CS 11 TA Office Hours Policies (Last Updated Spring 2024)

Introduction

This document outlines the CS 11 TA office hours policies, the vast majority of which are copied verbatim from Brown University's 2020 policy for their introductory computer science course. These policies have two main purposes:

1. To set expectations on how students and TAs will interact during office hours, and
2. to facilitate student learning.

If you feel that any policy is unfair to your situation, feel free to contact a member of the course staff.

General Policies

This section lists the TA Office Hours policies and provides explanations for each one.

1. If you hit a bug, you should have put *significant* effort into fixing it on your own before seeing a TA. You should be able to show relevant evidence if a TA asks for it; examples of evidence include an implementation plan, pseudocode, `cout` or `cerr` debugging statements, or widespread commenting. After the first few weeks of the course, **TAs will turn away students who cannot provide evidence of attempting to solve their problem on their own**; the student will be reminded of the debugging tools they've been taught, after which they should use those tools to try to handle the bug on their own before asking for help again.

   - Rationale: Debugging is one of the most important skills to develop in CS 11, and like most skills it cannot be improved without practice. Many CS 11 students avoid this practice because it is uncomfortable, and instead rely on the TAs to walk them through the entire solution to an assignment. This is a major barrier to learning, and will only make a student's life harder and more stressful as the semester continues. Although it may be frustrating at times, devoting the time to debug your own code is essential to success in CS 11. TAs are available as a resource only when it is evident that you have truly attempted solving the issue.

2. TAs can only help with one question/concept/bug per visit. This policy may be relaxed at a TA's discretion if the queue is short during their office hours.

   - Rationale: We feel a responsibility to give equal support to all students, which means that if we give extra support to one student, we must provide the same for all students, significantly slowing down TA hours. A student cannot expect to be the special case who receives extra help. If you feel like you need extra help consistently, consider reaching out to the StAAr Center to be connected with a CS 11 tutor.

3. Each visit with a TA is capped at **20 minutes**. The first 5 minutes should be spent explaining your question to the TA and, in the case of debugging, showing evidence that you've worked on the problem on your own.

   - Rationale: We enforce this time limit in an attempt to meet with all students who are waiting on the queue. If a bug is unusually difficult to solve and has not been solved in the 20 minute window, there is a greater chance you will reach a solution if you redirect your issue to Piazza instead of putting yourself right back onto the office hour queue (particularly if the queue is long).

4. By default, TA hours will end at the posted time regardless of the length of the queue left (**TAs are students too, with their own lives**). The queue grows exponentially longer as each homework deadline gets closer, so don't assume that you'll receive help if you join the queue during the last 30 minutes of office hours on a Tuesday night. If a TA decides to extend their hours, they will post about it on piazza.

   - Rationale: TAs are students (people, even!), who also have busy schedules and coursework. We all put in a lot of time to make sure this course runs smoothly, and while we love doing it, we need to care for our own mental and physical health, as well as work on our own homework too.

5. Do not expect to receive more than your "fair share" of TA hours, especially for debugging questions. We want you to get the help you need, which is why we hold so many office hours, but keep in mind that struggling through hard bugs on your own is the fastest route to becoming an expert debugger and one of the best ways to reinforce the concepts you will learn in CS 11.

   - See all above rationales.

6. Starting with HW3, coding incrementally will be enforced during office hours, meaning that if you come to a TA with a bug, but have coded beyond it so that there are several more bugs, you will be asked to comment-out the additional progress (and additional bugs) to focus on the step at hand.

   - Rationale: It is harder for TAs and you to find a given bug if there is additional code that has built upon it. By having a focus on a specific piece of code and bug, TAs can do a better job helping you find the bug during the 20 minutes given.