TEACHING ASSISTANT GUIDELINES

Welcome to the role of Teaching Assistant (TA) for the School of Computing Science at Simon Fraser University. The following information and guidelines are for your reference.

TA Appointments – General
The School requires TAs for the majority of their course offerings each semester at the Burnaby, Surrey and Vancouver campuses and requirements are posted 8-10 weeks before the start of the next semester.

http://www.sfu.ca/computing/current-students/graduate-students/tssu-employment.html

You are hired as a Teaching Assistant as per the Teaching Support Staff Union Collective Agreement (TSSU), please visit the Human Resources page for access to the Agreement that outlines the requirements and benefits for its members. If you are a new Graduate student, this process will be explained to you in more detail once you arrive in Vancouver.

http://www.sfu.ca/human-resources/tssu.html

TA/TM Appointment Priority Ranking
Teaching assistants are assigned to courses based on the School’s Priority Ranking:

All appointments will be made as per the TSSU Collective Agreement (Articles XIII, F.3.a. (i through iv) and XII.F.4 (a through c)). Whenever the number of graduate students who have priority for appointments as defined in Article XIII of the Collective Agreement exceeds the number of TA and/or TM appointments available in a given semester, the following priority ranking may be taken into account when determining which applicant(s) should be offered appointments.

1. Financial needs of the student
2. TA preference
3. Instructor preference

If an assignment within a priority group requires selection between applicants, the graduate student without financial support from merit based scholarships or merit based fellowships during the semester of appointment will have priority for the appointment. For specific information please refer to the TSSU Collective Agreement.

TA appointments are completed by the Manager, Academic Programs (MAP), Janet Morton (cmptappl@sfu.ca) and the Graduate Director or his delegate.

Your TA Contract is effective from the first day of the semester until the final grade deadline (approximately 17 weeks) and you are expected to be available for the entire period. You must also be available for all scheduled labs (course dependent) at the time you apply. There may be some flexibility in the lab schedule and this is determined by the course instructor once all of the appointments have been finalized.

Please note that some scholarships or fellowships have restrictions limiting the amount of additional funding that a student can hold during the period of the award, please ensure that you review the Terms of Reference for any awards that you have received.
Administration

- **Any course conflicts, change requests or identified scheduling conflicts must be brought to the attention of the MAP immediately and prior to accepting an offer.** *
- **If the status of your TA application changes you MUST contact the MAP.**
- Computing Science Graduate students are invited, by email, to apply for teaching assistantships about 8-10 weeks before the beginning of the next semester. This same information is also posted under TSSU TA/TM Employment on our website.

http://www.sfu.ca/computing/current-students/graduate-students/tssu-employment.html

- You must review your funding plan (if any) with your Supervisor and/or Committee prior to submitting your application. Student’s supervisors are cc’d on all TA offers to ensure that they are aware of your activities for the semester.
- Graduate students apply online for TA appointments and must be **must be fully registered** for the semester they are applying for. Students indicate the number of base units desired, land have the option of listing ranked by course knowledge and campus preference. Students must review the minimum course requirements posted on the TA/TM application page as well as course outlines. All course outlines can be found at our Course Central website.

http://www.sfu.ca/computing/undergraduate/course-central.html

- Based on enrollment expectations the MAP and Chair assign applicants to courses according to the School’s priority ranking. When an applicant’s base unit request is not met by a single course, a second course may be assigned BUT there is NO guarantee that you will receive a full appointment in any given semester.
- Appointments are made for the Burnaby, Surrey and Vancouver campuses and there are some differences when working as a TA at the different campuses, specifically in regard to lab work and lab assignments.
- Appointment revisions are made throughout the appointment period and once completed copies of the contracts are provided to students. Please note that students no longer have to sign contracts before the appointment information is sent to payroll – we consider our electronic acceptance of the appointment as your “signature”. There may be contract updates during the first 2-3 weeks of the semester as enrollments stabilize and changes will be reflected in updated contracts.
- Course instructors are notified when an appointment is finalized and you are both responsible for making contact – if there are any concerns please notify the MAP immediately.

Timelines

TA/TMs and the course instructor are responsible for ensuring that the following timelines are met with regard to Time Use Guidelines (TUGS) and the Workload Review to ensure that the time assigned to each individual TA is adequate to complete the required work for the course.

TUGS must be completed by the instructor in consultation with the TA NO LATER than **the end of the first week of classes** - these are completed online and a copy is provided by the instructor to the TA.
WORKLOAD REVIEW – this is completed by the instructor in consultation with the TA NO LATER than the end of WEEK 5 of the semester. The forms are completed and returned to the department.

The Role of a successful TA

TAs play an integral and important part in providing teaching support for the School and although TA duties may vary with each appointment, there is an expectation that high-quality and timely work will be performed. An example of the work expected is:

• mark assignments, mid-terms and exams
• hold regular office hours and/or attend open labs/tutorials
• help supervise ALL mid-terms and the final exams
• assist the course instructor with preparation of assignments, tests and solutions

Training/Preparation

TA/TM Day: This instructional day is held at the beginning of each semester and we recommend that all NEW TAs as well as returning TAs.

International Teaching Assistants Program: This is a graduate seminar series specially designed for teaching assistants and graduate students who speak English as an additional language. The seminar helps students' academic communication and teaching skills. WE STRONGLY ENCOURAGE all students to take this Program during their first semester. There is no cost to students.

http://www.sfu.ca/continuing-studies/about/program-units/international-teaching-assistants-program/about-ita-program.html?utm_source=various&utm_medium=various&utm_campaign=ita

Working with the Course instructor

The course instructor is essentially your immediate supervisor for the semester which means that you will be working closely with him/her and building a relationship with them is important as it helps to ensure that you can both accomplish your work effectively and efficiently. If any problems or concerns arise between yourself and the instructor, please discuss this with him/her first. If you require further assistance please contact Janet Morton.

The Time Use Guidelines (TUGS) require that you and the instructor work together to set out the expectations for the semester. Be sure to clarify the type of communication required, how much marking is needed, if office hours are expected, etc. This will ensure that you both have a clear idea of expectations and roles for the semester. If there are workload concerns at any time during the semester please bring these to the course instructor’s and MAP’s attention.

Working with Students

The majority of your time will be spent working with students, face-to-face and by email. Students who come to you are looking for help which, as a TA, is your primary focus.
Please be responsive and timely in your dealings your students and if you have specific concerns or problems, it is your responsibility to follow-up with the course instructor as soon as possible.

- *The level of information/help you can provide students should be clarified with the course instructor.*
- *Questions regarding marks/grades should be referred to the course instructor.*

**Confidentiality**

During the semester you will have access to confidential information such as: student information, marks, marking keys for assignments, exams, etc. None of this information is to be shared with anyone.

- Keep student marks confidential; students may ONLY see their own marks.
- If you have access to marking keys and/or answers to assignments, mid-terms and exams:
  - do not make copies or share information
  - do not take these materials off campus
  - return all materials at the end of the semester
  - do not post answers to assignments without direction

**Course Materials**

You will meet and correspond with the course instructor throughout the semester so be sure to ask for software and text resources, reading materials, assignment and exam schedules so that you are fully prepared to support students in their learning.

If you need time to prepare for your role as a TA, talk to the course instructor to ensure that you are given time to prepare to meet the course expectations. This should be done during the preparation of the Time Use Guidelines (TUGS).

**Office Hours**

- Office hours may or may not be required for the course. This schedule is decided between yourself and course instructor and once set, any deviations from this must be approved by the instructor. You may also be asked to make up missed hours, particularly near assignment due dates, mid-terms and exams.
- It is your responsibility to be prepared for your office hours as you need to ensure that students are not only comfortable asking for assistance but that they know they are working with someone who “knows their stuff”.
- Treat the students with respect and in a manner that you would want to be treated in the same situation. Remember, they are working with this material for the first time so please be patient and understanding. It is your role to provide guidance, assistance and knowledge, but do not be afraid to say “no” if something makes you uncomfortable. In these situations, refer the student to, and/or consult with, the course instructor.
Tips to working smoothly with students:

- Write things down: Students often cannot deal with new information all at once. If you write some things down as you are talking, they can read it again later. Some concepts are easier to explain on paper, often with a picture or diagram.
- Do not spend all of your time with one student. If someone is monopolizing your time, tell them you need to deal with others before coming back to them. Ask them politely to wait.
- If you get the same question from several students, it might be more efficient to send an email with the response. Prior to emailing your students, bring the issue to the attention of the course instructor for clarification.
- Your office hours are most often held in offices with a whiteboard. This can be a very useful tool so please use it whenever possible.
- Do not give hints as to what will be on exams unless told to do so by the course instructor. Giving hints to individuals is unfair to the rest of the students.

Assignments, Marking and Exams

- Marking may be the biggest and most important part of your job as far as the students are concerned, and this activity satisfies two demands; ranking students and providing feedback on their work.
- Depending on the course, you may be asked to mark all of the assignments for a group of students, or a few assignments for the entire class.
- Every course and instructor has their own guidelines and expectations for the work that students submit. Talk to the course instructor to find out what is expected for each assignment, mid-term or exam that you are responsible for marking. The course instructor will provide guidance on this and most often will provide solutions and expectations.
- For each marking assignment you may want to mark a few assignments and then discuss them with the course instructor to ensure you are proceeding correctly. Review with the instructor that you are:
  o assigning proper marks;
  o interpreting his/her marking requirements properly; and that the marking scheme conforms to the course instructor’s expectations.
  o If further questions arise about how a particular question should be marked, it is the TAs responsibility to contact the course instructor for clarification and guidance. Failure to do this may result in dozens of papers needing to be re-marked.
- Do NOT rush through marking; do it right the first time. Rushing through marking will likely lead to problems that will take more time to deal with later. Remember that there can be correct answers that are not exactly like the answer key.

Tips to ensure that marking goes smoothly:

- If you take marks off, explain why by making a note on the paper that will enable you to remember why you gave the mark should the student come to inquire.
- If the answer does not match the answer key exactly, try to see whether they have the main points but have worded them differently.
- If the answer is incorrect, do not just give zero. Instead, evaluate the answer to determine how much of it was close to correct, what steps were correct, and how many part marks are deserved, if any.
- Do not be afraid to give good marks and good comments to good answers.
- Do not be afraid to give positive comments. People tend to do their best when encouraged.
- Do not worry about re-marking assignments or exam questions. If they deserve the marks, then re-mark, and make sure the course instructor corrects his/her grade information accordingly.
- There are often cases where questions are marked incorrectly due to hurrying, or not understanding what the student is trying to express. In re-marking cases, do watch out for attempts to cheat by changing incorrect answers, or by adding material. (see the section on cheating below).

**Marking Style and Procedure:**

- Show the mark given for each question and part-question out of the total possible
- Cross out unused space so that students cannot add to their answer after the exam or assignment is returned
- If students use the left-hand page of an exam booklet, circle the area used and initial it to show that it was seen and marked.
- Record the marks accurately
- Keep your own confidential record of the class marks
- Give the course instructor a copy each time a new assignment is marked
- Inform the course instructor of any changes to earlier marks

After the work is handed back to the students, you will probably get questions about the marks they received. These questions may range from "I don't understand what I did wrong here" to "I deserve more marks for this." After consultation with the instructor you can discuss what the students did wrong and why you gave them the mark you did.

- Different course instructors have different policies on changing marks. Some ask the TAs to re-evaluate marking while others prefer to do it themselves.
- If you are asked to reevaluate a student's work remember:
  - The number of marks an answer deserves is your decision, not the student's.
  - It is unfair to give marks back to one student and not others just because some complain more or louder than others. You can say “all students were marked this way, and though you may feel it’s harsh, it was evenly applied”.
  - You are assigning a mark based on the work they handed in, not their explanation of it after the fact.
  - It is okay to be wrong. If you gave less marks than the student deserved, don’t deny it, fix it.
  - If you get persistent complaints about marking from particular students, send them to the instructor.

**Academic Dishonesty**

Unfortunately incidents of Academic Dishonesty do occur. This is very serious, so please remember that being accused of academic dishonesty can have a devastating effect on a student. Regardless of your suspicions, the student may be innocent. Do not make hasty decisions or accusations. **If you suspect academic dishonesty has taken place refer this to the course instructor immediately;** you should not be dealing with this directly.
Tips for dealing with suspected Academic Dishonesty:

- Do not make any accusations – if you have suspicions take them to the Course instructor
- Do not return an assignment or exam to the student(s) – give them to the course instructor
- Get the names of any witnesses and ask them to make a written record of what they heard and saw if this is something brought to your attention by another student
- Keep a written record for yourself of everything that happened prior to referring this to the course instructor

Some examples of academic dishonesty are:

- A student may copy another’s assignment
- A student may take notes or other material into a closed-book exam
- A student may copy answers from another student during an exam
- A student may change the answers on a returned assignment or exam, then come back to the marker for reassessment