

Department of Art History
TA Orientation 2019

What Is a TA?

The **Teaching Assistantship** (TA) is a form of **Graduate Assistantship** (GA). GAs are typically half-time appointments (20 hours per week) that come with a waiver of tuition and some fees as well as a fixed salary, the exact terms of which are subject to the contract negotiated by the Graduate Employee Organization (GEO).

In addition to TAs, the Art History department employs a limited number of Research Assistants (RAs).

The **Research Assistant** (RA) is assigned to help a faculty member conduct research. These positions are usually assigned to faculty members who are serving in administrative roles and who therefore don't have as much time to devote to their own projects. The Art History Department usually has 3 RAs at any one time: one for the Chair, one for the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS), and one shared between the Director of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) and the Lecture and Events Committee (LEC).

The majority of Art History GA positions are **Teaching Assistantships** (TAs). TAs are assigned to courses based on enrollment, typically with one TA per every 50 students. Thus, the only Art History courses with TAs are the large, 100-level general education surveys. TAs are expected to teach discussion sections as well as grade papers and exams.

The department also employs a limited number of advanced PhD Candidates as **Graduate Instructors**, who are listed as the Instructor of Record and have the sole responsibility for a course. These can be either 100-level survey courses that are already on the books or 200-level “topics” courses based on the students’ research interests. Interested students should discuss this possibility with their advisers.

In addition to making graduate school more affordable, the Teaching Assistantship is an important site of training and, increasingly, a necessary experience on the academic job market. It is therefore the view of the Art History faculty that, as far as is possible, all doctoral students should receive a range of positions during the course of their studies, including TA-ing for broad surveys and being the instructor of record for both 100-level and 200-level courses.

Responsibilities of a TA

TAs are expected to:

- Attend all lectures and complete all readings
- Prepare for and lead weekly discussion sections
- Hold office hours and respond to student inquiries in a timely manner
- Grade assignments fairly and in a timely manner

Potential challenges encountered by TAs

Aside from a presumption of a degree of expertise in the material being taught, teaching entails a number of challenges. The ability to cope with these is gained through experience, and being a TA provides a relatively low-pressure opportunity to learn how to:

- Maintain a good balance between teaching and other responsibilities such as coursework or dissertation research
- Lead sections successfully, including encouraging student participation, promoting productive discussions, and maintaining authority in the classroom
- Handle student issues, including accommodating students with disabilities, dealing with insubordination, and getting help for students with personal or psychological issues
- Assess student work and assign grades fairly, including how to communicate expectations through a rubric, maintain consistency, and identify and address violations of the honor code such as plagiarism

Workload and Time Management

As with all Graduate Assistantships, the expectation is that being a TA will require around 20 hours of your time per week. Some weeks this will be less, and others more, but the average should be around 20 hours.

The responsibilities to students that teaching entails—showing up to sections prepared, making oneself available to meet with them outside of class time, returning graded assignments in a timely manner—can create a feeling of obligation that leads to more time being devoted to TA duties than is advisable, especially for first-time TAs.

The challenge is therefore how to fulfill one's responsibilities in an efficient manner without overburdening oneself.

- How much preparation is necessary to feel comfortable leading a discussion section?
- How much time should be spent grading an individual exam or a paper, and how much feedback should be given?

Know the expectations of the primary instructor. These should be clearly communicated to you both generally at the start of the semester and prior to any specific section or the grading of an assignment. If you have any questions or concerns, voice them.

- How should sections be run? What is their goal?
- What specific material should be covered in them each week?
- When grading, how much feedback—and of what sort—should be given?
- What is the rubric and how should grades be calculated for each assignment?

Discussion Sections

The stated goal of sections is for **discussion** and **review**. TAs should NOT be preparing and teaching a 50-minute lecture each week.

Go into each section with a sense of what you want to accomplish:

- What topics will be discussed and how do you want to challenge the students to think about them?
- What images would be useful to show to promote active discussion around these topics?
- What open-ended questions related to these topics can you ask that will encourage student participation.
- What are the most important artworks and ideas from the previous week's lectures to review with the students?

Set the tone early in the semester.

- Establish your classroom rules and expectations at the first meeting, including expectations for the maintaining of a respectful and inclusive tone during classroom discussions.
- Decide how you would like to be addressed by the students.
 - Some instructors are more comfortable going by their first names, while others prefer the degree of distance and authority conveyed by the more formal use of the last name.
 - As an earned rank, the title “Professor” is inappropriate for TAs or Graduate Instructors. You should refrain from referring to yourself as such on course materials or when signing emails.
- Learn the names of students and actively call on them to add their voices to discussions. (Photos of most students are available through the “Class Photo Roster” page on Blackboard.)
- Maintain your composure in the face of challenges.

Potential Classroom Challenges, or “What should I do if...?”

As a TA (and, for the rest of your teaching career), you can expect to face a number of potential challenges, both small and large. By thinking through some of these now, you can be prepared if they arise in the course of teaching.

There are a variety of resources on campus for you to turn to if you face an immediate issue, beginning with the faculty in this department. Don't hesitate to discuss issues with—or ask for advice from—any of us!

...there are technical issues in the classroom (e.g. the projector isn't working)?

All classrooms have instructions posted for the equipment they contain, as well as a number to call in case of a technical problem requiring immediate assistance. Classrooms in our department (Henry Hall and Jefferson Hall) are serviced by **CiCADA**:

Phone: (312) 413-3673

Email: ahit@helpdesk.uic.edu

Office: 103 Jefferson Hall

...I am ill or have an emergency that keeps me from attending my section(s)?

- See if a fellow TA can cover the class for you
- Email the students that either a substitute TA will be leading the section or it is cancelled
- If you must cancel the section, consider assigning the students an assignment to make up for it (e.g. turning in a brief response to the reading(s) that would have been discussed, watching a video online, etc.)
- Let the course instructor know

...I have one or more students with a disability or special needs in my section?

Students who require special accommodations in the classroom are expected to go through UIC's **Disability Resource Center** and to inform the instructor of their needs at the beginning of the semester.

Do your best to accommodate the needs of all students.

More information can be found at <https://drc.uic.edu/>

...a student comes to me to discuss urgent personal issues?

Because they are closer in age, students often see TAs as more approachable than members of the faculty. This means that, as a TA, students might tell you—or ask for advice—about personal issues. Be aware that, as employees of the university, you have a responsibility to report information relating to the harassment or sexual assault of members of our community to the administration. If you believe a student is about to tell you something you will be required to report, be as comforting as possible, but make sure they understand your obligations before they continue. In case they prefer to discuss something of this nature confidentially, refer them to the **Counseling Center**:

<https://counseling.uic.edu/>

2010 Student Services Building, 1200 W Harrison

8:00 am – 5:00 pm, Monday–Friday, and in the evenings by appointment

(312) 996-3490

If a student comes to you to complaining of severe depression, suicidal thoughts, or other immediate psychological issues, you can offer to accompany them to the counseling center to make sure they get the help they need. You cannot compel them to seek treatment, but make sure they know there are services on campus that are available to them.

If you believe a student poses an immediate threat to you, to others on campus, or to themselves, call the **campus police**: (312) 355-5555

The Counseling Center's website has useful information for concerned faculty and staff, including how to recognize when a student might be suicidal and how to best help troubled students.

<https://counseling.uic.edu/online-resources/>

...a student misbehaves or is insubordinate (e.g. actively challenges my authority)?

Because graduate students are often not much older than the undergrads they are teaching, it can sometimes be difficult to establish authority in the classroom. This is especially the case for women, people of color, and international graduate students whose first language is not English.

Students acting inappropriately should be told in no uncertain terms that their behavior will not be tolerated. Shut down inappropriate behavior when it occurs, and ask to speak to the offending student after class is over.

...students come unprepared (e.g. they haven't done the readings and are unable to participate in discussions)?

In discussion sections, where so much of the success of the class depends on the dynamic of the students and their having come prepared, it can be a source of great frustration when you have a room full of students who haven't done the reading or are unwilling to participate in discussions.

Be understanding ("I know you have a lot of work for your other courses..."), but also firm as you let them know that their participation in these discussions is expected and will be reflected in their grade for the course.

In the meantime, find a way to encourage discussion related to the general topic in question in spite of them not having done the reading, or pivot to review material presented in the lectures the previous week.

...a potentially sensitive topic comes up in discussion, or the discussion gets heated?

This can be a valuable opportunity to engage with students.

- Acknowledge the potentially sensitive nature of the subject that has come up and make clear your expectation that discussions proceed in a respectful and inclusive manner.
- Don't feel pressured to rush through a difficult topic of discussion in order to be able to cover all the material you had originally planned on for that class meeting. However, once the discussion has reached a point where everyone who wants to contribute has done so, it is okay to state that you will now be moving on to another topic.
- If any students appear to have been upset by something that came up in class, it may be useful to talk with them afterward.

...I don't know the answer to a student's question, or if I realize I have previously stated some incorrect information?

There is nothing wrong with admitting you don't know something, or admitting that you were wrong. Indeed, you can turn these situations into a teaching experience by, for example, modeling how one would go about finding a good source of information related to the student's question. Simply come back the following week with the answer to the question, or the correct information that you misspoke about.

Grading

Grading is one of the most time-consuming and important aspects of what we do as teachers. Learning how to do it quickly and fairly while providing students with useful feedback is one of the key skills gained as a TA.

Rightly or wrongly, grades are probably the biggest concern of undergrads, and they both deserve and expect to have their graded exams and assignments returned to them in a timely manner (typically no more than 2 weeks after being turned in).

Figure out how much time you can reasonably allot to grading each exam or paper. How many total do you have to grade, and how many hours can you devote to grading before they are expected to be returned to the students?

Fairness in Grading

- Always grade from a rubric that clearly states the expectations associated with each step in the grade scale for each aspect of the exam or assignment, preferably one that is shared with the students.
- If there are multiple TAs or graders in a course, the rubric should be consistent across all sections.
- Maintain a degree of leniency when you're grading, and keep an eye on the big picture. In most cases, grades typically naturally fall onto a bell curve, with a few students getting As, Ds, or Fs, and most students getting Bs and Cs.
- Both as a timesaver and a way to maintain consistency in grading, it is a good idea to grade one answer at a time across all exams and to use a spreadsheet to record grades as you do so.
- In courses with multiple TAs or graders, it is a good practice to compare examples of grading to maintain consistency across all sections.

Giving Feedback When Grading

For students to be able to grow and learn from their mistakes, they require useful feedback on their graded assignments, not just a letter or number grade.

However, it is not always possible or advisable to correct every error or give feedback on every aspect of an assignment. What is important is to find a good balance where advice is given about specific issues that can be improved without overwhelming the student with red ink.

For example, with a paper that has many grammatical errors, it might be useful to indicate all instances in the first paragraph, but not the rest of the paper, and then to refer the student to the Writing Center as a useful resource: <https://writingcenter.uic.edu/>.

Prioritize your feedback, so the student is made aware of the most important issues that he or she should address in the future.

Finally, make an effort to maintain a neutral or encouraging tone in your comments.

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

This is, unfortunately, an issue you are all too likely to encounter as a college instructor. Plagiarism is one of the most serious offences that can occur in an academic setting, and the university maintains a zero tolerance policy. It is important to be vigilant, to know how to identify it, and to be prepared to respond appropriately when you discover it.

Plagiarism happens for a variety of reasons, including laziness, fear of doing badly in a course, and/or a lack of understanding of what exactly it is and why it is such a major infraction. The best way to minimize its occurrence is to inform students early in the semester (to be reinforced whenever assignments are introduced or discussed) about the seriousness of plagiarism and its consequences when it is discovered.

How to Spot Plagiarism

While there are tools such as SafeAssign that are meant to catch plagiarism, these are best thought of as deterrents, showing the students that we are looking out for it. However, this often leads them to look for ways to get around the machine, such as by changing a few words here and there.

You are much more likely to find plagiarism when you trust your instincts. For example, students may try to misattribute information they find online to scholarly sources, wrongly thinking that we are only concerned about the form, rather than the content, of their citations. If you suspect that information did not come from the source to which it has been attributed, or if the style of the writing seems strange or out of character for a student, Google problematic phrases to see if they were lifted from websites.

What to Do When You Discover Plagiarism or Academic Dishonesty

Document everything!

- Indicate exactly what material was plagiarized and from where
- If material was copied from a website, note the site's name and URL, and precisely where on the site the plagiarized material can be found
- Indicate everything on the student's work, as well as the fact they have received an "F" on the assignment due to plagiarism, before you hand it back to them
- Make photos / scans of the student's work, including your comments to them, so that you have a copy should things escalate

Inform the instructor and decide together how to proceed. (Can the student redo the assignment for a grade? Should you report the incident to the university's administration?)

Information about how to report academic misconduct to the university can be found here: <https://dos.uic.edu/community-standards/academic-integrity/>

Other Issues? Questions?

Don't hesitate to discuss anything with the instructor of the course for which you are a TA or other members of the Art History faculty. You are doing a job for the department, but the faculty is here to support you! We will always have your back when student issues arise, and will never question your authority in front of students. It is our goal and desire to help you grow as teachers, in preparation for your future careers as art historians. So, even though we may seem busy (we are!) and you might not want to bother us, we will always be happy to make time to discuss any issues or questions you have related to teaching.

