

## Teaching Assistant Responsibilities

Although it is hard to say explicitly what makes a good TA versus a bad TA, here are the baseline responsibilities:

**Communication** – Much of being part of a working team is an ability to communicate. For example, suppose you have a major conference deadline during the quarter. Tell the professor upfront so the two of you can work out a way to decrease your workload that week. Your professor will understand and you'll be able to get your work done. On the other hand, you could just not tell the professor and disappear off the map for a week. Clearly, the latter choice would hurt your relationship with him/her. Another example – suppose a student or professor asks you a question you need some time to answer. Take a minute or two to reply saying “I'm working on it and have done X” – then *be sure to follow-up*. As a general guideline, either on forums or in e-mail, you should reply to a student or the professor in no greater than 24 hours (and most often less than that). Lastly, if you find yourself spending more hours than you are appointed – notify the professor as soon as possible. Until you can resolve the issue, you should be professional and keep getting the job done (while still logging your hours).

**Attention to Detail** – Students and professors understand you make mistakes time to time, but frequent errors on solutions or mistakes in discussion can result in a general loss of confidence. For things like solution writing – remember you are not just a student doing the homework – you *need* to be correct. If you need help, enlist friends to help review it with you or ask the professor if a particularly hard problem is troubling you. For things like grading – it means recognizing you weren't consistent grading a problem and going back through the homeworks (even if it is a large stack of homeworks) to re-grade it.

**Care about the students** – This is a difficult thing to fake. If you genuinely have it – it means you will listen patiently to their requests for re-grades. You will be patient with a struggling student and extend Office Hours to help him/her. You will discuss long term plans individually with students and try to give advice where you can (good classes to take, hints for graduate school, etc.). You will schedule extra Office Hours and/or an exam review right before an exam to help them. You will be quick about replying to e-mail and forums, especially on days before the homework is due. Students *know* if you care or not, and caring about them can make up for other minor blemishes or can make you stand out as one of the best.

**Resourcefulness** – This applies most to your relationship with the professor. The professor knows the answer to >95% of the questions you have. However, you can likely figure out the answer on your own for ~90% of those questions. For example, suppose a student asks you what the reading assignment is. You could ask the professor, or check if it's posted on the website. Clearly the latter choice is better for your relationship with the professor. Don't be afraid to ask questions you can't get the answer to on your own, but at least try before asking the professor.

**Don't try to fake it** – Suppose you are asked a question in OH/discussion and you don't know the answer. Don't try to fake it and give them a potentially incorrect answer. Say you don't know, promise you will find out the answer and get back to them, find out the answer, and give it to them on the website or at the next discussion. If you fake it and say something wrong in the

same way you give correct answers, students will be confused and will lose significant confidence in you.

**Be a team player** – Suppose your professor is asking the students to do a harder assignment than you think is reasonable. You expressed this privately to the professor but ultimately the professor went with the hard assignment. The next day, a student comes to your OH and complains about it. You can either say 1. “Yeah, its way too hard, I tried to stop it but the professor didn’t understand” or 2. “It isn’t as hard as it looks and <give the professors justification for it>”. The first scenario creates disharmony in the team and while you might think “Being on the side of the students” will get you credit with them, they may see you as cynical or disenfranchised and they will be bitter about the assignment (and potentially the class/you in general). In the second scenario, you stand up for the team and may help the student’s attitude toward the assignment.

**Give examples that relate to the students** - Much of computer science can be taught with good analogies. Chose interesting, relatable analogies and the students will learn the material better and appreciate you for doing it. Be creative!

**Praise in public, admonish in private** - In discussion or any other public forum do not harshly criticize a student’s answer or the professor. However, if a student asks a really insightful question or you see a really clever solution on a homework, feel free to praise the student. In the case of a clever homework solution, try not to use their name (you don’t know if they are comfortable with you doing so), but they’ll recognize the solution as theirs and be proud. Conversely, if you see a common error on a homework, be careful how to bring it up. Say something like “This was a common mistake because students likely thought X. X is understandable because of Y, but is wrong because of Z.”

**Read between the lines** – This point is quite subjective and could elicit a fair deal of debate. That said, some TAs (and graduate students) find criticism at UCSD very subtle relative to criticism in other cultures (even more subtle than other universities in the US). If you get an e-mail from a professor answering a question by telling you where you can find it on your own, realize you’ve likely made a mistake and need to be more resourceful. Similarly, an e-mail from a professor telling you the solutions are flawed and need to be fixed is likely not a “routine” e-mail. It behooves you to take any criticism seriously. If you overreact you’ll just be more attentive to details. If you under react, the professor may feel you are not being serious enough about the class. Students can be harder to read as some will criticize much of everything and others need a lot of courage to make a suggestion to you. Try to figure out the difference and take their comments seriously (at least address their concerns).

**Be positive and excited** – Even the most experienced TA can forget this. Suppose you TA your favorite research subject, you will almost inherently convey your interest and excitement in the topic. The next year you may be a TA for a “trivial” introductory course. While the material may seem trivial to you, don’t make the mistake of not being excited about it.