

Guide for new teaching assistants

1 Introduction

If you are a teaching assistant (TA) for the first time, your teacher will probably give you some advice and keep an eye on you during your teaching period. However, the guidance differs per course and in any case, it is good to know certain things before you start. Therefore, in this document we give you some practical information and tips on being a good TA. Enjoy! If you have any questions, please contact Selma Zaghaw at s.m.a@zaghow@vu.nl

2 What is expected of you?

As a TA you have a great responsibility. You are responsible for the exercise classes or practicals that you lead. “Thanks to the exercise classes, I passed this course” is not rarely mentioned in the evaluation forms. You are there to help the students, and you should be easy accessible to the students.

You are also there to help the teacher. In many courses, TAs help grading the exams and/or homework. This is often done together with the teacher and colleagues, but not always. Some teachers also ask TAs to provide insightful questions for exams and/or homework.

3 General tips

- Take the time to prepare your exercise classes or practicals:
 - Solve all exercises before the class from scratch.
 - Think about theories or definitions you might want to repeat in your exercise class, or examples you want to give. In case of programming: think of appropriate variable names and test your programs, so that you are aware of any errors that might occur.
 - Practice writing on the blackboard if you have no or little experience.

If you do not prepare well, you might get stuck on an exercise during class. If students get the impression that YOU do not understand an exercise, how will they ever understand it?

- On the other hand, you are not expected to know everything. If you do not know the answer to a question, just come back to it in the next class. In the meantime, you can discuss it with the teacher. It might take you a lot of time if you want to find the answer on the spot. You are there to assist: helping students to find the answer instead of giving the answer directly is also assisting.
- Keep in mind that not everyone is as smart as you are. Most of the students in your class are not! Take your time to explain the theory and do not get angry if students do not understand it immediately.
- Stimulate the students to show up by telling them that they learn a lot from the exercises. For some courses, it is more important to attend the exercise classes than to attend the lectures.
- Create a safe environment in class where students dare to ask questions.

- Check your email regularly for communication with the teacher, colleagues and students. Sometimes it is nice to have a whatsapp group with colleagues or students as well.
- You can help students via email, but it is often easier to explain something in person. You can set up a meeting with them in the TA room or book a small room (see Practical Information).
- If you can not make it to a class, ask a colleague to take over your class. You can also reschedule the class, but this tends to be difficult since all students should be available. As long as you fix it sufficiently ahead of time it should not be a problem. A third option is to tell your students to join another practical or exercise class. Discuss these options with the teacher and your colleagues.
- It is nice to learn the names of your students, since you will be seeing them a lot and they will appreciate it.

4 Tips for giving exercise classes

- Take the time to explain exercises to your students. The goal of an exercise class is not to do as many exercises as possible, but to help the students with the exercises! It is useless if you discuss all exercises but no one understands them.
- If you do not have time to do all exercises, you can write the solutions to some of the exercises on the blackboard in the break or before the next class. This way, the students at least have the answers.
- If someone misses some background knowledge, you can point this out and say that you do not have time to treat this in your exercise class. You can help this student individually in the break or after class, if you have the time. (Of course, in case none of the students has this background knowledge, it makes sense to explain it anyway.)
- Stimulate students to make exercises on the blackboard.
- Write complete solutions on the blackboard. If students do not pay attention in class but do make notes, it will help if their notes are complete and understandable.
- If there are other people in the room that you have to teach in, you can ask them to leave. You need five minutes to prepare your class (wipe out the blackboard, let the students come in).

5 Tips for giving Introduction to Programming practicals

- If there are no questions, you might want to:
 - work on your own studies. If you do this, students might be afraid to bother you, and decide not to ask you questions. But it is your task to encourage the students! Not discourage them from asking questions! So do not do this.
 - chat with colleagues that teach in the same room. If you do this, you also discourage the students to ask questions. Moreover, if you are chatting, students will get distracted and lose their focus.

So what should you do? Walk around and look how your students are doing! You can point out small errors and ask each student individually if they need any help. This way, students tend to ask more questions.

- Some students can not program without your help, they keep asking questions. Be careful that you do not spend too much time on one student. There is no time to give the lecture and neither to explain everything that is in the book.
- Next to an assistant, you are a tutor. It is your responsibility that students pass the practical. If a student does not show up the first practical, send them an email explaining your worries.

- Many students will “ask” you “my program does not work”. Although you might easily see the mistake, it is their task to find their mistakes and to remove all errors from their program. So instead of fixing it, help them to find the mistake.
- To explain a certain programming construct, you might want to do a small demonstration of a program. E.g. to explain virtual functions, it is easier to write a program than to draw something on the board.
- If you have never seen a student in your practical, but this student does hand in assignments, then you should set up a meeting with them, in which you ask them a few small questions concerning their program. This is in order to check whether the student understands what he or she has handed in. It is often very clear whether the student understands it or not.
- Ask students to leave the room if they are not taking the course, since they might disturb your students. Of course, if you have only one student in your group and the computer room has twenty places, it is unfair to send all other students away. However, you can ask them to be quiet.
- If you share a room with another TA: ask the students of your group to sit in the back, and the students of the other group to sit in the front (for example). This way, you exactly know which students are in your group, and you can easily help the right students.
- Do not help students that are not in your own practical group. If you help a student that is not from your group, their TA will not know which part of the code is made by the student and which part is made by you. We do not want students that have a program that is actually made by four different TAs. Moreover, students will get confused because different TAs help in different ways. At last, if no one else but their own TA will help them, they are forced to go to the right practical.
- Keep track of the time! There are some sneaky students that will keep asking questions, even though the practical ended ten minutes before. They will not tell you. Before you know it, you are half an hour over time!

6 Tips for grading

- Please take this task seriously.
- Be aware that grading is time consuming.
- In the beginning, you might want to do it together with a colleague.
- Write some feedback to the students while you grade.
- Often, the students in your class are the same age as you are. Maybe some of your friends are taking your class. It is okay to teach to your friends, but do not grade their homework or exams. You can always ask a colleague or the teacher to do this.
- Make sure that you and your colleagues grade consistently to avoid that grades differ per TA.

