

# USC Graduate School

## Handbook for Teaching Assistants (TAs), Research Assistants (RAs), and Graduate Assistant Lecturers (ALs)

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### Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible to serve as a Teaching Assistant (TA), Research Assistant (RA), or Graduate Assistant Lecturer (AL), students must:

- have been admitted to a graduate degree program with regular graduate standing
- be enrolled full-time
- be in good academic standing with a GPA of no lower than 3.0
- be verified by their home program to be making satisfactory academic progress toward the degree
- have met the [university's standards for proficiency in the English language](#)

### USC Standards for English Proficiency

For international students whose native language is not English, TA or AL offers are contingent on their achieving a score of at least 5.0 on the International Teaching Assistant (ITA) Oral Interview Exam, administered by USC's American Language Institute. First-time international TAs and ALs whose native language is not English must take this examination before assuming teaching duties, and no later than the first day of classes.

More information about the standards for English proficiency is available [here](#). More information about the ITA Oral Interview Exam is available [here](#). Information regarding the ITA Language Institute can be found [here](#).

## **Selection Criteria**

PhD students will be prioritized over master's students for all TA, RA, and AL positions. Selection criteria may include:

- departmental need
- prior teaching experience
- faculty requests
- student's relevant knowledge, skills, and expertise
- compatibility with the research goals of supervising faculty member or principal investigator
- specific limitations defined by the granting agency (if applicable)

Questions about the specifics of TA and AL selection should be referred to the department chair or director of the graduate program.

## **Offer Letter**

TA, RA, and AL appointments are confirmed through an official offer letter. The offer letter may be sent to the student at the beginning of the academic year or at the beginning of a semester or summer session. The offer letter details the length of the appointment, the time commitment, expectations of the department, stipend, and other benefits. The offer letter serves as a contract to be signed by the student and returned to the department or program.

## **Continuation and Reappointment**

The continuation and/or reappointment of any TA, RA, or AL position is based on the student's successful performance of teaching or research duties, satisfactory academic progress, and the selection criteria above. Student evaluations are taken into consideration for TAs and ALs. RAs must meet the program's and PI's or professor's expectations as outlined in the contractual [offer letter](#). In some cases, the reappointment of RAs is dependent on the continuation of contract or grant funding. Other factors that can affect continuation and reappointment of any position include departmental need and faculty evaluations (see [selection criteria](#)).

Poor performance or conduct may result in the immediate withdrawal of a TA, RA, or AL position.

## **USC Standards of Conduct**

TAs, RAs, and ALs are subject to the [rules and regulations](#) of the Board of Trustees, the university, and the department or program within which they hold their awards. In the performance of their responsibilities they must abide by the academic and instructional criteria and policies established by the department or program of their appointment. All TAs, RAs, and ALs shall respect the rights and opinions of students and uphold the academic and community standards of the university as set forth in the [Student Conduct Code](#) and in the [USC Code of Ethics](#) in the performance of their responsibilities.

All TAs, RAs, and ALs are required to review the [university's policy against harassment and discrimination for staff, faculty](#) and [students](#) prior to the beginning of the first semester of their appointment as a TA, RA, or AL.

[Discrimination, harassment](#), or [sexual harassment](#) is unacceptable. Any incidents must be immediately reported to the [Office of Equity and Diversity](#). Retaliation against complainants is a violation of university policy and should be reported immediately to the Office of Equity and Diversity. Victims or witnesses should not attempt to resolve discrimination, harassment, or sexual harassment issues within their department or school without guidance from the Office of Equity and Diversity.

USC also has established policies for [Conflict of Interest in Research](#) and [Scientific Misconduct](#). These policies apply to TAs, RAs, and ALs.

### **Expected Student Behavior**

TAs, RAs, and ALs should:

- be careful, thoughtful, and discreet
- conduct themselves professionally
- regularly communicate with their faculty supervisor
- ask for advice and assistance if and when they need it

### **Responsibilities**

- TA, RA, and AL positions support graduate students' experience as such. Therefore, their first responsibility is to their own studies
- After the offer letter has been issued, any modifications to TA, RA, or AL stipends and/or hours must be approved by the university

### **Teaching Assistants and Assistant Lecturers**

All responsibilities of TAs and ALs are carried out under the established supervision of the departmental faculty. The duties of TAs may include the following: reading course texts and materials, assisting during lectures, leading discussion sections or lab meetings, holding office hours each week, responding to student concerns, grading course assignments and exams, leading and monitoring lab exercises, participating in regular meetings with supervising faculty and other TAs, designing and leading review sessions, serving as a liaison between the instructor and students, upholding the university's policy on academic integrity, and assisting with the management of the course details. The [Center for Excellence in Teaching](#) is a good resource for support and information.

In addition to leading their courses, ALs may find that their duties sometimes overlap with those of TAs.

As with faculty at USC, TAs and ALs are evaluated by their students. TAs and ALs should review evaluations at the end of each semester after grades are submitted. TAs and ALs are encouraged to keep a record of the numerical scores and student comments for their teaching portfolio.

### **Research Assistants**

RAs are responsible for the accuracy, validity and integrity of the research on which they are contributing. The quality of the research reflects on the student, the faculty supervisor, and the university. Deliberate falsification of research results may result in dismissal from the university.

RAs must maintain the confidentiality of the faculty mentor's professional activities and research prior to presentation or publication, in accordance with existing practices and policies in the area of research activity.

In publication and presentation of research produced as an RA, the student must acknowledge the contributions of the faculty supervisor and other members of the research team.

RAs should assume responsibility for making proper use of the intellectual, instructional and physical environment in which they are conducting research.

The nature of some research projects may require that the RA be available during holiday periods or semester break. Students and their faculty supervisors should discuss expectations and time off before the appointment is accepted.

## **Faculty**

At the beginning of the semester, the supervising faculty member will discuss with their TAs and RAs the scope of their duties and responsibilities. This should include making the student aware of the criteria that will be used for the evaluation of performance. At the end of each semester, the supervising faculty will evaluate the performance of the TAs and RAs under their direction. Any written evaluations will be kept on file in the department.

Faculty are responsible for structuring the activities of TAs and RAs in accordance with university guidelines concerning TA and RA. TAs and RAs are allowed to devote **no more than 20 hours per week**, on average, to their teaching or research activities.

Faculty are responsible for knowing the terms of appointment for each of their TAs and RAs and adjusting the activities for each accordingly.

Supervising faculty may not require TAs and RAs to perform services unrelated to their teaching or research activities, such as personal errands for the faculty member, providing child or pet care, and so forth.

## **Expected Faculty Behavior**

Faculty supervisors of TAs should:

- provide and discuss the syllabus with the TA before or within the first week of classes
- explain to the TA the learning and content objectives of the course
- discuss with the TA any questions or concerns about the course material
- clarify their expectations pertaining to:
  - attendance in lecture
  - leading lab and discussion sections
  - designing syllabi for lab and discussion sections
  - grading
  - holding review sessions
  - office hours
  - procuring audio and visual material
  - photocopying or posting materials online
  - proctoring exams
  - overall purpose of the teaching assistant (TA) in the course
- schedule regular meetings with their TA team and with individual TAs.
- provide examples of a range of exams, papers, quizzes, and lab reports
- schedule meetings with the TAs to discuss upcoming assignments and provide or develop a grading rubric
- be sensitive to a TA's overall time and effort when scheduling turn-around time for graded assignments
- share with their TAs successful pedagogical strategies and activities for a given concept or topic
- share with their TAs general beneficial pedagogical practices
- be prompt in notifying their TAs with any change in scheduling or the syllabi

Faculty supervisors of RAs should:

- provide their RAs with a set of short- and long-term project goals to be accomplished in the semester/year
- clarify their expectations pertaining to:
  - number of hours spent on activities
  - quality and format for submitting research project components
  - methods of communication
  - professional and collegial etiquette
  - university holidays
- schedule regular meetings with their RAs to discuss current projects and progress towards stated goals
- discuss with the RA any questions or concerns about the research
- clarify their policies on patents, contributions of research activities, collaboration, and copyrights
- clarify their policy on using research conducted through the RAship for inclusion in theses or dissertations
- be sensitive to an RA's overall time and effort and ensure that the student does not exceed more time in the lab than the RAship allows
- share best research practices and encourage professional development
- promptly notify RAs about changes in the research schedule
- promptly notify RAs about changes in the standing of an external grant

## **Terms of Appointment**

### **Expected Effort**

The first responsibility of a graduate student is his/her own research and studies, satisfactory academic progress, and timely progress to the degree. For this reason, except for summer session, awards cannot exceed 20 hours per week for a 50% assignment or 10 hours per week for a 25% assignment, averaged over a semester.

Requests for up to an additional 5 hours per week for a temporary, short-term assignment or a one-time opportunity during the fall or spring semester are subject to approval by the Vice Provost for Graduate Programs. Students should see the staff advisor in their home program for help with the request process.

In cases where appointment to a TAship, RAship, or ALship is made in a program other than the student's home program, the program of appointment is responsible for providing stipend, tuition, and all health-related fees. The program of appointment should also inquire of the student and the student's advisor whether the student has any other appointments that could affect the total expected effort.

Effective in Fall 2014, PhD student research assistants must be provided the stipend determined by their home program even if their RAship is in a different setting, for example, a lab in a different school within USC. The home program is identified by the POST code under which the student is registered

## Stipends, Tuition Remission, and Health Benefits

- Each student is responsible for checking his/her account for accuracy.
- Each student settles any charges for which s/he is responsible by the deadline each semester.

All TA, RA, and AL appointments include tuition units, health insurance and access to the student health center, and a stipend. Each year, the Provost sets the base stipend for TAs, RAs, and ALs. Schools, programs, and PIs may offer appointments with higher amounts.

In addition:

- A 50% TA, RA, or AL appointment includes tuition remission up to 12 units per semester of the appointment and 6 units of tuition remission for the summer following the assignment.
- A 33% TA, RA, or AL appointment includes tuition remission up to 10 units per semester of the appointment and 5 units of tuition remission for the summer following the assignment.
- A 25% TA, RA, or AL appointment includes tuition remission up to 8 units per semester of the appointment and 4 units of tuition remission for the summer following the assignment.

TAs, RAs, and ALs who would like to use remitted tuition units for coursework outside their home program must have the written approval of their faculty advisor, department chair or program director, and the dean of the school. If students do not have prior approval, they may be responsible for covering the cost of these units.

The tuition allowance is non-transferable from semester to semester and will be applied to the student's account in the amount appropriate for the courses s/he takes. Students should contact the program of the appointment if the tuition is not credited to their account. Fees (books, laboratory, etc.) are not covered by the award.

The university requires TAs, RAs, and ALs to be enrolled in a minimum of 6 units every semester or in equivalent full-time enrollment (GRSC 800, GRSC 810, Thesis 594 or Dissertation 794).

Students who serve as TAs, RAs, and ALs during the summer receive a stipend and tuition remission proportional to the appointment. The health center fee will also be provided, and the student will have access from the first day of the appointment until the end of the summer. (The spring coverage period for the USC student health insurance includes January through the end of the summer as well.) Students who are invited to campus for any other sponsored academic purpose, such as a professional development institute, receive access to the student health center from the first day of the academic event until the end of the summer.

## Stipend Periods

Semester	Begin date	End date
Summer	May 16	August 15
Fall	August 16	December 31
Spring	January 1	May 15

The 4½ month periods for stipends are slightly different than the semester schedule. Students must be provided the stipend for the entire 4½ months. Students who leave the program part-way through the appointment are not entitled to the remaining stipend. Students receiving a fellowship should refer to the source of the fellowship for additional information about stipend periods and dates.

### **Tax Status of Awards**

The stipends provided to TA's, RA's, and AL's are treated as taxable income by the Internal Revenue Service. Therefore, the university is obligated to withhold income taxes. Tuition remission provided to a TA, RA, or AL is not taxable. International students should consult with OIS for information about tax filing. For additional information, students should contact the IRS directly or consult their own tax advisor.

### **Health Insurance**

The school in which a student serves as a TA, RA, or AL provides the premium for the student health insurance and for access to the student health center during the term of the student's service. Details of the current health insurance package can be found [here](#).

Students who had a spring TA, RA, or AL award will continue to have health insurance coverage for the entire summer. Students who are not serving as TAs, RAs, or ALs during the summer are responsible for the summer student health center fee, if they choose to have access.

### **TA Training**

All departments and programs must provide new TAs and ALs with training that will prepare them for their duties and responsibilities.

Training of a new TA, RA, or AL is the responsibility of both the program in which the appointment is held, and the faculty supervising the new TA, RA, or AL. Some schools and programs conduct their own required training programs as well.

The university-sponsored CET TA Training Program is offered every August and January before classes commence and provides a day-long discussion of university policies and TA responsibilities. At this event, outstanding TAs and faculty introduce new TAs to a variety of teaching methods and discuss issues pertaining to the life and challenges of being both a teacher and scholar.

### **Conflict Resolution**

If a student has a problem or complaint regarding an appointment as a TA, RA, or AL, then the problem should be brought immediately to the attention of the supervising faculty or staff to whom the TA, RA, or AL is responsible. If a solution cannot be reached, then resolution should then be sought through the department or program chair, and then the Dean of the academic unit. See the [Problem-Solving and Conflict Resolution](#) guidelines on the USC graduate school website for more information.

The student may refer the dispute to the Graduate School for consultation at any time. This may be done by first contacting the Graduate Student Advocate for Student Relations at [graduate.relations@usc.edu](mailto:graduate.relations@usc.edu) or at (213) 740-9033. For disputed academic evaluation procedures that result in dismissal from a degree program, students are referred to the "[Academic Policies](#)" section in [SCampus](#).

## Resources

### [Center for Excellence in Teaching](#)

The Center for Excellence in Teaching (CET) is the university's think tank for innovative teaching. As a faculty-led initiative, CET draws upon the talents of experienced faculty to promote a commitment to excellence in teaching, learning, and scholarship.

CET provides training and resources to improve teaching at USC, including supporting faculty and Teaching Assistants as they devise new courses and develop enriching out-of-class activities. Instructors are encouraged to find opportunities to define, practice, and advance their disciplines, in addition to interdisciplinary collaborative endeavors. CET offers seminars and lectures throughout the semester on a variety of topics, and provides a training session at the beginning of each semester for Teaching Assistants.

### [SCampus Student Guidebook](#)

SCampus provides information and official school policies on a wide-ranging number of topics.

### [American Language Institute](#)

Many international students are from countries where English is not spoken as a native language. The American Language Institute (ALI) provides classes and other resources to assist international undergraduate and graduate students in improving their English and adapting to an American university program.

Before they can be cleared to begin teaching at USC, all international Teaching Assistants are required to take part in a training program run by ALI.

### [Engemann Student Health Center](#) (UPC)

The Engemann Student Health Center website provides information about the USC health insurance, on-campus medical services, student counseling services, and wellness. Students may make appointments through the website as well. The Engemann Student Health Center tends to be used primarily by students based at UPC.

### [Eric Cohen Student Health Center](#) (HSC)

The Eric Cohen Student Health Center website provides information about the USC health insurance, on-campus medical services, student counseling services, and wellness. Students may make appointments through the website as well. The Eric Cohen Student Health Center tends to be used primarily by students based at HSC.