HANDBOOK FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN COMPUTER SCIENCE
(FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS)

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1. Department Contacts for Teaching Assistants 2
2. Responsibilities as a Teaching Assistant 2
3. Renewal of TA Appointment 3
4. Teaching Excellence Award (TEX) 4
5. Absence Guidelines 4
6. TA Office Hours 5
7. Grievance 5
8. Dos and Don'ts 5

1. Department Contacts for Teaching Assistants

- Nicole Lewis, **Graduate Student Services Specialist**, nlewis1@iastate.edu. *First point of contact for all questions related to teaching assistantship.*
- Prof. Samik Basu, **Director of Graduate Education** (DOGE), sbasu@iastate.edu
- Prof. Sam Xin, **Chair of the department**, cxin@iastate.edu

2. Responsibilities as a Teaching Assistant

A teaching assistant (TA) works with one or more instructors—either faculty members or student instructors—and supports a variety of instructional activities. The instructor(s) serve as the TA's supervisor and are responsible for directing, overseeing, and evaluating the TA's work.

Typical TA-duties include the following

1. **Grading assignments (homework, exams, projects, etc.).** The supervisor is responsible for providing solution keys and grading guidelines. TAs are expected to grade fairly and consistently, and to complete all grading tasks in a timely manner as instructed—considering both their own coursework and the time required to grade each submission. In some courses, grading is done collaboratively, which may require meetings outside regular hours, including evenings or weekends. The supervisor is responsible for scheduling these group-grading sessions.
2. **Holding office hours and answering student questions.** During office hours, TAs are expected to answer questions related to lecture topics and assignments and to be well-prepared on all relevant course materials. TAs must remain in their assigned office for the full duration of their office hours. If a TA must leave unexpectedly, they must inform the supervisor immediately, and a replacement must be arranged. TAs may also be assigned to respond to student questions via email or through online platforms such as Blackboard or Piazza. The supervisor will provide initial guidance on how these systems will be used in the course.
3. **Proctoring exams.** TAs assist the supervisor in proctoring exams. If an exam conflicts with the TA's own class or exam, the TA will be excused; however, the TA must inform the supervisor of such conflicts in advance.
4. **Holding recitation sessions.** Some courses include recitation sessions in which TAs present material selected and prepared by the supervisor. Recitations must not introduce topics that have not been covered in lecture.
5. **Preparing and holding labs.** Courses with designated lab sessions require TAs to assist students with lab assignments. TAs are expected to be fully prepared for these sessions, including understanding the lab setup and associated tools or systems.

Most courses will include the first three TA duties, while the remaining responsibilities may vary depending on the specific needs of the course and the TA's expertise with the material.

The list above is not exhaustive; supervisors may assign additional instructional duties as needed. Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that all assigned tasks can be reasonably completed within the TA's allotted appointment hours.

Academic Misconduct. ISU policies on academic misconduct: https://studentconduct.dso.iastate.edu/

The TAs are responsible for helping the supervisor to prevent and detect academic misconduct (cheating) and to foster academic integrity. The supervisor will clearly state what constitutes academic misconduct in the course. Most syllabi have a statement similar to the following:

> Academic misconduct: Academic Misconduct in any form is in violation of ISU *Student Disciplinary Regulations* and will not be tolerated. This includes but is not limited to: copying or sharing answers on tests or assignments, plagiarism, submitting a lab report for an experiment not performed or using data that is manufactured or collected by another person, entering student response data for another student or having another student enter student response data for you, using an inappropriate calculator during a quiz or exam, and having someone else do your academic work. Depending on the act, a student could receive an F grade on the test/assignment, F grade for the course, and could be suspended or expelled from the University. See the Conduct Code at https://studentconduct.dso.iastate.edu/ for more details and a full explanation of the ISU Academic Misconduct policies.

If a TA discovers or suspects a student of cheating: it must be reported to the instructor immediately! It is NOT the TA's responsibility to determine punishment or to judge a student's actions; however, it IS the TA's responsibility to inform instructor.

Be Prepared. The effectiveness of a teaching assistant depends largely on two factors: the quality of support they provide to students during office hours, and how well they assist the supervisor with instructional tasks such as grading. Students admitted to the computer science graduate program are generally expected to have a solid foundational understanding of core undergraduate topics—such as data structures, algorithms, and programming languages. However, it is understood that TAs may need time to review or refresh certain concepts before they can confidently assist others.

To ensure strong performance, TAs are strongly encouraged to read and thoroughly understand the course materials *before* they are presented in class. When possible, attending lectures is also recommended, as it helps TAs stay aligned with the instructor's presentation of concepts, examples, and expectations. Proactive preparation enables TAs to better support students, answer questions accurately, and contribute more effectively to the overall instructional goals of the course.

TAs should inform and discuss the matter with their faculty supervisor if they consistently exceed their assigned weekly hours in order to complete their allocated tasks.

3. Renewal of TA Appointment

Decisions concerning continuing TA appointments are made by the Department Chair, in consultation with the DOGE, and with input from faculty. Prerequisites for continuing:

- **Satisfactory Academic Progress:** the DOGE/Graduate Student Services Specialist certifies it.

- **Satisfactory performance of assigned TA responsibilities:** This is determined based one or more of the following written evaluations from TA supervisors, student evaluation, and/or other appropriate forms of input.

- **English proficiency:** Satisfy the EFT requirement the first semester of TA. The Iowa Board of Regent's Policy 3.21 – English Language Proficiency (Oral Communication Competence) mandates that international teaching assistants demonstrate the ability to communicate appropriate in the language of instruction. At Iowa State, compliance is upheld through the EFT requirement.

- **Application for (renewal of) TA appointment:** Application must be completed before the departmental deadline for applications for renewal of TA appointments ultimately based on department needs.

4. Teaching Excellence Award (TEX)

The purpose of the TEX award is to recognize and encourage outstanding achievement by graduate students in teaching. Candidates for this award must satisfy the eligibility requirements specified by the graduate college (http://www.grad-college.iastate.edu/academics/awards/tex/) and must be nominated by his/her faculty supervisor with whom he/she has worked as a teaching assistant. The nominations are reviewed and evaluated by the Computer Science graduate committee. The award includes letters, certificate of appreciation, and honor cord (to be worn at the time of graduation).

5. Absence Guidelines

When a TA accepts a position, they are obligated to be present for the entire duration of their assigned course session—except during official university holidays—and must remain available until all grades have been completed and submitted. If a TA is unable to fulfill their duties due to an emergency (e.g., serious illness), they must notify both the supervisor and the graduate student services specialist/DOGE immediately so that appropriate coverage can be arranged.

If a TA needs to leave Ames on a weekday for any non-emergency reason (e.g., personal travel, professional conferences), they must consult the graduate student services specialist and their supervisor **before** making any travel plans. In such cases, the TA must meet with a Graduate Student Services Specialist and receive approval prior to leaving.

6. TA Office Hours

TAs should discuss with their respective faculty supervisors to identify weekly office hour slots. The number of office hours and the length of each office hour vary with the courses. TAs are not expected to set up office hours that do not allow them to attend their own registered courses. TAs are expected to first set up office hours before setting up time for any other meetings (including research meetings with their thesis supervisors).

TAs are expected to inform Nicole Lewis their office hours before the start of classes so that appropriate office locations can be allocated.

7. Grievance

If a TA has any concern with his/her TA-assignment involving supervisor, other TAs and students, exceptions to TA contracts, etc., then the TA must contact Nicole Lewis, graduate student services specialist. Typically, the DOGE (if he/she is not part of the TA-concern) and/or the department chair are informed as well to resolve the concerns.

8. Dos and Don'ts

TAs are expected to check Iowa State email regularly, respond to emails regularly.

All email communication regarding TA work must be through your Iowa State email.

Before the first day of your TA assignment

- Once you are informed about your TA assignment, contact your supervisor to learn about the topics that will be covered in the course. In most cases, the course will have course-pages used in the previous semesters, which will include lecture materials, assignments, etc.
- Find out (from your supervisor) whether there are any TA orientations for the course. Typically, the department will hold an orientation session a week before the classes start.
- Setup an appointment with your supervisor to meet in the first week of your assignment to discuss specifics of TA duties, office hours, etc.
- Visit classes.iastate.edu to check the class time
- Start talking to other TAs from the same course. It is likely you will have someone who has worked as TA for the same course before, and you will be able to learn a lot about the scope of the TA work from your colleagues.

First week of your TA assignment

- TA assignment starts a week before the classes start. On the first day of the week, you may need to come to the department to attend departmental TA orientation

- You should meet with your supervisor in the first week of your assignment

Office hours

- **Be prepared and punctual** (if you need to leave for a brief moment leave a note at your office desk/door)
- Be polite, patient and respectful
- Encourage students to attend your office hours
- If you cannot answer a question or if you are not happy with the answer you have for a question during the office hours (there is nothing wrong with not knowing everything), follow up. Ask your fellow TAs, discuss with your supervisor and get back to the student with the question.

Evaluating assignments

- **Be consistent and fair**. It is often useful to grade the same question in all student submission in one pass to avoid inconsistency. Follow the guidelines provided by your supervisor. Do not hesitate to ask questions about grading (e.g., note the exceptions to the guidelines)
- **Student grades are confidential** and you must not discuss grades with anyone other than the student and the supervisor.
- **Keep supervisor in the loop** and inform him/her when you start grading and if you are expecting delays (due to longer than expected grading time per student-submission)
- Discuss with your supervisor how you should look for **academic dishonesty** (in some course, the supervisor will ask you to use software tools to detect possible plagiarism in programming assignments)

Proctoring exams

- Be prepared to answer queries regarding exam questions. That would mean you must review the exam questions and discuss with your supervisor about the solutions before the actual exam
- You must not provide the solutions to the exam questions during the exam. Clarifying what is asked in the question does not amount to presenting the solution
- Walk around the exam room so that all students get the opportunity to ask you questions if they want to.
- Do not tolerate academic dishonesty and report to your supervisor immediately.

Professional TA Behavior

Teaching assistants are expected to uphold the highest standards of professionalism when working with students, instructors, and staff. Challenging interactions are a normal part of instructional work, and the way a TA responds can greatly influence the learning environment. The following guidelines outline expectations for professional conduct:

- **Stay calm.**
  Maintaining composure helps de-escalate tense situations and allows for productive communication.

- **Be patient.**
  Students may approach with confusion, frustration, or strong emotions. Patience helps ensure discussions remain respectful and focused.
- **Listen carefully to student concerns.**
  Give students the opportunity to fully explain their issue—whether related to grading, deadlines, or course content.
  – Be open to dialogue and work toward a resolution within course policies.
  – **Do not** regrade any assignment without explicit approval from your supervisor.
  – **Do not** accept late work without prior authorization from your supervisor.
- **Use constructive and neutral language.**
  Prefer **"I" statements** over "you" statements to avoid sounding accusatory.
  Example: "I don't think I received that email" instead of "You never sent it."
- **Maintain appropriate boundaries with students.**
  TAs must avoid any form of inappropriate contact. Personal relationships or interactions that may appear unprofessional or compromise the TA–student boundary are strictly prohibited.
- **Avoid conflicts of interest.**
  TAs must not engage in situations that could bias their judgment or give the appearance of favoritism (e.g., grading work of close friends, tutoring students in the same course for pay, or entering into personal relationships with students). Any potential conflict must be disclosed to the supervisor immediately so reassignment or additional oversight can be arranged.
- **Seek help when necessary.**
  If a student's behavior becomes offensive, threatening, or makes you uncomfortable, report the incident promptly to your supervisor and the graduate student services specialist. Do not attempt to manage such situations on your own.

By demonstrating professionalism, respecting boundaries, and adhering to course policies, TAs contribute to a positive and supportive learning environment and uphold the integrity of the instructional mission.