

GUIDELINES FOR SUPERVISING TAs, Religious Studies, UNC-Chapel Hill, 2022

Teaching assistants are expected by their employment contracts to work an average of 15 hours/week over 18 weeks, with some variability expected over the course of the semester. These 15 hours are essential to the pedagogical training that is core to our doctoral program, and faculty play a leading role in providing that training within the time limits of the contract.

For regular TAs - Attending lectures (2 hours), teaching recitation (3 hours), reading the assigned work (1-2 hours), attending the weekly TA meeting for discussion of class planning and pedagogy (1 hour), and holding office hours (1 hour) leaves 7-8 hours per week for recitation preparation, grading, and liaising between undergraduates and faculty instructors concerning urgent issues. For weeks with high time commitments for grading, other tasks must be balanced to honor their contract.

For graders - Attending lectures (2.5 hours), reading the assigned work (1-2 hours), attending regular meetings for discussion of class planning and pedagogy (.5-1 hour), and holding office hours (1 hour) leaves 8.5-10 hours per week for grading, designing rubrics and exams, maintaining the Sakai site, and any preparation needed for pedagogical tasks during the lecture. If very short turnaround times are expected for grading major assignments, other tasks must be balanced to honor their contract.

A. Time Management

It is important that faculty members communicate clearly with TAs about the expected workload in every course and to design the course to keep within the contractual limits of 15 hours per week.

1. It is the faculty member's responsibility to monitor that the workload is equitably distributed between multiple TAs.
2. Faculty members should provide regular guidance for TAs concerning the content of recitation meetings in order to reduce TA preparation time. It is helpful, especially for novice teachers, if faculty indicate expected time parameters for recitation preparation or grading so TAs learn how best to balance their time.
3. Faculty members should consider TA time commitments in designing course assignments. They should communicate clearly with TAs about the level of student feedback required on assignments and about how to efficiently meet targets for specified grade averages on student assignments.
4. Faculty members should also solicit TA feedback on the time commitment a course requires.

B. Meetings with TAs

Weekly scheduled meetings with TAs in a space that allows TAs to take notes are an important method for communicating about the course, monitoring TA and student concerns, and developing as a teaching team. These meetings significantly improve TA performance and have a positive effect on TA workloads.

1. Many faculty members schedule regular one-hour meetings in order to provide a clear structure for communication with their TAs.
2. Regular TA meetings provide an opportunity to discuss the course readings and lecture content, recitation plans and expectations, grading techniques and expectations, upcoming assignments, other pedagogical matters, and student issues.

C. Communication

Clear, frequent, respectful communication is essential between faculty and TAs, as well as with undergrads.

1. Some faculty members solicit input on course planning before or during the semester, especially in relation to effectiveness or readings or exam design; enough time should be provided for input and it should be received in a professional manner.
2. Faculty and TAs rely primarily on email to communicate with each other and with undergraduates. It is important to establish guidelines for response time between all parties (generally within 24 hours during the workweek, respecting work-life boundaries on weekends).
3. Communicate respectfully and clearly about whether the faculty or the TA should respond to certain types of undergraduate questions or concerns, in order to avoid undermining the TA or, inversely, tasking them above their level of authority.

D. Grading

Consistency and timeliness in grading are crucial to faculty and TAs. Faculty guidance plays a significant role in streamlining the process and reducing TA anxiety, whether through providing exam keys and essay rubrics (see Sakai sites for explanation and examples) or grading a handful together at the start. The time commitment in multi-TA courses especially benefits from faculty guidance to standardize across sections.

1. Faculty backing TAs' decisions conveys confidence in the TAs as graders during the semester; special care should be taken in recognition that female-presenting, POC, LGBTQIA+, and non-Christian TAs are more frequently challenged. Plagiarism charges or grading disputes over final grades are adjudicated by the faculty to respect TA time.
2. Grading for an average requires more feedback from the TA to each student in order to justify the grade, which increases their time commitment.
3. Faculty should be aware that grading in undergraduate classes often comes at the same time that assignments are due in graduate classes, and plan accordingly. The mandatory 72-hour turnaround for grading finals is very difficult for both faculty and TAs.

E. Recitations

Expectations for the recitation sessions should be clearly communicated to the TAs before the start of the semester in order to help with time management, workload, and potential anxiety on the part of the TAs. This includes decisions about recitation content (sometimes in a recitation syllabus): assigned recitation readings, separate assignments, lesson plans or guiding questions for specific recitations, and/or whether TAs can assign additional materials. It is also important to clarify the purpose of the recitation and its format.

1. Some faculty assign specific and separate readings to the recitation portion of the class or allow TAs to select and assign additional readings and material, while others have no additional readings and materials for recitations. Consistency internal to the course is helpful for managing undergraduate expectations and TA workload.
2. Faculty should utilize the weekly meetings with TAs to share their expectations, guidance, and/or lesson plans. Guiding questions facilitate speedy preparation, consistency, and coordination between multiple TAs.
3. TAs benefit from a balance between careful guidance and openness to TA pedagogical innovation in order to hone their teaching skills.

F. Teaching Observations

Faculty are required to observe their TA(s) once per semester (see the form for the report on the Sakai site). The teaching observation should be scheduled in advance and in consultation with the TA. Scheduling it in the first half of the semester, meeting with the TA about the observation soon thereafter, and providing the written report all make the observation and feedback most beneficial for the TA in their quest to improve their teaching.

1. TAs benefit from detailed feedback and discussion of pedagogical strategies. The teaching observation should work in tandem with the weekly meetings in their focus on teaching strategies, diverse experiences in the classroom, student engagement, and efficiency in recitation preparation.
2. The feedback in the meeting and in the written report should avoid condescending or biased language and instead be constructive and encouraging. The written report of the teaching observation becomes part of the graduate student's internal file.

G. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are central to the university's teaching mission and the department. Faculty have a responsibility to educate themselves on issues of DEI as well as strategies to address exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization.

1. There are several types of relationships in which it is important to recognize and address DEI, power dynamics, and infractions: between faculty and TAs; between TAs and undergraduate students; between faculty and undergraduate students; and lastly between TAs.
2. Faculty should address DEI issues before or at the start of the semester and make room for reflection, complaints, and conflict resolution throughout the semester. This includes self-reflection on faculty social locations, recognition of the social locations of TAs, and attending available trainings and education on DEI, discrimination, implicit bias, and the intersectional nature of diverse identities including race, gender and sexual identities, class, disability, and religion.
3. An issue particular to the religious studies classroom is the question of instructors' and students' visible or assumed faith commitments. Faculty guidance on the pedagogical issue of whether and how TAs should address this issue, especially for those whom undergraduates would perceive as non-Christian, is invaluable.

H. Grader-only Assignments

Graders generally grade major assignments (producing rubrics for them), grade forum posts, lead writing workshops, and manage the Sakai site.

1. Most TAs find this type of course less time-consuming, but also less enjoyable unless they are incorporated into the class in an in-person component (such as leading a portion of the class or engaging small groups).
2. Turnaround expectations for grading are often shorter but see D3 that the timing may come when TAs have assignments in their own classes.