

Western University
Department of Physics and Astronomy
Graduate Student Teaching Assistantship Guidelines
December 2015

(1) The Role of the Teaching Assistant

The role of the Teaching Assistant is to assist the instructor in delivering a high quality course and to enhance the learning experience of the students. Being a Teaching Assistant is a valuable part of the graduate experience that can help students develop many complementary professional skills that will enhance the academic and research skills they develop in the program. The TA experience should be about teaching, which means the TA must have mastery of the academic material at a level significantly above the abilities of the students in the class. TAs are encouraged to ask for guidance and feedback from Instructors, fellow TAs and students (e.g., sitting in on tutorials, checking marking, giving interim evaluations) to improve their teaching skills.

(2) The Role of the Instructor

The role of the Instructor is to deliver a high quality course to the students. The Instructor is ultimately responsible for the content and delivery of the curriculum, the appropriateness of the exams and assignments, and the fairness and consistency of marks. The Instructor also has a supervisory role to the TA, and should provide explicit teaching guidance as appropriate. For example, TAs may request feedback on tutorial delivery, marking practices, etc.

(3) Priority of TA Assignment (undergraduate and graduate courses):

In order to allocate available TA hours effectively and assign TAs for courses in our Department according to their abilities and experience, a priority list for TA allocation is given below.

(a) First priority: Large courses with a laboratory/project component

Large courses (enrolment > 100) with laboratory/project component have the greatest need for TAs because of the logistics of dealing with a large number of students including providing tutorials, monitoring laboratories and grading exams, lab reports and project reports.

(b) Second priority: (i) Large courses without a laboratory component

(ii) Moderate and small courses with a lab component (safety requirements in the lab component)

(c) Third Priority: Moderate sized courses (25 < enrolment < 100)

(d) Fourth priority: Small courses (enrolment < 25)

Small undergraduate courses are not automatically guaranteed a TA, however, a request can be made to the TA coordinator with an explanation of why a TA is required. If TAs are available they will be assigned based on the course enrolment, the difficulty level of the course and the need for student support.

Please note that in general graduate courses will not obtain TA support unless enrolment is sufficiently high. An instructor who feels they require a TA for a graduate course must get permission from the Graduate Chair. A TA in a graduate course must have passed the PhD Comprehensive Examination. It is the Instructor's responsibility to ensure that all marking for graduate courses with a TA will be anonymous, so that the identity of the student being marked is hidden from the TA.

(4) Assignment of TA hours

The number of available TA hours needs to be distributed among the priority categories in order to enhance student learning impact, and not necessarily to save time for instructors.

- (a) For the large classes, each tutorial section needs 70 hours of TA including tutorial preparation, marking and proctoring.
- (b) For the First Year Lab, each lab sub-section (each lab room) needs two TAs, one as a 'marker' and the other as a 'helper'. The total TA hours needed for the lab depends on the total enrolment in all first year physics courses.
- (c) Upper year courses with a small enrolment (enrolment < 20) will typically be assigned 70 TA hours, although the Instructor should inform the Grad Chair if a $\frac{1}{4}$ TA (35 hours) is more appropriate. A request for up to 140 h must be made to the Graduate Chair (within one month after teaching assignment have been made). More TA hours are allocated for courses with a lab component (due to safety requirements of running a lab).
- (d) At the request of the instructor, an Administrative TA will be available for large courses. The Admin TA will typically be assigned 70 TA hours, although up to 140 TA hours will be possible if authorized by the Graduate Chair.
- (e) All approved special TA requests for September (Fall term) must be communicated by the instructor to the TA coordinator by the first week of July. For the Winter term the requests need to be communicated by the first week of November.

(5) Assignment of TAs

The TA assignments are carried out by the TA Assignment Committee. This committee includes the Laboratory Coordinator, the Undergraduate Chair, the Graduate Chair and the Graduate Assistant, one of whom will be designated by the Department Chair as the TA Coordinator. The Committee takes the following items into consideration when assigning TAs.

- (a) Consulting the course instructor to decide the required number of TAs and their hours.
- (b) Taking into account the current and past enrolment figures in the course in addition to past TA allocation for the course.

- (c) Special requests from course instructors for a particular TA for the course.
- (d) Special requests from TAs to work with a particular instructor/course.
- (e) Abilities of the TAs in the subject matter of the course, language skills, teaching skills, and social skills.
- (f) Special accommodations for the TA (e.g. medical, absences for a long period, travelling required for completion of the thesis, etc.).

Typically, upper-year undergraduate courses are given to more experienced PhD-level students who have already passed the Comprehensive Examination. Under no circumstances should a TA be given to a student so they can “learn the course material”, e.g., as remedial work for a poor performance in a subject area; it is more appropriate for them to be a student in the course in this case.

(6) Monitoring of TA hours by the TA and Instructor

The TA must monitor their hours and give regular feedback to the course Instructor (or the Administrative TA if applicable) on how many hours have been used. If the TA uses up all assigned TA hours before the end of the term, the Department may not be able to provide more TA hours for the course. In this case, the responsibilities of the TA defer to the course Instructor.

In some cases, the number of hours assigned to the TA are insufficient for the duties assigned to the TA by the Instructor. The following procedure will be used for resolving this situation.

- (a) If and when it becomes apparent to the TA or the Instructor that the required hours to perform the expected duties of the TA are greater than the allocated hours, the first step is for the TA and the Instructor to have an in-person conversation about modifying the expected duties and/or the practice of the TA (in the cases where the TA is spending too much time on a given activity).
- (b) If following this meeting the situation is not resolved to the satisfaction of either the TA or the Instructor, one of them must contact the Graduate Chair or the Department Chair to resolve the dispute as soon as possible.

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