

TA Application and Assignment Guidelines

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1 Introduction

Teaching Assistantships (TAs) play three important roles in our department. First, they are an important part of many graduate students' overall funding packages, particularly for those whose external funding awards do not reach our department minimums. Second, they provide graduate students with experience in various aspects of university pedagogy. Although the exact exposure one gets varies with the particular TA assignment, one can gain experience with teaching, curriculum development, assessment, and course administration. Finally, TAs are vital to our department's curriculum delivery, especially at the undergraduate level. There is no way that we could successfully provide high quality experiences for our students without TA support.

The purpose of this document is to 1) orient folks to what TAs do, 2) discuss how decisions are made about how many TA hours a given course should get, 3) detail how graduate students can apply for TA ships (and provide some rudimentary advice doing so), and 4) explain how TA roles are assigned. I am grateful to several students for their feedback on this document.

2 What do TAs do?

TAs provide essential support to instructors for many of the courses that we offer in the Psychology Department at Queen's. The particular support that is required differs from course to course. For instance, TAs for lab courses or tutorials (e.g., 100, 202, 203, 301, 302, 300-level lab courses) might be expected to teach or tutor students in labs, collaborate with the instructor to prepare some of the lab curriculum, provide support for marking lab assignments and any exams, and so forth. TAs in lecture courses might be more focused on grading exams, grading writing assignments for the course, interacting with students to discuss their exam grades, organizing the online material for the course, and so forth. The specific duties for any course are assigned by the instructor according to the course needs. If you would like to know more about what's required in a specific course, feel free to contact the instructor for the course, or if possible, talk to someone who has been a TA for the course before.

3 How do we decide how many TAs will be needed in a course?

The assignment of TA hours to a course is based on an assessment of the work that is required in the course, and the number of students expected to be enrolled in the course. Some TA responsibilities are constant no matter what the enrolment of the course (e.g., prep time, meeting with faculty members, calibrating marking). Other responsibilities (e.g., marking, contact hours, etc.) scale directly with course enrolment — although it might not be perfectly true, we assume that marking 200 exams takes about twice as long as marking 100. To determine how many hours a course will be assigned, we assess the TA responsibilities, determine how many hours are required per student, multiply that by the projected enrolment, and then add the constant (non-scaling) hours.

$$\textit{TargetAllocation} = \textit{Hrs/student} * \textit{enrolment} + \textit{constant}$$

We then round up the target allocation in 52 hour unit assignments. For instance, if the target allocation for a course is 180, the course will ultimately be assigned 208 hours (4 52-hour unit assignments).

4 How do students apply for TAs

A list of courses that require TAs for the upcoming academic year (Fall and Winter) will be published on or around July 1 of each calendar year. The list will include the name of the course, a brief synopsis of its content, the TA responsibilities for the course, and the total allocation of hours that we expect to have for the course.

You can use this information to make a guess about how responsibilities will be distributed across the term. For instance, there may be some courses for which the primary responsibility of the TAs is to mark exams. In these cases, one can expect that TA responsibilities will be concentrated in the weeks following the exams. If you're interested in learning more about a particular course, you have a few options. One good one is to take a look at last year's syllabus, which for now are here: <https://www.queensu.ca/psychology/undergraduate/current-students/course-information/current-course-outlines>. You can also reach out to the instructor for the course, which is indicated on the list (unless it's TBA).

At the same time as we distribute the list of courses, we will also distribute a link to a form that will ask you to list 6 courses that you would be willing to be a TA for. As you will see, the form will ask you to rank your list of courses according to your preference, and you'll also be asked to score your willingness to TA the course. The idea here is that although you might prefer to TA in one course rather than another, you might in fact be very happy to TA all of the courses that you list. This is important information for us as we go through the complicated process of assigning TA ships.

At this time, students will also be invited to let us know how many hours they would like to work. For students who require a TA position to make up their minimum funding (i.e., students without some kind of external funding totalling over \$15,000) **they must apply for at least 208 hours over the course of the year**. This can be divided however one might like. For instance, one could opt to work 208 hours in a given term. Or one could work 104 hours in each term. Students who require a TA ship to make up their minimum funding can opt to not TA, but then they will not get that part of their minimum funding package, and it will not be compensated for by the department elsewhere. If you decide to opt out of your TA funding, please let the grad office know!

Students may also make themselves available for additional hours.

For instance, if you are a student who has to TA for 208 hours to make up your minimum funding, you can also make yourself available for more. Indeed some assignments (e.g., Intro Psyc) have lots of opportunities to exceed 208 hours. However, please also note that additional hours are not guaranteed to any student, and that they are assigned in accordance with a pretty strict priority procedure, which I'll describe in more detail below.

There is no minimum amount of hours that students with external funding must apply for (indeed, they don't have to apply for any if they don't want to!).

4.1 What courses should you list?

You are welcome to apply for any course that you want to. With that said, there are a few guidelines that you might follow.

1. You might want to TA for courses that are close to your area of study and expertise. If you think that teaching might be in your future, experience working in these courses is likely directly relevant to any future employment for you.
2. Likewise, you might consider signing up to be a TA in one of our more general courses, like PSYC 100 (Intro) or PSYC 203 (Research Methods), or PSYC 300 (Statistics). These are good to have exposure to for professional purposes. For one, potential employers are frequently looking for folks with experience in these courses. Also, TAing in these courses provides an opportunity for you to refresh your own skills, which can be useful for your professional development more generally.
3. Be aware of how many hours are allocated to the different courses when listing your preferences. Some of our courses are very popular among TA applicants, but have limited hours associated with them (e.g., Human Sexuality). I suspect that this may be the case for our online courses this year as well. It doesn't hurt to list these courses as top preferences but be aware that when there are limited spots available in these courses, it just statistically decreases the likelihood that you'll get that top preference.

4. Feel free to talk with your supervisor, lab mates, or me about the various pros and cons of different courses. Be aware, though, that experiences vary from year to year with instructor, enrolment, resource allocation, and so forth. Thus, a negative review of a particular TA experience one year might not override a preference to work in a class that's of great interest to you.
5. You do not always need to have experience with a particular topic area or class in order to work as a TA in the course. If you are looking to "stretch" yourself and work in a class that is a little outside of your area, that's great. Please be aware, though, that the further the course material is away from your expertise, the more difficult you may find it to discharge some of the TA duties, like marking. "Catching up" by doing something like attending lectures might be something that you have to do on your own time (outside of your paid hours). You might see this as a relatively small investment in helping you achieve your goal of gaining breadth, just be aware that that small investment might be required.
6. Try to take an assignment that is going to dovetail well with your other time commitments and responsibilities. For instance, the MSc in Clinical has substantial coursework, which takes up a lot of time. If you're in that situation (e.g., a new Clinical student), it may or may not be the best time to take a large assignment in PSYC 100. Again, I would suggest that folks reach out to supervisors to get advice on the best way to get TA experience in the upcoming year.

5 How are TA ships assigned

The process of assigning TAs to courses is a complicated one that requires the satisfaction of multiple constraints. The main three sets of constraints are: 1) PSAC priorities for assigning TA ships, 2) ensuring that our courses have the necessary resources, and 3) applicants' and instructors' preferences. I will discuss each of these in turn.

5.1 PSAC Requirements

The assignment of TA positions is governed primarily by a priority structure described in Article 12 of the Collective Agreement between PSAC and Queen's University. I encourage all students to read through the relevant section of this document at <https://psac901.org/unit-1-collective-agreement/>. In brief, the top priority for TA positions goes to students who are in the funding-guaranteed years of their program (MSc 1 & 2; PhD 1, 2, 3, & 4) and are guaranteed a TA ship to constitute their minimum funding package. Because the details of funding packages can change every year depending on the results of external funding competitions, a given student's priority for TA assignment may vary from year to year. Thus, in any given year, we prioritize the assignment of

available hours to those who require TA positions to constitute their minimum funding package.

5.2 Course Requirements

We have a number of courses that require TA support in order to provide a quality experience for our students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. All courses need to be staffed with resources that are appropriate to meeting the workload demands of the course.

5.3 Applicant and Instructor Preferences

As noted above, applicants can state their preferences for being assigned (or not being assigned) to courses. Instructors, too, can state their preferences for having (or not having) a particular TA assigned to their course. We try very hard to find places where there's a match — an eligible student wants to TA in a particular course and the instructor wants them, too. For the most part, however, instructors rarely express preferences for specific TAs, only qualifications that they hope TAs will have. And so, student preferences are usually the main constraint we try to satisfy here.

We do our best to find instances where all three constraints are satisfied optimally. For instance, we might first look for 1) PSAC high priority applicants who 2) applied to a difficult to staff course, 3) and gave that class a high preference score (top 3). When all three constraints cannot be satisfied optimally, they are applied in the following order: 1) PSAC, 2) course requirements, 3) applicant preferences. It is worth emphasizing that the PSAC priority groups take precedence over the other constraints because it represents a legally negotiated contract between union members (which all TAs are) and Queen's University.

6 Timeline

- Course list is distributed along with a link to an application form in first week of July.
- Students return application forms 3 weeks after course list is distributed.
- Graduate Assistant prepares application data for TA assignment process by August 1.
- In the first week of August, Graduate Coordinator creates draft version of the TA role assignment schedule.
- In the second week of August, draft version is distributed to instructors for feedback on assignments and support.

- On or around August 15, the faculty-approved assignment of Fall/Winter TA roles are distributed to TAs. TAs may request changes at this time (in case something has changed from when they applied for positions).
- No later than 2 weeks before classes begin (per PSAC), a final list of assignments will be distributed to all TAs and course instructors.
- Fall term contracts will be distributed from the Psychology Office shortly after TA assignments are approved.
- Sometime between the final assignment and the end of the first week of classes, TAs meet with course instructors to establish TAs' course responsibilities and the approximate hours assigned to each.

For more information and guidance on general things related to being a Teaching Assistant, please see Queen's teaching assistant toolkit, a set of tools put together by the Centre for Teaching and Learning. You are also encouraged to reach out to PSAC, the union that represents TA workers at Queen's, to get advice about how to best track your TA hours and ensure that you are working within your contract.