

Understanding and Making the Most of Your Assistantship



<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/funding/assistantships.html>

<https://policies.vt.edu/6210.pdf>



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Get
assistantship
contract offer

Accept contract in
Graduate Contract
System

Communicate with
assistantship supervisor
about reporting to work,
assignments and
expectations

Department pays
tuition remission and
sets up stipend
payment, which
triggers out-of-state
waiver if applicable

Semester begins...



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Standard Compensation

- Monthly stipend (approved annually by the Board of Visitors; rate is dependent on departmental practices and availability of funding; must be \geq \$2682/m (100% assistantship) unless supplemented by fellowship or scholarship; **registration for direct deposit of stipend required (beware of scams!)**)
- In-state tuition and program fees, prorated by length and percentage of appointment
 - Tuition bill – if paid late by department, they can request waiver of late fee from the Bursar's Office
- Out-of-state tuition waiver (if you earn at least \$2000 on assistantship stipend during the semester)
- Health insurance subsidy for coverage of single student (family coverage available but not subsidized)
 - <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/funding/assistantships/benefits.html>
- Comp fee payment plan (different from Budget Tuition Plan)
- Standard contract start/end dates to provide 9 full paychecks in each semester. Contract start/end dates may be different from actual work start/end dates.
- Work-Life grant program: <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/funding/funding-information-for-departments/work-life-grants.html>



Maintaining Eligibility

- Enroll full-time in your degree program (12-18 credit hours/semester)
 - Audited hours do not count
 - Monitored for entire semester; will be notified if dropping below
 - Research, independent study, incompletes, P/F courses are ok
- Maintain 3.0 or better GPA; exceptions possible with departmental support
- Meet employment eligibility requirements
- Fulfill contractual obligations at acceptable performance level

Students on a full assistantship (100%, 1 FTE), are expected to work an average of 20 hours/week during their contract period. Students enrolled in Research & Dissertation (R & D) credit hours are expected to exert significant time and effort toward earning those credits in addition to fulfilling their assistantship duties.



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Additional Benefits

- Professional development; skill building – discipline-specific **and** general
 - Communication
 - Team work
 - Problem-solving
 - Public speaking/presentations
 - ...
- Access to world-class equipment, resources and minds
- Opportunity to build professional network, secure job references



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Are you prepared?

- Did you read the assistantship contract before signing it?
- Did you understand it all? Did you ask for any clarification or additional information?
- Did you have a conversation with your supervisor about expectations?
- Do you have the resources to complete your tasks successfully?



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Expectations

- First and last day of work (may be different from standard contract start/end dates)
- Work location and expectations for each option:
 - Physical location | Hybrid | Remote
- Work schedule:
 - Office or lab hours, if any
 - Recurring meetings
- Communication
 - Frequency
 - Preferred method
- Departmental resources
 - Access to work area, lounge, equipment, mail, etc
 - Supervisor(s) and support for position
- Major tasks and responsibilities
- Deadlines and deliverables



Scenario 1.

You are two weeks into your assistantship appointment, but you haven't been given any guidelines of when and where to show up for work or exactly what to do.

How would you handle it?



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Scenario 1: Potential Responses

- Request a meeting with your assistantship supervisor and show up with a list of questions about work schedule, work location, communication preferences (method, frequency, etc.), initial tasks, etc.
- If a meeting is not possible, send your questions by email.
- Ask other students who work for the same supervisor about what their first days/weeks were like, and whether they have any advice.
- Enjoy the short period of extra time on your hands. There will be times later when you may have to work extra!
- How would you respond?



Scenario 2.

Your assistantship supervisor has given you a bunch of stuff to do, although none of them have any immediate deadlines. Your weekly hours spent on your assistantship duties hover right around 20, and you feel fairly comfortable with everything you need to do. Today your advisor comes to you with a whole new project that will require quite a bit of reading and learning some new techniques, and suddenly you feel overwhelmed.

What would you do next?



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Scenario 2.: Potential Responses

- Document for yourself how much time you spend on the tasks already assigned. Occasionally having to work slightly more than 20 hours is probably acceptable, but consistently having to work more is likely not.
- Show your supervisor how much time you spend on what tasks/projects, and ask if any adjustments can be made. Can you prioritize some tasks to work on now and table some tasks to work on later? Can some tasks be removed from your list entirely?
- If everything is time sensitive and must be completed now, can adjustments to your work hours be done at a later date? For example, you might work more now, but reduce your hours during exams or when you want to take a vacation?
- Other ideas the supervisor might have?
- Talk to the Ombudsperson: bryanh76@vt.edu



Scenario 3.

Your advisor expects you to be in a GA/GTA/GRA space for four hours every day of the week. This is useful sometimes when you get to connect with other students or your advisor, but often you find it distracting and you would prefer to work from a different, more quiet location (home, library, etc).

What are some ways that you could negotiate with your advisor regarding a hybrid arrangement?



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Scenario 3.: Potential Responses

- First, find out why or if it is necessary for GAs/GTAs/GRAs to work in the designated space. Is it about providing office hours? Monitoring equipment? Supporting each other? Or other reason?
- Find out what the negative impacts might be, if any, if occasionally you worked from another space. E.g. you would miss some interactions, discussions, or the ability to provide input.
- Explain to your advisor the harmful effects of working in the space, and offer an alternative solution(s). Seek a compromise that meets your needs as well as your advisor's desired outcomes.
- ... Other ideas?



Communication with Advisor/Supervisor

Seek to understand expectations, ask questions:

- When/where to report to work; requirements during breaks
- Performance expectations – initial discussion and regular check-ins
- Times off for illness or personal reasons

Treat assistantship as work:

- If not assigned a schedule, create schedule for yourself with deadlines and deliverables
- Proactively identify and carry out productive tasks and occasionally report progress to your supervisor
- If uncertain about a task, offer potential approaches as you seek clarification
- Track your hours and seek guidance/adjustment of workload from your supervisor if you consistently work more (or less) than an average of 20 hrs/wk

Understand personal priorities, preferences, and tolerance levels (your own and your supervisor's):

- Communication style – direct/indirect; verbal/written; regular/ad hoc; ...
- Management style – micro/macro; laissez-faire; ...
- What's important to you: funding or relationship or project or present/future or ...

Seek acceptable compromise if there are differences between your needs/aspirations and your supervisor's

Remember that both you and your supervisor are human beings with joys and stressors outside of work, too



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Resources



- Graduate School: grads@vt.edu; gibsonm@vt.edu
- <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/funding/assistantships.html>
- Where to find assistantship postings:
<https://glcweekly.graduateschool.vt.edu/>
- Graduate Ombudsperson: <https://www.graduate.ombudsman.vt.edu/>
- Job search assistance: <https://career.vt.edu/job-search/Handshake.html> --
also accessible to VT alumni for a couple of years after graduation
- Quick guide for new graduate assistants (GA, GTA, GRA)
https://graduateschool.vt.edu/content/dam/graduateschool_vt_edu/assistantships_and_funding/Quick_guide.pdf

