

## **Best Practices for Graders and Teaching Assistants: A Guide for Faculty and Graduate Students**

### **Overview**

Each year a group of graduate students become graders or teaching assistants for the first time. And each year several faculty members (some new hires, some old hands) have their first opportunity to work with graders or T.A.s at UF. This short document is intended as a guide for those newcomers to the grader/T.A. system and as a resource for those who already have more experience.

The guidelines that follow combine information on the department's rules and expectations with occasional comments on the broader patterns of individual expectations. The latter are not intended as new rules, but rather as information that faculty – and students – might find useful in making their own decisions. (References to “T.A.s” should be understood to include both T.A.s and graders where appropriate.)

### **Work Assignments**

- Each semester the chair and associate chair determine how many slots are available for graders, research assistants, teaching assistants, and teaching associates. Faculty members who wish to work with graders or T.A.s consult with the associate chair in preparing their schedules.
- The associate chair and the graduate coordinator work together in placing individual graduate students in particular slots. The recent practice has been to consult with both the faculty and the students about their preferences. But of course the declaration of a preference does not guarantee that result.
- We will make every effort to arrange – or rearrange – work assignments to accommodate students' class schedules. Graduate students who are taking undergraduate courses (such as language courses) would be wise to communicate any potential conflicts to the associate chair as soon as they know their class schedules.
- Students who do not have an M.A. in hand or at least a year of graduate study at UF will rarely be assigned to teaching assistant positions.

### **Responsibilities and Authority**

- Professors and T.A.s should see themselves as part of a teaching 'team', although the professor is the final authority in all pedagogical decisions, including course content, examinations, and grading.
- Beyond these broad observations, practice varies quite a bit from course to course. Some faculty members grant their T.A.s substantial autonomy in determining discussion topics and in making grading decisions, other professors prefer to apply a more firm hand in determining discussion content and in making final decisions about grades. T.A.s should not assume that each professor will bring the same assumptions to the relationship, and professors should take care to communicate their expectations before the semester begins.

### **Work Loads**

- At present, graders are assigned to courses with a cap of 63 students. Teaching assistants are generally assigned three discussion sections, with a cap of 19 students in each section (for a total of 57).

- All graders, R.A.s and T.A.s in the History Department are given 0.33 appointments, which translates into an expectation of 13.3 hours per week. In practice, the work load in most courses will fluctuate from week to week depending on the flow of assignments and grading.
- The amount of grading required of T.A.s varies quite a bit from course to course. Some professors grade a portion of each assignment or take on one or more assignments to grade themselves; other professors supervise the work but do not actually do any of the grading.
- T.A.s should understand that their work contract extends through the entire semester. They should be available to meet with instructor's prior to the first class meeting, and they should also be prepared to meet following the final examination to go over grading. T.A.s should not make travel plans without consulting with the professor about grading timetables and possible meetings at both ends of the semester.

### **Communication**

- Faculty members should hold a meeting at the outset of the semester where expectations are discussed in some detail.
- Graders and T.A.s are expected to hold regular office hours. Most offer additional hours and/or review sessions when examinations are approaching and assignments are coming due.
- T.A.s should be sure that their students and the professor have access to a functioning email address. It is particularly important that T.A.s check their email regularly.
- Faculty are also expected to provide T.A.s with regular guidance and direction throughout the semester. Most faculty members meet with their T.A.s on a weekly basis to discuss the week's discussion topics and related matters.
- Most faculty members hold additional sessions to discuss grading expectations and strategies.
- If the T.A. is going to miss class for a professional conference s/he should let the instructor know well in advance so that other arrangements can be made.
- If the T.A. is sick and cannot meet a class s/he should make every effort to contact both the instructor and Linda Opper in order to make last minute arrangements.

### **Examinations and Grading**

- Some faculty members actively collaborate with their T.A.s in the writing of quizzes and examinations, others prefer to make those decisions.
- When T.A.s are arranging review sessions and extra office hours, it is of course best for the faculty member to give the T.A.s a clear sense of the exam's structure and contents well in advance.
- As noted above, the faculty member is responsible for all course grades, although s/he may choose to hand over some or all of that responsibility to the T.A. or grader. In practice, we take many different approaches to grading assignments. It is up to the professor to communicate grading expectations to the T.A. or grader. It is up to the T.A. or grader to follow those expectations.
- When a student has a complaint about a grade, most professors expect that student to first consult with the T.A. before speaking with the professor. Of course the professor has the right to overrule a grading decision, although in ordinary circumstances this would be done after some consultation with the T.A.
- The grading process raises a series of issues about confidentiality. Everyone should keep in mind that it is against University policy to leave graded papers in public areas for students to pick up. It is also against University policy to discuss specific grades in emails. And, needless to say, it is inappropriate to discuss a student's grades with another student (or to give one student's paper to another student).

### **Professionalism and Civility**

- All participants have the reasonable expectation that they will be treated with professional respect.
- T.A.s should always be on time for all lectures. In fact, it is reasonable to expect T.A.s to arrive several minutes before class in order to be available for last minute conversations.
- In conversations with undergraduates, all members of the teaching partnership should respect the authority of the rest of the team. That is, T.A.s should not undermine the professor by criticizing him/her to students. The faculty member, in turn, should be supportive of the T.A. even when overruling a particular decision. And, of course, T.A.s should not undermine each other.
- Of course the office staff should always be treated with professionalism and respect. Xerox requests should be submitted at least a day in advance.

### **Pedagogical Training and Assessment**

- The professor should visit at least one discussion section held by each T.A. These visitations should be followed by a formal conversation about teaching strategies and they should also provide part of the basis for the end of semester assessment.
- In some cases the professor will invite the T.A. or grader to deliver a guest lecture. This is not a requirement or an expectation for either party.
- At the end of the semester the professor submits a written evaluation of the T.A. or grader to the Graduate Coordinator. Most professors share this written evaluation with the T.A.
- These letters of assessment become part of the student's personal file. They play an important role in determining future assignments and in rankings for various prizes and awards.

### **Complaints**

- If the professor or the T.A. has any concerns about the behavior of any other member of the teaching team, the first step is of course to consult directly with the other party.
- If problems persist, the faculty member or T.A. should consult with either the associate chair or the graduate coordinator.
- T.A.s who persistently fail to meet their work obligations in a professional manner risk losing future funding opportunities.
- Professors who fail to work effectively with graders or T.A.s risk losing that opportunity in the future.

### **Resources**

- The main purpose of this document is to summarize a series of expectations and practices, not as a guide to good teaching methods. The "Professional Development" page of the Graduate Studies web page includes a long list of useful links:  
[http://web.history.ufl.edu/new/grad\\_studies/links\\_current.htm](http://web.history.ufl.edu/new/grad_studies/links_current.htm)
- The Judicial Affairs page on the Dean of Students website includes useful information on Academic Honesty and the Honor Code: <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/judicial/academic.php>
- The Disability Resource Center page on the Dean of Students website includes useful information on resources and accommodations for students with various disabilities:  
<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/faculty.php>
- The Judicial Affairs page on the Dean of Students website also includes details on the Student Code of Conduct including sexual harassment:  
<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/judicial/conductcode.php>