

Undergraduate Teaching Assistantships: Guidelines for GLG 357

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Class time/location: 8.30am – 09.50am, SHD 237

Lab time/location: Tuesday, 1.15pm – 4.05pm, SHD 239

Office hours: Thursday 1.15pm – 4.05pm, SHD 239

Undergraduate Teaching Assistant definition: An undergraduate Teaching Assistant (TA) is a student enrolled in a credit-bearing course with specific student learning outcomes who assists faculty and graduate teaching assistants in providing instructional support. Undergraduate TAs will normally have taken, and excelled in, the course for which they are serving as assistants. Undergraduate TA positions provide opportunities for students to enrich their educational experiences while simultaneously supporting faculty and providing greater individualized support of enrolled students than might otherwise be possible. By assisting with course instruction, undergraduate TAs should also develop knowledge of course content and skills that are natural to an instructional role.

Please read this document carefully and let me know if you have any questions. Your reasons for undertaking this position in this course will vary. The main part of my role is to act as a mentor and provide direction and advice as you complete your responsibilities. Course materials will be available to all TAs through the course Canvas site. Materials from the 2021 course can be found on this [Google Drive](#).

Many students undertaking an undergraduate TA position wonder what is expected of them and what they can expect from the instructor of the course in terms of support and guidance. Experiences can differ for each student because expectations may vary from one instructor (and/or course) to the next. This document is designed to outline what I expect of students who undertake an undergraduate TA position in GLG 357. This document also outlines what students can expect of me.

Receiving course credit as an Undergraduate Teaching Assistant

At Miami, there are two ways through which you can receive credit for your role as an undergraduate TA. First, this can be done through registering for independent study hours (x77). Second, you have the option of completing the Miami Undergraduate Associate program:

<https://miamioh.edu/student-life/rinella-learning-center/leadership-employment/ua/index.html>.

Through this program you will work with the instructor to 1) identify your goals and learning objectives associated with your undergraduate associate position and 2) define the roles and responsibilities you will assume throughout the semester. The deadline for applying to this program for the Spring 2022 semester is **February 7th**. For both options, the number of credit hours can be discussed with me. For both options in the past, students have selected 2-3 hours.

The content and information provided on the next several pages have been modified from various resources which exist at other institutions. It is presented to you here within the context of GLG 357.

Best Practices (*adapted from the University of Minnesota*)

What types of TA practices best help students learn? What types of activities are particularly helpful to educators? As you prepare for your role as a TA, consider the classes you have taken and think about what the TAs have done that was particularly helpful, and what have the TAs done that was not helpful? [You should not be undertaking the role of an undergraduate TA with the impression that you are supposed to simply supply students with correct answers to assignments.](#)

[Undergraduate TAs play a crucial role in supporting students with their learning and simply supplying students with correct answers to assignments does nothing to facilitate and support learning.](#)

Here is a list of some practices that other TAs and course instructors have mentioned as being particularly useful:

- **Show up.** A large part of being successful is just showing up. Show up to the activities that you are responsible for. Students appreciate that they can rely on you.
- **Be prompt.** Show up on time. Ideally, show up a few minutes early so students can settle in by the time the lab should start. Answer email and other communications in a timely fashion. Be on time to weekly meetings.
- **Be engaged.** When you are in a lab, [you are there for the students. Students appreciate knowing that you are approachable and are there to help them. Lab time, for example, is not a time to withdraw to a corner and check your phone, or work on an assignment.](#) Even if there is a lull in student questions during the lab, make sure you are attentive to what is going on, and that students know you are accessible for questions or for checking their work.
- **Use good time management skills.** Part of being a student is having too much to do. (The same is very true of being a professor!). There is always more to learn, more to read, more to write, more research to do, people to talk to, projects to participate in, etc. Being a successful TA requires balancing your TA work, your coursework, and other commitments. This is admittedly not easy. However, by accepting a TA offer you are committing to being able to put in sufficient time to do your TA duties.
- **Communicate.** Part of working in a group is using good communication practices. Part of this is communicating with students. Part is communicating with other TAs. And part is communicating with the instructor. There are a number of good communication practices including, but not limited to the following:
 - If your course has weekly meetings make sure you attend them since these meetings are a primary way for the course staff to exchange important information; if you miss a meeting (for example due to illness) check to see what you missed.
 - Alert the instructor (and other TAs if appropriate) about course problems. Often TAs are the first to recognize when, for example, the majority of the class is struggling with material/content, when there is confusion about the meaning of a particular question or what weird and wonderful minerals they are observing in a hand sample or thin section.
 - Ask good questions. These might be for the instructor and/or TAs ("A number of students are asking about X, and I'm not sure what to tell them. What do you recommend?"), or of the students themselves ("can you explain your answer so I'm sure I understand it?"). One of the most efficient ways to assess if a student truly understands a concept is to ask them to explain it to you, or at least explain their approach/reasoning behind their answer.
- **Mentor other TAs.** One important way, if not the primary way, that effective TA practices are passed along is from TA to TA. This is one reason why there are multiple TAs, usually including a number of experienced TAs. TAs should help other. For example, TAs often share tips about how to handle difficult course concepts ("in the past this topic has been difficult for students, but we found that it helps to explain it by...").
- **Be positive and enjoy your TA work.** You are likely a TA for GLG 357 because you find the course content interesting, you like teaching and learning, and you enjoy helping others learn. Be positive, enjoy your TA work, and share your enthusiasm for learning and for the field of Petrology!

- **Be professional.** In addition to following the department and University rules, the best TAs model professional behavior in their TA work. Students take cues from TAs. If students see TAs arriving to labs on time, being approachable, etc. then students are more likely to show up on time and be engaged. If students see TAs arriving late, retreating to a corner to do their own work during lab, etc. then students are less likely to have a high regard for the course or for the field of study. Professionalism includes not only those issues, but also issues such as respect for students.

Responsibilities and Expectations

Undergraduate TAs will not be responsible for designing any assignments (without oversight), grading, the organization of the course field trip, or conducting any high-risk laboratory experiments. Undergraduate TAs will also not be involved in the investigation of academic misconduct of fellow students: if a TA suspects another student of being in violation of the Miami academic student code of conduct, they should report this immediately to the faculty member (*see Academic Dishonesty section below*). Undergraduate TAs are responsible for assisting in the teaching of the weekly labs, attending weekly meetings to discuss the following weeks lab, and are expected to communicate in a timely manner with the course instructor, other undergraduate TAs, and the graduate TAs.

TAs are expected to disclose any possible conflicts of interest due to previous or present personal relationships with students in the course, and should never accept money or personal gifts from other students.

A Teaching Assistantship can have many benefits to the student, the faculty instructor, and other students enrolled in the class. For you, the TA, it can lead to:

- 1) a better understanding of the teaching and learning process
- 2) a deeper appreciation of the subject matter
- 3) pre-professional training
- 4) improvement of scientific communications skills
- 5) the development of leadership and self-confidence
- 6) better time management skills

Communication

Undergraduate TAs should check email regularly (minimally once every business day) and respond to faculty, other TAs (including graduate TAs), in a timely fashion (usually within one business day, but sooner if the situation warrants it).

Academic Dishonesty

If you notice suspicious activity, you first need to decide whether it is likely that academic dishonesty occurred, and, if so, whether there is reasonable evidence to support that suspicion. Please refer to the course syllabus and Miami University's Student Code of Conduct for additional clarification regarding Academic Dishonesty policies. If you think that cheating has occurred, then you should always report this to the instructor. More specifically, you should

- Gather evidence.
- Take notes: write down any additional information that might be relevant, and which you might not remember if the situation is contested at a later date.

- Discuss with the instructor: the instructor will then need to decide what further action to take. If the instructor determines that cheating has indeed occurred, there are University procedures they will need to follow.

Faculty Responsibilities

For the faculty instructor, the TA can provide valuable formative feedback on course assignments, course content and delivery, and discuss how well the students in the course coping with the material and workload.

From Roderick (2009) several aspects of good practice for undergraduate TAs have been identified. From my perspective, these work to:

- 1) Train and mentor undergraduate teaching assistants
- 2) Provide teaching assistants with visibility and opportunities to display competence
- 3) Engage teaching assistants in the course and in student learning
- 4) Communicate clearly the responsibilities of assistantships
- 5) Enhance educational quality for all

As the faculty instructor, I therefore have following responsibilities:

- 1) Establish and maintain reliable lines of communication
- 2) Ensure that an undergraduate TA receives the appropriate training
- 3) Never require an undergraduate TA to prepare course material without oversight
- 4) Work with an undergraduate TA ahead of time to identify potential peer conflicts
- 5) Work with an undergraduate TA ahead of time to identify schedule conflicts

I am extremely grateful to any student who volunteers their time to assist with the teaching of this course. Please do not hesitate to contact me at any time regarding any aspect of this position.

This document has been prepared with resources available from Brown University, Carnegie Mellon, Columbia University, SUNY Buffalo, University of Georgia, University of Minnesota, University of Pittsburgh, and Yale.

References cited:

Roderick, C. (2009). Undergraduate teaching assistantships: Good practices. *MountainRise, the International Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*.
<http://www.wcu.edu/facctr/mountainrise/archive/vol5no2/html/finuta.pdf>