

Department of Physics and Astronomy TA-Instructor Responsibility Guidebook

This document contains Departmental guidelines for the responsibilities of course **Instructors** (the individual in charge of the course, usually a TTS or NTS faculty member) and **Teaching Assistants** (TAs, usually a graduate student working toward the Ph.D. degree). Instructors and TAs are expected to abide by these guidelines as closely as possible within reason. In all cases, the lead Instructors have the ultimate responsibility for insuring a good instructional outcome for both TAs and for all students enrolled in our courses.

These guidelines are based on the premise that communication is vital to good instructional outcomes. Open, frequent communication between all involved parties (Instructor, TA, students) is essential to create the best learning experience for the student. We also encourage instructors and TAs to make use of University-wide teaching resources such as those provided by the University Center for Teaching and Learning (UCTL).

I. Types of TA positions in department

- a. **Recitation** – TAs running recitation sections generally guide students through educational material designed to complement the material covered during the main class periods (usually a lecture).
- b. **Lab** – Lab TAs generally guide students through performing laboratory experiments as part of one of our laboratory courses.
- c. **Grader** – TAs that serve as graders generally grade homework and/or exams.
- d. **Mixed** – Some TAs may be assigned a mixture of duties (e.g., some grading work and some recitation work) in order to (1) cover all of our courses and (2) ensure that they are working a 20-hour work week on the average.

II. TA Responsibilities

- a. TAs must work a **20-hour work week** on the average. On the average, the time spent by a TA carrying out teaching duties **must not exceed 20 hours per week** on average nor may this time be significantly below 20 hours per week.
 - i. TAs that find themselves working more than 20 hours per week on the average should contact both their Instructor(s) and the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) as soon as possible in order to rectify the situation. Though it is not necessary, it would be helpful to provide the Instructor(s) and DGS with a rough accounting time spent on specific tasks and responsibilities.

- b. TAs must be on time to all classes (labs, recitations, and any other class meetings). **Lateness will not be tolerated.** Consequences may include termination and/or being denied TA opportunities in subsequent semesters.
- c. TAs must be prepared to lead their recitations and/or lab courses. This includes, but is not limited to:
 - i. Thinking carefully about the material to be covered;
 - ii. Consulting with the course Instructor regarding the material to be covered if necessary;
 - iii. Anticipating questions from students;
 - iv. Working through homework problem prior to recitation/office hours;
 - v. Having quizzes prepared and proofread prior to recitation if necessary.
- d. TAs must maintain a productive learning environment at all times. This includes, but is not limited to:
 - i. Being patient;
 - ii. Being understanding (not condescending);
 - iii. Attempting to understand student difficulties;
 - iv. Attempting to engage students in instruction.
- e. Communicate with Instructor **at least once per week.** In particular, TAs should make sure that they know:
 - i. The material that has been covered in recent lectures;
 - ii. The material that should be covered in recitation or lab.
- f. Recitation TAs must offer **at least 2 hours** of office hours each week. Graders and lab TAs may offer office hours as necessary in consultation with the course Instructor.
- g. TAs must return graded material **promptly.** TAs and course Instructors should decide on grading timelines and deadlines. TAs should adhere to these timelines and deadlines except in cases where a new deadline has been decided upon by mutual agreement between the TA and the course Instructor. For example, revised deadlines may be set in order to accommodate TA illness or enable a TA to prepare for an exam.
- h. Though the Instructor may request that the TA help to prepare exams and solutions to exams, provided that the TA workload does not exceed the 20-hour per week average, the **Instructor** (and not the TA) is ultimately responsible for all exams and solutions.
- i. TAs should seek help when needed (e.g., advice from TA mentors, Instructor, and other University resources such as UCTL).
- j. TAs must attend lectures for the courses they are teaching **if** this is required by their Instructor. However, attendance at lecture constitutes part of the 20-hour work week of a TA. Therefore, in cases in which a TA attends lecture, the TA and the Instructor must work together to ensure that the overall TA work load, including the time spent at lecture, **does not exceed 20 hours per week** on the average.

- k. TAs may offer additional review sessions to their students; however, this is not required and should only be done if the TA can conduct these additional reviews without exceeding the 20 hour work week limitation.
- l. Harassment of any kind will not be tolerated. This includes but **is not limited to** verbal, non-verbal, and physical harassment, disparagement, intimidation, exclusion, and sexual harassment including inappropriate verbal or physical conduct. The University of Pittsburgh's official Anti-Harassment Policy reads as follows:

No University employee, University student, or individual on University property may intentionally harass or abuse a person (physically, verbally or electronically) when the conduct is severe or pervasive and objectively and subjectively has the effect of: (1) unreasonably interfering with such person's work or equal access to education, or (2) creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work or academic environment. Consistent with the University Nondiscrimination Policy and Sexual Harassment Policy, harassment on the basis of a legally protected classification, such as racial harassment or sexual harassment, is prohibited. This policy statement will be applied with due respect for the University's commitment to equality of opportunity, human dignity, diversity, and academic freedom, and, when constitutionally protected speech is implicated, only to the extent consistent with the First Amendment.

- m. If the TA feels as though an Instructor is not living up to the responsibilities of an Instructor (see below), TAs should contact the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS). The DGS will take the following steps.
 - i. Communicate with Instructor regarding the problem.
 - ii. If problem cannot be fixed, DGS will send report to the Chair.

III. Instructor Responsibilities

- a. **Instructors bear the ultimate responsibility for all aspects the course** and are responsible for insuring a positive instructional experience for any students enrolled in the course as well as for any TAs working with the Instructor. Instructors should bear in mind at all times that as part of the TA experience, TAs are mastering the basic material and learning to become educators and that Instructors serve as their mentors in this regard. In addition to teaching, TAs are also learning under the supervision of the course Instructor.
- b. Instructors are responsible for all instruction, including handouts and other supplementary materials, during lecture periods.
- c. Instructors must maintain a productive learning environment at all times, including all contact with the TAs with which they work.

Maintaining a productive learning environment can include, but is not limited to:

- i. Being patient;
 - ii. Being understanding (not condescending);
 - iii. Attempting to understand student difficulties;
 - iv. Attempting to understand, mitigate, and rectify any issues with TAs;
 - v. Attempting to engage students in instruction.
- d. **Instructors must meet with all of their TAs prior to the beginning of the semester.** During these meetings, Instructors should address the following points.
- i. The general structure of the **course**
 - ii. The general structure of **labs/recitations**
 - iii. Any **general grading criteria** and/or considerations
 - iv. Describe the **general responsibilities** of the TA (these responsibilities should be consistent with the expectations described throughout this document) including
 1. Whether or not the TA is expected to attend lecture
 2. Whether or not the TA is expected to write quizzes and/or solutions to quizzes
 3. Whether or not the TA is expected to help write exams and produce solutions for exams
 4. Whether or not the TA is expected to write solutions for homework sets
 - v. The amount time the Instructor expects the TA to spend on class responsibilities each week and the method by which the TA and Instructor will ensure that the TA workload does not exceed an average of 20 hours per week.
 - vi. The potential to introduce active learning methods into recitations.
- e. **Instructors must set a standing weekly meeting with TAs.** In the event of travel, this meeting may be carried out using teleconferencing tools if practicable. At minimum, these meetings should address the following points.
- i. The material covered in recent lectures.
 - ii. The material that should be covered in recitations and/or labs along with any specific instructions on how to cover this material.
 - iii. The general results of recent quizzes/homework assignments in an effort to identify any widespread misunderstandings among the students.
 - iv. Any grading or other deadlines that have not already been agreed upon.
 - v. Any other outstanding issues that must be discussed and resolved through Instructor-TA collaboration.

- vi. Whether or not the TA and Instructor are abiding by the expectations outlined in this document and set out by the Instructor and TA at earlier meetings.
- f. Reviewing, editing, and approving of quizzes or other handouts. TAs often have little experience preparing quizzes and other handouts. It is the responsibility of the Instructor to see that these handouts and quizzes are commensurate with instructional goals.
- g. Writing exams and preparing exam solutions. The Instructor may request that the TA help prepare exams and solutions to exams. However, the instructor must make certain that this additional work does not cause the TA workload to exceed 20 hours per week on average and this expectation must be made clear at the initial TA-Instructor meeting at the beginning of the semester (Section III b above). In all cases, the **Instructor** (and not the TA) is ultimately responsible for all exams and exam solutions.
- h. Instructors must sit in on and evaluate TA recitations at least twice during the course of a semester.
 - i. The first visit must occur within the first month of semester. Subsequent to each visit, Instructors should submit an evaluation form to the Graduate Administrator.
 - ii. The Instructor should work with the TA (and perhaps with TA mentors, or other University resources such as UCTL) to improve instruction as necessary.
- i. Instructors should actively monitor the time the TA spends per week to ensure the average TA workload does not exceed the 20 hour per week maximum.
- j. Instructors may not place undue burden on TAs. In particular, Instructors may not attempt to assign TAs responsibilities that are clearly listed as Instructor responsibilities.
- k. Harassment of any kind will not be tolerated. This includes but **is not limited to** verbal, non-verbal, and physical harassment, disparagement, intimidation, exclusion, and sexual harassment including inappropriate verbal or physical conduct. The University of Pittsburgh's Anti-Harassment Policy reads as follows.

No University employee, University student, or individual on University property may intentionally harass or abuse a person (physically, verbally or electronically) when the conduct is severe or pervasive and objectively and subjectively has the effect of: (1) unreasonably interfering with such person's work or equal access to education, or (2) creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work or academic environment. Consistent with the University Nondiscrimination Policy and Sexual Harassment Policy, harassment on the basis of a legally protected classification, such as racial harassment or sexual harassment, is prohibited. This policy statement will be applied with due respect for the University's commitment to equality of opportunity, human

dignity, diversity, and academic freedom, and, when constitutionally protected speech is implicated, only to the extent consistent with the First Amendment.

- I. If the Instructor feels as though a TA is not living up to the responsibilities of a TA (as described above), the Instructor should discuss the issue with the TA. If the TA and Instructor cannot resolve the issue, the Instructor should contact the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS). The DGS will take the following steps.
 - i. Communicate with the TA regarding the problem.
 - ii. If the problem cannot be rectified through consultation with the TA, the DGS will send report to the Chair.
 - iii. If the problem is sufficiently serious (e.g., lateness, repeated carelessness) the DGS may act to dismiss the TA and/or deny the TA in question future opportunities to fund their studies as a teaching assistant.