



Preparing Guidance for Online Teaching Assistants

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Section 1. Introduction

The Teaching Assistant (TA) for an online course can be valuable in allowing an instructor to give more time to teaching, and less time to other kinds of tasks. Toward this goal, possible areas of TA responsibility have been identified in this document based on recommendations from academic sources, other university sites, and from IPFW faculty and TAs with experience in online courses.

At IPFW, instructors of online classes with 30 or more students may request support for a Teaching Assistant (TA) through [Online Learning](#). In some courses, instructors may want a student with a record of outstanding performance in the same or a similar course. In others, they may want proficiency in Blackboard and technology. And some may want a TA with multiple competencies. Depending on the department under which the class is listed, there also may be guidelines for who may act as a TA.

Tip: Select an individual who meshes well with your personality and teaching style. While a student may be an excellent teacher and assistant, if you don't "click" well with them you may find that the course won't go as smoothly as you would have hoped. (Adam Dircksen, personal communication, November 14, 2011).

The second section, [Areas of Guidance for Online TAs](#), has been prepared for reflection about what tasks might be assigned and what the TA may need to know, some or all of which may require explicit guidance. In several areas, resources are listed that might be of value to a TA. Topics are:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">TA Hours;Blackboard Skills,Other Technology Skills;Course Policies,Course Content; | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tone and Class "Pulse;"• Course Management;• Providing Extra Support;• Class Discussions;• and Grading. |
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The third section, [Sample Teaching Assistant Guide](#), is a guide that has been used successfully by TAs in one of IPFW's online courses. And the fourth section, [TA Checklist Template](#), is a template that could be used or adapted to create a checklist for a TA.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to IPFW faculty, staff, and TAs: Dipak Chowdhury, Adam Dircksen, Ludy Goodson, Debrah Huffman, Janeann Perkins, Gail Rathbun, Stephen Skillman, Peter Schnellenberger, Kevin Stoller, Karen VanGorder; and to Georgia Southern's Raleigh Way for recommendations, discussions, and comments on this document.

Section 2. Areas of Guidance for Online TAs

TA Hours.

- Weekly Hours:** How many hours should the TA devote to the course each week?
- Delays and Absences:** Do you want the TA to notify both you and the students in advance of delays or absences?

Blackboard Skills.

- Blackboard Training:** Do you want the TA to have completed Blackboard training and to be familiar with Blackboard training resources for students? Resources: [Information Technology Services](#); [Essential Training for Students](#); and [Blackboard Training Registration](#).
- Blackboard Problems:** Do you want the TA to contact [ITServices Help Desk](#) to resolve Blackboard technology problems, or to contact you? Or both?

URLS for these resources are listed below.

Information Technology Services: <http://new.ipfw.edu/its/> .

Essential Training for Students: <http://www.lynda.com/Blackboard-9-0-tutorials/Blackboard-9-x-Essential-Training-for-Students/84527-2.html>.

Blackboard Training Registration: <http://new.ipfw.edu/training/>.

ITServices Help Desk: <http://new.ipfw.edu/offices/its/help/>.

Other Technology Skills.

- Computer Proficiency:** Does the TA need to gain computer proficiency? Resources [STEPS](#).
- Software:** What software will the TA and students need to use? Resources: [ITServices Resources](#); [ITServices Software and Applications](#); and [Lynda.com Online Training Videos](#) at ITServices.
- Library Technology:** What library technology skills will be needed in the course? Resources: [Distance Learning Library Support](#) and [Integrated Information Foraging](#).

URLS for these resources are listed below.

STEPS Workshops: <http://new.ipfw.edu/steps/>.

ITServices Resources: <http://new.ipfw.edu/offices/its/resources/>.

ITServices Software and Applications: <http://new.ipfw.edu/offices/its/resources/>.

Lynda.com Online Training Videos: <http://new.ipfw.edu/its/>.

Distance Learning Library Support: <http://www.lib.ipfw.edu/2019.0.html>.

Integrated Information Foraging: <http://www.lib.ipfw.edu/726.0.html>.

Course Policies.

- Review of Policies:** What should the TA know about important course policies and procedures? If the TA notices a lack of compliance with these, what do you want the TA to do?
- Settings for Course Areas:** Do you want the TA to check or create “settings” in areas such as discussions, blogs, quizzes, tests, or assignments?
- Confidentiality:** What is important to explain to the TA about confidentiality of student records and information?

EXAMPLE: The U.S. Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) restricts the type of information about students that can be made public. This includes things such as a person’s social security number, grades, and student number. Do not include any of that information on **anything** you distribute...(Iowa State University, 2006, p. 3)

Course Content.

- Course Organization:** Do you want the TA to become familiar with content and how it is organized? Familiar enough to be able to explain it to students?
- Access to Course Materials:** Do you want the TA to find out about and advise students on how to get their books or how to access other content?
- Working Ahead:** Do you want the TA to study and work ahead of students on all course materials? And to check active links in advance of each week's materials?
- Schedule Review:** Do you want the TA to check the schedule of all due dates?
- Notification of Errors:** Do you want the TA to notify you of any errors found in course materials?
- Adding Content:** Is it important to advise the TA to never add any course content or quizzes without your approval and guidance? Or, is it alright for the TA to add certain content?

Tone and Class “Pulse.”

- Basic Tone:** What tone do you want the TA to express in communication with the students? Do you want expressions of genuine, real caring and encouragement? Or do you prefer a coaching or professional tone in encouraging students to get and stay on track?

EXAMPLE: When dealing with freshmen, keep in mind that they are in a transitional period. Most have just left high school where the highly structured format provided much more prodding and hand-holding than is possible or appropriate at the university level...Patient encouragement coupled with adherence to high standards and discipline can aid such a transition. Coddling or, at the other extreme, insensitivity can retard it. ([Department of Computer Science](#), University of Maryland, 2008)

EXAMPLE: A student who approaches you honestly seeking help is trusting you to a certain extent by revealing her or his insecurity or unsureness. Respect this trust and do your best to help the student overcome the problem. ([Department of Computer Science](#), University of Maryland, 2008)

EXAMPLE: Compared to face- to-face classroom education, distance education requires students to be more focused, become better time managers, and to have the ability to work alone and with others (Hardy & Boaz, 1997). ([Truluck](#), 2007)

EXAMPLE: ...especially important (is) providing the high-touch element to balance the high-tech approach ([Thomas](#), 2005); FSU's mentors are trained to communicate early and often...and to respond quickly, in all events within 48 hours....The establishment of trust is basic to the goal of facilitating learning. ([Hayes](#), n.d.)

- TA Challenges:** How do you want the TA to respond if students challenge the TA's role or approach in the course?
- Checking Class Pulse:** Do you want the TA to take the initiative in getting in touch with students? Do you want the TA to become aware of what individual students are coping with? Do you want the TA to advise you on the “pulse” of the class?

EXAMPLE: About the third week, post a new thread: “Feedback from You.” Ask students: “How's it going? What parts of this course are your favorites? What do you like least or would you change?” (Post in your office; make announcement that new message has been posted.) Summarize the information from students; send to Prof. Chowdhury and Ludy Goodson. This will help us in making improvements in the course. (Professor Chowdhury, ASTR 264).

Course Management.

- TA's Course Presence:** Do you want the TA to have a “TA Discussion Room” or “TA Online Office” so that the TA has a visible presence in the course and so that students can easily post

general questions and comments for the TA? How often do you want the TA to check this area? How do you define a “timely response” to students?

- Instructor's Online Office:** Do you want the TA to check questions and comments posted in your Online Office, too? If the TA notices something that needs attention, how do you want the TA to respond? To notify you first or to handle it independently?
- TA's Introduction:** Do you want the TA to send students a personal welcome and introduction about the TA's role at the start of the course? Do you also want to introduce the TA to the class?
- Study Groups:** Do you want the TA to manage any online study groups?
- Reminders:** What reminders do you want the TA to send to students? Do you want your TA to send messages reminding the class of due dates and assignment requirements at certain times before they are due?
- Tracking and Reporting:** Do you want the TA to track participation and grading? If so, in what format? A table in MS Word, a chart in Excel, or another way? Do you want periodic reports from the TA?
- Cheating:** How vigilant do you want the TA to be in looking for signs of possible cheating? How would the TA be able to notice such signs? When and how should the TA report them to you?
- Messages:** Do you have any planned messages or materials that you want the TA to send out or post as announcements to students at different times during the course? Or to send out periodic messages of tips that might help students excel in the class?

EXAMPLE: Remind...students that while online learning gives them more flexibility, it requires the same commitment as a regular class...Encourage students to work ahead...(Digital Learning Department, OSPI, 2009-2011).

Providing Extra Support.

- Student Needs:** Do you want the TA to analyze and discuss student needs for extra support?
- Supplemental Content:** Do you want to provide the TA with any supplemental course content? Are there resources for supporting underprepared students that will be important to use? Would you like the TA to search for supplemental content that might help students?
- Extra Study Areas:** Would you expect the TA to create extra online study sessions? To give special guidance to individual students?
- FAQs:** Would you want the TA to prepare frequently asked questions and answers to help current and future students with the course?

Class Discussions.

TIP: The material the professor presents, the manner in which it is developed and explained, and the relative emphasis placed on subtopics are what you need to process and support in discussion sessions...(Department of Computer Science, University of Maryland, 2008)

- Discussion Threads:** Are there discussion forum threads that you want the TA to add to the course? Do you want the TA to coach students in each forum and thread, or just certain ones?
- Feedback:** What guidelines do you want the TA to follow in giving feedback on student discussions? How soon should the feedback be given? And, what type of feedback?

EXAMPLE: Divergent questions, calling for student judgment and processing of relevant information, often trigger spirited discussions...Often you'll ask **follow-up questions** after you get an answer to your initiating question. (Department of Computer Science, 2008)

EXAMPLE: When a student seeks individual help, first ascertain whether she or he has genuinely attempted the problem(s) or is merely trying to exploit you for 'easy answers.' After the student has shown you what has been tried, evaluate the specific skills that have already been mastered and point these out to the student. Pose leading questions which can lead the student through the remaining steps. Merely showing students how to do a problem helps little. It is the skills of problem solving that you are there to help them learn...Be as equitable as possible in distributing your time among individual students. ([Department of Computer Science](#), University of Maryland, 2008)

Grading.

ALERT: To avoid confusion and possible grade appeals, the IPFW instructor and TA need to give consistent messages to students about grading of discussions and assignments. "I want to share a voice on grading with my TA." (K. Stoller, personal communication, November 14, 2011)

- What to Grade:** What do you want the TA to grade?
- Scoring Guides:** What guidelines or rules for marking, commenting, and recording grades do you want the TA to follow?
- Turnaround Time:** How soon do you want grading to be completed after a discussion? After submission of an assignment?
- Posting:** Do you want to check the grading before it's posted in the Gradebook?

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Section 3. Sample Teaching Assistant Guide

Dr. Dipak Chowdhury, Emeritus Professor of Geology, has given and explained the following guide to TAs for his online ASTR 264 course. One of his teaching assistants, Mr. Stephen Skillman, has reported that this checklist was very helpful in getting started and knowing what to do, and what NOT to do, in his role as a TA in the course.

Instructor Responsibility

1. You are very important in making the students feel welcome, in adding that “touch of warmth” to the learning, in checking on how they are doing, in reporting issues that come up, and in keeping track of progress.
2. Content is critical and as the instructor, and due to the complex content, I need to explain things in my own way regarding the content in the course. So, make sure that you check with me about any of the content questions that may arise.
3. You may want to let students know:
“I won’t be giving the content information, but will assist in clarifying as much as I can. If in doubt about an answer, I’ll check in with Prof. Chowdhury. But do let me know anything you might think of as a ‘muddy point,’ anything that you can’t figure out or that is confusing to you. I’ll do my best to find a way to help in consultation with Prof. Chowdhury.”
4. Do not post any new quizzes or answers to quizzes unless you get them from me.
5. Do not change any content unless I provide it or give directions for you to do so.

TA Discussion Room

6. Your role is important in giving a “personal touch” to the learning experiences in this class.
7. “Hello” or “Welcome.” (Done, but repost in your discussion area; add Announcement that you’ve posted a new message in your discussion area and add your name in the announcement; e.g., “Please check my TA Discussion area for a new message. ~ Your TA, Mr. Skillman.”
8. “TA Office Hours.” Post turnaround to expect for the questions that they post in your area. You should plan to check and respond to student questions and emails within 24-48 hours. If uncertain about how or when to respond to something, please check with me.

Checking Progress on Student Participation

9. Make a table of the students in the course, and mark their level of participation in each week’s discussion. You might enter a check mark ✓ to show that the student participated, a minus - to show student did not participate, and a + to show extra contribution for the week.
10. Give me a weekly summary for each week’s progress. This will help in grading.
11. Check each student’s participation every week. If you see that a student is slow in participating in the group discussion, send an encouraging note.
12. Pay attention to whether a student seems to be falling behind, seems to have too much difficulty, or seems to be taking “shortcuts” to find answers rather than studying the questions.
13. Check in on students by email to find out about reasons for delays. This kind of message would be good: “I noticed you haven’t yet submitted your answers for the Discussion Problems Assignment. Since the week is fast moving along, I hope you can submit them soon. And, I hope everything is alright. Let me know if you are having difficulties or if there’s anything that I can do to help.”
14. If you notice students are having particular problems, let me know so that I can follow up as appropriate.

Reminders to Students

15. Periodically, post reminder in your discussion room of upcoming deadlines (like for the end of the discussion week, and just before the quizzes and tests); and post an announcement “Please check the new message posted in my discussion room. ~ Mr. Skillman”

Student Access to Resources

16. In advance, each week check through the “Student View,” to make sure web links are working. If you see problems, notify both myself and Ludy Goodson.
17. You may need to remind me to post a Weekly Review. Or I may want to send you a file and have you post it. Do you know how to do this in the Weekly Reviews discussion forum? It is very important to promptly direct students to resources and solutions to administrative and logistical problems. These usually are reported in my “Online Office” but might also show up in the group discussions.
18. Check my Online Office regularly to see what students are posting. You may need to send a reminder to me to post an immediate reply to something. For some issues, you may be able to handle it. General protocol: post a message in your discussion area and then post an announcement that you’ve posted a new message.

Gathering Feedback from Students

19. About the third week, post a new thread: “Feedback from You.” Ask students: “How’s it going? What parts of this course are your favorites? What do you like least or would you change?” (Post in your office; make announcement that new message has been posted.) Summarize the information from students; send to me and Ludy Goodson. This will help us in making improvements in the course.
20. Near the end of the course, the students also will be asked to complete a team evaluation report. When this happens, add to the table that you made for reporting the discussions, and enter a plus + for those students who receive high praise, and a – for those who receive low praise or persistent criticism about their contributions from their teammates. These pluses or minuses may sway a grade one way or another for some students. Your summary will help me make some decisions.

Student Lounge Reminder

21. As promised in the syllabus, the “Student Lounge” is just for students. Do not visit and read messages in this area.

Section 4. TA Checklist Template

TA Hours.

- Work assigned hours each week (track and report hours).
- Notify me and the students in advance of absences and delays.

Blackboard Skills.

- Become familiar with and use [Information Technology Services](#); [Essential Training for Students](#); and [Blackboard Training Registration](#).
- Contact [ITServices Help Desk](#) to resolve technology problems.

URLS for these resources are listed below.

Information Technology Services: <http://new.ipfw.edu/its/> .

Essential Training for Students: <http://www.lynda.com/Blackboard-9-0-tutorials/Blackboard-9-x-Essential-Training-for-Students/84527-2.html>.

Blackboard Training Registration: <http://new.ipfw.edu/training/>.

ITServices Help Desk: <http://new.ipfw.edu/offices/its/help/>.

Other Technology Skills.

- Refer to [STEPS Workshops](#) for gaining computer proficiency.
- Learn about software used in courses through [ITServices Resources](#); [ITServices Software and Applications](#); and [Lynda.com Online Training Videos](#) (use ITServices link).
- Use [Distance Learning Library Support](#) and [Integrated Information Foraging](#) to support use of library technology.

URLS for these resources are listed below.

STEPS Workshops: <http://new.ipfw.edu/steps/>.

ITServices Resources: <http://new.ipfw.edu/offices/its/resources/>.

ITServices Software and Applications: <http://new.ipfw.edu/offices/its/resources/>.

Lynda.com Online Training Videos: <http://new.ipfw.edu/its/>.

Distance Learning Library Support: <http://www.lib.ipfw.edu/2019.0.html>.

Integrated Information Foraging: <http://www.lib.ipfw.edu/726.0.html>.

Course Policies.

- Before the first week of class, study course policies; draw my attention to anything confusing.
- Check “settings” for tool areas, e.g., discussions, blogs, assessments, and assignments.
- Keep student records and information about students confidential.

EXAMPLE: The U.S. Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) restricts the type of information about students that can be made public. This includes things such as a person’s social security number, grades, and student number. Do not include any of that information on **anything** you distribute...(Iowa State University, 2006, p. 3)

Course Content.

- Before the first week of class, become familiar with content and how it is organized; become familiar enough to be able to explain the organization to students.
- Find out about and advise students on how to get their books and access other content.

- Study and work ahead of students on all course materials.
- Check active links in advance of each week's materials.
- Check schedule of all due dates.
- Notify me of any errors found in course materials.
- Never add any course content or quizzes without my approval and guidance.

Tone and Class "Pulse."

- Genuinely, and with real caring, encourage students to get and stay on track; think of your role more as a "coach" who helps the students to manage time.

EXAMPLE: When dealing with freshmen, keep in mind that they are in a transitional period. Most have just left high school where the highly structured format provided much more prodding and hand-holding than is possible or appropriate at the university level...Patient encouragement coupled with adherence to high standards and discipline can aid such a transition. Coddling or, at the other extreme, insensitivity can retard it. ([Department of Computer Science](#), University of Maryland, 2008)

EXAMPLE: A student who approaches you honestly seeking help is trusting you to a certain extent by revealing her or his insecurity or unsureness. Respect this trust and do your best to help the student overcome the problem. ([Department of Computer Science](#), University of Maryland, 2008)

EXAMPLE: Compared to face- to-face classroom education, distance education requires students to be more focused, become better time managers, and to have the ability to work alone and with others (Hardy & Boaz, 1997). ([Truluck](#), 2007)

EXAMPLE: ...especially important (is) providing the high-touch element to balance the high-tech approach ([Thomas](#), 2005); FSU's mentors are trained to communicate early and often...and to respond quickly, in all events within 48 hours....The establishment of trust is basic to the goal of facilitating learning. ([Hayes](#), n.d.) **TA Challenges:** How do you want the TA to respond if students challenge the TA's role or approach in the course?

- Take the initiative in getting in touch with students; become aware of what individual students are coping with and discuss these issues with me.
- Get in touch with students and advise me on the "pulse" of the class as follows.

EXAMPLE: About the third week, post a new thread: "Feedback from You." Ask students: "How's it going? What parts of this course are your favorites? What do you like least or would you change?" (Post in your office; make announcement that new message has been posted.) Summarize the information from students; send to Prof. Chowdhury and Ludy Goodson. This will help us in making improvements in the course. (Professor Chowdhury, ASTR 264).

Course Management.

- Send students a personal welcome and introduction about your role at the start of the course.
- Set up a "TA's Online Office" or "TA Discussion Room" for students' comments and questions.
- Check questions and comments at my "Online Office;" alert me to issues needing attention.
- Send weekly reminders to students about upcoming due dates.
- Clarify assignments when questions arise from students.
- Track submissions of assignments, exams, and discussions; find out reasons for delays.
- Send out periodic messages of tips that might help students excel in the class.

EXAMPLE: Remind...students that while online learning gives them more flexibility, it requires the same commitment as a regular class...Encourage students to work ahead...([Digital Learning Department](#), OSPI, 2009-2011).

- Check and report changes and abnormalities in student participation.
- Look for signs of possible cheating and report any concerns to me right away.
- Set up and manage a couple of online study groups for students.
- Stay alert to possible signs of cheating and report any concerns to me.
- Send out periodic messages of tips that might help students excel in the class?

EXAMPLE: Remind...students that while online learning gives them more flexibility, it requires the same commitment as a regular class...Encourage students to work ahead...(Digital Learning Department, OSPI, 2009-2011).

Providing Extra Support.

- Analyze and discuss student needs for extra support.
- Prepare a list of frequently asked questions and answers to help students with the course.
- Check with me about creating extra online study sessions and special guidance for students.
- Search and discuss with me supplemental content that could help underprepared students.
- Look for supplemental content that might help students and discuss this with me.
- Let me know about special guidance you may want to give to individual students.

Class Discussions.

TIP: The material the professor presents, the manner in which it is developed and explained, and the relative emphasis placed on subtopics are what you need to process and support in discussion sessions...(Department of Computer Science, University of Maryland, 2008)

- Create more discussion forum threads to advance discussions; discuss these with me.
- Give feedback to students on progress of their discussions according to my guidelines.

EXAMPLE: Divergent questions, calling for student judgment and processing of relevant information, often trigger spirited discussions...Often you'll ask **follow-up questions** after you get an answer to your initiating question. (Department of Computer Science, 2008)

EXAMPLE: When a student seeks individual help, first ascertain whether she or he has genuinely attempted the problem(s) or is merely trying to exploit you for 'easy answers.' After the student has shown you what has been tried, evaluate the specific skills that have already been mastered and point these out to the student. Pose leading questions which can lead the student through the remaining steps. Merely showing students how to do a problem helps little. It is the skills of problem solving that you are there to help them learn...Be as equitable as possible in distributing your time among individual students. (Department of Computer Science, University of Maryland, 2008)

Grading.

ALERT: To avoid confusion and possible grade appeals, the IPFW instructor and TA need to give consistent messages to students about grading of discussions and assignments. "I want to share a voice on grading with my TA." (K. Stoller, personal communication, November 14, 2011)

- Use course rubrics or other scoring guides for grading.
- Check with me on how and when to do other grading in the course.
- Do not delay grading; students need rapid feedback; check with me before posting grades.