GRADUATE STUDENT

TEACHING ASSISTANT MANUAL

Faculty of Mathematics

MATHEMATICS GRADUATE OFFICE
University of Waterloo
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CANADA

August 2014
Forward

Former graduate students Dave Bigelow, Alice Metzlar, and Dimpy Pathria under the direction of Associate Dean Bruce Richmond produced the original version of this Teaching Assistant Manual in 1988.

The manual has undergone several revisions over the years. In 1994, in light of increasing concerns about improving the quality of TAs, a major revision was undertaken by graduate student Herb Kunze in consultation with Byron Weber Becker, Lecturer in Computer Science and with Professor John Wainwright, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies.

It is our hope that future Teaching Assistants will find this material helpful as they prepare to carry out their TA duties. Comments and/or suggestions regarding this TA Manual are welcome and should be directed by e-mail to mgo@math.uwaterloo.ca.

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Associate Dean,  
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August 2014
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. **INTRODUCTION** ................................................. 4

2. **ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS** ................................ 4
   2.1 Terms of Employment........................................ 4
   2.2 Getting Paid................................................. 5
   2.3 Work-Related Problems...................................... 6
   2.4 How TAs are Assigned...................................... 6
   2.5 Unsatisfactory Performance............................... 6

3. **TEACHING ASSISTANT DUTIES** ......................... 7
   3.1 Getting Started.............................................. 7
   3.2 Tutoring.................................................. 8
   3.3 Marking................................................... 10
   3.3.1 Finishing Up, Information and Privacy,
         Copyright Issues........................................ 12
   3.3.2 Recording Marks........................................ 12
   3.4 Proctoring Tests and Examinations.................... 13
   3.4.1 Math Faculty Proctoring Pool........................ 14
   3.5 Cheating and the Academic Discipline Policy........ 14
   3.6 End of Term............................................... 15

4. **UNIVERSITY TA MANUAL** ................................. 15

APPENDIX

People and Places to Know..................................... 16/17/18
1. Introduction

This manual briefly describes the role of Teaching Assistants (TAs) in the Faculty of Mathematics. It attempts to provide practical advice to TA’s and to answer some common concerns about administrative aspects and duties. Throughout the document are comments from undergraduate students regarding past TA performance.

TA’s in the Math Faculty primarily assist course instructors by tutoring, marking, and proctoring. Effective TA’s play an essential role in the teaching process. They answer students questions, help solve problems, and provide feedback. Being a TA benefits a graduate student by providing financial support and by providing experience in communicating knowledge. Learning to be an effective TA is an important part of your graduate education.

The guidelines for tutoring and marking in Sections 3.2 and 3.3 reflect the experience of a number of past and present graduate students and professors. We urge you to read them carefully.

2. Administrative Details

University Policy is described in “Guidelines on Graduate Student Support,” which you were notified about on admission and is found at:
https://uwaterloo.ca/graduate-studies/guidelines-graduate-student-support.

2.1 Terms of Employment

One TA unit requires an average of five hours of work per week for the academic term, giving a total of approximately 80 hours. *Time needed to learn course material is not included in these hours.* TA duties begin on the first day of classes and ends when the grades for the course have been submitted. TA’s are expected to be available through this complete time period. In general, the duties will not be distributed uniformly throughout the term.

The Ontario Ministry of Education and Training expects that universities will restrict their employment of full time graduate students to a maximum of ten hours per week. As a result, a student may have at most two TA units in one term.

Some scholarships place restrictions on the number of TA units a student may accept per year. For example, holders of NSERC Post-Graduate Scholarships are not to spend more than 450 hours per year on such duties.
If you are a Visa student, it is essential to supply your Department/School Graduate Coordinator with a copy of your valid Study Permit.

2.2 Getting Paid

The TA hourly rate is reviewed each year. When appropriate, Departments will make the information available to their students.

TA’s are paid on the last Friday of every month, directly into their bank account. If there is an issue with your TA payment, contact your Department/School Graduate Coordinator.

New and returning students with TA’s must provide information and complete various forms in order to be paid. Refer to information on the Human Resources website at https://uwaterloo.ca/human-resources/students/information-graduate-students. Web pages: https://uwaterloo.ca/human-resources/students/payroll-and-benefits-signup and https://uwaterloo.ca/human-resources/pay-administration/payroll-forms provide additional helpful information.

Required information includes:

1. *Your Canadian Social Insurance Number (SIN). If you do not have one yet, you must apply for one through the (Government of Canada) Kitchener Service Canada Centre and inform the Department of Human Resources and the Payroll Department as soon as you receive it. Information on applying for a SIN is available on the Human Resources website at https://uwaterloo.ca/human-resources/pay-administration/social-insurance-numbers-and-work-permit-requirements/how-apply-social-insurance-number “How to apply for a Social Insurance Number”.

2. Your current bank, branch, account number, and a void cheque for salary deposit purposes.

3. Your local mailing address, not Department/School address. Your income tax slips will be mailed to this address.

*Forms can be submitted prior to obtaining a SIN, however, Payroll will not release payment until SIN information has been received.

You can arrange to pay your tuition out of your monthly TA/RA salary. Guidelines for arranging this are available at the Finance (Student Accounts) website at https://www.uwaterloo.ca/finance/student-accounts. Select “Fees Arranged”? – see “Using a Promissory Note”.
2.3 Work-Related Problems

If due to serious illness or other emergency you are unable to fulfill a task that is part of your TA assignment, notify your TA supervisor immediately. In other special instances (for example, if you wish to attend a conference) notify your TA supervisor as soon as possible. Your TA supervisor may allow you to reassign your duties if you find a suitable replacement, or will at least attempt to rearrange the scheduling of your duties.

If you have any problems carrying out your assignment (for example, if your duties are requiring more than five hours a week on average), you should first talk with your TA supervisor. It is also a good idea to discuss any problem you have with your own advisor. Other people you can approach to address such problems include your Graduate Officer, your Department/School Chair or the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies. Some departments also have a Graduate Advocate who will be able to help with any problems with your TA duties.

2.4 How TA’s are Assigned

TA’s for Faculty courses (those with MATH prefix) are assigned through the office of the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies. TA’s for CS and departmental courses are assigned from within your unit. Most Computer Science graduate students are assigned to CS courses. Other students are assigned to either a faculty or departmental course.

Prior to the start of each term, CS graduate students will complete a TA Preference form on which they will indicate their duty preferences, such as marking, writing scripts, giving tutorials or holding office hours. Based on these preferences and a student’s skills and knowledge, students are assigned as TAs or as Instructional Apprentices (IA). Graduate students in other departments may mention their preferences for TA assignments to their Graduate Officer. In making specific assignments, a student’s qualifications and previous TA performance are taken into account.

2.5 Unsatisfactory Performance

Comment/Answer: “The TA’s don’t understand the course material”. Make sure that you are capable of TA’ing the course to which you have been assigned. As a graduate student, you are expected to have a general competence in your area. You are expected to know in detail the material in the courses you are TAing. If not then you must spend the time to learn the material, and this time is not included in a TA’s work hours.
Most TA’s are enthusiastic about their work and perform their duties in a responsible manner. TA’s are expected to meet required deadlines and to be punctual in carrying out their assigned duties. TA’s whose performance is unsatisfactory will be warned by their TA supervisor. Continuing unacceptable performance will be reported to the student’s Graduate Officer. This may result in the cancellation of future TA assignments with a consequent drop in financial support.

Resolution of a disagreement between an instructor, TA and Graduate Officer can be further facilitated by the Associate Deans of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies.

3. Teaching Assistant Duties

3.1 Getting Started

The first step in fulfilling your TA obligations is to meet with your TA supervisor, usually the course instructor, to discuss your specific duties. Clarifying your duties early can help prevent miscommunication, doing unnecessary work, and neglecting work that the instructor assumed would be done.

*You should contact your TA supervisor as soon as possible after you are informed of your assignment.* Computer Science TA’s for first and second year classes should contact the Instructional Support Coordinator.

During your first meeting with your TA supervisor, clarify these topics:

- **How does the supervisor want to stay in contact?**
- **Course content and schedule**
  - Get a course outline and any reference materials (course notes, textbooks, solution manuals).
  - Texts for Faculty TA’s (MATH, Algebra & Calculus) may be borrowed from the Mathematics Undergraduate Office (MC4022)
  - Scheduled dates for exams and any group marking.
  - Number and timing of assignments.
- **Marking**
  - How will you receive and return assignments?
  - What is the expected turnaround time?
  - Should you assign some marks for presentation?
  - Who will be preparing sample solutions?
  - Will sample solutions be posted; by whom?
  - If there are several TAs, how will the work be divided?
  - How should the marks be recorded?
- **Tutoring**
  - How many office hours are expected?
  - Is participation in a course newsgroup expected?
  - Meeting place, time, structure, etc., of tutorials
It may also be helpful for you to attend the first class of the course, to introduce yourself to the students and to get an idea of how the course is taught.

3.2 Tutoring

Types of Tutoring Environments

There are several different TA assignments that all essentially involve you answering students’ questions: a Tutorial Centre, Unix consulting, tutorials, labs, and office hours.

The Math Faculty has a first year and a second year Tutorial Centre in which graduate students and upper-year undergraduate students work, answering questions on the core and service Algebra and Calculus courses. If you are assigned to one of these courses, you will likely be asked to work regular weekly hours in the appropriate Tutorial Centre. Likewise, Computer Science has a first/second year Consulting Centre and IA’s who have a consulting role in their assigned course may also work in the Centre.

There is a Math Faculty Computing Facility (MFCF) co-op position available. The co-op sits in the consulting office/Help Centre answering users’ questions, as well as performing other duties as assigned by the Client Support Supervisor, MFCF.

Many courses have regular tutorials or labs in which students can work on assignments and ask questions. You may be asked to help with these sessions.

Office Hours

You may be asked to have office hours during which students can stop by your office and ask questions. Try to schedule office hours to start during one class period and end during the next class period to minimize time conflicts. If there is more than one TA for a course, it is helpful if you post the office hours of all the TAs on your door. Consider posting your electronic mail address as well.

Answering Questions

Comment/Answer: “TA’s are unapproachable, unfriendly, condescending, and impatient.” It is your job to help students; your demeanor is very important.

Students primarily use the above tutoring environments to find help in doing their assignments. The most common questions they ask are “How do I do this question?, and “What’s wrong with my solution?”. Both questions are tricky to answer without giving too much away. It takes a lot of practice to give useful and enlightening hints.
Always ask the student to explain what the question is asking and describe his/her reasoning. This probing reveals if the student has a conceptual problem, which requires you to talk about the material more generally, or point him/her to the appropriate section of the textbook.

**Comment/Answer:** "They don’t seem to have read the assignment, so how can they help me with it? You should familiarize yourself with the current material and assignment before you tutor or mark.

Your tutoring style will depend on your personality, but there are some guidelines you should try to follow:

- Be approachable, enthusiastic, and honest.
- Be prepared. Review the material on which the students are currently working. If you think an assignment question is incorrectly stated or ambiguous, see the instructor in advance.
- You should be able to answer all routine questions about the course material. When a student asks a difficult question, allow yourself a minute to think. If a question stumps you, admit it instead of fabricating an answer. Ask the student to return later, or direct the student to the instructor.
- Have the course material handy. Students often come unprepared.
- In a tutorial, don’t just sit at the front of the room. Circulate about the room, and if there aren’t many questions, approach individual students and ask if they are making progress.
- If many students have questions, don’t spend too much time with one person.
- Have the student reword the question, and explain what he/she has done. Encourage the student to ask clean, specific questions.
- Let the student think. Don’t give away the main point that renders the problem trivial.
- Answer questions at the level of the student.
- Motivate your approach to the problem. Seeing how somebody with more experience thinks about the problem can be helpful to the student.

**Comment/Answer:** “Their English is so bad that I can’t understand what they’re saying”. The ability to express oneself clearly in English is expected of TAs. The International Student Experience team located in the Student Success Office (SCH) has courses available to help you improve your language skills.

- Answer general questions about the course material, but keep in mind that it’s not your job to teach the course to students who have missed the lectures.
- In most tutoring situations, you will be talking to students individually. If however, a number of students have the same problem, it may be helpful to use the blackboard. Be sure to write clearly, turn around when speaking, and make sure that all the students in the group are following your explanation.
• Report widespread problems to the professor so they can be discussed in class.
• Monitor the course newsgroup to stay abreast of problems and solutions discussed there.

Students with general computer-related questions can be sent to the MFCF Help Centre in MC 3017.

3.3 Marking

Assignments are the major source of feedback for both the instructor and the students. The TA should provide students with information about how well they have learned course material. The assignments indicate to the instructor how well the course material has been communicated.

Some instructors will require that students submit their assignments in the drop boxes on the third or fourth floor of the Mathematics and Computer building (MC). If a late penalty policy has been established, make sure the drop boxes are cleared before each penalty increment. Clear boxes carefully, and also scan neighboring ones for stray assignments. If you find an assignment for another course in your box, write the date on it, sign it, and put it in the appropriate box, or turn it in to the TA for that course. Transferring assignments between TA’s is best done in person (try their office hours); do not use graduate mail boxes to forward assignments.

If a student has a problem submitting their work, the modification time of the file is traditionally used to determine if the work was completed late and the normal late policy should apply. Check with your instructor to make sure.

When testing programs, investigate all anomalies – especially when a program fails all of the tests. It may be a bug in your testing procedure, not the student’s program.

At the discretion of the instructor(s) involved, you may be asked to mark part of the midterm or final examination for the course.

Your marking style will depend on the instructor’s instructions, but here are some general guidelines:

Feedback to Students

• Mark clearly and neatly. Think about the wording before you write a comment.

Comment/Answer: “There aren’t enough comments on my paper to know what I did wrong.” Point out the key error in an incorrect solution and refer students to the solutions when necessary.
• Examine a student’s solution carefully, clearly mark where the student went wrong, and write a short explanation, if necessary. If the student appears to be very confused, however, you cannot expect to give help in a short comment. In such a case write “Get help from the professor or Tutorial Centre,” or “See the Solutions,” as appropriate.

• Avoid ambiguous or cryptic comments or symbols (for example, “???”).

• Avoid arrogant or sarcastic comments.

• Comments on the paper as a whole, for example, patterns of errors or weakness in the style of presentation, can be especially valuable to students. For example, “review the XYZ Theorem”.

• A common source of marking errors is when the final answer is correct but the method of solution contains a serious error. It is not enough to simply look at the final answer.

Marking Strategies

• Mark consistently. It helps to mark one question at a time on all papers and take breaks between questions.

• If several TAs are marking the same assignments, lighten the workload by dividing the questions, not the papers, among the markers. This also ensures that all papers will be marked with the same standard.

Comment/Answer: “They slavishly follow the marking scheme and won’t admit another solution is correct.” If you make sure that you understand the material, marking unique solutions should not be a problem.

• Another suggestion: for each question, group together all papers with a similar solution. Even subdivide into groups those papers in which similar errors were made. Then mark the papers, starting with the best. This leaves difficult decisions until the end, when you are thoroughly familiar with the question.

• Have model solutions available. If it is your job to prepare model solutions, you may find it helpful to first skim the work handed in.

• If it is your job to create the marking scheme, skim the papers to help you decide whether your proposed scheme is reasonable. Ask the instructor whether some marks should be assigned for presentation.
3.3.1. Finishing Up, Information and Privacy, Copyright Issues


- Material that contributes to a student’s grade must **not** be left in a public place.

- Comments and grades should be recorded on pages hidden from view of other students.

- Exams and assignments should be returned only to the students who wrote them and not to other individuals, unless written permission has been given by the author.

- If it is your job to post marks, identify the students by ID# only. You should also change the order of the ID#’s to prevent identification of students since lists are often alphabetical by last name.

- Include a comment sheet when returning the assignments to the professor, letting him/her know what material is giving students the most trouble and what things they understand particularly well.

- If it is your job to post model solutions, ensure that you have the location and timing details from the instructor. Solutions for CS courses may be posted in the display cases outside of MC4065 or online. Model solutions, which are to be made available to students, should be clear and correct. Make sure that you are following copyright rules and good practices at the University. Check with the TA Supervisor and see: [http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/copyright](http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/copyright) and [http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/copyright/teaching.html](http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/copyright/teaching.html).

- If many students question your marking, the Professor may ask you to have office hours to address marking issues. Do not be cajoled into changing marks unnecessarily.

- Detecting students who are cheating is important. See section 3.5 for more details.

3.3.2 Recording Marks

Find out whether your instructor or supervisor has a preferred method for recording marks. There are several simple ways to record marks:

- A paper copy of the class list.

- A table of marks kept in an ASCII computer file.
• A computer spreadsheet (E.G., sc on UNIX).

• A marks binder may be kept in a department office. In all cases, keep a backup copy of the mark list.

• Instructors can access class lists through QUEST.

• Every course in the UW course management system LEARN (http://learn.uwaterloo.ca) keeps a viewable current class list on the Classlist page. The roster is updated regularly during the day. The roster of student names can be exported as a comma separated [.CSV] file of names in a format that will allow uploading marks into the LEARN course gradebook. Exporting a roster does not happen on the Classlist page, but on the Grades page.

    Enrollment can fluctuate for a couple of weeks at the beginning of term.

    It’s a good idea to establish how changes to marks will be handled.

3.4 Proctoring Tests and Examinations

Another of the duties of a TA is to proctor tests and examinations. Midterm tests may be held during class time (in which case the instructor may not need a TA proctor) or during the evening, often in a midterm-testing slot.

Final examinations are always written during the official examination period.

For exams and tests outside of normal class times, you are expected to appear 20-30 minutes before the exam begins in order to distribute the exam material. In any case, you should have everything prepared so that the exam begins on time; latecomers can then be handled with minimal disruption to the other students.

If there is a mistake or a typographical error in the exam questions, announce this at the beginning of the examination period and write the changes clearly on the blackboard. Also announce any examination procedures to be followed; for instance, you may not want anyone to leave the examination room during the last fifteen minutes.

If the exam is held in a classroom, exam regulations require that students sit in alternate seats. Once the students have settled down, quietly take a head count as it is useful to know the number of examinees present (if, for example, a test paper gets lost). Count the number of exams submitted before leaving the exam room. If there is a discrepancy, try to resolve it as soon as possible. A seating plan should be circulated to the students for them to indicate their ID# and position in the examination room. In this way you can take attendance and discourage cheating by
neighboring students. During final exams, students must present their student ID cards and fill out the colored identification cards supplied by the Registrar’s Office.

If there is no clock in the examination room or if the one there is not giving the correct time, periodically post the time on the board (with greater frequency near the end of the exam period). If a student asks to leave the room for a short period make sure all the others are present before allowing him/her to leave and have another TA go with them.

Do not sit at the front of the room reading a book or doing some work. Walk around the room frequently and change your location in the room when sitting down. It is important that the students realize that the proctors are being vigilant.

Clarify with the instructor how questions are to be answered; when answering questions, you must be careful not to give out too much information. If there is a problem understanding the wording of a question, you can clarify what is required, but do not discuss course material.

Make an announcement when there are only five minutes left in the exam period. Collect exams punctually; extend the exam period only on the professor’s instructions. Remind the students not to discuss the exam until all papers have been collected. As papers are turned in, check each to make sure it has a name and ID# on it.

3.4.1 Math Faculty Proctoring Pool

The Math Faculty maintains a “pool” of graduate students, each of whom must be available to assist in the proctoring of a midterm or final examination (but not both) in a course other than the one(s) to which he/she was assigned. The Mathematics Undergraduate Office will select the pool proctors at random each term from the list of Graduate TAs.

Proctors selected for midterm exams will have duties anywhere from the 4th to the 11th week of term. Proctors selected for final examinations will be notified at least 1 week before classes end. If you are chosen to be a proctor and you are unable to be present at the assigned exam, you must arrange for a suitable substitute.

3.5 Cheating and the Academic Discipline Policy

Cheating on exams, tests, or assignments is a serious offense and the penalties range from a grade penalty to suspension or expulsion from the University. Cheating on exams includes using unauthorized aids or communicating in any way with others during an examination.
If you detect possible cases of cheating during a test or exam, you must inform the chief proctor as soon as possible. You must immediately write a note about the incident and keep any evidence, providing the student with a fresh exam sheet if necessary.

Cheating on an assignment or project includes the verbatim copying of another student’s solution, or collaborating excessively with another student. The only exceptions are assignments or projects, which the instructor designates as group activities.

Any possible cases of cheating found when marking must be reported to the instructor, who will determine whether cheating has occurred and take further action if necessary.

3.6 End of Term

At the end of term, you must return all of the course materials you may have received.


An excellent resource is the University TA Manual written by Svitlana Taraban-Gordon of the Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE). This manual can be accessed on the CTE website https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/support-graduate-students or the Graduate Studies Office (GSO) website https://uwaterloo.ca/graduate-studies/current-students (current student section).
Appendix: People and Places to Know

Mathematics Graduate Office
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Graduate Unit Contacts

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### Pure Mathematics
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MC5064 x33674

### Statistics & Actuarial Science
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Mary Lou Dufton, mdufton@uwaterloo.ca  
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M3-3114 x36532

### Masters of Quantitative Finance (MQF)
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M3-3137 x35728

### Mathematics Undergraduate Office – MC4022
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Nancy Orvis-Korn, POOL PROCTORING norvisko@uwaterloo.ca  
MC4022 x37557  
MC4022 x33254

### MFCF Instructional Support Coordinators
Ajnu Jacob ajacob@uwaterloo.ca  
Sean Scott sm3scott@uwaterloo.ca  
MC3054 x36272  
MC3066 x37175

### Year 1 Tutorial Centre
### Year 2 Tutorial Centre
Robert Andre, Tutorial Centre Coordinator randre@uwaterloo.ca

### Computer Science Instructional Support Coordinators
Karen Anderson kaanders@uwaterloo.ca  
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CS Undergraduate Studies Admin Coordinator  
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Computer Science Consulting Centre  
MC4065  x32538

Counseling Services – Mathematics  
MC4019C  x32655/35622

Payroll  
payroll@uwaterloo.ca  
hrhelp@uwaterloo.ca  
GSC1102  x35841/33134  x35935

Student Accounts  
NH 1110  x38466  
Re: student fee tax info  
studentaccounts@uwaterloo.ca

Conflict Management/ Human Rights Office  
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