SA/TA/GLA Instructions – CS 4536: Foundations of Computer Science   
Instructor: Rose Bohrer (pronouns: she/her)  
Instructor Office: Fuller Labs 139

# Overview

This document defines the job expectations for course staff, to help support communication and reduce stress for all of us.

This class is a unique style of programming languages course. Half of it is like a traditional 4000-level programming languages elective, half of it is human-computer interaction material focused on the design of programming languages and their social implications. The traditional material includes topics like mathematically defining the semantics of a programming language, designing static type systems formally, and designing and implementing technologies like parsers, type-checkers, and interpreters. Course staff are not expected to be equally strong in both aspects of the course as long as they are strong in one of the two areas.

There is one final exam and no midterm. There are 5 homework assignments. Every homework assignment has two parts: a programming assignment in the Rust programming language and a written assignment. Together, the five programming assignments implement a small programming language. Together, the five written assignments have each student design a small user study about programming languages which they run on their classmates during class time and then interpret the results of.

The class is designed for scalable grading. Programming assignments are autograded and written assignments are graded by completion (full points if you make a real attempt). For this reason, your grading time will focus more on giving open-ended feedback than on rubric grading.

**Terminology note:** There are many different job titles for course staff and it is important to use precise terminology because certain job titles come with certain protections under union contract:

* Student Assistant (SA) is typically an undergraduate student hired by the department for course support at up to 10 hours per week across different courses in different terms
* An undergraduate grader (UG) is typically hired for a specific course for a specific term at up to 10 hours per week
* A Teaching Assistant (TA) is a graduate student hired by the department on an ongoing basis for up to 20 hours of course support per week.
* A Graduate Learning Assistant (GLA) is another kind of graduate student hired for up to 20 hours of course support per week. Unlike TA’s, GLA’s do not receive tuition remission from WPI, and on the flip side there are certain restrictions on which tasks can be assigned to GLA compared to TAs.

If there is ever any uncertainty about your job title, please contact myself, the TA/SA coordinator, or the graduate coordinator so we can clarify.

# Time Breakdown

Graduate course staff are expected to spend an average of 20hrs per week supporting the course. Undergraduate course staff are expected to spend an average of 10hrs per week. Here is an approximate schedule for undergrad staff:

**Note:** The undergrad schedule has fewer hours for learning material because it is written for those who have taken the course previously from the same instructor.

* 1hr – Attend staff meeting
* 1hr – Respond to student questions / emails online
* 2hr – Review course material
* 2hrs – Hold office hours
* 4hrs – Provide feedback on student work (grading homeworks / exam)
* Once a term: help proctoring final

Here is an approximate schedule for graduate staff:

* 1hr – Attend staff meeting
* 1hr – Respond to student questions / emails online
* 3hrs – Hold office hours
* 5hrs – Learn the course material
* 10hrs – Provide feedback on student work (grading homeworks / exam)
* Once a term: help proctoring final

Students are encouraged to use Piazza for questions: <https://piazza.com/class/m1v0k4o3ein3pi/>  
but might email you as well.

# Staff Meetings

We will meet weekly to discuss the state of the course and plans for the next week. Meetings will not always necessarily take a full hour. During these meetings, you should also reflect on your interactions with students and help share their feedback, feelings, and thoughts with me.

# Learning the Course Material

I use my own materials to teach the course, so you should spend time getting familiar with them. If you took the course before, you can review your past work. If not, you should do every homework before your office hours so you are prepared to help students. Use the lecture notes and textbooks to learn-as-you-go to help complete the homeworks.

You are not required to attend lecture. If you would find attending helpful, let me know, but it is possible you would not be allowed to due to restrictions on the number of people in the room.

# Optional: Connecting Your TAing + Research

Sometimes I write research papers related to my teaching work. You are not required to contribute to that research work as part of this job. If you wish to be a part of the research project for your own reasons (such as wanting an opportunity for paper coauthorship) you are welcome to discuss with me.

# Time Management + Life Management

Course staff are expected to communicate openly and honestly if you are struggling to find time to complete your assigned work. I understand that you are students with many different responsibilities, which you cannot always predict. Sometimes you will have an important deadline outside the course, or you will get sick, or you will need to travel, etc. For these reasons, the weekly hours (10 or 20) are expected to be an average, not a minimum.

My job as the instructor is to be able to adjust when somebody runs into trouble. Open communication is important because it allows the rest of us to support you when needed.

Grading and communication timeline: assignments submitted on time are expected to be graded within 72 hours = 3 days. Assignments submitted late are expected to be graded by the same deadline as the following assignment (e.g., if 4 days remain until the next deadline, you have 7 days). The exam is typically graded the same day it is given. If you have a conflict and cannot attend this grading session, make alternative plans with the instructor (e.g., taking over a different task from another assistant). The end-of-term grading deadline is set by the university and is tight. This deadline takes priority over the timelines listed above, and you will need to complete all grading with enough time remaining for the instructor to calculate final grades. We will discuss the exact timeline near the end of the term, but I usually need 1-2 days for final grade calculations. Email from the instructor should be answered within one working day and you should check for online communication from students at least once each working day.

You are not expected to respond to communications outside your working hours. It is common for students to complain about this, in which case you should remind them that you are following the policy.

# Responding to Student Requests

Students might contact you directly asking about extensions, grading, and other matters. If they ask you for extensions of 3 days or less on homework assignments, you should approve them without asking for details. Make it clear that you are approving them based on my policy that I shared with you, not a personal decision. (Otherwise, students might assume they can manipulate you). For any extension request outside this policy, or where you are not sure, have them email me. For grading, I expect most questions to have straightforward answers because we use completion grading and auto-grading.

Although most of our students are respectful, some students do try to push the boundaries of course staff or take advantage of you. If this happens, send them to me because I will not let them push me around. Weekly course staff meetings are a good opportunity to talk about student interactions if you are not sure whether to be concerned about the student or not.

When students have a mental health problem, course staff and professors are often the first person to find out. As a student worker, you should not have to handle supporting a student on your own. I have extensive experience in this area and am happy to be helpful if a student worker or student in the class come to me with a problem. Note: if I believe there is a real, immediate risk of self-harm, I am legally required to report it to the university. I do this once or twice per year, which is a small fraction of students who share a concern with me.