TA Training

Karen Reid
Lecturer
BA4240
reid@cs.utoronto.ca

Topics

• Intro
• Union information
• Doing your job
• Communication
• Giving tutorials
• Grading programs

Contacts

TA assignments (which class are you hired for):
– Francois Pitt <fpitt@cs>
• Signing contracts and other money issues:
  – Lisa De Caro <lisab@cs>
• Professional development, how to do your job well:
  – Your supervisor (the instructor)
  – TATP (http://www.utoronto.ca/tatp/)
  – Karen Reid <reid@cs>
• Union stewards:
  – Tim Fowler tfowler@cs.toronto.edu
  – Cristiana Chitic crist@cs.toronto.edu
  – Matthew Kitching kitching@cs.toronto.edu

Doing your job

• Remember that this is paid work.
  – It is not a class.
  – You will not be penalized for asking questions.
  – Your supervisor wants you to work efficiently, and
    you need to learn how to do that.
  – Tell your supervisor about your strengths and
    weaknesses!
• You are part of a team that delivers a course
  to the students.
  – You have a responsibility to the instructor, your
    fellow TAs,
  – and most importantly to the students!
Communication

• You must keep in touch with your supervisor to
  – Notify him about your progress.
  – Notify her about any issues that came up during tutorial or if you deviated from the tutorial plan.
  – Notify him about any difficulties you are having.
  – Notify her early if you may not be able to meet a deadline.
  – Notify him early if you think you may be using more hours than budgeted.
• Your supervisor should not have to send you email to ask if you have completed a task you were asked to complete.

Your responsibilities

• Do the work that is asked of you by the expected deadline.
  – If something happens to make this impossible, notify your supervisor.
• If you are not given enough information or guidance to do the work in the specified amount of time, ask your supervisor for more input! (Ask early!)
• Act professionally to the students and your supervisor.

TA duties

• Giving tutorials
• Office/lab hours
• Grading assignments
• Grading exams
• Other?
  – Reading newsgroups/bulletin boards

The First Tutorial

• Set the tone for the whole term!
  – Arrive early and talk to the students individually
    – Are you here for cscXXX?
    – How has your first week been?
    – What other classes are you taking?
  – Write your name on the board and tell students something about yourself
  – Say something about how you expect the tutorials to work
    – What is the purpose of the tutorial?
    – You want to make sure every student in the room understands.
    – What do you find interesting about the course?
The First Tutorial

- Offer any tips you have for doing well in the course.
- Do your best to get the students talking in the first tutorial
  - Ask them questions
  - Get them to vote on an answer
  - Force them to participate in a problem solving exercise

The First Tutorial

- Speak clearly, loudly (enough) and slowly.

  Show your enthusiasm!

Giving tutorials

- Preparation is key.
  - Make sure you know how much preparation you are supposed to do, and how much your supervisor will give you
  - Ask your supervisor for the main idea of each tutorial
- Engage the students:
  - Ask them questions
  - Get them to work through problems
  - Pause to allow them to ask questions
  - Use the board (rather than slides)
- Be enthusiastic. Act like you care.

Grading assignments

- Purpose
  - Evaluation (Fair and consistent.)
  - Feedback
- What to do and how to do it
  - Know the goal of the assignment
  - Solutions and grading schemes
  - Do the marking
  - Record the grades
  - Return assignments
  - Regrades
The goal of the assignment

• The better you know the assignment, the easier it is to grade.
• Read everything the students have to read:
  – The assignment. All of it. As soon as you get it.
  – Any starter code.
  – Any announcements made about the assignment.
• Think about how you would do it.
• Watch out for other correct ways to do it.
• Watch out for instructor mistakes!
• If you are confused, ask the instructor.

Solutions and grading scheme

• Grading scheme
  – Often given to you by the instructor.
  – Sometimes you will need to make up one.
• Why grading schemes are important:
  – Faster to mark with a good grading scheme.
  – Marking will be consistent.
  – Highlights the important concepts/skills.
  – It is easier (faster) to give feedback.
• When more than one person grades an assignment, they must communicate to ensure consistency.

Properties of a good grading scheme

• Concentrates on the most important ideas.
• Lets students know what the important ideas are.
• Very structured: correctness, commenting, style.
• Easy to distinguish good work from poor work.
• Even good marking schemes usually need to be modified.
  – It’s hard to anticipate how students will get things wrong.

Grading scheme

• Get instructor to establish/approve of grading scheme
• Take care in disclosing it to students
• Read it early
• Augment it as you go
• Must not be vague
Marking for style

• Style, commenting, and writing quality are important.
• Vital for introductory courses.
• Maintain strong standards:
  – Students will get away with what they can
  – If you can’t follow it, don’t give it full marks
  – Remember that these students will eventually be employees and will need to know the difference between high quality work and low quality work.

Marking

• Don’t spend too long.
• Read the important part, at an appropriate level of detail.
• Give adequate feedback, but not excessive.
• A student must be able to tell why marks were lost.
• Augment the grading scheme as you go.
• Take notes.
• Coordinate with other graders.
  – Communication!
• Indicate grades clearly.

Read a few before starting

• To know the range of student performance.
• To identify problems with the grading scheme.
• BUT
  – Don’t grade the best/worst first.
  – Don’t alphabetize prior to grading.

What is important?

• Correctness
  – When student output matches expected output, their work is not necessarily correct!
  – When student output does not match expected output, their work may still be correct!
• Mark by what the assignment asked for
  – Students are often asked to use a particular technique.
  – E.g., if they did not use recursion when that was the point of the assignment, they should not get full marks.
Detecting cheating

- Report any suspicions to the instructor
- Hints and clues
  - Something looks familiar
  - Students copy poor papers too
- If you find a suspicious assignment, report it to the instructor immediately
  - Do not confront the student

Recording grades

- Many different policies about how to record grades.
  - Follow the approach your instructor wants.
- Work out with the instructor
  - Who has the authoritative copy?
  - Who is going to post the grades?
- Hang onto email until the end of term.
- Do not discard grades or intermediate work!
- If you have any questions or concerns ask the instructor.

Returning assignments

- Promises
  - Don’t make promises to the students.
  - Honour promises made by instructor.
- Hand out assignments by calling names
  - Make eye contact
  - Have fun
  - If you can’t pronounce a name, don’t feel badly. We all struggle with some names.

Regrades

- Students will ask for regrades.
- Find out the instructor’s policy on regrades.
- Never give marks back immediately.
- If it is a simple error (e.g., addition)
  - Take the assignment back
  - Make a note of the problem immediately, on their assignment, and initial it.
  - Make sure the modified grade is recorded properly.
Regrades

- If it is not a simple error
  - Listen/read and consider the complaint.
  - Get a written explanation from the student.
  - Warn them that you may regrade the entire assignment.
- Be fair - they might be right.
- Don't change your marking scheme.
- Don't give marks back to avoid conflict.
- Follow the instructor’s directions!!

Helpful phrases

- “Everyone was marked the same way.”
- “The assignment told you what to do.”
  - It helps if you have read the assignment thoroughly…)
- “Let me explain why I did that…”
- “Oops, sorry, you are right …”
- “I’m sorry, that’s my final decision. You need to talk to the professor if you have more questions.”

How to speed up marking

- A good marking scheme is vital
  - Make sure you understand the provided one
  - Or, spend the time to write a good one
- Do not read every line of code.
- Figure out what’s important and mark that.
- Mark in at least 3-4 hour stretches of time.
- Don't mark in front of the TV
  - Turn off IM, email, etc.
- Don’t write the same sentence 50 times.
- Do give feedback, but look for shortcuts.
- Use a timer.

Fast feedback

- On paper
  - Circle things that are wrong
  - Put ink on most pages that you read, even if it is just a tick.
  - Save detailed comments for a general summary.
- Electronically
  - Keep a file/clipboard of comments and use cut and paste.
Summary

• Remember all of the good teachers and TAs you had.
  – What made them good?
  – Try to emulate that.
• Take responsibility for your work
  – You are ultimately serving the students.
• Have some fun with TAing.
• Try to learn something from TAing.

Other

• Two upcoming training sessions for all TAs, both in BA5256 from 3-5 p.m.
  – Monday Sept 19: Giving Tutorials
  – Monday Sept 26: Marking Efficiently
(Please RSVP to ta-training@cs.utoronto.ca, so I can make sure the room is big enough.)
• TA Training Program
  – http://www.utoronto.ca/tatp/
• Slides
  – http://www.cs.utoronto.ca/~reid/ta/