EEB 2208 (Introduction to Conservation Biology)

Primary literature readings

In a subset of lectures we will break for 10-15 minutes to discuss a related paper. Do not treat these readings as optional because they will form the basis of class discussions and writing assignments that are worth 10% of the total class grade. They are also designed to teach you skills (e.g., figure interpretation) that will be helpful on the exam.

Class discussions (ungraded, but important)

During discussions I will randomly select people to either summarize key points from the paper or to answer simple questions about the reading. You will only have to give brief answers, but you will need to know what the papers are about and to have thought about what they mean. These discussions are not meant to be intimidating (really!), but are to help me get to know you a bit better and to give you a sense of what current conservation research involves. They are also intended to teach you how to read scientific papers so that you can better evaluate the evidence for scientific findings on your own.

The best way to avoid making this a scary, high-pressure experience is to prepare. For each discussion, you should:

a) make sure that you have read and thought about the paper,
b) be able to summarize what the paper is about in one or two sentences (this is the type of thing I will ask people to do in class),
c) be able to say something about how you think the paper relates to the lecture (if you read the course notes before class, this will be easier), and
d) be able to say what you think of the paper (Was it easy to understand? Do you see problems with the results, or how they are interpreted? Are the results surprising? etc.).

There are no "right" answers to (d) – if you hate the paper, or found it impossible to understand, then saying that is fine. I do not expect you to understand every detail of every paper (and definitely not statistical analyses or complex lab methods – if you find these parts confusing, just skip over them). I do expect you to be able to figure out why the study was done, what the main findings are, and how it relates to the course material. I will also ask a lot of questions about how graphs and figures should be interpreted.

Grading: Participation in discussions is not graded (with the exception noted below, under "Bonus points"), but do not take this to mean that you should not participate. First, I will pick people randomly to answer questions, so preparation will save you the embarrassment of having nothing to say or from having to pretend you are not in the room. Second, when people join discussions you do not have to listen to me drone on so much … making class more interesting for everyone (especially me). Third, the discussions are designed to help you use and understand peer-reviewed papers, an essential skill for the poster assignment later in the semester and for a career in science. Finally, you'll have to read and understand the papers in order to do a good job on the in-class questions, so you might as well be ready to talk about them too.

In-class writing assignments (10% of total class grade)

On each discussion day you will get 2-3 minutes to answer two simple questions about the paper. We are purposefully not giving you very long because we want you to have thought about these questions before you come to class and to be ready to write something concise when you arrive. Usually, we will do this at the start of class. If you turn up late, you will not get another opportunity later in the class (so don't be late!). The questions will be the same every time:

1) Describe one thing from the paper that surprised you.
2) Explain why it was surprising.

In each case we are looking for a short simple answer. You can be surprised by things in the methods used, the interpretation of the results, the findings, things that were not discussed in the paper but seemed important, etc., etc., etc. But you must justify the reason for your surprise, and it cannot simply be because it is something you did not know (see below).

Ideally you will relate your answer to information we have talked about in class. For example, an answer like this one would get full points: "*I was surprised the species was listed as endangered because it is a habitat and food generalist, and those types of species usually have a low risk of extinction.*" There is no need to write more than this: the sentence clearly explains what was surprising, and then gives an explanation based on general patterns that we will discuss in class.

IMPORTANT: As noted, simply not knowing something is not a sufficient reason for surprise in this assignment. For example, this answer would only get half points: "*I was surprised the species was listed as endangered because I assumed there were lots of them.*" In this case, the simple fact that the author did not know anything about the topic is not sufficient for the second half point.

You will also lose points if it is clear that you have not carefully read the paper. For example, if you say you were surprised by things that are not in the paper, refer to things that are not relevant to the study, or make statements that do not follow logically from the findings, etc., you are unlikely to get any points.

Grading: Grading is based on thoughtful participation, rather than a narrow set of specific answers. If your answer meets the criteria described above, you will get the points. There are ten readings, each worth 1% of the total class grade. If you are not present for an assignment, you will not get any points for it. If you do not answer both questions, you will not get full points.

I encourage you to discuss the papers with others before class, but your answers should be your own. If your answer is the same as the person sitting next to you (or in front, etc.), and you are seen glancing their way, then you will get no points. If this happens more than once, you will get zero for this entire portion of the class and risk getting an F overall for the class. Do not think it is not obvious when people try to do this. (I apologize for even bringing this topic up as I know that most students are honorable – unfortunately there are enough who are not, that I am forced to be blunt and to explain how seriously I take cheating.)

Responses can only be given during the assigned class time (no email responses allowed; this is not negotiable unless there is good medical justification). If you have to miss a discussion, your grade will be averaged over the assignments that you did complete (e.g., if you attend 9 of the 10 discussions and get 7.5/9 points (83%), your grade will be adjusted to 8.3 out of 10). If you miss more than three discussions, though, you will lose points for ALL of the discussions that you missed.

Bonus points

Anyone can gain bonus points for particularly thoughtful responses in either their written answers or the discussions. But such things really have to surprise the grader into thinking "Wow, that's a good point." These points are given out rarely, and only when people are truly original in their responses. So, if you are surprised by the same thing that your friend is surprised by, you can guarantee that you will not get a bonus.

No one can get more than 10 points total no matter what, but we will keep track of especially good answers from the very first discussion so that you can "stockpile" replacement points in case you lose points later in the semester. Remember, the more you contribute to the discussions, the more likely you are to impress us.