



POLICIES AND PROCEDURES FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS & GRADUATE STUDENT LECTURERS

An Element of the Graduate Teaching at USC Resource Hub
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Purpose of this Document

The following pages serve as a policy guide for Teaching Assistants (TAs) and Graduate Assistant Lecturers (ALs) at the University of Southern California. TAs and ALs play an important role in USC’s educational mission by supporting instruction, engaging students in learning, fostering inclusive classroom environments, and contributing to the academic success of the university community.

This document provides an overview of the expectations and benefits associated with these appointments. It provides guidance on university and departmental policies, requirements, and expectations. On the affiliated Graduate Teaching at USC Resource Hub, TAs and ALs will find practical information and recommendations for effective teaching, student support, and classroom management, as well as information about available training, resources, and professional development opportunities to help graduate students expand their teaching skills.

Staff from the Graduate School and the Center for Excellence in Teaching prepared this document, with input from students, staff, and faculty across the university. It is intended as a reference tool and does not replace official university policies, departmental requirements, or the provisions of the collective bargaining agreement between USC and graduate student workers. To the extent some of the topics below are addressed in these policies or documents, TAs and ALs are encouraged to refer to those policies and documents. TAs and ALs are also encouraged to consult their academic unit, supervising faculty member, the Graduate School, and other university offices for additional guidance, as needed.

GA, TA and AL Roles for Graduate Students

Graduate Assistant (GA) is an overarching term for students serving as Teaching Assistants (TA), Graduate Assistant Lecturers (AL), or Research Assistants (RAs). GA appointments include tuition, fees, and a stipend at or above the university’s minimum rate, which the Provost sets annually. Schools and programs may offer higher stipend amounts.

The university requires GAs to be enrolled in at least 6 units in the fall and spring semesters, or in equivalent full-time courses such as GRSC 800abz, GRSC 810, Thesis 594, or Dissertation 794.

GA appointments are confirmed by an official offer letter sent at the beginning of the academic year or a semester. These letters are sent to students via the Graduate School's TARA system or, for students in Dornsife, from the Dornsife Student Database. A 50% GA appointment is considered "full-time" for a graduate student, as the remaining 50% of a student's time should be dedicated to coursework or research leading to the degree. All GA responsibilities are carried out under the supervision of a designated faculty member.

Doctoral students generally fill GA positions; however, schools may award GA positions to students in master's programs, provided the benefits, including tuition, fees, and the minimum stipend, are covered by the school or program at the established rates.

Graduate student appointments vary in their responsibilities and level of instructional authority. While all roles contribute to the university's mission, they differ in the extent to which they involve teaching, assessment, student interaction, and academic judgment.

Teaching Assistantships (Job Code 032010) offer graduate students the opportunity to develop important skills in USC classrooms. The duties of TAs typically include some combination of the following:

- reading course texts and materials,
- assisting during lectures,
- leading discussion sections or lab meetings,
- holding office hours,
- 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 helping manage course details.

Graduate Assistant Lecturers (Job Code 032014) are advanced PhD students who serve as the instructors of record for undergraduate classes, including sections of the Freshman Writing Program, language programs, or the American Language Institute.

Other Non-GA Teaching Support Roles

Course Assistant and Grader roles are available to master's students as hourly student workers. Course assistants provide classroom administrative support. While graders, teaching assistants, and graduate assistant lecturers may assess student work, graders typically score assignments according to predetermined rubrics or answer keys. In contrast, TAs and ALs provide substantive feedback on student work, help students understand course concepts, and exercise academic judgment when applying the instructor's grading criteria. Graders and course

assistants do not lead discussion sections or lab meetings, hold office hours, or respond directly to student academic concerns.

Graders and course assistants are compensated at an hourly rate that is determined by the school or program. These positions generally do not receive tuition reimbursement and do not include the benefits associated with a Teaching Assistant or Graduate Assistant Lecturer appointment.

To avoid conflicts of interest and preserve appropriate academic oversight, teaching assistants should be assigned only to courses below their own level of study. Accordingly, PhD students may support master's and undergraduate courses, while master's students may support undergraduate courses. Students should not be placed in positions where they are asked to evaluate or grade peers at the same academic level.

Role	Primary Focus	Academic/Instructional Judgment
Course Assistant	Course administration, organization, and logistics. May assist with course communications, instructional technology, classroom or laboratory operations, assignment tracking, and other administrative functions.	None or minimal. Does not teach course content, assess student learning, or exercise academic judgment.
Grader	Evaluation of student work using standardized grading criteria, rubrics, or answer keys established by the instructor of record.	Limited. Applies instructor-established standards and grading criteria but does not determine grading policies or have instructional responsibilities.
Teaching Assistant (TA)	Support of instruction and student learning through activities such as leading discussions or lab sections, holding office hours, facilitating learning activities, answering questions about course content, and assessing student work.	Moderate. Provides substantive feedback and exercises instructional and academic judgment when evaluating student work under the supervision of the instructor of record.

Graduate Assistant Lecturer (AL)	Serves as the instructor of record for a course and is responsible for course delivery, student engagement, assessment, and classroom management.	Significant. Exercises primary instructional responsibility and academic judgment for the course, including evaluating student performance, assigning grades, and managing day-to-day instructional decisions in accordance with university and departmental policies.
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Eligibility Requirements

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

- have been admitted to a USC graduate degree program
- be enrolled full-time
- be in good academic standing with a GPA of 3.0 or higher
- be making satisfactory academic progress toward the degree as determined by their home program
- have met the university's standards for proficiency in the English language

Offer Letters

TA and AL appointments are confirmed through an official offer letter sent at the beginning of the academic year or semester. Students with appointments that start in the fall should expect to receive this offer in mid-July.

The offer letter details the appointment length (semester or year), time commitment, departmental expectations, stipend, and other benefits. The offer letter is a contract the student must sign, and the department or program must archive.

Terms of Appointment

A graduate student's first responsibility is their own research and studies. For this reason, during the fall and spring semesters, TA and AL appointments cannot exceed 20 hours per week for a 50% assignment or 10 hours per week for a 25% assignment.

Weekly hours may fluctuate due to the nature of the assignment, but should not exceed 20 hours for a 50% appointment or 10 hours for a 25% appointment, averaged over the semester. TAs and ALs are encouraged to work closely with their supervisor and, if necessary, their department chair to plan the expected work hours appropriately.

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 require approval from the Vice Provost

for Graduate Programs. Students should see the staff advisor in their home program for help with the request process.

If an appointment to a TAship or ALship is made outside the student's home program, the hiring program is responsible for the stipend, tuition, and all fees. They must also determine whether the student has any other appointments that could affect the total expected effort.

The hiring program must also provide the student with the stipend set by their home program. The home program is identified by the POST code under which the student is registered.

The dates of the fall, spring, and summer semesters are generally as follows:

Semester	Approximate Start Date	Approximate End Date
Fall	August 15	December 31
Spring	January 1	May 15
Summer	May 16	August 14

Benefits

TA and AL appointments include a stipend, tuition units, and all fees, including health and dental insurance.

Tuition Remission is provided based on the appointment level.

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

TAs and ALs who would like to use remitted tuition units for coursework outside their home program or for coursework that does not count toward the degree must have written approval from their faculty advisor, department chair, or program director, and the dean of their home 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 they take. Students should contact the program that issued the offer letter if the correct number of tuition units is not credited to their account.

Health Insurance and Student Health

The hiring program or school covers the cost of student health insurance and access to the student health center during the term of service. Details of the current health insurance package are available [here](#). Students who received a spring TA or AL award will continue to have health insurance coverage for the following summer.

Leaves of Absence

If a student needs to take a leave of absence during the TA or AL appointment, they must immediately contact the supervising course faculty and their program advising staff.

Students serving as TAs or ALs may use up to 5 days of sick leave per Academic Year for illness or to care for a family member. Students may also have up to five days of bereavement leave per Academic Year for the loss of a family member. TA/ALs are encouraged to work with their supervisors and program staff to schedule sick or bereavement leave.

Students with serious medical conditions should consult the Medical Leave policy, which differs from a general leave of absence. Health Leaves are administered by USC Campus Support and Intervention (CSI) in consultation with the student's program and the Graduate School. More information can be found [here](#).

Accommodations for TAs/ALs with Disabilities

The University will provide reasonable accommodations to TAs/ALs who are disabled or become disabled and need reasonable accommodations to perform the essential functions of their duties as a TA/AL, consistent with University policy and applicable law. The University uses an interactive process to determine what reasonable accommodations may be available and the effectiveness of any accommodations made. TA/ALs are encouraged to initiate this discussion with their supervisors and program staff.

Holidays

TAs and ALs are eligible for holidays based on USC's academic [schedule](#). If a TA is unable to observe a holiday due to the obligations of their appointment, they will be provided with another day off instead of the missed holiday during the same semester, with the advance agreement of their designated faculty supervisor and, as needed, the Director of Graduate Studies.

Summer Appointments

Students who serve as TAs and ALs during the summer receive a stipend and tuition remission proportional to the appointment. The summer term may run for the full summer, be split into two 6-week sessions, or other special session configurations.

All summer TAs and ALs will have access to the Student Health Center. Students invited to campus for any other sponsored academic purpose, such as TA professional development activities, will also have access to the Student Health Center from the first day of the academic event through the end of the summer.

International TAs

International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) account for a large percentage of graduate assistants at USC. To ensure the highest quality of undergraduate instruction, USC requires a high level of English proficiency from everyone involved in teaching.

The American Language Institute evaluates English proficiency and provides the training international TAs need to develop the language skills required to fulfill their responsibilities. 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 American Language Institute (ALI) is available here: <https://ali.usc.edu/>

TA Training

All departments and programs must provide new TAs and ALs with training that will prepare them for their duties and responsibilities. Both the program in which the appointment is held and the faculty supervisor are responsible for training a new TA or AL. Additional university-wide training may also be available. For graduate students interested in instructional training, the Center for Excellence in Teaching offers a semester-long [Future Faculty Teaching Institute](#).

Continuation and Reappointment

The continuation and/or reappointment of any TA or AL position is based on the student's successful performance and satisfactory academic progress. Student evaluations may also be considered for TAs and ALs.

Standards of Conduct

TAs and ALs are subject to the rules and regulations of the Board of Trustees, the university, and the department or program where they are assigned. In performing their duties, they must abide by the academic and instructional criteria and policies established by the department or program to which they are appointed. All TAs and ALs shall respect students' rights and uphold the university's academic and community standards, as outlined in the USC Student Handbook, the USC Integrity and Accountability Code, and USC's Unifying Values.

TAs and ALs are required to review the university's [Policy on Prohibited Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation](#) for staff, faculty, and students before the start of their first semester as TAs or ALs. Discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, and retaliation are unacceptable. TAs and ALs are considered designated employees and must immediately report any Prohibited Conduct to the [Office of Civil Rights Compliance](#).

Victims or witnesses should not attempt to resolve discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, or retaliation issues within their department or school without guidance from the [Office of Civil Rights Compliance](#). TAs or ALs may not attempt to investigate or resolve discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, or retaliation issues except with the permission of the [Office of Civil Rights Compliance](#).

Conflicts of Interest

A TA or AL may not work directly for or supervise a close relation, such as a spouse, domestic partner, sibling, parent, child, grandparent, or grandchild. This also applies to close relations with no line of authority or reporting. Please see USC's [Conflict of Interest and Commitment Policy](#).

Relationships with Students

There is an inherent power differential between TAs, ALs, and the students they support. Because of the power differential, TAs and ALs are prohibited from having an intimate, romantic, or sexual relationship, even a consensual one, with any student that the TA or AL teaches, supervises, or grades. The University does not tolerate non-consensual sexual relationships within its work and academic environment. Please see the [Prohibited Relationships with Students](#) policy.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

The University is committed to full compliance with the laws protecting qualified students with disabilities. Not all disabilities will be apparent to TAs and ALs. The professional staff of the [USC Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) determines the necessary accommodations and services and issues accommodation letters that students present to their instructors. TAs and ALs who have a student with disabilities in their class are required to provide the accommodations set out in the accommodations letter and, as necessary, make reasonable efforts to cooperate in implementing any accommodation. TAs and ALs are also required to maintain the confidentiality of students with accommodations.

If a student requests an accommodation that is not already outlined in their accommodation letter, please refer them to OSAS. If you believe a student may require an accommodation but has not requested one, please contact OSAS directly.

FERPA

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) is a federal law governing the privacy of student records and USC's obligations regarding the release and access to these records. TAs and ALs should complete the FERPA awareness training by logging in to [Trojan Learn](#) and searching for "USC FERPA Awareness Course".

More information on complying with FERPA is available on the [Office of Academic Records and Registrar](#) website. If you have questions regarding the application of FERPA, please refer them to the [Office of Ethics and Compliance](#).

Reporting Wrongdoing

USC requires faculty, staff, and students to promptly report any suspicion of wrongdoing to the appropriate authorities. It is not a TA's or an AL's responsibility to determine whether a situation constitutes wrongdoing, but it is their responsibility to report those concerns. By refusing to look the other way, we stay true to the law, our ethical commitments, and USC's highest values.

The [Report & Response website](#) is an easy-to-use online location where TAs and ALs can report concerns and get the support they need. In addition to the Report & Response website, TAs and ALs may also report concerns by calling 213-740-2500 or 800-348-7454 (toll-free). Live operators staff this number 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. A longer list of offices that accept reports of particular kinds of wrongdoing is available [online](#).

Designated Employees

TAs and ALs are Designated Employees and have a duty to report known or suspected abuse or neglect relating to children, elders, or dependent adults. They must understand what they are required to report, when it must be reported, and to whom. More information is available [here](#) and [here](#).

Faculty Expectations

At the beginning of the semester, the supervising faculty or staff member will discuss the scope of the TA/AL's duties and responsibilities with their TAs/ALs. This should include making the TA/AL aware of the criteria used to evaluate performance.

Supervisors must know the terms of appointment for each TA/AL and adjust their activities accordingly. Supervisors of TAs/ALs should:

- Provide and discuss the syllabus and course policies before or within the first week of classes
- Explain the learning and content objectives of the course
- Discuss any questions or concerns about the course material

- Schedule regular meetings with their TA/AL team and with individual TAs/ALs
- Provide examples of a range of exams, papers, quizzes, and lab reports
- Schedule meetings with the TAs/ALs to discuss upcoming assignments
- Provide or develop a grading rubric and hold a norming session applying the grading criteria
- Be sensitive to a TA's/AL's overall time and effort when scheduling turnaround time for graded assignments
- Share successful pedagogical strategies and activities for a given concept or topic
- Clarify their expectations about:
 - attendance during lectures or class times
 - leading lab and discussion sections
 - designing syllabi for lab and discussion sections
 - holding review sessions
 - office hours
 - procuring audio and visual material
 - photocopying or posting materials online
 - proctoring exams

Supervisors may not require TAs/ALs to perform services unrelated to their teaching activities, such as personal errands for the faculty member, providing child or pet care, and so forth. Supervisors may also not employ, recruit, or otherwise use a student's services in a business venture if they have a teaching, advising, or supervisory relationship with that student.

Supervisors may not retaliate against or intimidate TAs/ALs for seeking advice, raising concerns, filing a report, or asserting a right under a University policy or under a federal, state, or local law. They may also not retaliate against or intimidate TAs/ALs for their participation in a University-authorized investigative or resolution process, nor attempt to dissuade them from participating in such processes.

TA and AL Evaluations

At the end of each semester, supervisors will evaluate the performance of the TAs and ALs under their direction. The department will keep any written evaluations on file. Faculty are responsible for structuring TAs' activities in accordance with university guidelines.

Problem Resolution

TAs and ALs should work with their supervisors and academic advisors, including the program chair or school dean, to resolve issues.

TAs and ALs should expect clear guidance and feedback about their performance.

Where possible, before a TA/AL is suspended or discharged, a conference meeting will be held with the TA/AL and their faculty supervisor. The TA/AL may request union representation at the conference meeting.

If suspension, discharge, or other discipline is warranted, the supervisor and/or program staff will provide the student with a written notification. If the TA/AL, or their union, wishes to contest the suspension or discharge, they shall give written notice to the University within ten (10) calendar days of receipt of the notice of discharge or suspension. The dispute shall be submitted and determined under the grievance and arbitration procedure of the collective bargaining agreement between USC and graduate student workers, to the extent applicable.