Working with TAs

Recommendations:

Clarify TA Roles and Responsibilities.

Teaching assistants (TAs) at Caltech may serve a variety of roles, ranging from writing & grading problem sets to delivering lectures to setting up and maintaining lab equipment. Due to this variability, it is important to set and communicate your expectations for your TAs before the course begins. In the TA Handbook, we recommend that TAs ask their instructors the following questions to help clarify their responsibilities:

1. Will there be regular TA-professor meetings?

> Clear, regular communication is critical for a successful working relationship with your TAs, whether this occurs through in-person meetings or over asynchronous platforms. Make sure that TAs know what you expect at these meetings -- should they be prepared to discuss the previous week, outline their lesson plans for the upcoming week, or simply to check in with you about any concerns or questions they may have? Additionally, you can use regular meeting time to discuss your approach to teaching, receive feedback, and work with your TAs on their own pedagogical goals (developing a guest lecture, learning how to write effective exam questions, etc.).

2. Who will be responsible for writing problem sets and exams? For grading them?

> If TAs are responsible for writing problem sets and/or exams, ensure that they have access to lecture/reading/lab material with sufficient lead time for them to generate and develop questions based on that material. If TAs are responsible for grading, consider whether they will be using a common rubric/grading scheme you create or if you will require them to develop their own.

3. Are the TAs expected to help prepare lecture or lecture notes? To make lecture notes available to the class?

4. Are the TAs expected to attend lecture? To take detailed lecture notes?

5. Will the TAs be asked to deliver any lectures? If not, will they be allowed to teach a lecture if they wish to?

> Many graduate students are interested in gaining experience with teaching, particularly if they are interested in applying for careers in academia. If feasible, consider offering your TAs the opportunity and support to lead a lecture session if they are interested.

6. Are the TAs expected to hold office hours? How often?

7. In courses with multiple TAs, how will the TA duties be divided?

> Will there be a "Head TA" that is designated with additional authority/responsibility? Will TAs divide up submissions and grade some of each problem set/assignment, or alternate who is responsible for doing all of the grading that week?

8. Will there be any review sessions out-of-class? Who will prepare and facilitate them?

9. Who will review requests for extensions on problem sets and exams? Are the TAs allowed to grant extensions? If so, with or without notifying the professor?

10. What is the procedure for making changes in grades/points if a mistake has been made on problem sets? Exams?

11. Are the TAs expected or allowed to prepare supplementary course materials for students?

12. Who will talk to students wishing to add or drop the course, and who will sign the add/drop card?

13. In courses with multiple class meeting times, who will review student requests to switch sections?

> In addition, it is helpful to clarify how you'd like your TAs to address you, as students come from a range of educational and cultural backgrounds. Some students come from backgrounds where it was common and expected to address professors by their first name, others come from contexts where the appropriate forms of address would be Professor LastName or Dr. LastName. Specifying your preference gets everyone on the same page.

Support Your TAs on a personal level.

In addition to outlining your expectations for your TAs before the term begins, it is important to consider what you will provide for your TAs in order to support them throughout the course.

1. Get to know your TAs as individuals.

> Learn about your TAs' previous experiences with teaching, their goals for teaching in this course, their concerns for the TA role, etc. **What can you do to help them to achieve their goals and/or alleviate their concerns?** If they are interested in a future faculty career, consider offering them the opportunity (and the support) to lead a lecture or design lab activities. If they have had poor previous experiences with grading, explore how that can be avoided/mitigated with this class (e.g., setting reasonable deadlines for grading to be completed, going over rubrics together to ensure they are clear and comprehensive, etc.).

2. Support your TAs as valued members of the instructional team with their own subject expertise.

> Introduce your TAs to the students, highlighting their expertise and the specific role(s) they hold in the course. You might invite your TAs to briefly introduce themselves to students during one of your first lectures, and/or via photographs, bios, welcome videos, introductions on an online discussion board, etc.

> As much as possible, maintain a united front with TAs in public, while being open to disagreements in private. Don't override TA decisions (e.g. decisions on grading or extensions) without speaking with the TA first.

3. Regularly discuss how teaching is going during the term.

> Create time and opportunities for the teaching team (instructor(s) + TAs) to build effective working relationships with each other, such as through regular meetings and/or asynchronous

communication (through email/Teams/Discord, etc.). Invite input from TAs about their concerns and brainstorm how to troubleshoot challenges that might arise. Dedicate time for questions on content, course structure, class activities, assignments, etc.   If you are not having regular synchronous meetings, create a process to individually check in with every TA about how their teaching is going, what support they need, and about any challenges they are facing.

4. Explain the "why" or the learning objectives of the activities you ask TAs to facilitate (e.g., discussion of readings, lectures, critique of peers' work, etc.)

Be transparent with your TAs about the teaching methods you have chosen and the goals of each activity. This both helps guide your TAs in how to lead these activities to help students reach those learning objectives, and also provides a window for TAs on how to develop their own teaching practices.

5. Model inclusive language and behavior.

For instance, avoid generalizations that may not include all members (e.g., assuming they all own smartphones, celebrate certain holidays, have similar work schedules, share similar internet access, etc.).

6. At the end of the term, collect feedback from TAs about their experience, focusing on strengths and recommendations about course structure, their instructional role, and instructional team dynamics (both between Instructor(s)-TA(s) and between TAs).

Use this information to reflect and revise for future iterations of the course. What went well? What can be improved? Were your TAs able to meet their teaching goals? Do they have advice or resources they can pass on to future TAs?

Finally, consider your broader role as a mentor for your TAs' development as teachers.

1. Facilitate ongoing training for TAs.

Welcome feedback on and provide support for teaching methods, and encourage reflection on teaching successes and challenges. This can include inviting comments and discussion on the syllabus ahead of the start of the term (or in review at the end of the term), having TAs visit each other's recitations to learn from each other, and periodically revisiting the teaching goals they set at the beginning of the term.

2. Invest in formal TA development and recognition.

Facilitate CTLO connections for TA teaching consultations and trainings (e.g. CTLO's teaching workshops) and nominate excellent TAs for recognition through teaching awards.

3. Develop a structure for experienced TAs to mentor peers who are new(er) to teaching.

Establish clear guidelines about the nature and scope of the mentoring relationship.