Soc. 495. Tips for TAs
TA Training Workshop (by Isaac Speer, Corey O’Malley, Kevin Shih, Andrew Herman and Rebecca Jean Emigh; revised 09/12/20)

Remember, these are just tricks of the trade. Different strategies work differently for different TAs, professors, course content, etc.! Your goal is to discover what works best for you!

1. Preparing for the Quarter – Rosters, Readings, and Rooms
   A. You can download course rosters – including photo rosters – from the MyUCLA website (my.ucla.edu). These rosters only become available once you have been assigned to particular sections of a class, so you may not have access to them yet. We will also cover this in the Technology Session.
   B. You should be able to obtain all reading materials for the course for free; ask the professor you are working for how you can obtain them. Books are usually provided by the front office, which obtains desk copies of books from publishers. Course readers are either provided by the front office or available at an off-campus printing store with a department-issued voucher. When course readings are available online, you can also ask the front office staff to have a copy of each reading printed for you at no cost.
   C. Sometimes the publishers are late in sending reading materials to the front office or fail to send them at all. If the reading materials have not arrived in time for you to prepare for sections, the front office can issue vouchers so that you can obtain these reading materials from the UCLA Bookstore at no cost to yourself. In most cases, you will have to return the desk copies to the front office when you are done with the quarter.
   D. Check the listing for the course on the registrar’s website (or on my.ucla.edu) to find out where lecture and sections are being held. If you are not already familiar with the particular building(s) and classroom(s), it can be very helpful to make a visit in-person before the quarter begins. Although most locations on campus are pretty easy to find, there are a few buildings on campus with odd features (counter-intuitive floor numbers, labyrinthine or blocked-off corridors, irregular room numbers) and straight-up anomalies (mislabeled classrooms, doors with no numbers, etc.). Additionally, construction on campus can sometimes make even the most straightforward-seeming routes into navigational challenges.
   E. Once you know exactly where your sections are held, make sure you will be able make it from one location to another on time if you have back-to-back sections or lecture. You may also want to factor in 5 minutes or so for students’ questions after section ends. Even if you don’t make a policy of taking questions after class, it can easily take five minutes to gather your things, erase the board, turn off any electronics you used, and tell any lingering students that you will need to talk to them at another time. If you find yourself in the rare position that you literally cannot make it from one room to another on time, you should contact Simbi Mahlanza, the undergraduate counselor, to see if it is possible for one of your sections to be relocated. This is much easier to accomplish (and less
disruptive to the students) early in the quarter, so it’s something you want to check on in
advance of the first class meeting.
F. Be sure to double-check the locations of your sections the night/morning before you go to
your first sections. The university has been known to occasionally relocate sections at the
last minute.
G. You can get information about each UCLA classroom, including capacity and what kind
of AV equipment is available, on the Office of Instructional Development’s (OID)
classroom website: http://www.oid.ucla.edu/classrooms. (Most of the time, if you Google
the building name and room number, the first hit will be the classroom report from OID.)
If you need to rent equipment from the AV department, you will have a stronger chance
of getting it if you put in a request before the quarter begins.
H. In addition to checking the room capacity on the OID website, it is recommended that
you verify in-person that the classroom actually has the number of chairs advertised. If
you discover that you do not have enough chairs in the classroom for all of your students,
Simbi Mahlanza (the Sociology undergraduate counselor) can contact facilities for you to
obtain more chairs or, if possible, move you to a larger classroom.

2. Course Enrollment and PTE Numbers
A. One of the first issues you may encounter as a TA is students asking to get into the
course. Most courses have an enrollment cap of 25 students per section, with a waitlist of
5 students per section. Students on the waitlists, as well as students who weren’t even
able to get onto the waitlists, are frequently eager to get into the course.
B. The UCLA registrar’s office uses Permission-to-Enroll (PTE) Numbers that allow
professors (and TAs) to override the enrollment cap for a particular student. Under some
circumstances, you or the professor may wish to over-enroll the course by assigning a
PTE numbers to one or more students. Some professors issue no PTE numbers and will
set this as the course policy. Other professors may be open to or even eager to issue PTE
numbers. There are some practical reasons why this may be useful (e.g., if historically the
class has a high drop rate, then the Prof. may want to over-enroll the class so that by the
midterm, the class is simply at the “full level” so that it gets a TA the next year). There
also may be broader pressures on faculty and departments to over-enroll students.
C. However, *neither you nor the professor is under any obligation to over-enroll your
sections*. The TA contracts specify that TAs should be assigned no more than 75 students,
so it is up to you whether you are willing to take the extra students. Professors are not
permitted to unilaterally over-enroll their classes, so the decision to issue PTEs should be
made collectively and not in an after-the-fact manner.
D. If you and your professor decide to over-enroll your class, you are required to revise your
TA contract to reflect this change and submit the revisions to Irina. This policy is to
protect the TAs and to limit over-enrollments. So, if you are going to over-enroll your class, be sure to submit your updated contract to Irina as soon as possible.

E. In consultation with the professor, you and your fellow TAs should adopt a uniform PTE policy for all sections and stick to it.

F. Keep in mind that classrooms – both where the lecture takes place and the sections - have a limited number of seats. You should avoid assigning more PTE numbers than there are available seats in either the lecture room or section room. In order to keep the PTE policy uniform between sections, it is also sometimes necessary to take into account the capacities of the classrooms that other TA(s) are using as well (i.e. if you have two extra seats in each of your sections but the other TA has only one empty seat in his or her sections, you may decide to issue only one PTE number per section in order to keep things fair)

G. Extra students will create extra grading work. Be sure to discuss how this additional work will be accomplished. It may be possible to hire an examination reader, for example, for a class that is over-enrolled by a large number of students, and/or add extra TAs and sections. How this extra work will be managed should be addressed in your updated contract. The union is often willing to offer advice on these negotiations.

H. Also keep in mind that, depending on what PTE policy is chosen, you may have to do additional clerical work in terms of verifying whether or not students meet the criteria, determining which students want to enroll in which sections, etc. Also, remember that if you cannot verify the criteria, you may get complaints about unfairness if students lie. Finally, if you adopt a PTE policy that circumvents the waitlist, keep in mind that students can see what place they are in on the waitlist, and have a strong justification for not using the waitlist.

I. Examples of Different Types of PTE Policies
   - Accept x students per section off of the waitlist
   - Accept all students who turn in all homework by the 2nd week
   - Accept only graduating Seniors who wouldn’t otherwise graduate (Spring quarter)
   - Accept any seniors
   - Accept any sociology majors

3. Section Enrollment and Section Switching
   A. In addition to students requesting PTE numbers to enroll in the course, students may also request to switch into another section. Some may even just start attending a section that they aren’t enrolled in without asking you.
   B. Students want to switch sections for a variety of reasons:
      1. Students are forced to choose a section upon enrollment. Some students realize, after they have enrolled, that they have a scheduling conflict with the section they chose, and will therefore come to you asking to switch sections.
2. Other students will deliberately enroll in a section they cannot attend in the hopes that they will be able to switch into another section once the quarter starts, often because the section(s) they are able to attend was full when they enrolled.

3. Some students will want to change sections not because of scheduling conflicts but for convenience reasons – such as not wanting to be in an early morning section.

4. Finally, some students may just want the flexibility of attending whichever section they want in a given week, even though courses are not set up to accommodate this.

C. As with PTE policy, section switching policy should be determined in consultation with the professor and the other TAs and should be consistently applied.

D. Section switching can be a logistical problem when the professor wants you to take attendance. It is much easier to take attendance if students come to the same section each week, so you will want students to be settled into sections they will regularly attend by the second or third week of the quarter. If you aren’t taking attendance this isn’t an issue.

E. Section switching can also be a logistical problem in terms of over-crowding. Ideally, you do not want to end up in a situation where students have to sit on the floor, especially students who are actually enrolled in the section. Furthermore, you generally want to avoid sections that are too large or too small – larger sections may lead students to feel like they don’t need to participate, while in very small sections you may depend too much on the contributions of one or two students.

F. While it is tempting to use PTE numbers to allow students to switch sections, this is extremely inadvisable. The MyUCLA system was not designed for this purpose, it often leads to courses becoming over-enrolled, and it makes it extremely difficult for students to be added from the waitlist when other students drop.

G. Historically, section switching was done informally, by adding students’ names to your own roster/attendance sheet rather than having them officially re-enroll in a different section. As of 2013, however, the department has asked that faculty and TAs no longer permit informal section switching because it interferes with the new electronic course evaluation system.

H. If you wish to allow students to switch sections, contact Simbi Mahlanza before the end of 2nd week (when study lists are finalized) and ask her to make the adjustments to the roster without over-enrolling the course.

I. Possibilities for Section Switching Policies:
   1. Students must find someone to trade places with them by the start of 2nd week
   2. Students can move into a section only if it is under-enrolled
   3. Students can move into a section if there are chairs available in the room
   4. Students can move into a section provided they are willing to sit on the floor.
      (Tread carefully with this one, as students may decide they dislike this arrangement later on and take it out on you on your evaluations.)
J. For both PTE and section switching issues, it is often advisable to get a sense of the order of magnitude of the problem. Your professor may have a sense of this if s/he has taught the class before. Over-enrolling the class by 5 students can be an entirely different problem from over-enrolling it by 50 students. Letting 2 students switch sections is a much different problem than letting 25 students switch sections.

4. Section Policies
   A. It’s usually best for you to clearly present your section policies (whether they are required to attend, whether they get graded on participation, etc.) on a section syllabus prepared in advance for the quarter. We will provide some sample syllabi so you can see what other TAs include on these documents. Students will be more accountable if there are some written rules that you can hold them to.
   B. When working with other TAs, it’s best to have a uniform attendance and participation policy for all sections, so try to coordinate this with fellow TAs if it isn’t established by the professor. It’s fine for TAs to run their sections differently (provided this is ok with the professor) but policies should be uniform wherever the distribution of points/credit is concerned.
   C. Whatever policies you pick, try to stick with them. You can relax the rules a bit as the quarter goes on, but you don’t want students to get the sense they are whittling you down.
   D. On the other hand, it’s much better to start strict and then relax the rules a bit as you go than to have to become stricter as the quarter goes on. In general, you won’t be able to enforce a policy that you try implement once the quarter is underway—the students will have habits already and will (justifiably) complain that the rules have changed.
   E. In addition to requiring attendance, some TAs may find it helpful or necessary to require students to bring their readings/completed homework to section with them to get attendance/participation credit. A reading requirement may seem unnecessary at first, but in some courses you may be surprised by how few of your students bring their readings unless there is a direct incentive.
   F. Students will routinely try to get around attendance and participation policies, mainly by asking for credit for coming in late, for turning in homework late, etc. Don’t let students try to haggle with you over attendance points and assignment deadlines – just remind them what the policy is and what they have to do to get credit.
   G. Keep in mind that no matter what your attendance policy is, some students will complain about it. You can try to placate students by offering one free absence or one free missed homework assignment, etc. This is a very nice thing to do for students, but keep in mind that this often doesn’t dissuade people who miss two sections, etc. from making complaints. You can also have a five minute (or X minute grace period) for late students, but remember that then they may just complain about being “only 1” minute late after the X minute grace period. Late students may also disrupt your class, especially if you start out by lecturing or by having student presentations. If you hand back papers, take
attendance, or do other administrative tasks at the beginning of section, you may wish to have a policy that students are “late” once these administrative tasks are done (then they have a grace period and there is no disruption of the course itself).

H. In a remote-only environment, lateness and attendance policies in general are a lot easier to deal with. When someone comes in late to your Zoom meeting, it isn’t disruptive, so long as you haven’t disabled the default setting of muting participants when they enter. Further, at ucla.zoom.us there are detailed attendance rolls kept for every meeting you host. You can design your attendance policy around this to minimize disputes. For instance, you can say that “attendance” means being in the room for more than 25 minutes of the section, and that “lateness” means entering the room more than 5 minutes after the section starts. Both of those things are easily extracted from Zoom’s records.

5. Weekly Section Preparation
   A. For the first day of sections you should generally prepare a syllabus and go over all of your policies in class. You’ll also want to introduce yourself and have the students introduce themselves – you may also wish for them to say their year or major. You want to be friendly and explain how attending sections will be useful to them – this will set a positive tone for the rest of the quarter.
   B. Depending on the professor’s desires, you and your fellow TAs may have more or less autonomy in terms of determining section content. Sometimes professors will provide you with clear instructions on a weekly basis on what to discuss or what exercises to do in sections. Other professors will leave it completely up to TAs to determine section content.
   C. Unless you are instructed otherwise by your professor, avoid spending discussion section time lecturing/presenting new material to students. Discussion sections are best spent discussing course materials with the students using the Socratic Method or some other method that gets the students to talk and think. Your goal should be to get the students talking about the material by asking them guided questions or exercises that help them describe and link together the various concepts and ideas from the course materials. It is appropriate to give students some opportunity to ask you questions (often at the beginning or end of discussion) but the students will ultimately learn more if they are asked to re-phrase the answers to these questions in their own words. Also, it will sometimes be necessary for you to break out of the Socratic Method and outline a reading/argument by yourself – for example, if you’ve been told to cover a certain amount of material in section, you’ve spent most section doing Socratic Method, and you only have 10 minutes to cover the rest of the material. Again, though, students will ultimately learn more by having to express ideas in their own words, so try to make this the focal point of discussion section.
   D. Sections do not need to be identical in content, and oftentimes it is necessary to address different topics/issues in some sections and not others based on when they fall in the
week. (For example, a section that occurs before lecture may have to cover different content than a section that occurs after lecture). Nonetheless, TAs should try to have some consistency in the content and format of sections. When applicable, we recommend speaking with other TAs on a weekly basis about what you plan on covering or doing in sections. This will give you a chance to share ideas about how to organize discussion and what concepts/theories to emphasize, and to coordinate as much as possible. Discuss with the professor how the students should prepare (e.g., some professors want the students to read before lecturing on the topic; others want the reading done after they lecture).

E. You will need to find a balance between doing too much section preparation and doing too little. On the one hand, 50 minute sections can go surprisingly fast if you have come prepared with discussion questions and students have come with some knowledge of the material you will be discussing. The chief danger in over-preparing is exhausting yourself the night before sections, and then being disappointed when you don’t get through even half of the material you’ve prepared. On the other hand, you need to be prepared enough that you can generate discussion even when students have come with no interest in or knowledge of the material. You don’t want to find yourself in a discussion section where neither you nor the students have anything to say. As an example of what works, one previous TAC usually found that 2 pages of double-spaced answers to questions on the readings is enough to lead a useful discussion section. As another example, Rebecca assigns students with three discussion topics, each composed of about 3 to 4 individual questions, for each discussion section. The TA can cover the first set really well, the second set in some detail, and a quick run through of the third one in a discussion section.

F. To help motivate students to do the reading for the course, you may find it to be helpful to give them weekly reading questions or homework assignments. You can use the course website to facilitate these assignments by creating discussion boards, having students submit homework assignments to the website, etc. Students can use discussion boards to submit answers to a reading question, or to post their own question about the reading, or to post reading summaries, etc. We will cover this in the Technology Session.

6. Your Role as a TA

A. Ultimately, your role as a TA is to assist the professor in educating the students. This means presenting a unified front to the students, even if on a personal level you disagree with or dislike the professor. This is not always easy! When students criticize the professor or complain about the class you should be respectful of their opinions—you can even offer to relay them to the professor—but should not encourage or support their claims directly. Remember that the professor—the instructor of record—is ultimately responsible for the class, not the TA. Don’t take on more—or less—responsibility than is yours!

B. Some students will try to manipulate TAs and professors by playing them off of each other in a way reminiscent of children who go ask one parent for something after the
other refuses. For example, a student may go to a professor asking for an extension on a late assignment, and when the professor says no, they may then go to the TA to ask for the extension, and may even falsely claim that the professor has agreed to it. The best way to prevent this manipulation is to always relay special requests to the professor, and to always check with the professor/other TAs when a student claims they have special permission for something.

C. Ideally, you want the professor to back you up so that you have authority to enforce the policies. Most professors will do this automatically. Some will not, but usually unintentionally and accidentally. Very rarely, but it does happen, the professor will cave in to the students to seem “nice” on a regular basis and/or have the TAs play the “bad cop” role. If you think the professor has granted something to which you said “no,” stay calm. Discuss this with the professor. It’s generally the case that there has been a misunderstanding by you, the professor, and/or the student that can be rectified. In the very rare case that you discern a deeper pattern over a specific issue that keeps resurfacing despite your attempts to discuss this with the professor, ask him/her if you can send all students with that particular issue directly to him/her.

D. Remember, professors are human too—talking through matters almost always clears up whatever issues are going on.

E. Office hours are a great resource for students if they are willing to use them, because it allows them to seek one-on-one instruction from you and because many students are more comfortable asking questions when they aren’t in front of their peers. Office hours will also help you get a sense of how well your students comprehend the material. Some students will want to meet one-on-one, while other students will want to meet with you in small groups and use office hours as a mini-discussion section. You should encourage your students to take advantage of office hours, especially if they seem to be having difficulty with the course.

F. It may also be helpful to set some expectations for students for office hours, such as that they must bring any readings/graded exams/other materials that they want to discuss with them to office hours, that you won’t just summarize entire readings for them, etc.

G. Students sometimes come to the TA because they are afraid of meeting with the professor. Do not discourage them from coming to see you, but also don’t encourage them to avoid the professor (even if it makes you feel wonderful that they like you better than the professor!). You should always try to make the students feel comfortable seeking help from any of the TAs for the course (students should not be dissuaded from talking to the TAs for sections other than their own) or the professor.

H. In interacting with students, you want to strike a balance between being friendly and being respected. You want students to feel that you are approachable for help with course materials but you don’t want them to think of you as a ‘friend,’ insofar as that entails doing them special favors or giving them extra consideration. Try to avoid offering any
help to one student, even in the form of extra office hours, which you wouldn’t be willing (or able) to offer to other students who asked.

I. As a TA, you may find some students who treat you as a psychologist or social worker. If students mention personal issues briefly to you in passing as it directly relates to the course, be sympathetic and then return to the course material. But resist being drawn into long stories or sagas with multiple installments over the weeks—which is not your role or area of expertise. When a student comes to you in need of extra-curricular help, refer them to appropriate resources and avoid becoming involved yourself. We will address these campus resources in the Student Issues/Practical Problems Panel.

J. Most of the administrative offices on campus are excellent and know how to find a good balance between actually helping/providing services that students need while weeding out senseless whining or manipulation. Useful offices on campus include:

1. UCLA Police Department (https://www.ucpd.ucla.edu/). UCPD responds to emergencies on campus and accepts reports of crimes on or near campus. You can call 911 from any phone on campus (land line or cell phone) to be directly connected to UCPD emergency dispatch. Alternatively, they can be reached at 310.825.1491 for both emergency and non-emergency calls.

2. Dean of Students (http://www.deanofstudents.ucla.edu/). They will handle cases of cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic dishonesty. They can usually give some general advice without doing a formal investigation. The Office of the Dean of Students is located in 1104 Murphy Hall.

3. Center for Accessible Education (CAE) (http://www.cae.ucla.edu). They will provide extra help for students with mental or physical disabilities. They do some screening and documentation, and then will contact the professor of the course as appropriate. CAE is located in A255 Murphy Hall.

4. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) (http://www.counseling.ucla.edu/). They help students with a range of issues, from problems everyone has (procrastination) to serious mental illness. Refer your students to them, when necessary. CAPS can accommodate urgent cases between 9 am and 4 pm every weekday without an appointment. Their main phone line (310.825.0768) also has counselors available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Their guide to identifying students in distress (http://www.counseling.ucla.edu/distressedstudent.html) is also useful. CAPS is located on the west side of the John Wooden Center, adjacent to the Intramural playing fields (221 Westwood Plaza).

5. Office of Ombuds Services (http://www.ombuds.ucla.edu/contact.htm). This office helps resolve disputes between faculty, students, and staff. In the context of TAing, your most frequent/only contact with this office may be if they call you because a student in your class has complained to them about his/her grade. The
Office of Ombuds Services is located in the Strathmore Building, suite 105 (501 Westwood Plaza).

6. Academic Advancement Program (AAP) (http://www.aap.ucla.edu/). They provide support to first generation college students, underrepresented minorities, low-income families, etc. They implement a diversity program. They also provide tutoring; your class may even have an AAP tutor assigned to it. They often know their students very well, and often can help with problems that may arise with these students. AAP can be found at 1232 Campbell Hall.

7. Consultation & Response Team (http://www.studentincrisis.ucla.edu/). This unit provides resources relating to students at-risk or in crisis. They have a team of Student Care Managers/Advocates who are trained to consult on a wide variety of concerns related to student well-being, including (but not limited to) campus safety, financial crisis, sexual assault, and domestic violence.

8. Office of Emergency Management (https://www.emergency.ucla.edu/). This office coordinates between a variety of units on campus. Their website has information on the BruinAlert system (you should automatically be enrolled in; you can update your settings through my.ucla.edu) as well as details about how to handle a variety of emergency situations that you will hopefully never actually encounter!

9. Sexual Harassment Prevention Office (http://www.sexualharassment.ucla.edu/default.htm). They will investigate claims of sexual harassment. Under some circumstances, they are legally required to report information reported to them, so you probably want to think it over before you go straight to them.

10. UAW Local 2865 (http://www.uaw2865.org/). This is the union that represents TAs, Tutors, and Readers in the UC system. They can inform you of your rights and responsibilities and help with employment situations.

11. Behavioral Intervention Team (https://www.chr.ucla.edu/behavioral-intervention-team/). This is a multidisciplinary team consisting of representatives from the Office of Legal Affairs, Staff & Faculty Counseling Center, Insurance & Risk Management, UCLA Police Department, and Employee & Labor Relations. If you have concerns that someone you know may be at risk of harming themselves or others, or if you are concerned that someone poses a significant disruption to the campus environment, you should visit their website or contact the coordinator, Chris Silva, at (310) 794-0422 or cesilva@chr.ucla.edu.

6. Test Preparation
A. You should try to get information from the professor about the test as far in advance as possible. Find out what students should know about the tests in terms of format as well as content. What are you expected to tell them and what information are you supposed to withhold from them? This information can also help you plan your sections; for example, if you know that the tests will involve a lot of definitions, then you will probably want to make identifying and explaining keywords a part of your discussion sections.

B. Some professors want input from TAs in terms of providing sample essay questions, keywords and other suggestions for tests or for study guides.

C. Some professors will provide study guides as well, and students will frequently request these guides from TAs. However, unless the TAs are writing the test—which is not supposed to happen—TAs are not really in a position to provide study guides. Requests for study guides from students should be re-directed to the professor unless the professor says otherwise.

D. Some professors will ask you to hold an in-class review session before tests, or to schedule a review session outside of normal class time. Students frequently request review sessions as well, but be sure to check with the professor before offering to hold one. Simbi Mahlanza, the undergraduate counselor, can help you with obtaining room reservations for review sessions.

E. You are not obligated to hold a review session for your sections unless it is mentioned in your contract, but Professors sometimes inadvertently forget about review sessions when listing the duties for their TAs. If a review session isn’t mentioned in your contract, we strongly recommend asking the Professor at the beginning of the quarter about whether or not they expect you to hold a review session. If they do, please request that they amend the duties in your contract to reflect this and re-submit it to Irina.

F. If multiple review sessions are being offered by the TAs, you should have a talk with the other TAs about what they will and will not cover.

G. Unless instructed otherwise, we recommend that you run review sessions in such a way that relieves you, as the TA, from being expected to give out all of the answers or summarize all of the course material for the term. Here are a few suggestions for how to avoid this:

1. Tell your students in advance that the review session will be Q-and-A format, and that they should bring any questions they have regarding the course materials. Tell them you will only be answering questions, not lecturing about “what they will need to know.”

2. If the professor has given out homework or discussion questions from earlier in the quarter, then you can tell students to bring these materials to the review session and have them discuss their answers. Your role will be to provide feedback to the answers they’ve already generated rather than to explain concepts/arguments/theories from scratch.
3. When students ask obvious or easy questions, you might want to re-direct them to the class as a whole instead of answering them yourself. This gives students an opportunity to phrase answers in their own words and get your feedback, which can be more helpful than just hearing the correct answer repeated by you.

7. Grading Policies and Procedures
   A. Some professors will take an active role in determining grading procedures by providing keys and instructions at the beginning of the process, and by reviewing the grades at the end. Other professors will provide general instructions and expect their TAs to work out the actual key in terms of what components are worth what points. Finally, some professors will leave it entirely up to TAs to determine how grades are distributed.
   B. If professors don’t provide a key, TAs should usually work with whatever guidance they have to develop their own key to grade the test or paper. A key will help ensure that you grade consistently from assignment to assignment, as well as helping you grade consistently with any fellow TAs.
   C. When possible, TAs should use blind grading, meaning they should not be aware of the names of students while grading the assignments. This helps protect the TA against accusations of bias from students. Blind grading can be accomplished with blue books provided students only write their names on the outside of the blue book. It can be accomplished with papers if students use title pages and only include their names on the title page, or if students use University ID numbers instead of names. Consult with the professor to see whether or not this is possible.
   D. It is often helpful to set a time budget for yourself. If possible, find out from the professor how much time he/she expects you to devote to grading. A professor may be able to estimate how long it takes her/him to grade a question—it will take a TA longer (e.g., Rebecca can grade about 3 to 4 times as quickly as TAs—she is on the lightning fast end of the continuum). Figure out the number of hours you can devote to each assignment and divide by the number of students to give yourself a sense of how much time you can spend on each assignment, or even each answer. You may even want to time yourself as you grade. It may seem silly to worry about the difference between 5 minutes per essay question versus 10 minutes per essay question, but the time really adds up. As an example, for a TA with 75 students and an exam with 4 essay questions, 5 minutes per essay versus 10 minutes per essay is the difference between 25 hours of grading (reasonable) and 50 hours of grading (totally unreasonable)!
   E. The grading rubric and your time budget are going to be in conflict from time to time. The rubric, for instance, may require you to give a very close reading to each answer, but the professor and you may not have planned to set aside enough time for that grading. This is the most common reason why TAs end up going over their allotted work hours for the quarter, or for any given week. This is a real problem! Communication is important in these cases. It is advisable to keep the professor informed if particular questions are
taking too long to grade, as you may be able to re-think later assignments to balance it out. If you are familiar with the topic, and especially as you become more familiar with your own grading habits, it can be very helpful to point these issues out before you even start grading, when the rubric can still be adjusted.

F. Similar to the last point, it can also be helpful to ask the professor if very simple assignments can be set-up for automatic grading on CCLE. If you are just checking that students filled in the blank properly, or provided the right numerical answer to a question, it is usually much faster (and more accurate) to have CCLE grade them.

G. There are two general strategies to grading that are frequently employed in the undergraduate classes. Professors often use one of these or a variant on them. Let’s call the first strategy the Predetermined Distribution, and the second strategy the Two-Stage Distribution.

1. For the Predetermined Distribution strategy, professors will have a particular letter grade distribution in mind from the outset, and will instruct TAs to fit students into this distribution. For example, a professor might request that “I want a B- average and very few A’s”, and so TAs will have to be sure that they assign few A’s and many scores in the C to B+ range. Some professors may want TAs to use numerical scores in addition to letter grades, so in these cases TAs should be sure to know the cut-off point for an A, the cut-off for an A- etc. in advance so that they can produce a numerical distribution that fits what the professor wants in terms of letter grades.

2. In contrast, in the Two-Stage Distribution Strategy, professors will instruct TAs to use a key to assign numerical scores without assigning letter grades. Then, at the end of the process, the professor will look at the numerical score distribution and determine the cut-off points for the various letter grades. This method allows the TAs to just follow the key as they grade, rather than worrying about fitting students to a particular letter grade distribution. It also provides a last-resort opportunity for professors to standardize the grades if there are large discrepancies between the scoring done by two or more TAs. For example, if one TA assigned consistently higher scores than the other one, the professor can come up with separate letter grade scales for each TA, so that a similar proportion of each TA’s students receive A’s, B’s, C’s, etc. end.

F. These strategies create different challenges for TAs, especially when they are combined haphazardly. The Predetermined Distribution Strategy can be challenging when TAs are asked to come up with a particular letter grade distribution – such as mostly B’s with few A’s and few C-‘s - while grading using a fixed, numerical key. In most cases, it is virtually impossible to craft a key in advance that will allow you to arrive at the letter grade distribution the professor wants. After all, you don’t know what the average student’s work is going to look like in advance. Our advice for a situation like this is to write scores in pencil at first in case you decide you need to revise your key a bit as you
go along in order to arrive at the professor’s preferred distribution. Also, be sure to coordinate carefully the grading and key revisions with any fellow TAs you have.

G. The Two-Stage Distribution Strategy poses a different challenge. When following this strategy it will be easy to come up with a key (if it is not already provided) because you won’t have to design it to conform to a predetermined letter grade distribution. However, in this strategy it’s possible for students to end up with low numerical scores, as the key won’t be tailored to produce a particular average, and will likely be more stratifying in the results. The challenge, then, will come from students, who hate to get a 70/100 on any assignment, even if 70 points corresponds to an A after the letter grade cut-offs are assigned.

H. Of course it’s also possible that the professor you work for will want to employ an entirely different grading strategy. The most important thing is to have a clear idea of what their expectations are, think about any logical or practical dilemmas that it may raise, and to coordinate as closely as possible with any fellow TAs you have.

E. When there are multiple TAs and minimal direction from the professor, there are several options for ensuring that grading is done consistently between TAs:

1. Splitting up the questions so that all the responses to a given question are graded by one person. That way each TA only has to worry about being consistent with herself/himself.

2. TAs can create a key and then test the key by each reviewing the same set of tests or papers and recording the grades they would assign on a separate sheet. Then TAs can compare the grades each would assign to determine whether or not they are interpreting and applying the key in the same way.

3. At the end of the process but before assignments are handed back to students, TAs can take it upon themselves to compare numerical or letter-grade distributions to make sure they assigned roughly similar proportions of 90s, 80s, 70s or As, Bs, Cs, etc. If there are large discrepancies, grades can be adjusted so that each TA has a similar proportion of As, Bs, Cs, etc.

F. Graded assignments should always be returned to all students on the same day. Graded assignments should not be handed back until after any adjustments are made to the letter grades; you don’t want to have to correct grades systematically after papers or tests have already been handed back.

G. Grading appeals should also be handled consistently, so have a conversation with the professor and any fellow TAs about this before papers or tests are handed back. Some professors will want all appeals to go to them, whereas others will leave appeals up to your discretion. We recommend, at the least, requiring students to come to office hours to discuss their grade with you before they can make an appeal for you to re-grade the assignment. Often students are dissuaded from trying to appeal their grade after you explain to them why they received the grade that they received and advise them on how to do better on the next assignment.
H. One common strategy to discourage grading appeals is to tell the students that a re-grade must encompass the whole assignment or exam (not one single part) and that you reserve the right to raise or lower their grade. Some professors ask the students to write a memo on why they deserve a different grade—this also sometimes discourages frivolous requests.

I. Another useful strategy for discouraging appeals is to require students to wait one or two days after having the assignment or exam returned to them before asking you about it. Many appeals are rooted, understandably, in a kind of reactionary disappointment. The extra time can help in giving students the time to think about their grade and feedback, which in some cases is enough for them to understand why they received the grade that they did.

J. Avoid re-grading assignments in the presence of students—if a student comes to your office hours asking for a re-grade, and you agree, do the re-grade at a later time and return the assignment to the student on another occasion.

K. Sometimes it is not possible to return exams and papers to students after grading is complete. In these cases, exams and papers should be saved for an entire quarter after the class has finished, and then destroyed. The front office has a shredder for exactly this purpose.

8. Student complaints.

A. Students can complain about courses and teaching staff to the Department Vice Chair for Undergraduates, the Department Chair, the Ombuds Office, and/or the Dean of Students. It is their right to do so, so don’t panic if this happens. Some courses are genuinely unfair, so it’s important to give students the opportunity to do this.

B. However, most of these staff members understand how to differentiate between legitimate problems and whining, so if you are conducting your course fairly, most of the time there will not be a problem for you. These offices will have no sympathy for students who do not come to class or do the required work.

C. It helps a lot in establishing the facts of the situation if you have written documentation about what happened. If something seems strange to you (e.g., a student you have never seen shows up to an exam, a student asks you for a strange personal request that you refuse, a struggling student who has never been to class gets 100% on an exam, someone shows up to an exam five minutes before the end, etc.) put it in writing, even just as an email to yourself or a fellow TA so you have a record of it. You can also email it to the professor as an FYI. Another option, if you anticipate a problem with a particular student after an encounter with him or her, is to send a very polite “confirmation of our discussion” email to the student (e.g., “Just wanted to confirm our conversation today, Sept. 29th, about the reading requirements of the course….”).
D. Attendance records for section are useful even if attendance is not required, just as a record of who is coming. Then, if a student makes a complaint, you will be able to say whether or not it is a student who has been engaged in the class.
   a. Note: As mentioned above, remote education has some advantages here. Zoom automatically records the exact times people are in a meeting room, and CCLE records every attempt a person makes for an assignment, and in particular setups, also records when people view lectures. Relying on things like this can reduce the subjectivity around whether something should “count” or not.

E. As an example of some precautionary measures, Rebecca routinely copies all TAs on course correspondence so that everyone has a record of what has happened. Also, Rebecca always takes “talking attendance” of who talks in class to have a record of active participation.

9. Work Load Issues
   A. A TAs workload for any particular course should be outlined in the contract document sent to the TA at the beginning of the quarter. The professor should have written this document and checked it for the current quarter. You should also check it over, make sure it is clear and that you understand what the course entails. If you have any questions, and/or it doesn’t match what you understand about the class from having spoken to the professor, straighten this out right away. Talk to the professor first and try to work this out with him or her. If this doesn’t work, you can also talk to the Graduate Advisor and the Faculty Director of Graduate Studies. Your workload document is actually a departmental document—it’s not just for your information—so there should be support in getting it to be fairly accurate. It may be a simple matter—sometimes when the instructor changes, the document may accidentally not be updated.

   B. The TAs workload should not exceed 20 hours a week over the whole quarter (i.e. cumulatively). There will be some variability from week to week—during midterm and finals, you will be grading and this will take longer. You have to expect this and build it into your schedule. On the other hand, if you are routinely spending more than 20 hours a week during the “non-exam weeks” (for example, grading weekly homeworks is already taking you 15 hours, and on top of this you are holding office hours and your discussion sections, etc.), you will have a workload issue. Again, first, talk to the professor about this; s/he may not really have any idea how much time something is taking, or you may have misunderstood what s/he wanted you to do so that it is taking too much time. You can also talk to departmental and union staff about workload issues if talking to the professor doesn’t resolve it. If you are exceeding your workload time because you are spending a lot of time on duties other than grading, you probably need to re-evaluate what you are doing. If you are spending a lot of time out of office hours with students, figure out how to resolve the issues another way (holding a joint session for students all at once, referring students to other campus offices, etc.).
preparing for your section because you don’t understand the material, you may need a short weekly session with your professor to ask questions about it. It is the Professor’s responsibility to ensure that you are asked to perform tasks that can reasonably be accomplished in 20 hours per week, but it is your responsibility to ensure that you are performing those tasks in a reasonably efficient manner.

C. If you are having trouble with the grading load in particular, as is common in some classes, consider some of the advice given above around grading.

D. Keep a written record of the hours you work each day and week. This will help you understand how you can perform your job more efficiently as well as protect you in the event that your workload is genuinely excessive. No one can help you with a workload problem—including you yourself—unless you have a record of what tasks you have performed and how much time the work is taking.