

Short Guide to Teaching with TAs

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Role of TAs at UCLA

Teaching Assistants (TAs) play a critical role in teaching at UCLA by helping facilitate student learning through tasks such as leading small group discussions, overseeing lab experiments, grading assignments, and providing individual student support during office hours.

TAs at UCLA are represented by UAW 4811, a union that represents Academic Student Employees, Student Researchers, Postdocs, and Academic Researchers across the University of California. Typically, TAs are employed either at 25% or 50% of full time. TAs appointed at 25% time are expected to work 10 hours/week, not to exceed 110 hours/quarter; TAs appointed at 50% time are expected to work 20 hours/week, not to exceed 220 hours/quarter.

TAs are not required to work until instruction officially begins. Therefore, while instructors may choose to reach out to TAs before the beginning of term to establish communication, they should note that TAs are not contracted to do any labor before the start of the quarter (or during winter, spring, and summer breaks). Because many instructors—including graduate students—come from institutions without TAs or where TAs play a different role than they do at UCLA, defining expectations for all members of the instructional team is important to ensure an organized and fair workflow.

Aligning Lectures with TA Sections

The purpose of TA sections can vary widely from course to course and discipline to discipline. For example, sections may provide opportunities for students to discuss material, practice applying analytical or problem solving skills, conduct labs, workshop creative projects, or a combination of these (or other) activities. Clarifying the alignment between lecture and section ensures an integrated learning experience for students and increases the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching teams.

To achieve alignment, reflect on the objectives of the course, week, and/or lesson and articulate how activities students will participate in during lecture and section work in tandem to help students achieve the desired goal. Use the TLC's [Aligning Lectures with TA Sections](#) reflection guide to support this planning process.

Benefits of Team Building with TAs

Instructors gain many benefits from investing in their working relationships with TAs. These include:

Creating a more equitable student learning experience

In large classes with more than one TA assigned, having regular meetings as an instructional team to plan for discussion sections or labs and to standardize grading of assignments and exams helps ensure that undergraduates assigned to different TAs receive the same support and consideration they need to succeed in the course. Regular meetings with TAs also help instructors stay informed about how students are doing and any issues in the course.

Helping the course run smoothly

Establishing communication norms and contingency plans can help the instructional team know what to do in the event of disruptions due to illness, emergencies, or other unforeseen events.

Mentoring the next generation of instructors in the discipline

By integrating TAs into their planning process and taking an interest in the teaching that TAs do in the course, instructors of record have a hand in shaping future educators in their field.

Strategies to Foster Effective Instructional Teams

To foster effective instructional teams, it helps to focus on three areas: developing shared expectations across roles; establishing communication norms; and providing mentorship.

Developing shared expectations across roles

The [Academic Apprentice Personnel Manual](#) details the responsibilities of instructors of record and TAs:

- Instructors of record hold final responsibility for course content, work assignments, performance evaluations, and grading in their course
- TAs aid in all aspects of instruction, including tutoring, grading, and advising, as well as teaching discussion sections, laboratory sections, and fieldwork

In addition to these responsibilities—which instructors and TAs can discuss as they relate to their specific course contexts—instructors may consider doing the following:

- Model leadership and provide consistent guidance and mentorship to TAs
- Grant TAs access to any course materials (i.e. syllabi, textbooks, course website, MyUCLA gradebook) they require in a timely manner

- Coordinate instruction across sections led by different TAs to ensure alignment with course goals and expectations as well as student learning needs

Establishing communication norms

Plan to reach out to TAs before the first day of class. This initial email might include the syllabus as well as plans for meeting as a team and communicating throughout the quarter. In addition, organize grade norming sessions and develop shared rubrics used by the teaching team.

As part of communication expectations, instructors may ask TAs to:

- Maintain consistent communication with students, the instructor of record, and other members of the teaching team for the course
- Respond promptly to all course-related emails
- Attend weekly meetings and grade norming sessions

Providing mentorship opportunities for TAs

During the quarter, instructors can create room for TAs to share their subject matter expertise by inviting them to co-create components of the curriculum or guest lecture, provided that workload hours permit. They can also take part in the teaching development of TAs by:

- Observing a TA's discussion or lab section, both to serve as an effective professional reference for any teaching jobs, and to help TAs start to develop into reflective practitioners by providing them constructive feedback on their teaching
- Allowing TAs insight into the course design and lesson planning process
- Asking for feedback on teaching or course materials in order to improve the learning experience for students

Takeaways

Before the start of the quarter, instructors working with TAs can set themselves up for effective team instruction by:

1. Aligning lecture and TA sections toward shared learning objectives
2. Reflecting on ways to model effective teaching, provide mentorship, and bring TA expertise into the course
3. Considering the responsibilities of each person on the instructional team and planning to make these expectations explicit
4. Reaching out to TAs before the first day of class to establish contact and set up an initial meeting, and to develop shared expectations and norms for communicating as a team

It often helps to put shared expectations in writing. Consider filling out a teaching mentorship plan together with TAs. Feel free to use this template developed by the TLC: [Shared Expectations for Teaching Teams](#).

For advice on how to adapt instruction if you are teaching more students and/or teaching with a smaller instructional team, check out this [reflection guide](#) from CEILS. While developed for life and physical science instructors, much of the advice is relevant for instructors in any field.

Instructor Consultations

The UCLA [Teaching and Learning Center \(TLC\)](#) and other campus teaching support units are available for individual consultations to help you adapt the above strategies to your course or explore additional approaches for assessing student learning.

Request a [TLC Consultation](#) or email the Graduate Student & Postdoctoral Scholar Engagement (GSPSE) unit of the TLC directly at gspse@teaching.ucla.edu. All TLC consultations are confidential and non-evaluative. The GSPSE team consults with Instructors of Record, TAs, and teaching teams.