

Guidelines for TAs and TFs

Congratulations on your appointment as a TA/TF!

The importance of gaining teaching experience within a graduate program is well known, as is the critical role TA/TFs play in the work of the department.

TA/TF assignments cover a wide breadth of subjects and involve a variety of responsibilities, which means that for the specifics of your courses, you'll communicate with the instructor or supervisor regularly. Please ask questions (or request to meet with your instructor/supervisor if you don't have regularly scheduled meetings) if you are uncertain about your responsibilities.

This document is designed to respond to the broader question, "How can I help the courses for which I've been assigned TA/TF?" and aims to give both new and experienced TAs a general sense of expectations. It has been prepared with input from instructors who work with TAs regularly: Dr. Jay Arms, Dr. Rika Asai, Dr. Marcelle Pierson, Dr. Susan Rice, and Dr. Yoko Suzuki.

General:

Your TA position offers you teaching experience and the instructors/supervisors of the courses are happy to mentor you. One challenge, though, is that being a TA/TF means that you are no longer solely in a "student" role—for the students in the classes you teach, you are an instructor. A TA/TF position thus requires professionalism on your part which includes the following behaviors:

- Make sure you understand the learning objectives of the course so you can help further them. Whether you're not very familiar with the course materials you've been assigned to teach and are learning just ahead of your students or have well-developed ideas about what you'd like to teach in the course, having a clear sense of the instructor's learning objectives will help streamline your work.
- Be sure you have access to and are familiar with the course syllabus so that if students have questions, you can provide answers that conform to the class policies.
- Find out how many hours you are responsible for and have a conversation with your instructor/supervisor about it. Because of the nature of the academic year, there will undoubtedly be lulls and spurts of activity (often coinciding with your own work as a graduate student) so planning and organization is key.
- As an instructor, you should be aware of the situations in which you're a mandatory reporter—if this isn't clear to you after the DSAS TA orientation, you can find out more here: <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix/make-report/responsible-employee-program-and-reporting> or reach out to Carrie Benson in the Title IX office.
- Think about what you'd like your students to call you— "professor" is a title that undergraduates frequently use to refer to anyone who teaches them, but as a TA/TF, it's not appropriate for you to ask students to use this title for yourself. A common practice for TAs is simply for students to use your first name. If you prefer a level of formality, you can use Mr/Ms/Dr as appropriate.

- Ask your supervisor how they prefer to be contacted. Let your supervisor know how to get in touch with you most effectively and be responsive when they reach out. Because we are conducting Pitt business, University email is the preferred mode, but some instructors are ok with texts while other instructors don't like receiving work texts. Be certain to check your Pitt email frequently for University and Music department communications.

Lecture:

- Always come early to lecture! It is unprofessional to see TA/TFs arriving late or just in the nick of time and you're also not able to help with any classroom set up if you come so late, so plan to arrive 5-10 minutes before class time.
- Be aware that you are modeling good student behavior—be attentive during lectures and consider taking notes. We understand your desire to do some of your own work during lecture time, but we encourage you to engage in your supervisor's lecture because it's a helpful way to prepare yourself for the associated recitations.
- If you must do other work, please do so discreetly. Under no circumstances should you be posting things on social media, texting, or FaceTiming your friends during class time.
- If there is group discussion, circulate and help students generate ideas. However, it's generally not appropriate to answer the prompts for undergraduates during class time.
- If you're expected to be present for lectures but are sick/unable to attend, please let your instructor/supervisor know with as much advance notice as possible.

Recitation:

- Different supervisors have different philosophies and expectations about the role of recitations in the course as a whole, so be sure you're on the same page as the instructor of the course. In particular, be sure you're aware of the amount of freedom you have to design your own lesson plans, PowerPoints, etc.
- If you've been given lesson plans to utilize, a good guideline is to follow them, but definitely be proactive about lesson plans, course topics, tools that might be helpful to students—communicate with the instructor but keep in mind that ultimately the teacher is responsible for the course, and it is not helpful to undermine the class because it's easier or more interesting for you to teach something else.
- If you need to miss a class, please handle it as you would any work position—inform your supervisor that you will miss the class and confirm that the arrangements you've made for the class are acceptable. Best practice is to trade classes with one of your fellow instructors. If you can't find a trade, consult with your supervisor to see if someone else can fill in, or if you can prepare an in-class activity for your students to do.
- If you get sick or have an emergency at the last minute, it's OK to cancel class—but you should notify your supervisor, your class, and the department administrator so that they can put a sign on the door.
- If you need to miss more than one class, please speak with your supervisor so that an arrangement that works for both you *and your students* can be made. Please remember that it's not your supervisor's responsibility to devise or implement these arrangements on your behalf.

- Do not cancel or alter the modality of the class (i.e., teach your recitation via Zoom) without clearing it with your supervisor first.
- Students have a right to their privacy in your class—please do not discuss things like DRS accommodations or students' individual grades in class!
- Inform the instructor of habitual absences and other concerning student behavior.

Attendance:

- Your class likely has an attendance policy (find out what it is!), which means you need to take attendance.
- You must also enforce a consistent attendance policy—this is out of fairness to everyone in the class and also because class management problems are likely to arise if there are discrepancies between different recitations or between different students in your class.
- You may find it useful to use the “Roll Call” tool on Canvas so that both you and the students can see how they are doing in attendance.
- Pro-tip: use “taking attendance” as a way to get to know your students' names.

Grading:

- Be as consistent and accurate about grading as possible. If your supervisor hasn't created a rubric, make sure everyone is on the same page about how things should be graded.
- Be sure you have access to and are familiar with the course policies regarding late assignments and extra credit.
- Fix grading errors when students bring them to you. It may seem insignificant to you because it's just a point or something like that, but it's important to the student and it's best for the class that things seem fairly and accurately graded.
- Grading and feedback are important opportunities in the teaching and learning process. Not all feedback is accompanied by a grade, but effective grades provide students with feedback. For this reason, timeliness in grading is as important as providing useful feedback.

For ensembles classes:

- Come early to help set up and be prepared to stay late to put things away.
- Be prepared to help with logistics and administration of ensemble activities. This may not seem like “teaching,” but it is critical to course preparation in an ensemble class.
- Do your best to learn the music, even if you've never played it before.
- Check in with the director before you leave each rehearsal/performance.

Questions you should be able to answer:

1. What are the learning objectives of the course as a whole?
2. What are the learning objectives of a given recitation/class?
3. What will the TA duties largely consist of? What will the weekly rhythm look like? Are there times in the semester when it might be more or less time-intensive?
4. What's the best way to communicate with the instructor of the course?
5. What should I do if I have to miss class?