

Cornell University Field of Computer Science
Graduate Teaching Assistant Handbook for MS and PhD Students

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1. Introduction

Serving as a teaching assistant is a valuable experience for all graduate students. PhD students who are thinking about a career as faculty will gain insight and experience in setting up and running classes. More broadly, all careers of our graduates include leading, mentoring, and helping groups of colleagues and customers learn systems. Being a teaching assistant offers useful practice in developing these skills. This document contains information for current and prospective Graduate (Ph.D. and M.S.) Teaching Assistants (TAs) in the Field of Computer Science of Cornell University. Both instructors and TAs should be familiar with the contents of this document.

2. Responsibilities and Expectations

Relationship between Graduate Teaching Assistant and Instructor

Each course has a lead instructor (sometimes two or more co-instructors). The instructor is typically a professor or a lecturer, but can also be a graduate student. Many CS courses have a large number of undergraduate and MEng TAs and consultants, who hold office hours, grade homework assignments, etc. The role of the TA is to help the instructor in running the course. The following types of activities may be part of a TA's responsibilities, and are to be discussed by the instructor with the TA (or TAs):

- Scheduling undergrad, graduate, and instructor office hours
- Maintenance of course web site
- Acting as lead TA for a group of other TAs
- Planning and developing course content, such as homework and project assignments

- Grading homework and project assignments, as well as developing grading guides for other TAs to use
- Developing exam and quiz questions
- Grading exams and quizzes, as well as developing grading guides including ensuring food is ordered (if needed)
- Scanning exams and quizzes
- Scheduling proctoring for exams, and acting as proctors
- Scheduling and/or running grading and scanning sessions
- Assisting with lectures (including Zoom-based lectures) or even presenting a lecture
- Scheduling TA grading session, including ensuring food is ordered (if needed)
- Moderating online discussion forums

TAs may also be called upon to do recitations. Such TAs may be asked to attend the lectures. The lesson plan for a recitation is planned with the instructor.

The instructor is responsible for the content of the course and the grading policies. This includes the following:

- Syllabus and lectures
- Final approval of homework and project assignments
- Final proofreading of exams and quizzes
- Spotchecking grading results before release
- Assigning final grades

Good communication between the instructor and TA(s) is crucial for a successful working relationship. The instructor and the TA(s) need to discuss expectations before the semester starts. Lead TAs for certain tasks should determine what needs to be done and have regular meetings with the instructor to make sure that nothing was missed. In addition, it is good practice to have at least one scheduled weekly meeting with all TAs to discuss issues.

We recommend that **discussions between the TA and instructor** should begin one or two weeks before the first lecture. TAs should reach out to the instructor and attempt to start the discussion at least a week before in case the instructor is not proactive about this.

3. Time Management

A Graduate TA's job is to support the teaching of a course for an **average of 15 hours per week**. TA shouldn't exceed 20 hours in any week. If a TA finds that they are regularly exceeding these limits, they should reach out to the instructor of the course with documentation. The instructor may not be aware of the issue. The TA may also reach out to the Graduate Office with concerns. Please consider that time spent learning material does not count towards the 15-20 hours. However, if the TA is asked by the instructor to attend lectures (e.g., due to running sections that

depend on the lecture) that counts towards the 15 hours. On the flip side, if the instructor believes the TA is not working sufficiently, the instructor should discuss their concerns with the TA. If the student feels there is still an issue, they need to reach out to their [Union Representative](#).

Time management is critical. Typically the course load on the TA varies significantly during the semester. At the same time, the TA typically has research pressures related to conference deadlines, and possible travel to conferences or external meetings. The TA is responsible for notifying the instructor at the beginning of the semester for any scheduled travel. When called upon, a TA should be able to explain to the instructor the time they have spent on the course.

Part-time TAs commit to an average of 8 hours per week if the student's full-time appointment is a GRA or Fellowship. If the student has a full-time TA, the part-time TA will only be 5 hours. Compensation will be prorated for applicable hours.

4. Official University Appointment Periods:

Fall: August 21 - January 5
Spring: January 6 - May 20
Summer: TA appointment dates per [Summer Session](#) Course Offerings

TAs should be sure to stay in town until the grading of the final exam. We understand that sometimes the start of the semester or end of semester duties do not line up with the above appointment periods. However; students should note there are periods during the appointment in which they will usually not have responsibilities. For example, students may be requested to start TA duties in the fall prior to Aug 21, but the final exam should be graded in December and employment spans until January 5.

5. Conflict Resolution

TAs and Instructors should reach out to the Assistant Director of MS/PhD Programs, DGS, or Chair if they are having any problems with their Instructor or TA. Reports of conflicts will be handled with the utmost sensitivity to ensure that TAs do not have to fear negative consequences of bringing concerns forward. You may also wish to review the [Graduate School's Grievance Procedure](#).

6. Code of Ethics

The code of ethics below is from the Association for the Tutor Profession, but the ethics discussed there apply to TAs also. We want to highlight the issues around romantic relationships.

Romantic or sexual relationships between students or postgraduates (as defined by [Policy 6.3](#)) and faculty members, staff members, or others in positions of authority over them are

prohibited whenever those relationships have the potential to interfere with an individual's right or ability to pursue academic, training, research, or professional interests. This means that students serving as TAs in a course may not have such relationships with any student in the course, nor can a head TA have such a relationship with TAs or consultants. To make sure we comply with this policy, TAs may not offer or accept a date with a student in the course nor with a TA or consultant that they are serving as head TA for. Please report any pre-existing relationships to the Assistant Director of MS/PhD Programs or the DGS.

From the Association for the Tutor Profession:

- a. **Best Interest:** Tutors will be committed to acting in the best interest of tutees as specified by the employing organization or institute.
- b. **Responsibility:** Tutors will take responsibility for their own behavior and work to resolve conflicts that may arise between themselves and a client.
- c. **Integrity:** Tutors will practice and promote accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness.
- d. **Fairness:** Tutors will exercise reasonable judgment and take precautions to ensure that their potential biases, the boundaries of their competence, and the limitations of their expertise do not lead to or condone unjust practices.
- e. **Commitment:** Tutors will fulfill commitments made to learners.
- f. **Respect for Others' Rights and Dignity:** Tutors will respect the dignity and worth of all people, and the rights of individuals to privacy, confidentiality and self-determination.
- g. **Excellence:** Tutors will strive to maintain excellence by continuing to improve their tutoring skills and engage in applicable professional development activities.
- h. **Respect for Individual Differences:** Tutors will respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, sex, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status.
- i. **Professionalism:** Tutors will not engage in inappropriate relations with tutees.
- j. **Confidentiality:** Tutors will maintain the highest privacy standards in terms of protecting personal information relative to those whom they tutor.

7. Resources

- [Policy 1.3: Graduate Student Assistantships](#)
- [Graduate School Summary of Assistantships](#)
- [International Teaching Assistant Program Course](#)
- [Center for Teaching Innovation](#)
- [Policy 6.3: Consensual Relationships](#)

Appendix

Graduate TA Offer Process for Academic Year TA's

The TA assignment process has the following steps.

- 1) Gather Funding Data, which includes faculty TA preferences, faculty funding, and TA preferences for students on both campuses. (Due Oct 31 for spring, June 15 for Fall)
- 2) Gather Student expected funding, encouraging them to have a conversation with their advisors
 - Includes TA Preferences, and option to include any course(s) that they feel they do not have the background to TA
- 3) Note faculty non-responses to funding data at deadline and send individual reminders. Repeat until all data is collected. This takes time. Some reasons for late responses: funding uncertain, waiting on proposals, and/or need to meet with SRAC to discuss funding options.
- 4) Note any student/faculty differences in responses and reach out to faculty and/or students for clarification as needed.
 - *NOTE: First year PhD students admitted with an academic year TA offer: Sometimes faculty may offer a GRA in the spring semester of the student's first year. If there are enough students in the TA pool to accommodate this offer, we can confirm the spring GRA, but this is not always possible. However, often this decision cannot be finalized until very close to the semester as we need to see how enrollments are looking for the courses. We have a commitment to ensure our courses are staffed.
- 5) Start assigning MS and PhD TAs to courses taking into account:
 - Student preferences
 - Student backgrounds (partly based on reviewing transcripts, or discussion with the student)
 - Student research areas of interest
 - Faculty preferences
 - Course needs
 - Do we have enough MS and PhD students in the TA pool? If not:
 - Can we offer more MEng support? If so, a rule of thumb is 2 MENG TAs for every 1 MS or PhD TA. Discussion with AD for MEng program to discuss options. Noting that MENG students are not required to accept TA offers, their funding is not contingent on being a TA as MEng students are only awarded a 50% stipend as a TA. It is a self-funded program. Because their program is heavy in coursework, they often don't feel they have the time/resources to be a TA.
 - Considerations when creating assignments
 - Not all students get top preferences. Students generally ask for the same classes to TA and we just cannot accommodate this, which is why multiple preferences

are requested. Students providing a limited preference list may be assigned a TA not within their preferences.

- For hard to fill courses: If unsure if a student can TA a course after reviewing their transcript, reach out to the student to ask for clarification. Hard to fill courses change from semester to semester and year to year, depending on the skillset of the students in the TA pool that year.
 - Work closely with AD for the MEng program if there are courses that are hard to fill, either with MS/PHD TA's or MEng TA's. Discuss creative solutions. Can we make up for each other's program TA vacancies? If not, then:
 - Conversations with faculty for creative solutions when there are no students in the pool with the right backgrounds
 - Part-time TAs
 - Can they put a student in the pool if there are additional TA lines available
 - Additional undergrad TA help
 - Finding these creative solutions, and selecting among different potential solutions, requires making judgment calls that we can't picture encoding in the form of a transparent algorithm.
 - Last minute changes to the TA pool, which can be confidential (LOA's, last minute fellowships, visas, drastic course enrollment fluctuations, ITA language assessment screenings)
 - Goal to last minute changes to the TA pool is to make small localized swap, not to disrupt all of the assignments.
 - We try to be respectful of these changes. If a student finds they are in a class that they feel they cannot TA, they should tell us. We will try hard to assign them to another course.
- 6) Goal is to share TA assignments with faculty, staff and students in early-mid August 10 for Fall, December 10 for Spring. Last minute changes can happen up until start or just after the start of classes.
- 7) Share TA assignments with ELI TA Development program for mid-term evaluations.
- 8) Share TA assignments with ITSG so they can set proper permissions.

TA Support letters are sent at the start of each fall and spring semester.

Fall:	August 10
Spring:	December 10

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