

Guidelines on TAs and Graders  
Department of History  
University of Pennsylvania  
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**What are our guiding principles on teaching fellowships?**

The primary purpose of teaching fellowships is the professional training of first-rate teachers capable of providing high-quality educational experiences to current Penn undergraduates and future students.

Instructors should regard TAs/graders as apprentices and colleagues, not clerical and technical resources. While it is entirely reasonable for instructors to ask TAs/graders to do mundane course support (e.g., scanning course materials, proctoring exams, updating the course website, reviewing drafts of assignments, and so on), instructors should be respectful of students and their labor.

Likewise, TAs/grader should regard instructors as mentors and colleagues. Instructors are ultimately accountable for their courses, but TAs/graders should approach their TAing/grading as seriously as they would a course of their own design.

Transparency and open communication are necessary for instructors and TAs/graders. Instructors should clearly communicate how they understand the roles and responsibilities of their TAs/graders. Instructors should also ask graduate students what they hope to gain from the experience. Graduate students, for their part, should be able to speak freely with instructors about expectations and responsibilities.

If graduate students think that expectations are unclear, they should inform the instructor at the earliest possible opportunity and seek clarification. If they think that expectations are unreasonable or unrealistic, they should raise this with the instructor and/or the graduate chair (aka the “DGS”).

**What’s the difference between TAs and graders?**

Doctoral students in History provide teaching services in their second and third years, with the general understanding that at least two of those semesters will be TAships. Being a grader and being a TA are distinct experiences, even in remote or hybrid teaching settings. Students often find that being a TA is more demanding (and more rewarding), but being a grader is also a substantial commitment with many opportunities for professional growth.

TAs must attend all lectures and course planning sessions; read and comprehend all the materials that the instructor has assigned to the students; conduct up to three recitation sessions per week; hold weekly office hours; grade papers, exams, and other assignments in a timely fashion; and respond in a timely and professional manner to all course-related correspondence. “Grading” means not only assigning a score or grade, but also supporting student learning by providing appropriate feedback on student work. TAs are not expected to teach more than 3 sections (capped at 17 students each, or 51 total). In recent years, due to declining enrollments, TAs generally teach 2 sections.

Graders are expected to attend all lectures and course planning sessions; read and comprehend all the materials that the instructor has assigned to the students; hold regular office hours; grade papers, exams, and other assignments in a timely fashion; and respond in a timely and professional manner to all course-related correspondence. “Grading” means not only assigning a score or grade, but also supporting student learning by providing appropriate feedback on student work. Graders do not prepare for or conduct recitations. Graders can be assigned up to 60 students, though the average number has dropped considerably in recent years.

### **During a period of remote teaching, can graders be asked to do more than grade?**

Yes, with qualifications. Instructors can ask graders to lead breakout sessions on Zoom, for example, or monitor discussion boards during class. But an instructor can’t require graders to work synchronously with students outside regular class hours and office hours.

### **What are the duties of faculty instructors?**

Grading: Instructors should meet with TAs/graders at the beginning of the semester to review tasks and expectations. In doing so, instructors may assume that TAs/graders have familiarized themselves with the expectations outlined in this document, but they should be prepared to answer any clarifying questions and to elaborate on any expectations that are unique to their course. As assignments arise, instructors should go over grading expectations with their TAs/graders. It is good practice for instructors to review a sample set of each assignment to see how undergraduates are understanding course material and to see what issues TA/graders are encountering. In conjunction with that review, instructors often find it useful to provide TAs/graders with samples of graded work and/or with a grading rubric. After the TAs/graders evaluate student work, instructors should review proposed grades to ensure that evaluations are consistent across students, and that they meet the instructor’s standards. If TA/grader work does not meet expectations, the instructor should offer feedback on how to improve.

Weekly meetings with TAs (optional for graders): Instructors should meet with their TAs weekly to review lectures and develop plans for the upcoming week’s recitations. These conversations should cover the assigned readings, and might also include pedagogical approaches for engaging students in the recitations. Instructors may choose to meet with graders on a weekly basis, but may also choose to meet less frequently.

Feedback on TA recitation: Instructors should attend one recitation conducted by each of their TAs roughly midway through the semester, and then provide constructive feedback.

Feedback on TA/grader lecture (optional): Some instructors allow TAs and graders to present one lecture in their course, or one segment of a lecture, for the purpose of providing teaching experience. It is optional for faculty to offer this opportunity, and voluntary for TAs/graders to accept or decline the offer.

Evaluations of TAs/graders: At the end of the semester, all instructors who have been assigned TAs will provide written evaluations. Instructors who have been assigned graders may also provide written evaluations, but are not required to do so. These evaluations will be shared with

TAs/graders and recorded in their department files. In addition, faculty can customize online course evaluations given to undergraduates so that TAs and graders receive comments specific to them. Instructors must also provide a formal grade to TAs/graders. The grade should reflect how well the TA/grader has satisfied expectations, as set forth in this document and as communicated to the TA/grader. As with all coursework, instructors should be prepared to discuss these grades with their TAs/graders upon request.

### **How much time should TAs and graders work?**

According to university rules, TAs and graders cannot work more than 20 hours per week. Hours encompass everything related to the course: attending lectures, preparing for and running recitations, reading for class, holding office hours, grading, etc. Obviously, there will be fluctuation in the workload over the course of the semester. Also, there could be slight to moderate differences in total work hours between graders in different courses depending on enrollment and course design. Not every grader will have the same number of students. TAs will, in the end, probably work more cumulative hours than graders.

The History Department believes that 15 hours per week on average is a reasonable amount of time to spend on TA/grader work and recommends that TAs/graders plan accordingly. A time commitment that exceeds 15 hours per week on average is cause for concern. The operating principle is that graduate student teaching service should advance professionalization, not hinder progress toward degree.

If the duties assigned to the TA/grader are unusually time consuming, instructors should consider lightening the grading load, or doing some of the grading themselves. When a TA/grader believes that the duties assigned cannot be completed within the parameters outlined in this document, the TA/grader should communicate this concern as soon as possible to the instructor and/or to the DGS so that adjustments can be made.

### **How can graduate students communicate concerns?**

At any point in the semester, a graduate student may speak to the DGS confidentially. At the end of the semester, TAs and graders may be asked to complete a brief survey; the results will be viewable by the DGS only. For extraordinary circumstances, SAS has a grievance procedure: <https://www.sas.upenn.edu/graduate-division/resources/academic-grievance-procedure>.