CALCULUS RECITATION FAQ (for Math 90/100)

What is recitation (the conference section)?

This course has a mandatory weekly 80-minute recitation section, taught by a Teaching Assistant (TA). Recitation is where you hand in your homework for the week. The TA will briefly take questions about those problems (after you’ve handed them in), and then for most of the session, you’ll work in groups to solve new problems. In some weeks, there will be a quiz at the end of the session to help you practice for exams.

Why do we have recitation?

Since we have limited time (and in some cases, many students) in our lecture sections, the ratio of listening to doing is sometime higher than we’d like, and the best way to learn mathematics is by actively solving problems. Recitation is an opportunity for you to do so with other students, so that you can benefit from each other’s perspectives. In addition, we believe that being able to communicate mathematics is as important as understanding it yourself, and discussing problems in groups builds useful communication skills.

Why doesn’t the TA spend the entire recitation answering questions?

Having the TA speak the whole time would defeat the purpose of recitation being a problem-solving environment. There are many other opportunities to ask homework questions: you can ask your instructor or TA before or after class, you can visit them in office hours, you can e-mail them, and/or you can visit the Math Resource Center. There is more information on these resources in the syllabus, and you can access them throughout the week; during recitation, we want to you focus primarily on group collaboration.

You said recitation is mandatory. What if I can’t make it?

If you have a conflict for a particular week, and it’s possible for you to attend a different session that week, contact your TA (not your instructor) and explain the situation. If your TA doesn’t have a session at the desired time, you should also contact another TA who does. You should be able to attend another session for that week, but if you do this without asking in advance, you will probably not receive credit. You are also entitled to miss any two recitations during the semester (though you should still arrange in advance to hand in homework!). This policy is in place in case you get sick or some other emergency; if you have more than two absences for legitimate reasons, you should tell your TA, who will probably refer you to the course head.

If you have a frequent conflict, that’s a problem. Coming to recitation is part of your responsibility for the class, and it’s not optional. When you enroll in the course, you agree to attend a weekly session at a given time; if this isn’t possible, you either shouldn’t take the course this semester, or you’ll have to forfeit a portion of your potential grade. We offer recitation at three different times, so if this course is a priority for you, you should be able to choose a time that works. And remember that we’re allowing you to miss any two sessions, regardless of excuse, which should give you some flexibility.
How is recitation graded?

Because we don’t want recitation to be a stressful environment, and because we know different students solve problems at different speeds, we don’t base your entire recitation grade on how successfully you solve problems. To alleviate pressure, half your grade is based on attendance and adequate participation. If you show up for the entire session and make a legitimate effort to contribute within your group, you’ll get full credit for half of your recitation grade. If you show up late, goof off, ignore your group, or work on things other than calculus, you’ll earn less than that. The TA’s decision on participation grading is final.

The other half of your grade is based on group work and/or quizzes. This varies from week to week; sometimes your group may hand in worksheet solutions, sometimes you may be asked to write up your own solution to a problem, and sometimes there will be a graded quiz. That grade is averaged with the participation grade above; so for example, if you come to recitation and actively participate in group work, and then you earn 70% on a quiz, your recitation grade for that week will be 85% (0.5 * 100% + 0.5 * 70%).

Do I need to solve all of the problems on the worksheet every week to earn full credit?

Absolutely not! The recitation worksheets are (usually) designed to make sure you don’t run out of problems to work on. That means most groups will not complete the entire worksheet before the end of recitation. If there are particular problems that will be graded, you will be told in advance so you can prioritize those problems. This does not mean, however, that you should stop working once you’ve solved those problems... quitting early will affect your participation grade, so use your full time productively. Any worksheet problems you don’t get to can be used as practice problems to work on later.

I’d be happier if recitation weren’t graded at all.

In Math 170 (a Calculus II course for particularly independent students), the 10% of your grade that would normally be determined by recitations is reattributed to exams. The average student recitation grade in Math 90/100 is much higher than the average student exam grade. That means that in the vast majority of cases, having a graded recitation will increase your overall average, and there’s a chance it will raise your letter grade. If you make a reasonable effort, recitation grading is much more likely to help you than to hurt you. It will probably hurt you if you regularly skip recitation, but as noted above, you’re not supposed to do that.

Well, then, I’d be happier if recitation was graded, and I automatically got 100% just for showing up.

Your grade represents your accomplishments in the course, and the more credit we give simply for being in the room, the less meaningful that grade becomes. We’re already compromising on the recitation grade by basing half of it on (a generous assessment of) attendance and participation. We think it’s reasonable to base the other half on the calculus proficiency you demonstrate while you’re here.

I have other questions!

When in doubt, ask your instructor and/or TA (you can and should do this with questions about calculus too). If they’re not sure how to help, or if you have general feedback/questions about the existence of recitation and how the time is used, you can also contact the course head, Dan Katz, at djkatz@math.brown.edu.