Guidelines for TAs and TFs

Department of Music, University of Pittsburgh

Congratulations on your appointment as a TA/TF!

Teaching opportunities are a critical component of the graduate student experience and operations of the music department and university. Teaching Assistants (TAs) and Teaching Fellows (TFs) are graduate student employees of the university who are charged with a significant and important portion of the undergraduate curriculum at Pitt. TA/TFs help Instructors of Record manage large classrooms, provide crucial discussion opportunities for undergraduates, and serve as a conduit between professors and their students. These appointments also help facilitate a path toward the degree for graduate students by providing unparalleled teaching experience to prepare you for future employment in your field. You should take your TA/TF appointment seriously as employment you have now; as a professional obligation toward undergraduate education; and as training for your future career.

With bargaining for the first contract under the newly established Pitt Graduate Student Union ongoing, please be aware that the terms and conditions of your work as a TA/TF may change once the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) is signed. We encourage you to stay informed about the bargaining process by consulting the Graduate Student Union website (https://www.pittgradunion.org/) and the Provost's website (https://www.provost.pitt.edu/teaching-assistants-teaching-fellows-and-graduate-student-assistants). We also encourage you to maintain an open dialogue with your Instructor of Record throughout the process to ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of any changes that may affect your work.

This document is designed to respond to the broader question, "How can I best help the courses for which I've been assigned as a TA/TF?" It aims to give both new and experienced TA/TFs a clear sense of general expectations prior to beginning your appointment. It has been prepared with input from full-time faculty who regularly supervise and mentor TA/TFs: Dr. Jay Arms, Dr. Rika Asai, Dr. Aaron Myers-Brooks, Dr. Marcelle Pierson, Dr. Susan Rice, Dr. Yoko Suzuki, and Prof. Roger Zahab.

TA/TF assignments cover a wide breadth of subjects and involve a variety of responsibilities, which means that you'll need to communicate with the Instructor of Record of each of your appointments regularly to learn the specifics of that class and ensure you are meeting the expectations and responsibilities of the position. Please ask questions if you are uncertain about your responsibilities.

As a TA/TF, you become part of a teaching team, responsible to other team members as well as your students. The Instructor of Record is the primary instructor of the class. They are ultimately responsible for designing the course, delivering material, assessing students, and leading the teaching team. As a TA/TF you perform duties outlined by the Instructor of Record. Every class is different, and different Instructors of Record will differ in their styles and expectations. You'll need to be dynamic and flexible as you move to different TA/TF positions over your graduate career.

General:

A TA/TF position requires professionalism on your part that comes with practice and experience with university education. Here are some general guidelines to consider when stepping into any TA/TF position:

- Make sure you understand the learning objectives of the course so you can help further them. Whether you're not very familiar with the course materials you've been assigned to teach and are learning just ahead of your students or have well-developed ideas about how you'd like to teach a similar course, having a clear sense of the *Instructor of Record's* learning objectives will help you streamline your work and work more effectively as part of the teaching team.
- Be sure you have access to and are familiar with the course syllabus and required materials (such as textbooks) so that if students have questions, you can provide informed answers that conform to class policies and expectations.
- Find out how many hours per week you are responsible for working and have a conversation with your Instructor of Record about it. Because of the nature of the academic year, there will undoubtedly be lulls and bursts of activity (often coinciding with your own work as a graduate student) so planning and organization is key. Expect to work more than your per/week allotment some weeks, and less than the allotment in other weeks.
- Find out if there's a dedicated TA meeting for your class. Sometimes this will be frequent, short conversations after a lecture, other times there will be a dedicated hour once per week for the teaching team to gather, coordinate, and discuss the course. Make sure you are available, present, and engaged for all meetings.
- Keep track of your weekly working hours in a spreadsheet, noting the time spent and the activity (e.g., 2 x 50 mins. in lecture, 2 hours grading, 1 hour recitation prep, etc.) This will help you understand how you're spending your working hours and produce data to address any issues that arise with your workload. It is common for new TAs to spend too much time prepping or grading without realizing it, for example. It's a good idea to show your log to your Instructor of Record to receive feedback and make sure you're using your time effectively.
- If you find you are consistently working too many hours relative to your assignment, the first step is to bring up the issue to the Instructor of Record as soon as you're aware of it. If you cannot come to a solution, you may reach out to the DGS who can mediate and help find alternative solutions.
- As a TA/TF, you should be aware of the situations in which you're a "responsible employee" (formerly "mandatory reporter"). If, after having taken the module in the DSAS New TA Orientation, you would like more information, please see: https://www.wellbeing.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix/how-make-report/responsible-employee-program-and-reporting. If you have further questions, please reach out to the Title IX office at: titleixcoordinator@pitt.edu
- Think about what you'd like your students to call you—"professor" is a title that undergraduates frequently use to refer to anyone who teaches them, but as a TA/TF, it's not appropriate for you to ask students to use this title for yourself, since this is a specific position title at Pitt. A common practice for TAs is simply for students to use your first name. If you prefer a level of formality, you can use Mr/Ms/Mx/Dr, as appropriate.
- Discuss communication norms with your Instructor of Record. Let your Instructor of Record know how to get in touch with you most effectively and be responsive when they reach out. Because we are conducting Pitt business, University email is the preferred mode, but some instructors are ok with texts while other instructors don't like receiving work texts. Be certain to check your Pitt email frequently for University and Music department communications.

- Prior to the beginning of each semester for which you have a TA/TF appointment, you should reach out to the Instructor of Record to introduce yourself and touch base about your assignment, especially if you haven't worked with this individual before. This is also a good opportunity to discuss your other obligations with the Instructor of Record, such as upcoming comprehensive exams, thesis defense, conference travel, etc.
- One challenge for new TAs/TFs can be that you are no longer solely in a "student" role at Pitt. For the undergraduate students in the classes and recitations you teach, you are an instructor with authority and expertise in the subject. You may be closer in age to your students than to your Instructor of Record, but you must maintain a degree of professionalism in how you relate to your students.
- From your first TA/TF appointment it's not too early to begin thinking about how it can support your future career. Job applications in academia frequently require Teaching Philosophy statements, in which you must discuss your teaching experience, priorities, methods, and objectives succinctly. Your time as a TA may constitute the bulk of your college-teaching experience when you enter the job market, so it's a good idea to keep these ideas in the back of your mind as you begin your teaching career.

Course Components:

Different TA/TF assignments will include different components, requiring you to attend lectures, lead recitations, grade student assignments, participate in rehearsals, help organize performances, or other tasks relevant to the undergraduate music program. Again, it is your responsibility to confirm the Instructor of Record's expectations of you for each assignment you receive. What follows is a non-exhaustive list of things to consider for common course components.

Lecture:

- Always come early to lecture! It is unprofessional to see TA/TFs arriving late or just in the nick of time and you're also not able to help with any classroom set up or interact with students who have questions if you come so late. It is best practice to arrive 5-10 minutes before class time.
- Be aware that you are modeling good student behavior—be attentive during lectures and consider taking notes, which will help you prepare for your recitation and to answer student questions. We understand a common desire to do some of your own work during lecture time, but this sets a poor example and can be distracting to students and the lecturer and is a misuse of your TA assignment. Observing other instructors teach is also a way for you to develop your own style. You can get a sense of what may or may not work for you, effective strategies for classroom engagement, and how to handle difficult situations like a disruptive student or other unforeseeable occurrence. We encourage you discuss teaching methodology with your Instructors of Record to actively learn how to do this kind of work.
- If you must do other work in a particular session, please do so discreetly and with your Instructor of Record's prior knowledge and consent. Under no circumstances should you be posting things on social media, texting, or FaceTiming your friends during class time.
- If there is group discussion, circulate around the classroom and help students generate ideas and keep them on topic. However, it's generally not appropriate to answer the prompts for undergraduates during class time. Instead try to guide their conversation in a productive way that helps them understand the exercise.
- If you're expected to be present for lectures but are sick/unable to attend, please let your Instructor of Record know with as much advance notice as possible.

- If your class uses lecture periods for examinations, be sure to come earlier than usual to help with the set up and passing out of exam materials (test forms, bubble sheets, etc.). During the exam, you should be moving about the space to answer questions and ensure academic integrity among the test-takers.

Recitation:

- Different Instructors of Record have different philosophies and expectations about the role of recitations in their courses, so be sure you're on the same page from the start of the course. In particular, be sure you're aware of the amount of freedom you have to design your own lesson plans, PowerPoints, etc.
- If you've been given lesson plans to follow for recitation, a good guideline is to adhere to them. You can still be proactive about personalizing lesson plans, activities, and identifying tools that might be helpful to students, but always check with the Instructor of Record before altering a lesson plan. Keep in mind that the Instructor of Record is ultimately responsible for the course and needs to be aware of what you're doing in recitation to accomplish the course learning objectives. It is not helpful to undermine the class and Instructor Record simply because it's more interesting or easier for you to teach something else.
- If you are not given a specific lesson plan, it is your responsibility to develop one and come to each recitation prepared. It's best to create some simple slides with the session's agenda, discussion questions, and supplemental material. For each week you should coordinate with the Instructor of Record and other TAs to ensure cohesion and equity between the different sections, but it's good to personalize your classroom somehow. Consider bringing in additional audio/visual examples to explain a particularly important or difficult concept or create a Jeopardy-style game to conduct a review session as exam season approaches.
- Familiarize yourself with the classroom technology. Pitt facilities are mostly standardized, but each room has its quirks in terms of the location of technologies, which ports work or don't, how to dim the lights, etc. Also familiarize yourself with Classroom Technology Services (https://teaching.pitt.edu/classroom-services/) in case you need to report issues, or fetch a cable, adaptor, or other piece of technology.
- Please be sure to wipe the chalkboard/whiteboard after use and return desks to their starting positions if you moved things around. Cluttered desk arrangements can create accessibility issues for subsequent class sessions and create unnecessary complications for other instructors using the room. Be extra conscientious if your class meets in one of the Nationality Rooms of the Cathedral of Learning.
- If you need to miss a recitation, please handle it as you would any work position—inform your Instructor of Record that you will miss the class and confirm that you've made acceptable arrangements. Best practice is to trade classes with one of your fellow instructors. If you can't find a trade, consult with your Instructor of Record to see if someone else can fill in, or if you can prepare an in-class activity for your students to do.
- Do not cancel or alter the modality of the class (i.e., teach your recitation via Zoom) without clearing it with your Instructor of Record first. Once you've made arrangements with the Instructor of Record, you should notify your class and the department administrator so that they can put a sign on the door.
- Note that your presence in recitations leading up to exams or other important deadlines is of paramount importance and extra effort should be made to ensure those sessions are covered. It creates an equity issue when some students don't have access to a review session while others in the same class do.

- The expectation is that you will attend every class and recitation. If you need to miss a recitation, please speak with your Instructor of Record so that an arrangement that works for both you, your colleagues, *and your students* can be made. Please remember that it is NOT your Instructor of Record's responsibility to devise or implement special arrangements on your behalf.
- Students have a right to their privacy in your class—please do not discuss things like DRS accommodations or students' individual grades in the presence of other students in the class or with other graduate students and people outside the class. Be especially careful to not accidentally display your gradebook on the screen during class time.

Attendance:

- Your class likely has an attendance policy (find out what it is!), which means you need to take attendance in class and/or your recitation. Your course may use TopHat, Canvas, "Roll Call," or simple quizzes, and you may need to create a spreadsheet to track student attendance.
- You must also enforce a consistent attendance policy—this is out of fairness to everyone in the class and because class management problems are more likely to arise if there are discrepancies between different recitations or between different students in your class.
- As the leader of recitation, you'll have more direct contact with the individuals in your section and are better positioned to identify students who may need support. Inform the instructor of habitual absences and other concerning student behavior sooner rather than later. If a student misses 2 recitations, that is reason enough to let the instructor know, and they can follow up with appropriate Pitt resources and services.
- Pro-tip #1: use "taking attendance" as a way to get to know your students' names. The first couple of times you take roll, you should encourage your students to state their preferred names and pronouns and do your best to remember them and say your students' names correctly.
- Pro-tip #2: Enable "NameCoach Roster" in Canvas, and ask your students to record themselves saying their names to help you practice outside of the classroom.

Grading:

- Be as consistent and accurate about grading as possible. If your Instructor of Record hasn't created a rubric, make sure everyone is on the same page about how things should be graded. Again, there shouldn't be any discrepancies in how you evaluate students in your section or between your section and another TA's.
- Be sure you have access to and are familiar with the course policies regarding late assignments and extra credit.
- Fix grading errors when students bring them to you. It may seem insignificant to you because it's just a point or something like that, but it's important to the student and it's best for the class that things seem fairly and accurately graded. Acknowledging and correcting one's own mistakes is part of being a good teacher.
- If a student continues to challenge a grade you issued and think is fair, it is a good idea to send the student to the Instructor of Record who can assess the assignment and take the issue from there. They can confirm your adherence to the rubric/grading policy and help the student understand their grade better.
- Grading and feedback are important opportunities in the teaching and learning process. Not all feedback is accompanied by a grade, but effective grades provide students with feedback. For

this reason, **timeliness in grading** is as important as providing useful feedback—consult your Instructor of Record for their expectations on this matter.

Ensembles Classes:

- Come early to help set up and be prepared to stay late to put things away.
- Frequently check in with the instructor and be proactive about offering assistance. Even taking care of small tasks, like filling humidifiers, organizing the instruments, or tidying up the rehearsal space can make a huge difference for the teaching environment.
- Be prepared to help with logistics and administration of ensemble activities, such as moving instruments, coordinating with venues, and writing/proofing program notes and posters. This may not seem like "teaching," but it is critical to course preparation in an ensemble class.
- For the World Music Ensembles, do your best to learn the music, even (especially) if you've never played it before. You may be asked to hold office hours to help students practice their parts and may be asked to help assess student progress with the material.
- Check in with the director (who is also the Instructor of Record) before you leave each rehearsal/performance.

Summary questions you should be able to answer about any course you teach:

1. What are the learning objectives of the course as a whole?
2. What are the learning objectives of a given recitation/class?
3. What are the expectations of my current Instructor of Record regarding:
    a. Lecture?
    b. Recitation?
    c. Grading?
    d. Communication?
4. What will the TA duties largely consist of? What will the weekly rhythm look like? Are there times in the semester when it might be more or less time-intensive?
5. What's the best way to communicate with the Instructor of Record for the course?
6. What should I do if I have to miss a class?