

Teaching Assistant Handbook

Contents

1	Being a Mathematics Teaching Assistant	3
1.1	Who This Handbook Is For	3
1.2	The Role of the TA	3
1.3	Working With Students	4
1.4	Communication and Getting Help	4
2	Before the Semester Begins	5
2.1	Eligibility	5
2.2	Applying for a TA Position	5
2.3	How TA Assignments Are Made	6
2.4	If You Are Appointed	7
2.5	Plan to Be Available for the Full Appointment	7
2.6	Returning TAs	7
3	Your Responsibilities During the Semester	8
3.1	Workload	8
3.2	Working With Your Instructor	8
3.3	Grading	9
3.4	The Help Room	9
3.5	Communication	10
3.6	Course Materials and Textbooks	10
4	Attendance, Scheduling, and Availability	10
4.1	Being Available During the Semester	10
4.2	Help Room Attendance	11
4.3	If You Need to Miss a Help Room Shift	11
4.4	Swapping Help Room Hours	11
4.5	Tardiness and Repeated Absences	11
4.6	When Your Workload Becomes Difficult to Manage	12
5	Professional Responsibilities	12
5.1	Confidentiality and Student Information	12
5.2	Conflicts of Interest	13
5.3	Professional Boundaries	13
5.4	Academic Integrity and AI Tools	13
5.5	AI in the Help Room	14
5.6	When You Are Unsure	14
6	When Something Goes Wrong	14

6.1	If You Cannot Meet a Grading Deadline	14
6.2	If You Need to Miss a Scheduled Responsibility	15
6.3	If You Have a Problem With a Student	15
6.4	If You Have a Problem With Your Instructor	15
6.5	If Your Availability Changes Significantly	16
6.6	Complaints and Escalation	16
6.7	Ending a TA Appointment	16
6.8	Ask for Help Early	16
7	Appointment, Pay, and Employment Information	16
7.1	Appointment Titles	17
7.2	Appointment Dates and Hiring Paperwork	17
7.3	Salary and Payroll	17
7.4	Other Campus Employment	18
7.5	Union Representation	18
7.6	Evaluations and Future Appointments	18
8	Getting Help and Department Contacts	19
8.1	Who Should I Contact?	19
8.2	Department Contacts	20

Appendices 21

A	Frequently Asked Questions	21
A.1	Applying and Being Appointed	21
A.2	Before the Semester Begins	22
A.3	Workload and Responsibilities	23
A.4	Grading	23
A.5	The Help Room	24
A.6	Attendance and Scheduling	25
A.7	Communication and Working With Students	26
A.8	Confidentiality and Conflicts of Interest	26
A.9	Pay and Employment	27
A.10	Problems, Complaints, and Future Appointments	27
A.11	When You Are Not Sure What to Do	28

1 Being a Mathematics Teaching Assistant

Teaching assistants are an important part of the Mathematics Department's undergraduate courses. Depending on your appointment and the course you are assigned to, you may grade homework or exams, work with students in the Help Room, answer questions about course material, attend course meetings, or provide other instructional support. In many courses, TAs are among the people students interact with most often outside the classroom.

The job is not complicated when expectations are clear. A good TA is reliable, communicates well, treats students fairly, completes assigned work on time, and asks questions when something is unclear. You are not expected to know the answer to every math question or to solve every problem that arises on your own. You are expected to use good judgment and to communicate with the instructor or the Department when you need help.

This handbook explains how TA appointments work and what the Mathematics Department expects from students serving in these positions. It also explains the practical parts of the job: workload, grading, Help Room responsibilities, communication, attendance, confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and what to do when a problem comes up.

1.1 Who This Handbook Is For

In this handbook, **Teaching Assistant (TA)** is used as a general term for students who provide instructional support in Mathematics courses. The University may use different formal appointment titles depending on the student and the position; those titles are discussed later in this handbook.

This handbook applies to undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students serving as TAs in the Department of Mathematics. PhD students in Mathematics should also read the Department's *Graduate Student Handbook*, especially the sections concerning teaching responsibilities, doctoral appointments, and related expectations. The two handbooks are intended to be read together where they overlap.

Policies and procedures may change from time to time. Returning TAs should therefore review the current handbook rather than assume that the expectations are the same as in a previous semester.

1.2 The Role of the TA

A TA supports the work of the course instructor and helps students learn the material. The exact responsibilities depend on the appointment, but most TA work falls into three areas:

- helping students during scheduled Help Room hours
- grading homework, assignments, or exams when appropriate
- communicating with students, instructors, and Department staff.

The expected balance among these responsibilities differs by appointment. The specific workload expectations for undergraduate, master's, and doctoral TAs are given later in this handbook.

The instructor remains responsible for organizing and teaching the course. As a TA, you should work closely with the instructor rather than trying to make independent decisions about course policies, grading standards, deadlines, or other matters that affect students. At the beginning of the semester, you should expect to meet with the instructor to discuss your responsibilities and how the course will be organized. Some instructors will also hold occasional meetings with their TAs during the semester.

The most useful rule is simple: **when you are unsure, ask**. If grading instructions are unclear, ask the instructor. If the workload seems too large to complete within the expected time, raise the issue early. If a student asks you to make a decision that belongs to the instructor, refer the student to the instructor. Small questions are much easier to resolve before they become larger problems.

1.3 Working With Students

Students should be able to expect their TAs to be helpful, fair, and professional. This means treating students respectfully, applying grading instructions consistently, protecting confidential information, and being dependable about scheduled responsibilities.

Helping a student does not mean simply providing an answer. Students now have access to many sources of mathematical help, including textbooks, online resources, computational tools, and AI systems that can explain concepts and solve many standard problems. The value of working with a TA is different. A good conversation can help a student identify what they do not understand, explain their reasoning, recognize a mistake, choose a useful approach, and learn how to continue on their own.

When a student asks for help, it is often useful to begin by asking what they have already tried. You may then work through part of the problem together, ask a question that points toward the next step, compare two possible approaches, or help the student interpret a solution they have already found. The goal is not merely for the student to leave with a correct answer, but for them to leave understanding more mathematics than when they arrived.

Students may sometimes bring you a solution produced by an AI system or another outside resource. You do not need to treat this as unusual. A useful response is often to ask the student to explain the solution, check whether the reasoning is correct, and identify the step they do not understand. Having a solution in front of you and understanding why it works are not the same thing.

You will also occasionally be asked a question you cannot answer immediately. That is normal. It is better to say that you are unsure, think about the problem, or refer the question to the instructor than to improvise an answer you do not trust. Part of being a good mathematician (and a good TA) is knowing when to check something.

Questions about whether AI tools, online resources, or collaboration are permitted on a particular assignment are governed by the instructor's course policies. TAs should not create their own rules or make independent academic-integrity decisions. If a situation is unclear, ask the instructor.

Because TAs work directly with students and may have access to grades and other academic information, the position also carries professional responsibilities. Confidentiality, conflicts of interest, academic integrity, and appropriate boundaries are discussed later in this handbook.

1.4 Communication and Getting Help

Good communication prevents most TA problems.

If you cannot meet a grading deadline, if your availability changes, if you need to miss a scheduled Help Room hour, or if something about the job is not working, communicate early. Depending on the issue, the right person may be your course instructor, the Academic Coordinator, or another Department administrator.

The Department does not expect TAs to handle difficult situations alone. TAs who are unsure about their responsibilities, concerned about their workload, or experiencing problems with a student or instructor should ask for help. The handbook gives more specific guidance later about whom to contact and how to escalate a concern when necessary.

Teaching assistants provide important support to our courses and to our students. The goal of the policies in this handbook is not to make the job complicated. It is to make expectations clear, help courses run smoothly, and give TAs a clear path when questions or problems arise.

2 Before the Semester Begins

Serving as a TA begins before the first day of class. You need to apply for the position, provide the required enrollment and academic information, complete any necessary hiring paperwork, and make sure you understand your assignment. Once you are appointed, you will also need to complete the Department's TA orientation, provide your availability for Help Room scheduling, and connect with the instructor for your course.

This section explains the main steps. Some details vary depending on your student status and whether you have previously worked for the University.

2.1 Eligibility

To be eligible for a TA position in the Department of Mathematics, you must normally be a currently enrolled, full-time student in a degree-granting program at Columbia College, the School of Professional Studies, the School of General Studies, the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Barnard College, or Teachers College. In some circumstances, part-time graduate students may be eligible with prior approval.

You should also have a strong academic background in the course you are applying to support. Normally, this means that you have successfully completed the relevant coursework with a grade of at least A. The coursework will usually have been completed at Columbia, although graduate students may document equivalent coursework completed at another institution by providing an unofficial transcript.

There are occasional exceptions. An instructor may recommend a student who has not taken the exact Columbia course if the instructor is familiar with the student's background and believes that the student is well prepared to support the course. These situations are considered individually.

2.2 Applying for a TA Position

Students interested in serving as TAs should submit the Department's online TA application. TA appointments are made by Department staff based on instructional needs, course enrollments, student qualifications, and the overall availability of positions.

Individual instructors do not appoint their own TAs. Students therefore do not need to contact instructors to ask for a TA position, and doing so does not replace the Department's application process. The application form includes space for you to indicate courses or instructors you would prefer to work with. The Department will take these preferences into account when making assignments and will try to accommodate them when possible, but a particular course or instructor assignment cannot be guaranteed.

TA assignments depend on the needs of the Department as a whole. You may therefore be offered a position in a course other than your first choice, or with an instructor you did not list as a preference. If you are offered an assignment, you should review it carefully and contact the Department if you have a question about whether the course is appropriate for your background.

Priority is normally given to applications received by the following dates:

- July 15 for fall appointments
- December 1 for spring appointments
- January 31 for summer appointments.

Additional deadlines may be announced by the Department when necessary.

As part of the application, you will be asked to verify your enrollment status. For continuing Columbia students, this should normally be a screenshot or printout of the Enrollment History tab in Vergil showing **(1) your name**, **(2) your UNI**, and **(3) full-time enrollment status** for the semester in which you are applying to work. See Figure 1.

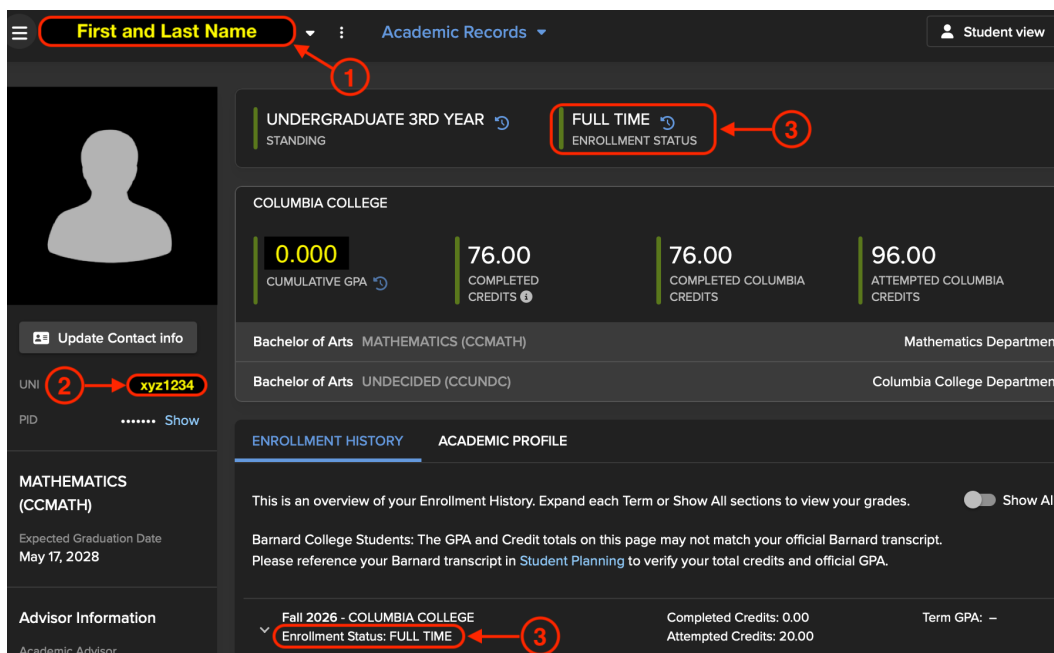


Figure 1: Example of acceptable enrollment verification from Vergil. Your screenshot should show your name, UNI, and enrollment status for the semester in which you are applying to work.

If you are entering your first semester as a Columbia graduate student, you may apply before your enrollment status has been updated in Vergil. You will still need to provide verification of your enrollment status at least two weeks before the first day of classes. Without this verification, you cannot be appointed as a TA.

You will also be asked to provide grade information. This should normally be an unofficial transcript from Columbia or, when relevant, from a previous institution. If grades from the most recent semester have not yet been posted, you may apply and provide updated grade information once the grades become available.

2.3 How TA Assignments Are Made

Submitting an application does not guarantee a TA appointment. The Department receives many applications, while the number and type of available positions depend on the courses being offered, enrollments, and the instructional needs of the semester.

When making assignments, the Department considers several factors, including:

- your performance in the course or subject you are applying to support
- an instructor recommendation, when applicable
- evaluations and feedback from previous TA appointments
- previous tutoring or teaching experience
- your ability to communicate clearly and work effectively with students and instructors.

Students who are not selected are welcome to apply again in a later semester. Applications may also be kept on file in case an opening becomes available after the initial assignments have been made.

The hiring process sometimes continues into the first two weeks of the semester while enrollments settle and instructional needs become clear. If you are selected for a position, the Department will contact you directly with information about the appointment.

2.4 If You Are Appointed

Once you accept a TA appointment, there are several things to complete before you begin working.

New hires must complete the required employment paperwork with the Department. In particular, you may not begin work until the University's **I-9 employment verification** requirements have been completed. Follow the deadlines and instructions in your appointment letter carefully.

You will also be added to a CourseWorks site containing the Department's TA orientation. The orientation is required and should be completed at least one week before the start of classes. It covers practical information about the position and should be completed even if you have previously served as a TA when the Department asks you to do so.

Before the semester begins, the Department will also ask for your availability for Help Room scheduling. You may be asked to provide as many as six hours of possible availability each week so that the schedule can be assembled. This does not mean that you will be scheduled for six hours. Undergraduate TAs are normally assigned two Help Room hours per week, while master's and doctoral TAs are normally assigned three.

Once your course assignment is confirmed, you should expect to hear from the instructor about the course and your responsibilities. At the beginning of the semester, you and the instructor should discuss the grading arrangement, expected turnaround time, Help Room responsibilities, communication, and any other course-specific duties.

If you have not heard from your instructor by the end of the Change of Program period, contact the Department's Academic Coordinator.

2.5 Plan to Be Available for the Full Appointment

TAs are expected to be on campus and available beginning with the first day of classes. You should not accept an appointment if you know that other commitments will prevent you from carrying out the regular responsibilities of the position.

Graduate TAs may also be needed during the final examination period, particularly for exam grading or proctoring. If this applies to your course, you and the instructor should discuss the expected end-of-semester responsibilities early enough for you to plan accordingly.

If your availability changes significantly after you accept the position, tell the instructor and the Academic Coordinator as soon as possible. It is much easier to adjust an assignment when a scheduling problem is raised early.

2.6 Returning TAs

TA appointments do not automatically continue from one semester or academic year to the next. If you would like to serve again, you must submit a new application for the appropriate hiring period.

Previous TA experience is taken into account when future assignments are made. This includes feedback from students, instructors, and Department staff, as well as reliability in grading, communication, Help Room attendance, and other assigned responsibilities.

Reappointment is therefore not guaranteed, even if you have served as a TA before. Returning TAs should also review the current version of this handbook and complete any required application or orientation steps for the new appointment.

3 Your Responsibilities During the Semester

Once the semester begins, most TA work is straightforward: stay in communication with your instructor, complete assigned grading on time, attend your scheduled Help Room hours, and ask for guidance when something is unclear.

The exact balance of responsibilities depends on your appointment and the course. Some weeks will be busier than others, especially around exams or major assignments. The workload expectations below are therefore averages over the semester rather than a fixed number of hours that must be identical every week.

3.1 Workload

Undergraduate TAs are expected to work an average of approximately **6 hours** per week:

- two hours of scheduled Help Room work;
- approximately three hours of grading homework or other assignments; and
- approximately one hour for email and communication with students, instructors, and Department staff.

Master's student TAs are expected to work an average of approximately **7 hours** per week:

- three hours of scheduled Help Room work;
- approximately three hours of grading homework, assignments, or exams; and
- approximately one hour for email and communication with students, instructors, and Department staff.

Doctoral student TAs are expected to work an average of approximately **8-10 hours** per week:

- three hours of scheduled Help Room work;
- approximately four-six hours of grading homework, assignments, or exams and, when applicable, leading recitation sections; and
- approximately one hour for email and communication with students, instructors, and Department staff.

These numbers describe an average over the semester. You may have very little grading in one week and substantially more in another. For master's and PhD TAs, final-exam grading may also require additional time near the end of the semester.

If the work you are assigned cannot reasonably be completed within the expected workload, do not simply absorb the extra work or wait until deadlines are missed. Speak with the instructor early and try to identify a reasonable solution. If the problem cannot be resolved with the instructor, contact the Academic Coordinator.

3.2 Working With Your Instructor

You should expect to meet with your course instructor near the beginning of the semester to discuss how the course will run and what your responsibilities will be. Depending on the course, this may include grading procedures, deadlines, Help Room responsibilities, communication with students, use of course platforms, and any other duties specific to the course.

Some instructors may ask TAs to attend an early class meeting so that they can be introduced to students. Instructors may also hold occasional meetings with their TAs during the semester. When such meetings are scheduled as part of the course, attendance is expected.

Good communication between the instructor and the TA is especially important around grading. Before beginning an assignment, make sure that you understand what is being graded, what standards or rubric should be used, and when the work should be completed. If something is unclear, ask before making a policy or grading decision on your own.

3.3 Grading

Grading should be timely, consistent, and guided by the instructor's expectations. Your role is to apply the grading standards for the course, not to create your own grading policy.

Complete assigned grading by the deadline set by the instructor. If the amount of grading or the deadline becomes difficult to manage, contact the instructor as soon as possible. It is much easier to adjust the work before a deadline than after students have been waiting for feedback.

When grading, keep the following principles in mind:

- follow the instructor's solutions, rubric, and grading guidance as much as you can
- apply the same standards consistently across students
- ask the instructor when a solution is ambiguous or does not fit the expected rubric
- keep comments focused on math and on helping the student understand what needs improvement
- do not make independent decisions about course-wide grading policies, regrades, extensions, or exceptions unless the instructor has explicitly asked you to do so.

Students now have access to AI systems and other online tools that can produce convincing solutions to many standard mathematics problems. You may therefore encounter work that looks unusual, uses methods not taught in the course, or appears to have been produced with outside assistance. Your job as a TA is not to investigate the student or make an independent determination of academic misconduct. If something concerns you, preserve the relevant work and bring it to the instructor's attention. The instructor is responsible for deciding how the course policy applies.

The distinction between a correct solution and genuine understanding is also worth keeping in mind when giving feedback. A polished solution may still hide a misunderstanding, while an imperfect solution may show substantial mathematical progress. Good grading should follow the course rubric while giving students useful information about their reasoning.

3.4 The Help Room

The Mathematics Department maintains Help Rooms where students can receive drop-in support from undergraduate and graduate TAs. The current locations are:

- **502 Milstein Center: Salmasi Computational Science/Math Collaboration Space**
College Algebra, Calculus I, Calculus II, and Calculus III
- **406 Mathematics: Columbia Math Help Room**
Calculus IV and higher-level Mathematics courses.

Help Room hours are a shared Department resource. During your scheduled shift, you should help any student whose question falls within the mathematics you are qualified to support, even if the student is enrolled in a different section or is not in the course to which you are assigned.

TAs are required to wear the Department-provided lanyard while working in the Help Room so that students can identify who is available to help.

The purpose of the Help Room is not simply to provide answers. Students can now obtain answers, worked solutions, and explanations from many sources, including AI systems. What they often need from a TA is something different: a mathematical conversation.

When a student asks for help, begin when possible by finding out what they have tried and where they became stuck. A useful interaction may involve asking a question, checking a line of reasoning, explaining why a method applies, comparing two approaches, or helping the student make sense of a solution they have already found.

A student may sometimes arrive with a solution produced by an AI system, an online solver, or another outside source. There is no need to treat the existence of such a solution as unusual. Instead, ask what the student understands about it. Can they explain why a step is valid? Do they know why that method

was chosen? Could they use the same idea on a related problem? Having a solution and understanding the mathematics behind it are different things.

The goal of a good Help Room interaction is therefore not necessarily to finish the problem. It is to help the student leave better able to continue independently.

You will sometimes be asked a question that you cannot answer. That is perfectly normal. Do not guess or improvise a solution you do not trust. You may think about the problem with the student, ask another TA for a second opinion, or suggest that the student bring the question to the instructor.

Attendance and procedures for missed or swapped Help Room hours are discussed in Section 4.

3.5 Communication

TAs are expected to check their email regularly and to respond to messages from the course instructor, Department staff, and students within two business days.

Not every message requires a long response. Sometimes the appropriate answer is simply to acknowledge the message, clarify when you will be able to address the issue, or direct the student to the instructor when the question involves a course policy or decision outside your role.

When communicating with students, be clear about the distinction between questions you can answer and decisions that belong to the instructor. For example, you can explain mathematics or clarify feedback you gave while grading, but questions about extensions, exceptions to course policies, final grading decisions, or other individual accommodations should generally be referred to the instructor unless you have been given different instructions.

If you know that you will be unavailable or unable to respond normally for a period of time, let the instructor know rather than allowing messages or assigned work to go unanswered.

3.6 Course Materials and Textbooks

The Department has a limited number of course textbooks that may be available for TAs to borrow through the Academic Coordinator. There may not be enough copies for every TA, and TAs working in the same course may sometimes need to share a book or coordinate with the instructor about access to course materials.

Make sure that you have access to the materials you need in order to do your assigned work. If you are expected to grade an assignment, for example, you should have access to the assignment itself, the relevant solutions or grading guidance, and any course platform needed to complete the work.

If something you need has not been provided, ask the instructor rather than trying to reconstruct the course expectations from old materials or from what another section happens to be doing.

4 Attendance, Scheduling, and Availability

TA positions involve scheduled responsibilities, especially Help Room hours, and students depend on those schedules being reliable. At the same time, illness, emergencies, academic obligations, and other conflicts do arise. The important thing is to communicate early and make sure that the work or Help Room coverage is handled appropriately.

4.1 Being Available During the Semester

TAs are expected to be on campus and available beginning with the first day of classes. Graduate TAs may also be needed through the end of the final examination period when their course requires exam proctoring

or grading.

If you know before accepting an appointment that you have substantial scheduling restrictions that will prevent you from meeting the regular responsibilities of the position, you should raise them with the Department before accepting the appointment.

Schedules sometimes change after the semester begins. If your availability changes significantly and you are no longer able to meet the requirements of the position, contact your instructor and the Academic Coordinator as soon as possible. The earlier the Department knows about a problem, the more likely it is that a workable solution can be found.

4.2 Help Room Attendance

Attendance during your assigned Help Room hours is required. Students rely on the published Help Room schedule, and an uncovered shift can leave students without the support they were told would be available.

TAs are expected to clock in and out for each scheduled Help Room shift using the form or system provided by the Department. The Department uses this information to make sure that Help Rooms are staffed and operating as expected.

Remembering to clock in and out is part of the responsibility of the shift. If you realize that you forgot to record your attendance, contact the Academic Coordinator rather than leaving the record unresolved.

Help Rooms normally begin operating one week after classes start and continue through the last day of classes. They are generally closed during the final examination period and on University holidays when classes do not meet. If you are unsure whether the Help Room is operating on a particular day, check with the Academic Coordinator.

4.3 If You Need to Miss a Help Room Shift

If you know in advance that you cannot attend one of your regularly scheduled Help Room hours, notify your course instructor and the Academic Coordinator at least one week in advance whenever possible.

Illnesses and emergencies are different, of course. In those situations, give as much notice as you reasonably can. The goal is not to predict an emergency; it is to let the appropriate people know once you realize that you cannot make the shift. The Department may request documentation for an absence when appropriate.

Do not simply miss a shift and assume that someone else will cover it. If you cannot attend, communicate.

4.4 Swapping Help Room Hours

For an occasional planned absence, you may swap a Help Room hour with another TA so that the Help Room remains staffed. You do not normally need advance Department approval for an occasional swap.

Both TAs should be clear about the arrangement, and the change should be communicated in writing to the course instructor and the Academic Coordinator. This avoids confusion about who is expected to be present.

Occasional swaps are a practical way to handle scheduling conflicts. They should not become a way of informally changing your regular schedule every week. If your assigned hours no longer work for you on a continuing basis, contact the Academic Coordinator so that the regular schedule can be reconsidered.

4.5 Tardiness and Repeated Absences

A single problem should be handled by communicating and fixing it. A pattern is different. Repeated lateness, missed Help Room hours, failure to record attendance, or frequent last-minute schedule changes

interfere with the operation of the Help Room and place additional work on other TAs. If there is an underlying scheduling or workload problem, raise it early rather than allowing missed responsibilities to accumulate.

Repeated attendance problems may affect your continued appointment and, in serious cases, may be grounds for dismissal. The purpose of this policy is straightforward: when the Department publishes a Help Room schedule, students should be able to rely on it.

4.6 When Your Workload Becomes Difficult to Manage

TA workloads are averages over the semester, so some weeks will naturally be busier than others. A week containing a major homework assignment or exam may require more grading time, while another week may require very little. What matters is whether the overall assignment remains reasonable within the expected workload for your appointment.

If you are regularly spending substantially more time than expected, or if you receive an assignment that you do not think can reasonably be completed by the requested deadline, speak with the instructor. Do this before the situation becomes an overdue-grading problem.

It is useful to be specific. Rather than simply saying that there is “too much grading,” explain how much work has been assigned, approximately how long it is taking, and what deadline you have been given. This makes it much easier for you and the instructor to decide whether the grading can be simplified, redistributed, or handled differently.

If you have raised a workload concern with the instructor and the problem is not resolved, contact the Academic Coordinator. TAs should not be expected to solve an unreasonable workload by silently working substantially beyond the expectations of the appointment.

5 Professional Responsibilities

TA work is usually informal in the best sense: you talk with students, answer questions, grade their work, and work closely with an instructor. At the same time, serving as a TA gives you responsibilities that you do not have as an ordinary student. You may have access to grades and other academic information, and students may view you as part of the instructional staff for the course.

The basic principle is to use the access and authority of the position only for the work of the course. Treat students fairly, protect information that has been entrusted to you, and ask the instructor or the Department when a situation feels unclear.

5.1 Confidentiality and Student Information

As a TA, you may have access to information about students that you would not otherwise see, including homework or exam grades, submitted work, and information available through course systems. This information is confidential. Discuss a student’s academic work or grades only when there is a legitimate course-related reason to do so, and only with the student, or the course instructor.

In particular:

- do not discuss one student’s grades or performance with other students
- do not share screenshots, grade records, submitted work, or other student information outside the instructional team
- do not leave graded work or student records where they can be seen by others
- do not use student work, grades, or identifying information for purposes unrelated to the course.

This obligation continues outside the classroom and outside University. For example, a conversation about a student's performance is still confidential if it takes place with friends, in a group chat, or on social media.

If you are unsure whether information may be shared, do not share it until you have checked with the instructor or the Department.

5.2 Conflicts of Interest

You should tell the instructor if you have a close personal relationship with a student in the course you are assigned to support. This includes family relationships, romantic relationships, close friendships, or other circumstances that could reasonably make it difficult for you to evaluate the student's work impartially.

You should not grade the work of someone with whom you have such a relationship. This does not necessarily mean that you cannot serve as a TA for the course. In most cases, the instructor can arrange for another member of the instructional team to grade that student's work.

The important thing is to disclose the situation early. You do not need to provide unnecessary personal details; the instructor only needs enough information to arrange an appropriate alternative.

TAs should also not accept money or personal gifts from students in connection with their work as a TA. If a student offers something and you are unsure whether it is appropriate to accept, ask the instructor or the Department.

5.3 Professional Boundaries

A TA is often close in age to the students in the course, and in some cases you may already know students socially. There is nothing unusual about this. What matters is keeping your role as a TA separate from your personal relationships when course decisions, grading, or confidential information are involved.

You should not give one student special access, grading consideration, information, or assistance that is not available to others. You should also avoid making promises about grades, extensions, exceptions, or course policies unless the instructor has specifically authorized you to make those decisions.

Course-related communication should normally take place through University-supported channels such as Columbia email, CourseWorks, Gradescope, or another platform selected by the instructor. You are not expected to give students your personal phone number or communicate through personal social-media accounts.

If an interaction with a student makes you uncomfortable, becomes unusually personal, or moves beyond what seems appropriate for the TA role, you do not need to handle the situation alone. Speak with the instructor or the Academic Coordinator.

5.4 Academic Integrity and AI Tools

TAs may encounter work that raises questions about academic integrity. This has always been part of teaching, but the widespread availability of AI systems and online problem-solving tools means that the form of these questions is changing.

AI systems can now produce polished mathematical solutions, explanations, summaries, and computer-generated work. The fact that a solution looks unusually polished, uses an unfamiliar method, or resembles AI-generated text is not by itself a determination that misconduct has occurred.

Your responsibility as a TA is much simpler: **follow the course policy and bring concerns to the instructor.** If you notice something that seems inconsistent with the instructor's rules for collaboration, outside resources, or AI use:

- do not confront or accuse the student on your own

- do not create your own test for whether work was AI-generated
- do not impose a grading penalty unless the instructor has explicitly directed you to do so
- preserve the relevant submission, grading record, or other information
- bring the concern to the instructor.

The instructor is responsible for applying the course policy and deciding whether further action is appropriate.

The same principle applies when students ask you what forms of AI assistance are allowed. Do not invent a rule based on your own preferences. Refer to the syllabus and the instructor's stated policy. If the policy is unclear, ask the instructor.

5.5 AI in the Help Room

Academic integrity is only one part of the role AI now plays in mathematics courses. Students may also use AI systems legitimately to review material, generate examples, obtain hints, or understand a solution.

If a student brings an AI-generated explanation or solution to the Help Room, the most useful question is often not "Did AI produce this?" but "Do you understand what it is doing?"

You might ask the student to explain a step, identify the theorem being used, check whether a calculation is correct, or apply the same idea to a slightly different problem. AI can produce an answer very quickly; an in-person conversation gives you the opportunity to find out whether the student can reason with the mathematics.

This is one of the most important parts of the TA role. The purpose of the Help Room is not to compete with online tools in producing solutions. It is to give students a place to ask questions, test their understanding, explain their reasoning, and receive feedback from another person who can respond to what they actually understand.

5.6 When You Are Unsure

Professional situations are not always covered perfectly by a written rule. You may encounter a grading issue, a student interaction, a confidentiality question, or an academic-integrity concern that does not fit neatly into an example in this handbook. When that happens, do not feel that you need to make the decision alone. Pause the decision when possible and ask the instructor or the appropriate Department contact.

Good judgment does not mean always knowing the answer immediately. Often it means recognizing when a question should be passed to someone with greater responsibility for the course.

6 When Something Goes Wrong

Most problems that arise during a TA appointment are manageable if they are raised early. A grading assignment takes longer than expected, a Help Room shift conflicts with something unavoidable, communication with an instructor breaks down, or an interaction with a student becomes difficult. None of these situations is improved by waiting and hoping that it resolves itself.

The general principle is simple: **start with the person closest to the issue, communicate clearly, and ask for Department help when you need it.**

6.1 If You Cannot Meet a Grading Deadline

If you realize that you will not be able to complete assigned grading by the instructor's deadline, contact the instructor as soon as possible. Do not wait until the deadline has passed. Explain what has been completed,

what remains, and why the assignment is taking longer than expected. The instructor may be able to adjust the deadline, simplify the grading, redistribute some of the work, or provide additional guidance.

If the problem is not just one unusually busy assignment but a recurring workload that cannot reasonably be completed within the expectations of your appointment, say so explicitly. If you and the instructor cannot resolve the issue, contact the Academic Coordinator.

6.2 If You Need to Miss a Scheduled Responsibility

If you know in advance that you will miss a Help Room shift or another required course responsibility, notify the appropriate people as early as possible and follow the procedures in Section 4. For illness or an emergency, give as much notice as you reasonably can. You are not expected to predict an emergency, but you are expected to communicate once you know that you cannot meet a scheduled responsibility.

When possible, help identify a practical solution, such as arranging an occasional Help Room swap. Do not simply assume that someone else will cover for you.

6.3 If You Have a Problem With a Student

Most student questions and disagreements can be handled through ordinary conversation. A student may disagree with grading feedback, ask repeatedly for an exception, become frustrated in the Help Room, or seek a decision that you do not have authority to make. You do not need to resolve every situation yourself.

If the issue concerns a course policy, grading exception, extension, academic-integrity question, or another decision that belongs to the instructor, refer the student to the instructor. If an interaction becomes difficult, inappropriate, or makes you uncomfortable, tell the instructor and, when appropriate, the Academic Coordinator.

Try to keep the discussion focused on the course and the mathematics. You do not need to win an argument with a student, and you should not make a policy decision simply to end a difficult conversation.

If you are concerned about a student's behavior toward you or toward other students, document what happened while the details are still fresh and ask the instructor or the Department how to proceed.

6.4 If You Have a Problem With Your Instructor

In most cases, the first step is to speak directly with the instructor. Misunderstandings about deadlines, grading expectations, communication, or workload can often be resolved through a straightforward conversation. It is useful to be specific about the problem. For example, explain what work you have been assigned, what instructions you received, what you have already tried, and what you think needs to be clarified or changed.

If the problem cannot be resolved with the instructor, or if the problem itself involves the instructor in a way that makes a direct conversation inappropriate, you may bring the issue to the Department.

Depending on the course, the next step is normally to contact the Academic Coordinator together with either the Director of Undergraduate Studies or the Director of Calculus. They can help clarify expectations, address workload or communication problems, and determine whether further action is needed.

You should not avoid raising a legitimate concern because you are worried that asking for help will itself be viewed as a problem. The purpose of the escalation process is to give TAs a clear way to address situations that cannot be resolved within the instructional team.

6.5 If Your Availability Changes Significantly

Sometimes circumstances change after an appointment begins. An academic schedule changes, another commitment becomes more demanding, or a personal situation makes it difficult to continue meeting the requirements of the position.

If your availability changes significantly, tell the instructor and the Academic Coordinator as soon as possible. The Department may be able to adjust responsibilities or make another arrangement, depending on the circumstances. In other cases, it may no longer be possible for you to continue in the position. The important thing is to address the situation directly rather than allowing missed work or absences to accumulate.

6.6 Complaints and Escalation

If you wish to raise a complaint related to your TA appointment, the course instructor is normally the first person to contact when the issue can appropriately be addressed there.

If the instructor cannot resolve the problem, or if the complaint involves the instructor, contact the Academic Coordinator and the appropriate academic director; normally the Director of Undergraduate Studies or the Director of Calculus, depending on the course.

More serious or unresolved matters may be referred to the Department Chair and the Director of Academic Administration and Finance, or to your academic advisor when appropriate.

Not every problem needs to move through every level of this process. The goal is to involve the people who are in the best position to address the issue and to escalate only when necessary.

6.7 Ending a TA Appointment

A TA appointment may sometimes need to end before the conclusion of the semester. This may happen if a TA can no longer meet the requirements of the position or if the TA is not meeting the expectations of the instructor or the Department.

When an appointment is ended during the semester, the circumstances and next steps should be communicated clearly in writing among the TA, the instructor, and the Department.

Repeated problems with attendance, grading, communication, reliability, or other required responsibilities may affect continued employment. At the same time, if you find that you cannot continue in the position, contact the Department rather than simply stopping work. The Department needs to make arrangements for the course and for the students who depend on that support.

6.8 Ask for Help Early

You do not need to wait until a situation becomes serious before asking for advice. If you are confused about an expectation, worried about your workload, uncertain how to handle a student interaction, or concerned that something in the course is not working well, talk with the instructor or the Academic Coordinator.

Many problems are much easier to solve when they are still small. Asking a question early is usually better than trying to manage an unclear situation alone.

7 Appointment, Pay, and Employment Information

The term *Teaching Assistant* is used throughout this handbook for convenience, but your formal University appointment may carry a different title. Your appointment letter is the official source for your title,

appointment dates, and compensation.

This section summarizes the employment information most TAs need during the semester. Questions about hiring paperwork or payroll should be directed to the appropriate Department administrator rather than to the course instructor.

7.1 Appointment Titles

The formal title used for a TA appointment depends on the student's status and, in some cases, the school in which the student is enrolled.

In general:

- undergraduate TAs are appointed as *Teaching Assistant III*
- graduate student TAs are appointed as *Readers*
- Barnard students are appointed as *Associate III*.

Teaching Assistant III and Reader appointments are classified by the University as Student Officer positions. Associate III appointments are classified as non-student Officers of Instruction.

Other appointment titles may occasionally be used when appropriate. If you are unsure what your formal title means, consult your appointment letter or ask the Department.

7.2 Appointment Dates and Hiring Paperwork

New TAs must complete the required hiring paperwork before beginning work. In particular, you may not begin working until the University's I-9 employment verification requirements have been completed.

Follow the instructions and deadlines in your appointment letter carefully. If paperwork is incomplete, your appointment and payroll may be delayed.

Appointment dates are generally:

- September 1 - May 31 for academic-year appointments;
- September 1 - December 31 for fall-only appointments; and
- January 1 - May 31 for spring-only appointments.

The actual length of an appointment is determined by the Department and may be affected by factors such as enrollment status or visa expiration dates. Your appointment letter gives the dates that apply to your position.

7.3 Salary and Payroll

Your salary and appointment details will be provided in your appointment letter and in the accompanying hiring communications.

University payroll is processed on a semi-monthly schedule, normally on the 15th and the last day of each month. Paychecks are typically issued several days after the end of the corresponding pay period.

New hires are strongly encouraged to enroll in direct deposit once their appointment has been processed.

Questions about salary, payroll, missing payments, direct deposit, or hiring paperwork should be directed to the Department's Manager of Financial Operations. Your course instructor does not manage payroll and will generally not be able to resolve payroll problems.

If something appears incorrect, raise the issue promptly. Payroll questions are much easier to investigate when the relevant appointment dates and pay periods are clear.

7.4 Other Campus Employment

You may hold another paid position elsewhere at the University while serving as a Mathematics TA, provided that your combined workload does not exceed the University's limit of 20 hours per week across all campus jobs.

If you already hold another University position when you receive a Mathematics TA offer, or if you accept another campus position after your TA appointment begins, you must notify the Manager of Financial Operations and the Director of Academic Administration and Finance.

Do this as soon as possible. The Department needs to know about other University employment in order to make sure that your combined appointments remain within the permitted workload.

Compensation from additional University positions will generally appear as "additional compensation" on the same paycheck as your Mathematics appointment. The Department cannot provide advice about individual tax circumstances or tax consequences; questions about your personal taxes should be directed to an appropriate tax resource.

7.5 Union Representation

Students appointed as Teaching Assistant III, Reader, or in another Student Officer position are covered by the collective bargaining agreement between Columbia University and the Student Workers of Columbia (SWC-UAW). The current collective bargaining agreement and related information are available through the University's student employee resources.

This handbook is intended to explain Department practices and expectations in a practical way. It does not replace the collective bargaining agreement or other applicable University policies. If a provision of this handbook conflicts with the collective bargaining agreement, the applicable terms of the collective bargaining agreement govern.

7.6 Evaluations and Future Appointments

TAs are evaluated as part of the Department's regular review of teaching and course support. Feedback may come from course evaluations, instructors, students, and Department staff.

When considering future TA appointments, the Department may take into account:

- student and instructor feedback
- the quality and timeliness of grading
- Help Room attendance and reliability
- communication with students, instructors, and Department staff
- overall performance in the TA role.

Previous service as a TA does not guarantee a future appointment. Returning TAs must submit a new application for the relevant hiring period, and assignments continue to depend on Department needs and the available positions.

The purpose of evaluation is not only to make future appointment decisions. Feedback can also identify problems while there is still time to address them. If an instructor or Department staff member raises a concern about your grading, communication, attendance, or another responsibility, take the concern seriously and ask for clarification about what needs to improve.

8 Getting Help and Department Contacts

You are not expected to know which Department office handles every question. In most cases, the best approach is to start with the person closest to the issue. If you contact the wrong person, they can help direct you to the right place.

For questions about the mathematics, grading, students, or the day-to-day operation of your course, your **course instructor** should normally be your first point of contact. For questions about your TA appointment, Help Room schedule, or Department procedures, the **Academic Coordinator** is usually the best place to start.

8.1 Who Should I Contact?

Question or issue	Start here
Course expectations, grading instructions, or deadlines	Course instructor
A question from a student about course policy, grading, or an exception	Course instructor
Help Room scheduling, swaps, attendance, or availability	Academic Coordinator
TA applications, assignments, or general TA procedures	Academic Coordinator
A workload problem that has not been resolved with the instructor	Academic Coordinator
Hiring paperwork, I-9 questions, salary, or payroll	Manager of Financial Operations
An unresolved issue involving a Calculus course	Academic Coordinator and Director of Calculus
An unresolved issue involving another undergraduate Mathematics course	Academic Coordinator and Director of Undergraduate Studies
A broader administrative or employment concern	Director of Academic Administration and Finance
A serious concern that has not been resolved through the usual Department channels	Department Chair and Director of Academic Administration and Finance

If you are unsure where your question belongs, contact the Academic Coordinator. You do not need to determine the entire escalation path before asking for help.

8.2 Department Contacts

Role	Contact
Academic Coordinator	John Ciampi 411 Mathematics 212-854-2432 jc7023@columbia.edu
Director of Undergraduate Studies	Professor Julien Dubedat 601 Mathematics 212-854-8806 dubedat@math.columbia.edu
Director of Calculus	Professor George Dragomir 410 Mathematics 212-854-2849 dragomir@math.columbia.edu
Director of Academic Administration and Finance	Deniz Ozdol 511 Mathematics 212-854-6366 dm3111@columbia.edu
Manager of Financial Operations	Zubaida Pinky 510 Mathematics 212-854-6366 zp2253@columbia.edu

A Frequently Asked Questions

This appendix answers some of the questions that come up most often for Mathematics TAs. It is intended as a quick reference. For fuller explanations, consult the relevant sections of this handbook.

A.1 Applying and Being Appointed

Who can apply to be a Mathematics TA?

TA positions are generally available to currently enrolled, full-time students in degree-granting programs at Columbia College, the School of Professional Studies, the School of General Studies, the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Barnard College, and Teachers College. In some circumstances, part-time graduate students may be eligible with prior approval.

Do I need to have taken the course I want to TA?

Normally, you should have successfully completed the relevant coursework with a grade of at least A. The course will usually have been taken at Columbia, although graduate students may document equivalent coursework completed elsewhere. In some cases, an instructor who knows a student's mathematical background may recommend a student who has not taken the exact Columbia course.

How do I apply?

Submit the Department's online TA application. The application asks for information about your enrollment, academic background, and the courses or instructors you would prefer to work with.

What are the application deadlines?

Priority is normally given to applications received by July 15 for fall appointments, December 1 for spring appointments, and January 31 for summer appointments. The Department may announce additional deadlines when necessary.

Should I contact an instructor and ask them to hire me as their TA?

No. TA appointments are made by Department staff, not by individual instructors. Contacting an instructor does not replace the Department's application process and is not necessary in order to be considered for an appointment. The application includes space for you to indicate courses or instructors you would prefer to work with. The Department will try to accommodate those preferences when possible, but a particular course or instructor assignment cannot be guaranteed.

Can an instructor request me as a TA?

An instructor may communicate relevant information or a recommendation to the Department, but the appointment itself is still made by Department staff as part of the overall TA assignment process.

If I request a particular course, will I be assigned to it?

Not necessarily. Assignments depend on course enrollments, instructional needs, the qualifications of applicants, and the number of available positions. You may be offered a course other than your first choice.

What enrollment verification do I need to provide?

Continuing Columbia students should normally provide a screenshot or printout from the Enrollment History section of Vergil showing their name, UNI, and full-time enrollment status for the semester in which they are applying to work.

I am entering my first semester as a Columbia graduate student and Vergil does not yet show my enrollment. Can I still apply?

Yes. You may submit the application before your enrollment status has been updated, but you must provide verification of enrollment at least two weeks before the first day of classes. Without this verification, you cannot be appointed as a TA.

What should I submit to verify my grades?

You should normally provide an unofficial transcript from Columbia or, when relevant, from a previous institution. If your most recent grades have not yet been posted, you may apply and provide updated information once those grades become available.

Does submitting an application guarantee that I will receive a position?

No. The Department receives more applications than there are available positions in many semesters. Assignments depend on instructional needs as well as applicant qualifications.

When will I find out whether I have been appointed?

The hiring process may continue into the first two or three weeks of the semester while enrollments and instructional needs settle. The Department will contact you directly if you are selected for an appointment.

If I am not selected initially, is my application discarded?

Not necessarily. Applications may be kept on file in case an opening becomes available later in the semester or during a subsequent hiring period.

I have been a TA before. Do I need to apply again?

Yes. Previous appointments do not automatically continue. Returning TAs must submit a new application for the relevant hiring period.

A.2 Before the Semester Begins

What do I need to do after accepting an appointment?

Complete all required hiring paperwork, complete the Department's TA orientation, provide your Help Room availability when requested, and communicate with the instructor for your assigned course.

Can I begin working before my hiring paperwork is complete?

No. In particular, you may not begin work until the University's I-9 employment verification requirements have been completed.

Do I have to complete the TA orientation?

Yes. Appointed TAs will be added to the Department's TA orientation in CourseWorks. It should be completed at least one week before classes begin.

Why am I asked to provide six hours of Help Room availability if I will not work six Help Room hours?

The Department needs enough possible times to build a schedule that works across many TAs. Undergraduate TAs are normally scheduled for two Help Room hours per week, while master's and doctoral TAs are normally scheduled for three.

What should I do if my instructor has not contacted me?

You should expect to communicate with your instructor near the beginning of the semester. If you have not heard from the instructor by the end of the Change of Program period, contact the Academic Coordinator.

I am a Mathematics PhD student. Is this the only handbook I need to read?

No. Mathematics PhD students should also read the Department's *Graduate Student Handbook*, especially the sections concerning teaching responsibilities and doctoral appointments. The two handbooks should be read together where they overlap.

A.3 Workload and Responsibilities

How many hours am I expected to work?

Undergraduate TAs are expected to average approximately six hours per week, master's TAs approximately seven hours per week, and doctoral TAs approximately ten hours per week. These are averages over the semester rather than fixed weekly totals.

Why might one week require more work than another?

Grading is not distributed evenly through the semester. A week with a major assignment or exam may be busy, while another week may contain very little grading. For graduate TAs, final-exam grading may also create a heavier workload near the end of the semester.

What should I do if my assigned work is taking much longer than expected?

Tell the instructor early. Explain what you have been assigned, approximately how much time it is taking, and what deadline you have been given. The instructor may be able to simplify the grading, redistribute work, adjust a deadline, or provide clearer guidance.

If the workload continues to exceed the expectations of your appointment and the problem cannot be resolved with the instructor, contact the Academic Coordinator.

Am I expected to attend meetings with the instructor?

Yes, when meetings are scheduled as part of the course. You should expect an initial conversation about your responsibilities, and some instructors may hold additional TA meetings during the semester.

Can I make decisions about course policies?

Normally, no. The instructor is responsible for course policies, grading standards, deadlines, extensions, exceptions, and other decisions that affect the course as a whole. If a student asks you to make a decision outside your role, refer the question to the instructor.

A.4 Grading

What should I know before I begin grading an assignment?

Make sure you understand the instructor's solutions, rubric, grading standards, and deadline. If the instructions are unclear, ask before beginning rather than inventing your own policy.

What if a student's solution does not fit the rubric?

Use your mathematical judgment, but ask the instructor when the appropriate score is unclear. Unusual but valid solutions do occur, and the grading standard should remain consistent across students.

Can I change the grading rubric if I think it is too strict or too generous?

No. You may raise concerns or suggest changes to the instructor, but the instructor is responsible for the grading policy.

A student disagrees with the grade I gave. What should I do?

You may explain how the work was evaluated and clarify your feedback. If the student is requesting a formal regrade, an exception, or a change in course policy, follow the instructor's regrade procedure or refer the student to the instructor.

Can undergraduate TAs grade exams?

Follow the responsibilities specified for your appointment and course. If you are unsure whether you are permitted to grade a particular assessment, ask the instructor or the Department before doing so.

What should I do if I think a student's work may involve unauthorized AI use or another academic-integrity problem?

Do not accuse the student or make an independent determination of misconduct. Preserve the relevant work and bring your concern to the instructor. The instructor is responsible for interpreting the course policy and deciding what action, if any, should follow.

Can I use an AI detector to decide whether a student used AI?

You should not create your own procedure for determining whether work was generated by AI or impose a penalty on that basis. If a submission concerns you, bring the work and your specific concern to the instructor.

A.5 The Help Room

Who should I help during my Help Room shift?

Help Room service is a shared Department responsibility. You should assist any student whose question falls within the mathematics you are qualified to support, even if the student is in another section or is not enrolled in the course to which you are assigned.

Do I need to wear the Department lanyard?

Yes. TAs should wear the Department-provided lanyard while working in the Help Room so that students can identify who is available to help.

Am I supposed to solve students' homework problems for them?

No. The purpose of the Help Room is to help students understand the mathematics and make progress on their own. Ask what the student has tried, identify where they became stuck, and help them decide what to do next. Sometimes the best help is an explanation; sometimes it is a question, a hint, a related example, or a discussion of why a particular method applies.

What if a student brings me an AI-generated solution?

Treat the solution as something to discuss, not automatically as an academic-integrity case. Ask the student what they understand about it. Have them explain a step, identify the method being used, or try applying

the idea to a related problem. Having a solution in front of you and understanding why it works are not the same thing.

Why should students come to the Help Room if AI can already answer many mathematics questions?

AI systems and online tools can produce answers and explanations quickly. An in-person conversation serves a different purpose. A TA can listen to how a student is thinking, notice the particular point of confusion, ask follow-up questions, adapt an explanation, and see whether the student can continue independently.

The Help Room is therefore not simply another place to obtain solutions. It is a place for mathematical conversation.

What if I do not know the answer to a student's question?

Say so. You may think through the problem with the student, ask another TA, or suggest that the student speak with the instructor. Do not improvise an answer you do not trust. Not knowing something immediately is normal; knowing when to check is part of good mathematical practice.

What if nobody comes during my Help Room shift?

Remain available for the full scheduled shift. The published schedule tells students when assistance is available, and attendance is required whether the room is busy or quiet.

A.6 Attendance and Scheduling

Do I have to clock in and out of the Help Room?

Yes. Use the form or system provided by the Department for each scheduled shift.

What if I forget to clock in or out?

Contact the Academic Coordinator and explain what happened rather than leaving the attendance record unresolved.

What should I do if I know that I will miss a Help Room shift?

Notify your instructor and the Academic Coordinator at least one week in advance whenever possible.

What if I am sick or have an emergency?

Give as much notice as you reasonably can. You are not expected to provide a week's notice for an emergency; you are expected to communicate once you know that you cannot attend.

Can I swap Help Room hours with another TA?

Yes. Occasional swaps are permitted and do not normally require advance Department approval. Make sure both TAs agree to the arrangement and communicate the change in writing to the instructor and the Academic Coordinator.

Can I swap my Help Room shift every week?

Frequent swaps should not be used as an informal way to create a new permanent schedule. If your regular hours no longer work, contact the Academic Coordinator and discuss changing the schedule.

When are the Help Rooms open?

Help Rooms normally begin operating one week after classes start and continue through the last day of classes. They are generally closed during the final examination period and on University holidays when classes do not meet.

A.7 Communication and Working With Students

How quickly am I expected to answer email?

TAs should check email regularly and respond to messages from students, instructors, and Department staff within two business days.

Do I need to give students my personal phone number?

No. Course communication should normally take place through University-supported channels such as Columbia email, CourseWorks, Gradescope, or another platform selected by the instructor.

A student is asking me for an extension or exception. Can I grant it?

Normally, no. Unless the instructor has explicitly given you authority to make that decision, refer the student to the instructor.

A student interaction is making me uncomfortable. What should I do?

You do not need to handle the situation alone. Tell the instructor or the Academic Coordinator. If appropriate, make a brief written record of what occurred while the details are still fresh.

A.8 Confidentiality and Conflicts of Interest

Can I tell my friends how someone in my course is doing?

No. Grades, submitted work, and other academic information you learn through your TA position are confidential.

Can I discuss a student's grade with another TA?

Only when there is a legitimate course-related reason and the other TA is appropriately involved in the course or grading process. Student information should not become casual conversation among TAs.

Can I upload student work to an AI system to help me grade it?

Do not upload identifiable student work, grades, or other confidential course information to an outside system unless the instructor and University policy explicitly authorize that use. If you are unsure what tools are permitted for grading, ask the instructor before using them.

What if one of my close friends is enrolled in the course?

Tell the instructor. You should not grade the work of a close friend, family member, romantic partner, or someone with whom you have another close personal relationship. The instructor can normally arrange for another grader to handle that student's work.

Do I need to explain the details of a personal relationship to the instructor?

No. You need to provide enough information for the instructor to recognize that a conflict exists and arrange an appropriate alternative, but unnecessary personal details are not required.

Can I accept a gift from a student?

TAs should not accept money or personal gifts from students in connection with their TA work. If you are unsure about a particular situation, ask the instructor or the Department.

A.9 Pay and Employment**Why does my official appointment title not say “Teaching Assistant”?**

The handbook uses *Teaching Assistant* as a general term. Formal University titles vary. Undergraduate TAs are generally appointed as Teaching Assistant III, graduate students as Readers, and Barnard students as Associate III.

When am I paid?

University payroll is processed semi-monthly, normally on the 15th and the last day of each month. Your appointment letter and hiring communications contain the details that apply to your appointment.

Who should I contact if there is a problem with my paycheck?

Contact the Department’s Manager of Financial Operations. Course instructors do not administer payroll.

Should I sign up for direct deposit?

New hires are strongly encouraged to enroll in direct deposit once their appointment has been processed.

Can I have another campus job while I am a TA?

Yes, provided that your total workload across all University jobs does not exceed 20 hours per week.

Do I need to tell the Department about another campus job?

Yes. If you already hold another University position when you receive your Mathematics appointment, or if you accept another position while serving as a Mathematics TA, notify the Manager of Financial Operations and the Director of Academic Administration and Finance.

Is my TA position unionized?

Teaching Assistant III, Reader, and other Student Officer appointments are covered by the collective bargaining agreement between Columbia University and the Student Workers of Columbia (SWC–UAW). The collective bargaining agreement governs where its provisions conflict with this handbook.

A.10 Problems, Complaints, and Future Appointments**What should I do if I have a problem with my instructor?**

When appropriate, begin by speaking directly with the instructor. Many problems involving expectations, deadlines, or workload can be resolved through a clear conversation. If the problem cannot be resolved with the instructor, or if the concern involves the instructor in a way that makes a direct conversation inappropriate, contact the Academic Coordinator and the appropriate academic director.

What should I do if I think my workload is unreasonable?

Raise the issue with the instructor early and be specific about the work, the time it is taking, and the deadline. If the issue cannot be resolved, contact the Academic Coordinator.

Can I raise a complaint without first speaking to the instructor?

Yes, when the complaint itself involves the instructor or when speaking directly with the instructor would not be appropriate. In that situation, contact the Academic Coordinator and the appropriate academic director.

Can my TA appointment end before the end of the semester?

Yes. An appointment may need to end if a TA can no longer meet the requirements of the position or is not meeting the expectations of the instructor or the Department. Such circumstances should be communicated clearly in writing.

Will one mistake cause me to lose my TA position?

Ordinary problems should be addressed through communication and correction. A recurring pattern of missed grading, poor communication, attendance problems, or other failure to meet the responsibilities of the appointment is more serious. If a concern is raised, take it seriously and ask what needs to improve.

How does my performance affect future TA appointments?

The Department may consider student and instructor feedback, grading quality and timeliness, Help Room attendance, communication, reliability, and overall performance when making future appointments.

Am I guaranteed to be rehired if I have served successfully before?

No. Previous TA service is considered, but future appointments also depend on instructional needs, available positions, and the applicant pool. Returning TAs must apply again.

A.11 When You Are Not Sure What to Do**Who should I ask first?**

For questions about the course, grading, mathematics, or student interactions, start with the course instructor. For Help Room scheduling, TA appointments, or general TA procedures, the Academic Coordinator is usually the best place to begin. Payroll and hiring-paperwork questions should go to the Manager of Financial Operations.

What if I do not know which person handles my question?

Ask the Academic Coordinator. You do not need to understand the Department's administrative structure before asking for help.

What is the most important general advice for a TA?

Communicate early. Ask when something is unclear. Do not make course-policy decisions that belong to the instructor. Treat students fairly and respectfully. Protect confidential information. And remember that your role is not simply to provide answers, but to help students understand mathematics and become better able to work on their own.