

# The helpful, friendly teaching assistant

**TA's are everywhere. They supervise science labs, and seminars. Some praise them, others damn them.**

## casserole

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editor  
ronald yakimchuk

features editor  
lydia dotto

associate editor  
richard vivone

photo editor  
chuck lyall

arts editor  
terry donnelly

This week's cover is an artistic representation by Al Scarth of two earthworms in search of an oboe, or maybe a lovesick spirogyra.

Teaching assistants are examined on C-2 by Lydia Dotto, and Casserole science editor Glenn Cheriton takes a tour of the underground radiation labs at U of A.

The centrefold is a background article on student syndicalism by student syndicalist Daniel LaTouche. It is a growing movement, and a powerful one. For this reason it deserves understanding.

More goodies on the arts pages. Lots of reviews — of books, Pluck, the Edmonton symphony, and "Waiting for Godot."

By LYDIA DOTTO

Perhaps the only thing most freshmen on this campus have in common is teaching assistants.

They have them for their science labs, their psychology experiments and their English classes. The TA's are alternately praised and damned. It's an occupational hazard.

The hiring of teaching assistants is handled by each department individually — there is no central body in the administration that is concerned with teaching assistants other than approving the budgets covering salaries.

Although each department operates independently of the others, there is a general uniformity in the manner in which TA's are hired.

Almost invariably, anyone applying to be a TA must be a student registered in the Faculty of Graduate Studies, and must already possess one degree from an accredited university. Most of the science departments also demand that their TA's be graduates from an honors program.

### USUALLY WORKING

These people are usually working towards their master's or doctor's degree, and may be involved in a research project, or, in the case of humanities students, a thesis.

In most faculties, students may apply for an assistantship, but the final decision is made by a committee and is based on a number of criteria, most notably, academic records and letters of reference.

In some departments, biochemistry for instance, hiring is more a matter of the department approaching promising students, than the other way around. In any case, the competition is quite severe, due to an abundance of applications. The only exception here is in the biochemistry department, because many graduate students can get jobs with the National Research Council or the Medical Research Council, jobs which allow them to do research without teaching as well. Nevertheless, biochem-

istry TA's still have to fulfill all criteria to qualify.

The duties of teaching assistants vary considerably from department to department. Most science TA's supervise labs, mark lab books and prepare lab exams. A good number also give lab lectures.

In the humanities, TA duties are quite different. The psychology department has two kinds of TA's. Some connected with a professor in a given course marks papers, read and correct essays, conduct experiments and sometimes fill in for the prof.

More advanced students, who are working for their doctorate and have completed most of their own course work, may be allowed to instruct a full course by themselves, generally a freshman course.

English TA's also conduct classes and seminars, as well as marking essays and papers.

### HOURS VARY

The hours of work a week required from TA's vary from department to department, and even within departments.

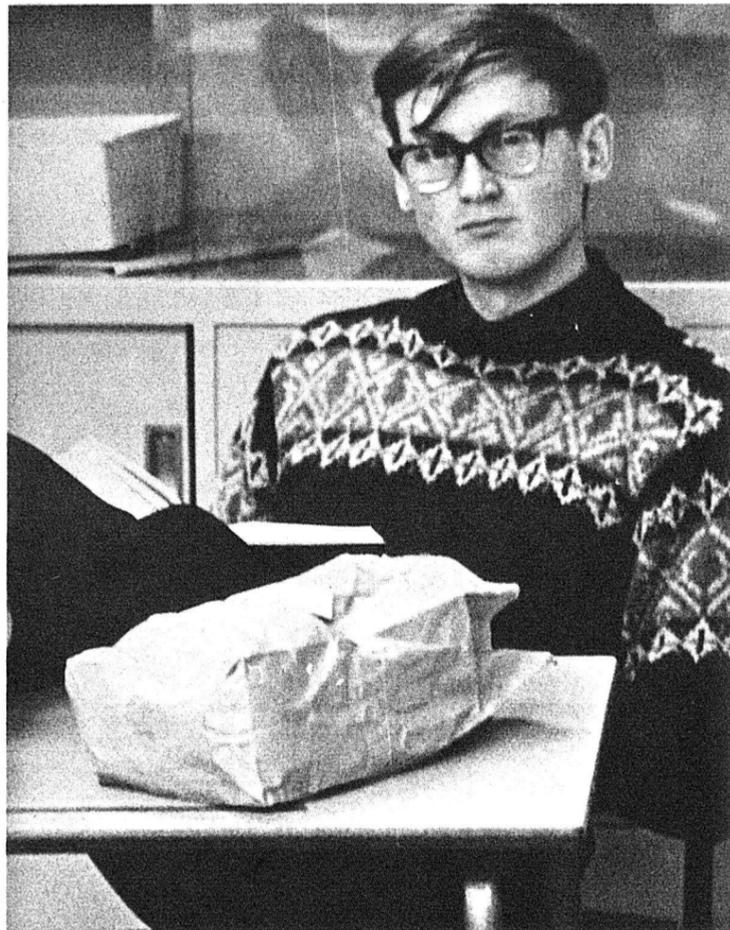
The English TA's put in 12 hours a week, as do full time psychology TA's. The psych department also retains part time teaching assistants on a nine or a six hour a week work schedule.

The physics department allows a teaching assistant to work anywhere up to a maximum of 12 hours a week. No more than this is allowed, because it is felt the student couldn't do justice to his course work otherwise.

In the biochemistry department, TA's put in nine hours a week in the form of three three-hour labs. These, of course, are just indications of time spent in class. TA's generally must put in quite a bit of time marking lab reports and other such things.

### TUITION WAIVED

In payment for their work, TA's, as a rule, have their tuition waived and receive a salary above and beyond this as well. This procedure was uniform for all departments consulted for this study, except in



**A FAMILIAR SIGHT IN SCIENCE LABS**

... the teaching assistant at work

the case of the psychology department, where part time teaching assistants do not enjoy the waiver of fees and have lower salaries than the full time TA's.

The psych department also pays

travel expenses for full time TA's who are coming here from other universities, but does not accord this privilege to part time teaching assistants.

People qualifying for TA's do not have to pass any tests, nor do they have to take any sort of a training program in teaching methods. No such training program is even offered here, although apparently some talk about starting one has been bandied around.

### LITTLE DONE

Very little is done, apparently, to formally assess a TA's competence in the classroom. Each teaching assistant is attached to a professor, however, who is responsible for his (the TA's) performance.

Generally speaking, each department tries to monitor or observe their TA's' progress but no examinations are ever given, and, as one department official put it, they "assume a degree of competence" in their TA's.

### APPLY TO ALL

None of the departments contacted issued instruction pamphlets or the like pertaining specifically to teaching assistants. Most rules or procedures (e.g. scrutiny of final exams to insure a departmental uniformity) apply to all faculty members without exception.

Although they are rare, there have been cases where a student has had a grievance against a TA. In such a situation, all department officials said, the student should not hesitate to seek out other people in the department or faculty — even the dean. Such occurrences are infrequent, however, and it has been noted that the TA's sometimes establish better rapport with their students than do older members of the department, especially where freshmen classes are concerned.



**HONEST SIR, I DON'T KNOW WHY IT BLEW UP**

... the helpful TA shows student the error of his ways