

Syllabus

Professor:

Dr. Lin Jiang

Office hours: by appointment.

Course Description: This is a three-credit course suitable for both undergraduate and graduate students interested in learning more about community ecology beyond those covered in the sophomore-level General Ecology. We will examine species interactions and their roles in regulating the structure and dynamics of ecological communities. Classroom discussion of readings from the primary literature, including both classic and recent scientific articles, will be a major component of the course.

Course Objectives: The main goal of this course is to introduce you to important concepts and issues in community ecology; by the end of the course, you should have a basic understanding of the current knowledge on how ecological communities operate. Another goal of this course is to practice and refine your skills in critically reading and effectively presenting scientific papers.

Prerequisites: Either BIOS 2300 (Ecology) or BIOS 2310 (Problem-based Ecology), or permission of instructor.

Required Textbook: Community Ecology, 2nd edition, Peter Morin, 2011, Wiley-Blackwell. ISBN: 978-1-4051-2411-9.

Course Format: This course will include lectures given by the instructor, presentations given by the students, and class discussions. Class presentations and discussions of assigned journal articles will follow lectures on the same topic. You are required to read all the assigned readings, including selected chapters from the textbook and journal articles, and participate in class discussions. During the semester, you will present one or two assigned papers using PowerPoint and will be responsible for leading class discussions of these papers. The presentation should be approximately 15-20 minutes, and may include materials outside the assigned paper.

Grading Criteria: Your course grade will be based on three (for undergraduates) or four (for graduate students) activities.

First, 50% (40% for graduate students) of your grade will be determined by two take-home exams [mid-term exam: 20%; cumulative final exam: 30% (20% for graduate students)]. The exams will cover materials from the textbook as well as from the assigned journal articles. You will be given at least one week to schedule the exam, but will be required to complete it within one 3-hour span. You may refer to textbooks, course notes, and primary literature articles while working on the exams, but are prohibited from obtaining information from the internet or discussing with your classmates.

Second, 20% of your grade will be determined by class presentation(s), which is graded by the instructor. Your presentation(s) should include (1) a general introduction of the topic addressed by the research article, (2) questions or hypotheses examined in the article, and why these questions/hypotheses are important, (3) a description of study systems and methodology, (4) results and their significance (i.e., how these results advance our understanding of the subject), and (5) a critique of the paper, that is, your own evaluation of the article (including both its strength and weakness). Good presentations also require effective presentation skills. Both criteria (content and presentation effectiveness) will be used to grade presentations. As a presenter, you should always strive for clarity given the limited amount of presenting time, and should, if appropriate, include other essential information outside the assigned paper (e.g., materials from other relevant papers) to help the audience better understand the topic. The presenter is also expected to lead class discussions on the presented article (e.g., by providing questions for the class to discuss) and answer questions from the audience. These activities will also be graded, forming part of your presentation grades.

Third, 30% (25% for graduate students) of your grade will be determined by class participation, which includes class attendance [15% (10% for graduate students)] and active involvement in class discussions (15%). The expectation is that you need to ask/answer at least one question during each paper discussion period. Student participation in paper discussion will be graded on a 0-3 scale (0-absent/silent, 1-tried to ask or answer questions, but the questions/answers are poor, 2-good attempt, 3-great answer/question).

Fourth, each graduate student needs to submit a research proposal that accounts for 15% of your grade. The proposal should have a maximum of 15 typed double-spaced pages. It should describe a hypothesis-driven research project in the area of Community Ecology, and should be organized into the following sections: “Summary”, “Objectives” or “Statement of the Problem”, “Background” or “Rationale and Significance” (where you provide a review of the relevant ecological literature and explain the significance and novelty of your proposed research), “Hypotheses” or “Research Questions”, “Research Approach” or “Experimental Plan” (where you provide details on your study system, experimental design, and data collection and analysis), and “Literature Cited”. Summary and bibliography are not included in the 15-page limit. Students are encouraged to discuss with the instructor about the topic of their proposals prior to working on them.

Grades will be assigned according to the following scale: 90-100 A, 80-89 B, 70-79 C, 60-69 D, below 60 F. The instructor reserves the right to change these standards based on class performance.

Attendance and policy on missing assignments and late exams: Students are expected to follow GT attendance policy (<http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/rules/4/>). Lecture attendance is highly recommended as lectures may cover materials outside the textbook. Class attendance is mandatory for all days when there is presentation. Each unexcused absence will result in the loss of your participation grades on that day, and if you miss a class in which you are presenting without a legitimate excuse, you will lose your presentation grades. Excusable absences include severe illness, death in family, or accident; written documents of these unforeseeable events must be provided to the instructor. Exams submitted after the due date will be graded with a 10% late penalty.

Academic Integrity: Your conduct in this course is expected to conform to the GT Student Honor Code (<https://policylibrary.gatech.edu/student-life/academic-honor-code>). I urge you to consult this for a full definition of your rights and responsibilities.

Learning Accommodations: If needed, we will make classroom accommodations for students with disabilities. These accommodations must be arranged in advance and in accordance with the Office of Disability Services (<http://disabilityservices.gatech.edu>).

Student-Faculty Expectations Agreement: At Georgia Tech, we believe that it is important to strive for an atmosphere of mutual respect, acknowledgement, and responsibility between faculty members and the student body. The Student-Faculty Expectations (<https://catalog.gatech.edu/rules/22/>) articulate some basic expectations that you can have of me and that I have of you. In the end, simple respect for knowledge, hard work, and cordial interactions will help build the environment we seek. Therefore, I encourage you to remain committed to the ideals of Georgia Tech while in this class.