

Department of Political Science Teaching Assistant Guidelines

July 2019

Students on GSAS Teaching Fellowship are assigned Teaching Assistant (TA) positions for courses offered by the Department of Political Science and certain courses offered by the Barnard College Department of Political Science. The department employs TA's for a variety of reasons in addition to providing fellowship assistance: first, to give Ph.D. candidates teaching experience and an opportunity to learn more about how to teach from experienced teachers; second, to help students to get more from their courses; and, finally, to ease the burdens of faculty instructors.

Selection of Teaching Assistants

Students on multi-year GSAS fellowships should expect to TA six semesters during a total of eight semesters of fellowship support in the second through fifth years of study. GSAS also offers Teaching Fellowships to political science students in the sixth year of study. Students in the seventh year of study are eligible to receive Teaching Fellowships upon approval by GSAS should undergraduate enrollment in department courses require additional resources after all other eligible students have been assigned Teaching Assistant positions. The department makes its best effort to ensure a fair distribution of workloads averaged over the course of the student's service as a TA.

The department chair's office, through the Deputy Chair and the Director of Academic Administration and Finance, arranges TA course assignments. While potential TA's are invited to express a preference for a particular course or instructor, and instructors may similarly request assignment of particular students to their courses, the department reserves the right to make assignments as necessary to optimize the TA roster for the department as a whole.

Faculty and TA's should discuss any concerns about assignments with the Deputy Chair, who will take appropriate action to resolve them.

Responsibilities of Teaching Assistants

TA's are foremost assistants in instruction. Depending on what is appropriate for a particular class, they are expected to lead discussion sections, hold office hours, attend all the lectures for the class, and participate in the grading for the course. If the course structure allows for it, TA's should be offered an opportunity to give one or two lectures in the course in order to gain teaching experience. Lecturing is voluntary, not obligatory. The instructor should attend TA lectures and offer constructive comments. TA's may also be expected to undertake other tasks that are essential for the successful conduct of the course—for example, checking to make certain that the assigned reading is on reserve, or photocopying material for a

reading packet. Finally, by the end of the term, TA's will have gained a perspective on the content and conduct of the course different from that of both the students and the instructor. TA's are therefore in a position to provide instructors with useful suggestions for improving the format, requirements, readings, and lectures of the course, and they are expected to do so.

The workload for a TA typically requires 10-15 hours per week throughout the semester and should not exceed 20 hours in any given week. TA's are not expected to provide research assistance, personal assistance, or other assistance to the instructor that is not related to the course.

For their part, to ensure the most effective use of their assistants as well as facilitate the development of their TA's as teachers, the faculty should take an active interest in what their TA's are doing in their discussion sections, provide them with advice on teaching, instruct them on grading standards and procedures, and participate in grading with them. As appropriate, faculty members should involve their TA's in the preparation of the course syllabus and exams. When faculty members order desk copies of course books for themselves, they should also order desk copies for their TA's. Faculty instructors should also help TA's acquire copies of the required readings for the course as needed. TA's should be treated with the dignity appropriate for a colleague in instruction.

Discussion Sections

Faculty and TA's should meet before the start of classes to discuss what TA's should and should not do in their discussion sections; e.g., discuss the assigned readings, clarify the ideas of the instructor, take students beyond the content of the class with points of their own. Faculty members will differ in the goals they want their discussion sections to achieve, but all are expected to provide clear guidance about what those goals are and the relative priority the TA is to assign to those goals.

It is equally important for the faculty to make these goals and priorities clear to their classes and to tell the students what proportion of their grade depends upon their performance in the discussion section. TA's are to be introduced to the class by a faculty instructor, and students should be told what they can expect to gain from attendance.

Serving as a TA should help students learn how to teach, and faculty should devote time and attention to the training of TA's. At the beginning of the term, they should discuss general issues and dilemmas (e.g., how much to structure discussions, how much to let them roam; what to do if the students are not doing the reading, not talking, talking too much, etc.), and the faculty should discuss with their TA's how their teaching is going throughout the term.

Grading

Advanced Ph.D. students may grade the narrative work of SIPA students and students in the department's freestanding M.A. program.

Ph.D. students can grade other Ph.D. students' problem sets, homework, and exams in quantitative courses, but are prohibited from grading other Ph.D. students' narrative work such as term papers, seminar papers, in-class essays, etc.

If graduate students attend discussion sections, the faculty instructor may consult with the TA about the students' performance in section for the purpose of arriving at a final grade. (Graduate students may not be required to attend discussion sections in all courses.)

Instructors are not to ask TA's to take full responsibility for grading work submitted by undergraduate students. Although a variety of mechanisms are possible to accomplish the task, faculty should grade enough of the undergraduate papers and exams (one part of each student's exam, for example) to provide guidelines for the TA's grading practices or should review the grades assigned by the TA.

Instructors should involve TA's in setting paper and examination topics if appropriate, and should consult with TA's about the grading standards that will be applied.

Instructors should make clear to the class the extent of the TA's responsibilities for grading so that students know with whom they should initiate discussions about their performance. Although final responsibility for all grades rests with the faculty instructor, as a matter of the TA's professional dignity, students should normally take up grading disputes with the TA before going to the instructor.

Training, Guidance, and Evaluation of Teaching Assistants

A number of resources are available to support TA training. The department holds one or two TA Workshops each semester for new and continuing TA's. The university's [Center for Teaching and Learning](https://ctl.columbia.edu/) (https://ctl.columbia.edu/). The CTL offers one-on-one consultations, teaching clinics, and a series of workshops throughout each semester. Students should discuss training needs with the Deputy Chair and/or the CTL staff.

The Graduate School offers a number of training experiences and resources. Details are available on the [GSAS website](https://gsas.columbia.edu/student-guide/teaching): https://gsas.columbia.edu/student-guide/teaching

Each TA should have his or her teaching constructively critiqued by a member of the faculty. The TA can ask either the course instructor or (through the Deputy Chair) another faculty member to do this. In addition, the instructor teaching the course

should provide the TA with guidance before, and constructive criticism after, the TA delivers one or more lectures in class.

TA's are evaluated through the Courseworks interface, and TA's are encouraged to review their evaluations. Evaluations are generally available to review within a few weeks of the end of the term.

Logistical Matters

As much as possible, TA's should make themselves available to instructors during the summer and winter holidays to assist in preparing for the following semester's courses. Please note that there may be summer deadlines for ordering material through the following services.

Course Packets. Course packets can be ordered through Village Copier on 112th Street and Amsterdam Ave., 212 666-4777.

Library Reserves. See the following link for information regarding reserved library material:

<http://library.columbia.edu/reserves.html>

Course Books. Faculty and Teaching Assistants may obtain free desk copies directly through publishers' websites. Publishers typically require requests for desk copies on department letterhead, which can be obtained from [Betty Howe](#). Course books can be ordered through the Columbia Bookstore:

<https://www.facultyenlight.com/node/add/adoption-request>

or

Book Culture bookstore on 112th Street between Amsterdam and Broadway:

<http://coursebooks.bookculture.com/>

CourseWorks. Faculty members may authorize TA's to modify sections of CourseWorks sites. Support for functions TA's may be asked to perform in CourseWorks is available here:

<https://courseworks2.columbia.edu/courses/58>

Photocopying. Photocopies for classroom use can be made on the department's photocopier. Please see Betty Howe for assistance. Copy jobs that will take more than ten minutes to complete (100 pages or more of copying) should be performed in the Printing Services copy shop in the Journalism Building. Betty Howe can provide payment details for such jobs.

Office Hours. The department schedules hours for TA's in shared offices on the seventh floor of the International Affairs Building. To reserve a room for office hours, TA's should see or write to Betty Howe, with their preferred schedules.

Section Rooms. The Maria Lema, the department's Academic Affairs Coordinator, arranges rooms for sections and will communicate with TA's about section classrooms after they are assigned to courses.