



rights  
responsibilities  
rewards  
resources

Office of the Dean for Graduate Education (ODGE)  
Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education (DUE)

## Rights

At the beginning of each semester, teaching assistants have the right to know, and faculty are expected to provide, the following:

- An overview of the course, including course goals, topics, and assignments.
- The number of hours/week the department expects TAs to devote to course-related activities. This number will be reasonable, given that TAs also have responsibilities as students and researchers.
- Specific course-related activities in which TAs are expected to engage (e.g., lead recitation sections, hold office hours, supervise labs, grade, attend lectures).
- Ways in which TAs are expected to work with course faculty.
- The distribution of work among TAs associated with the course.
- Methods and measurements by which TA performance will be evaluated (e.g., student evaluation surveys at the end of the semester, in-class observations by faculty during the semester).
- Resources at MIT accessible to TAs for assistance and support in teaching and mentoring students.
- Timely notification of any unexpected or unusual change in funding status as soon as the change is known, particularly if funding might be terminated.
- Any other department-specific expectations.

## Responsibilities

The duties of a teaching assistant may include assisting a faculty member in grading undergraduate homework and quizzes, instruction in the classroom and laboratory, preparing apparatus or material for demonstrations, posting web-based materials, and conducting tutorials and discussion sections. Regardless of assigned duties, all TAs are expected to:

- Work a designated number of hours / week on average. The number of hours / week may vary somewhat during the semester.
- Know the goals of the subject and understand the course content. TAs may be asked to help prepare problem sets, in-class assignments, or exams, as well as organize the course. TAs may be required to attend lectures.
- Come prepared to all recitations, labs, and review sessions.
- Be dependable. If a TA can't lead recitations, or carry out any other assignment, he or she must inform the supervisor. TAs may be asked by the supervisor to find a suitable replacement.
- Participate in the teaching assistant workshops that are offered by their School or department.
- Communicate effectively in English with students.
- Grade fairly and promptly. TAs should consult with faculty to ensure that their grading standards are consistent with other graders.
- Treat every student with courtesy and respect.
- Abide by MIT's Policy on Harassment. See [web.mit.edu/policies/9.5.html](http://web.mit.edu/policies/9.5.html)
- Avoid initiating or maintaining inappropriate relationships with students.
- Remain available at the end of the semester to help faculty with the administrative aspects of the subject.
- Comply with any additional department-specific requirements.

# Rewards

In fulfilling their responsibilities, teaching assistants enhance skills that will serve them well in future careers, whether in academia, business, or industry. These invaluable experiences help TAs to:

- Gain a deep understanding of the subject material.
- Communicate thoughts and ideas effectively.
- Improve presentation skills.
- Develop the ability to motivate and mentor others.
- Strengthen group facilitation skills.
- Enhance negotiation and conflict mediation skills.

## Other rewards include:

- Instructor-G Appointments. Advanced graduate students who show exemplary classroom performance may be appointed as an Instructor-G in recognition of their interest and ability in teaching. See also: [web.mit.edu/odg/gpp/assistance/rata.html](http://web.mit.edu/odg/gpp/assistance/rata.html)
- Honors and awards. At semester or academic year end, many departments recognize exceptional performance by teaching assistants. The Institute awards the Goodwin Medal each year for “conspicuously effective teaching” by a graduate student. Some prizes include monetary rewards. See also: [web.mit.edu/odg/development/teaching.html](http://web.mit.edu/odg/development/teaching.html)

# Resources

For help with teaching

## Teaching and Learning Laboratory

Room 5-122  
617.253.2850  
[web.mit.edu/tll/](http://web.mit.edu/tll/)

For non-native English speakers

## English Language Studies Program Foreign Languages and Literatures

Room 14N-305  
617.253.4771  
[web.mit.edu/fll/www/languages/ELS.html](http://web.mit.edu/fll/www/languages/ELS.html)

For confidential discussions related to workplace issues

## MIT Ombuds Office

Room 10-213  
617.253.5921  
[web.mit.edu/ombud/](http://web.mit.edu/ombud/)

For support with personal, administrative,  
or academic problems

## Student Support Services (S3)

Room 5-104  
617.253.4861  
[web.mit.edu/uaap/s3/](http://web.mit.edu/uaap/s3/)

For Institute-wide support and referral services

## Office of the Dean for Graduate Education

Room 3-138  
617.253.4860  
[web.mit.edu/odg](http://web.mit.edu/odg)

## Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education (DUE)

Room 7-133  
617.253.6056  
[web.due.mit.edu](http://web.due.mit.edu)

For department-specific support

## Departmental graduate administrators

[web.mit.edu/odg/gpp/oversight/administrators.html](http://web.mit.edu/odg/gpp/oversight/administrators.html)

For resources to support undergraduates

## Office of Undergraduate Advising and Academic Programming

Room 7-104  
617.253.6771  
[web.mit.edu/uaap/](http://web.mit.edu/uaap/)

MIT acknowledges the following sources for their contributions to this material:

Stony Brook State University of New York/ Computer Science Department/Teaching Assistant Duties and Evaluation  
[alum.cs.sunysb.edu/graduate/TAs/Responsibilities.html](http://alum.cs.sunysb.edu/graduate/TAs/Responsibilities.html)

Dartmouth College/Department of Physics and Astronomy/Teaching Labs/TA Responsibilities  
[www.dartmouth.edu/~physics/labs/ta.responsibilities.html](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~physics/labs/ta.responsibilities.html)



Massachusetts Institute of Technology

## Discussion guide for TAs, professors, and instructors

This sample guide highlights some of the common responsibilities for graduate TAs. This can be a useful starting point for discussion between TAs and professors/instructors. This can be helpful for:

- 1) Talking about responsibilities/expectations of TAs
- 2) Sharing these expectations with TA's advisor

### Topics:

- Weekly hours and attendance
  - X hours per week expected?
  - What to do if workload increases above X?
  - Attendance at lectures? (all, some)
- Class preparation
  - Set up required before class?
  - Proctor exams?
  - Responsibility for creating exams or problem sets?
- Administrative
  - Keep class attendance?
  - Maintain grade book?
  - Manage online info (Stellar)?
- Grading
  - Responsibility for grading exams, homework, projects?
  - How will grading standards be explained (rubrics)?
  - Will instructors review TA's grading before returning work to students?
  - Timeline for grading and returning work?
  - How to handle student grading complaints?
- Teaching and office hours
  - Is TA expected to lecture? Will TA receive feedback on performance?
  - Will TA review lecture plans with faculty prior to lecture?
  - Is TA expected to hold review sessions before exams?
  - Will TAs hold office hours? How often? Where?
  - Expectations for what to do during office hours?
- Working with student issues
  - What kinds of issues need to be reported to instructors?
  - Policy for late assignments, extensions, absences?
- TA teams
  - Will all the TAs meet regularly?
  - Is there a "lead" TA? What is their role?
- Communication and feedback
  - How often and in what form will we touch base? (in person, email, regular meetings?)
  - How do you best receive feedback (both professors and TAs)?
  - Schedule for feedback? (once a term, midterm, 3x per term, as needed?)
  - What to do if a problem comes up during the course?
- Wrap-up
  - Any requirements at the end of the course?
  - Expectations for passing on documentation?

## Guide to Expectations for Professors, Instructors, and Teaching Assistants

Professor(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Instructor(s): \_\_\_\_\_

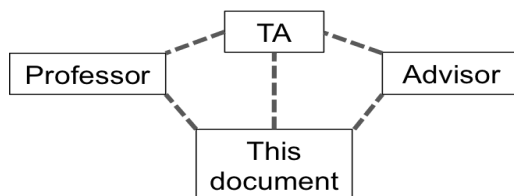
TA(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Semester: \_\_\_\_\_ Course: \_\_\_\_\_

Course meeting time/location:

Lab/discussion meeting time/location (if applicable):

This sample guide to expectations highlights some of the common responsibilities for graduate TAs. Use this document as a guide to discuss the TA responsibilities in more detail and add or remove additional requirements/expectations, as appropriate. The professors, instructors, and TAs should agree on the expectations for the TA appointment prior to the start of the course. Faculty advisors of the TAs should be included in the discussion as appropriate.



<b>TA weekly hours and attendance</b>	<b>Notes:</b>
Hours per week expected	
Actions to take if weekly hours are not within this range	
At lectures (all, some)	
Take notes or will be given notes	
Other	

<b>Class preparation</b>	<b>Notes:</b>
Set up technology or demonstrations in classroom before lectures	
Proctor exams (along or with other TAs, faculty)	

Responsibility for creating exams, problem sets, assignments	
Other	

<b>Administrative</b>	<b>Notes:</b>
Keep class attendance	
Maintain grade book	
Manage online information (e.g., Stellar)	
Other	

<b>Grading</b>	<b>Notes:</b>
Specific grading responsibilities: Exams (dates) Assignments (dates) Quizzes Projects	
Specific grading procedures (online submission?)	
How will grading standards be explained? (rubric, guidelines)	
Will faculty review TA's grading prior to returning work to students?	
Timeline for grading and returning work to students	
Process for handling student grading complaints	

<b>Office hours</b>	<b>Notes:</b>
Will TA hold office hours? Where? How often?	
How is TA expected to conduct office hours? (explain, clarify, review homework)	

Policies for notifying students in case of cancellation of office hours	
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<b>Working with student issues</b>	<b>Notes:</b>
What kinds of issues need to be reported to prof/instructors?	
Policy for late assignments, extensions, absences	
Procedures for ensuring academic honesty	

<b>Teaching methods</b>	<b>Notes:</b>
Is TA expected to lecture? How often? Will faculty be present? Will TA receive feedback on performance?	
Will TA review lecture plans with faculty prior to lecture?	
Is TA expected to hold review sessions prior to exams?	

<b>Discussion/lab sessions</b> (if applicable)	<b>Notes:</b>
Create a separate syllabus or lesson plan for the TA section?	
Pre-established assignments? How much flexibility does the TA have in conducting the lab / discussion section?	
Does the TA have autonomy to design their own activities or assignments? If yes, would they need to be reviewed by faculty? How soon in advance?	
Maintain / obtain equipment	

<b>Communication with professor/instructors</b>	<b>Notes:</b>
How frequently and in what form will you touch base (in person, email, regularly scheduled meetings, meetings as needed)?	



How much advance notice is needed for time conflicts?	
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<b>TA Teams</b> (if more than one TA)	<b>Notes:</b>
Is there a “lead” TA? What is their role?	
Will all the TAs meet regularly?	
Policies for maintaining consistency among TAs assigned to various sections of the same course	

<b>Feedback and evaluation</b>	<b>Notes:</b>
How do you best receive feedback? (both professors and TAs)	
Professor observation of lecture or lab/discussion section	
What does TA feedback look like? Professor feedback?	
Schedule for feedback (midterm, end of term?)	
Will there be separate student evaluation forms for lab/discussion sections?	

**Other responsibilities and notes:**

Optional:

*We have discussed the issues above and agreed upon the responsibilities of the TA position for this course.*

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Professor/Instructor(s)

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Teaching Assistant(s)

\_\_\_\_\_

Date