

# Managing Your Time as a TA

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## **Why does TAing take up so much time?**

Even though being a TA is supposed to be a “part-time” position, it can easily take up massive amounts of time every week. Especially if you do not have experience as a TA, or if you are TAing a new class, you can easily find yourself spending hours and hours per week working only on your TA responsibilities. In my experience, I have found TA work to be time-intensive for three general reasons:

### 1. **The job takes time**

There’s no way around it: being a TA entails a volume of time-intensive work; even the most efficient TA’s will still have to commit several hours a week to the job. In ‘lighter’ weeks, you will probably not hit the 20 hour/week benchmark set by the university. In ‘heavier’ weeks, you will meet that benchmark and even exceed it. In a new class, a typical week will be broken down into:

- Attending lecture: 3 hours (minimum)
- Attending section: 2 hours (minimum)
- Holding office hours: 2 hours
- Grading regular section assignments: 2-3 hours
- Reading/skimmming course material: 1-2 hours
- Planning section: 2-3 hours
- Administrative items (email; TED site management; appointments): 2-3 hours
- Commuting to/from lecture and section: 1-2 hours

Total: 15-20 hours per week

These are approximations, but what I would generally consider the average level of time spent on TA work when you are new to a course and have 60 students. Of course, this time will increase during weeks when you are grading student exams. Regardless of the actual time it takes to be a TA, I don’t actually think the hours necessary to do the job are what make it so time consuming. This brings me to the following two points.

### 2. **TAing breaks up your schedule in strange ways**

It would be one thing if those 15-20 hours per week were spent in two consecutive days. That kind of arrangement would allow you to block off your schedule and have “TA days” and “Field Paper/Prospectus/Dissertation days.” Unfortunately, that is not how most of the TA work is scheduled. Lecture and Section are often scheduled on different days of the week, grading and email are spread throughout the week, and most other tasks occur sporadically throughout the week. Depending on your particular schedule, you might feel your time being divided such that several hours of most days of the week go towards TA work.

The other, more important tasks we are working on (field papers, prospectus, dissertation, publications) require large blocks of time to “dig in and work” for several hours at a time. When TAing chops up your schedule, it can be difficult to get going on our more conceptually taxing and time-dense work.

### 3. **It is easy to prioritize your teaching and use your TA work to procrastinate**

This, in my opinion, is the best-kept secret among TA’s. We like to talk a lot about how being a TA takes up “so much time” (which, of course, it DOES). However, what is often left unsaid is

that, in many ways, we allow ourselves to prioritize teaching over our other responsibilities and thus use TAing as a form of “acceptable procrastination.” Though this experience is different for everyone, I think we all experience a similar gravitation towards TA work at certain times and for many reasons:

Teaching is enjoyable and gratifying – for most of us, teaching is fun. We get to talk about topics we are passionate about to people who have no choice but to sit and listen (and learn, hopefully!) From my own personal experience, teaching actually makes me feel more alive. In addition, there is a certain amount gratification that comes with teaching; it gives us the sense that we are doing important work and helping people achieve something. We might be more motivated to work on our TA work simply because we find it more enjoyable.

TA work involves discrete, non-negotiable tasks that have a clear endpoint – When you are a TA, you have several discrete tasks to complete each week that have a hard deadline: the papers must be graded by next week, you must be prepared for section on Wednesday, you must hold office hours on Tuesday, etc. In addition, you are able to “check off” each of these things as they get done. Compare this to the bigger, more diffuse projects we are working on – where deadlines are months in the future and rarely set in stone, and where even a completed piece of work still has room for improvement.

There is a clear starting point and process for completing TA work – Even if you don’t know the exact process for getting a piece of your TA work done, you can still find a way to start that task and figure out the process you need to complete it. Say you have never taught before but you know you need to plan for section. You could research lesson plans on the topic, look through the web for videos to discuss, reach out to other TAs in the course for ideas, revisit the textbook, etc. The discreet nature and hard deadline of the task motivates you to work on it, and the ability to figure out a process for completing the task make it more accessible to get started. Compare this to our other projects, where the process and starting points are less clear. When you only have 3 hours to work on *something* (because TAing has broken up your schedule), you are more likely to engage in the tasks that you know *how* to do and that you know you can *finish*.

The usual procrastination culprits – As much as we would like to think that our TA work and our research are separate spheres of our lives, they are in fact connected. They are connected by us. We are whole people; we cannot divide ourselves up so easily and of course, we are only human. Thus, our emotional dispositions toward certain facets of our work will have some influence on the other areas of our work. In order to understand why we procrastinate via **TA work**, we must necessarily examine what it is about our **other work** that is causing us to procrastinate in the first place, as well as the ways we are emotionally coping with those pressures. There are many potential explanations for why we procrastinate on our larger, higher-priority projects:

- Long term and diffuse deadlines; Few short-term consequences
- An uncertain or overwhelming process for starting or making progress
- Imposter Syndrome and/or perceived skill deficits
- Over/underestimating the time it takes to complete projects
- Fear of failure and/or perfectionism
- Fear of success
- Lack of interest or motivation
- Rebellion

All of these factors combine to make TA work a very easy (and enjoyable) method for procrastination. Because TAing involves a certain level of professional gratification, and because we are still being “productive” when we work on TA-related tasks, this kind of procrastination feels more acceptable to us than other forms of procrastination.

### **How can we manage? What can we do?**

I think there are a number of strategies we can use to help us manage our time more effectively and efficiently as TAs and graduate students. Some of these are simply and straightforward time-management techniques to make the most of our TA time. Others are widely-used techniques to prevent procrastination. All are of interest to us, in some form or another.

### **Making the Most of Your TA Time**

No matter what kind of time-management techniques you have, lecture and section (and the time it takes you to get there) are going to take up about the same number of hours for everyone. But with regard to the rest of your duties, there are several ways to be more efficient with your time while not sacrificing your thoroughness as a TA.

- Read/skim as much of the text as you need to teach it, but do not feel the need to thoroughly unpack the text unless you think it is absolutely necessary. By the time you begin your TA work, you should have some familiarity with the material (or at least the structure of academic arguments) that you should be able to grasp the concepts more quickly than the undergraduates. Read enough of the text to be sure what it is teaching the students, but there is no need to thoroughly read and unpack the texts unless you feel uncomfortable with the material or it is helpful for your own research.
- Multi-task as much as possible, especially during office hours. Students generally come to office hours in the week preceding the exam(s), and thus most weeks you will probably be alone in your office. When you do not have a student in your office hours, you should use that time to complete short-term TA work that does not require a lot of ‘revving up’ – that way if a student does come to your office you will not have a difficult time getting re-started. Office hours are a good time to grade weekly/regular assignments, skim course readings, or handle administrative tasks such as email.
- Set limits to student emails. Especially before an exam, students can be voracious in their emails. Enforce email policies with your students. For example, I tell my students that I will not answer substantive questions about course material over email, they have to come and speak with me about their questions. You can also tell your students that you will only answer course related emails during certain times of day, so if they email you outside of that time they can expect a response the following day.
- Give yourself a limit for time spent planning section. Planning section can be fun, especially when looking for events/ideas for students to discuss. It is very easy to go “down the rabbit hole” when planning section lessons, so impose a strict time limit on yourself. Also consider keeping a record of your lesson plans so that, if you TA for the same class again, you can cut down on planning time in the future.
- Give yourself a limit for time spent on administrative tasks and enforce that limit on yourself.
- Grade faster. I know, I know – that is easier said than done. However, there are a number of ways you can grade more efficiently.

- *Break up the grading into manageable units.* When you grade only 10-15 exams in one setting, you actually grade each individual exam more quickly. When you “marathon grade,” you are more likely to get distracted and the time per exam increases.
- *Set a standard amount of time to spend on each exam, and enforce that time limit on yourself as much as possible.* For example, set a timer to go off every 15 minutes, knowing that you have to finish grading the exam within that 15 minute period.
- *Set up a grading standard sheet and keep it in front of you while you grade so that you can quickly recall what the students were expected to do in their essay.* If the instructor gives you a points allocation system, include that in the sheet and figure out the way you can allocate and add up points most quickly (some people like to add up the points, I prefer to subtract points from the total points possible).
- *Don't go crazy with comments.* Seeing too many comments can actually shut down the student and prevent them from reading all of your comments. Leave short, targeted comments in the margins as necessary (e.g. “citation?”; “evidence?”; “example?”) and more summative comments at the end of the essay that point to overarching problems and what the student should work on for next time (e.g. “Too much summary of the readings without tying them together to make an argument.” or “Try working on finding connections between the class readings so you can use them coherently.”)
- *Don't leave comments on final exams.* This is pretty much futile. Instead, attach a note to students' bluebooks that says you are willing to discuss the exam grade with them in the new quarter.
- Be stingy with your time – be careful not to over-do it on “extracurriculars.” Many TAs like to hold additional review sessions for their students prior to exams, which is totally fine. However, if you choose to hold review sessions or other “extracurricular” TA work (such as making extra credit assignments), remember to be stingy with your time. It is the students' responsibility to take advantage of a review session by coming prepared with questions, it is not your responsibility to plan an extra lesson, which takes up even more of your time.
- Collect time-use data for yourself – if you want to figure out a way to save more time on your TA work, you should start by knowing what part of your TA work is taking the most of your time. For several weeks, record your time use in the following table, then reflect on ways you can be more efficient in particular areas of your TA work.

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Attend lecture	3	3	3	3	3
Hold section	2	2	2	2	2
Office hours/meet with students	2	2	2	2	2
Prep for section					
Do readings					
Student emails					
Meet with instructor					
Grade section assignments					
Grade course assignments/exams					

### Constructing a Better Schedule

There's only so much wiggle room with this because we have no control over when/where the registrar's office schedules our lectures and sections, and we have only limited control over which section times we

get every quarter. But here are a few suggestions for mitigating the ‘scattering’ effect that TAing can wreak on your schedule.

- Block at least two days a week off as “no-TA days.” In many (but not all) cases, your lecture times and section will fall on 2 or 3 days during the week. Most often, this leaves a minimum of 2 weekdays where you will not have to engage in TA activities. Make these days *sacred time* for working on your other projects. By that I mean, respond to student emails once during these days and save any other duties for the next day.
- Identify elements of your other projects that don’t require large blocks of time. Of course, you should also try working on your other projects for a couple hours during the days where you have to attend lecture/section as a TA. Save your more discreet and shorter tasks for these days, such as working on IRB forms, scheduling interviews, reading journal articles, etc.
- Schedule office hours on the same day as lecture or section. This will help you protect your “no-TA days” and will probably result in more students attending office hours (because they will actually be on campus).
- Schedule student appointments carefully. Do your best to have to schedule student appointments on days where you will be more engaged in your TA work than your other projects. Also consider setting a discreet endpoint for the meeting (unless the student really needs the extra time for help). It is perfectly okay to tell a student that you have to leave (or have another meeting) after talking with them for 30-60 minutes.

### **Procrastinating through your TA work**

As mentioned above, there are several reasons why we may be using TA work to procrastinate on our other projects. Since this is a case-by-case problem, you are the best starting point for understanding your own relationship to your work. If you find yourself procrastinating on your other projects by prioritizing your TA work, consider looking into the following strategies:

- Make to-do lists each week and order the tasks by importance/urgency. This is often called the “Eisenhower method.”
- Set up regular meetings with an advisor and at each meeting specify clear goals that you need to accomplish before you meet again.
- Look for an accountability partner with whom you can specify short term goals and check in regularly for external accountability
- Start (or join) a writing group that meets at regular intervals. Also, consider attending a “write on site” session with Abigail.
- Look into books that may help you, such as:
  - *The Now Habit* by Neil Fiore
  - *Eat That Frog!* by Brian Tracy
  - *Destination Dissertation* by Sonja Foss and William Waters
- Talk with the Senior TA or other advanced graduate students. Chances are they have dealt with this and have some useful ideas!