Brown University

Department of Computer Science

Undergraduate Missive

Meta-TAs and The Director of Undergraduate Studies

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Contents

0 Welcome

Welcome to the Department of Computer Science! This guide is intended to introduce you to our undergraduate teaching assistant program, something that will probably play a big role in your academic experience in the department. We're glad to have you around!

1 Your TAs

For many courses in the department, your TAs will be your number one resource. Here are some guidelines so that your TAs can be of best use to you and your classmates.

1.1 When should I talk to a TA?

You should go to TA hours when you have questions about course assignments and course material, but only after you have consulted the lecture notes, course texts, and any other course resources.

TAs are intended as a resource for you—don't hesitate to use them. Many of your TAs probably had the same questions when they were students in your course. They didn't become TAs for the complimentary private jet—they took the job because they like the material and they like to help students learn.

However, you must try to answer your own questions before seeking help from TAs. It's the best way for you to learn, especially when code is involved.

1.2 When can I talk to a TA?

You can talk to TAs about course material only while they're on hours and during other official times established by the course (e.g. labs, sections, and help sessions). Check your course web page for a schedule.

Your TAs are students too and have a right to get their work done in the lab, to seek help from their TAs, and to have a personal life outside the department. Furthermore, it's not fair for any one student to get extra help from a TA just because they happen to sit nearby in the lab or live down the hall. To this end, you may not seek help from TAs while they are not on hours. TAs are friendly and knowledgeable—please don't take advantage of this by asking for help at other times, since this will put them in the uncomfortable position of having to say "no."

1.3 Can I get help from people who are not TAs?

In general, yes. However, help is always governed not only by the Academic Code but also by your course's collaboration policy, which should be documented in the missive for your

course.

Most courses allow a limited degree of collaboration, but since all courses have different policies, be sure to study the policy closely and talk to your head TAs if you have any questions.

1.4 How do I find my TAs?

TA hours are usually held on the 2nd floor of the CIT. The exact locations and times of the hours for particular course will be noted on that courses website.

When multiple people are waiting for a given course, TAs will usually start a waiting list. If the course is using SignMeUp, the department's list management software, you can sign up on the machine closest to the door in the fishbowl. Your course may allow remote signups in which case you can also add your name via any computer. If the course is using a whiteboard list, you can add your name to the list by writing it at the bottom. Once you sign up, you can wait in the hallway or Sunlab for your TA to call or zwrite you.

The hours room is a place to get your questions answered, not to sit and do your work. Please do not "hang out" in the hours room. What's more, machines in the hours rooms are for TA use only—do not log on to those machines when you're not being helped.

When a TA is on hours, you can ask them questions in person. Zwriting (or mailing) individual TAs, even when they are on hours, is discouraged. Instead, use the course mail alias (e.g. cs0330tas@lists.brown.edu) to contact your course staff. These aliases send to all TAs for the course and often the professor as well, and sending questions to the entire staff as opposed to individuals will get you answers a lot faster.

1.5 What about administrative issues?

For administrative issues, such as account problems and special accommodations, you should get in touch with your head TAs. Email is usually the best way to do this, though some head TAs may make themselves available for administrative requests at the end of lecture.

Please use publicized mail addresses (e.g. cs0040headtas@lists.brown.edu) when contacting your head TAs.

2 Your Department Account

Almost all courses require use of the department's undergraduate computing facilities to complete and hand in assignments. If you don't already have a CS account, it will be created for you during the first or second week of the semester. Course identities are also given to existing accounts then.

The department maintains a secure and reliable system. However, course work stored in your CS account is only as secure as the file permissions you set. Many courses use account setup scripts and install scripts to set initial permissions, but you are responsible for maintaining appropriately restrictive file permissions on your files. It is against the collaboration policy of most courses to let others share or copy your code, and having your code available through improperly set file permissions or printouts lying around is a form of allowing others to share your code. This may be a violation of course collaboration policies and is subject to the Tenets of Community Behavior.

3 The Sunlab Consultants

The Sunlab consultants are paid to watch over the lab and to help people use their accounts. The on-duty consultant always sits at 9a, the node nearest the door when you enter CIT 143.

The consultants provide support for remote login, startups, and a reasonable number of programs on the ugrad Linux systems, as well as a basic level of support for the ugrad Windows machines.

The consultants are not the same as TAs, and do not provide assistance on course material, course assignments, course-specific software, or course-specific account customizations.

The line between these, though usually obvious to consultants, is sometimes difficult for new students to determine. Please have patience while you're figuring this out, and you can expect the same from consultants.

Some students work both as a consultant and as a TA. Please respect the separation between these roles, and don't ask your TAs for course help while they're sitting at 9a.

The consultants are managed by two head consultants. The head consultants this year are Emily Kasbohm and Giovanni Pittalis. They can be reached via email at head-consultant@cs.brown.edu.

4 The SPOCs

The SPOCs (Systems Programmer, Operator, and Consultants) assist in the installation, maintenance, development, and documentation of local software. In addition, they represent the off-hours technical support staff and assist with administrative tasks.

The SPOCs this year are Benjamin Murphy, Josh Roy, William Povell, and Steven Shi.

In general, you should first talk to a Sunlab consultant about technical problems. For technical issues beyond the scope of the consultants, you can contact the technical staff (including the SPOCs) by mailing problem@cs.brown.edu.

5 The Meta-TAs

The Meta-TAs are the two ugrads responsible for coordinating the TA program. This year, the meta-TAs are Alyssa Baum and Katya Schwiegershausen. If you have issues or questions about the UTA program, you can talk to them or email them at mta@cs.brown.edu.

6 What do I do if I have a problem with a TA? A consultant? A professor?

If you feel you have been treated inappropriately by a TA, your best course of action is to get in touch with a head TA for the course. If you feel uncomfortable talking to a head TA (or if your issue is with one of the head TAs), get in touch with the professor for the course.

For issues with the consultants, talk to the head consultants or the meta-TAs.

For issues with a Meta-TA, talk to Tom Doeppner, the Director of Undergraduate Studies. For issues with a professor (including Professor Doeppner), talk to the department chair, Ugur Cetintemel.

This document was produced in cooperation with the director of undergraduate study, the consultants, and your head TAs.

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http://www.cs.brown.edu/courses/ta/