

SCIENCE IN OUR WORLD: CERTAINTY & CONTROVERSY

FALL 2011 SYLLABUS

There is nothing which can better deserve our patronage than the promotion of science and literature. Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness. —George Washington to Congress, January 8, 1790.

“Scientific knowledge is a body of statements of varying degrees of certainty - some most unsure, some nearly sure, none absolutely certain” —Richard Feynman (1918-88, Nobel prize in Physics 1965)

Welcome to SC200

Science will be part of the solution to every problem in the 21st century - and it will continue to illuminate humanity and humanity's place in the universe. This means it is not enough for universities to train scientists to do science. Non-scientists need to be scientifically literate too. Scientific literacy involves more than knowing something of what scientists have already learnt. It also involves an appreciation of the importance of science for daily life, business, politics, our collective future and our view of ourselves. And, just as importantly, it involves an ability to evaluate the science reported to non-scientists and to draw sensible conclusions from it. It is impossible to do any of that without understanding how scientists grope and stagger forward, and how their efforts appear in the media. **The aim of this course is to make the citizens and leaders of the future better consumers of science.**

Course Description

3 credits, non-science majors, assumes no background knowledge, and possibly even a loathing for science.

Location: 220 Hammond. **Class Time:** Tuesday and Thursday from 2.30pm-3:45pm

Course Instructor

Dr Andrew Read, Course Director,
Director, Center of Infectious Disease Dynamics,
Professor of Biology and Entomology,
514B Mueller Laboratories
Office Phone: 814 867-2396
Office Hours: By Appointment

a.read@psu.edu
www.thereadgroup.net

Guest Instructors

Dr Victoria Braithwaite,
Professor of Fisheries and Biology

v.braithwaite@psu.edu
<http://tiny.cc/zimch>

Dr Daniel Larson
Verne M. Willaman Dean, Eberly College of Science

djlanson@psu.edu
<http://www.science.psu.edu/about/dean-larson>

Dr Mary Beth Williams,
Professor of Chemistry

mew17@psu.edu
<http://research.chem.psu.edu/mbwgroup/index.html>

Undergraduate Teaching Assistants

Carolyn (Cally) Prutting,
Suzanne Zakaria,

crp5166@psu.edu
sxz5046@psu.edu

Tech support

Chris Stubbs, ITS

cas391@psu.edu

Course Objectives

By analogy with literature, dance, wine, food and music appreciation courses, this is a science appreciation course. With extensive use of case studies, we will help students develop a critical appreciation of the process of scientific discovery and its implications.

1. *The meaning, use and diversity of the scientific method*

- Science is both imaginative and highly disciplined
- Science is a very successful way to gain knowledge
- Science is a human endeavor and so is often flawed, yet it can in the long run draw powerful context- and culture-independent conclusions
- Why it works: organized skepticism.
- What conflicting evidence means and how we can sort it out (not all data are equal)
- Why there is no such thing as absolute proof in science
- What is meant by certainty in science - and how scientists convey it, and why it usually can't be conjured up over night
- What science can and cannot deliver (knowledge and ethics)
- Why it is hard to aim science at a target

2. *The difference between good science, bad science, pseudoscience and everything else; evidence versus conviction; skeptics versus deniers*

3. *The societal implications of thinking scientifically*

- The impact of science on humanity's view of humanity
- The enormous impact science will continue to have
- The contemporary utility of science for everyday life, for business and for governance
- Science is a civilizing enterprise that generates wonder and awe.

Materials you need for this class

There is no text book for this course. Everything will be presented in class, or you will find it on the web. RELIABLE 24/7 internet access is essential. If this is a problem, let Dr Read know by the end of the first week.

Course website

The course site is at Angel (<https://cms.psu.edu>). This site will contain administrative material, including timetable changes, class handouts (lecture notes will not be provided in full – handouts are to assist in note taking), and tests. **Do not be fooled – the class handouts are not a substitute for attending class. The best way to succeed in SC200 – and to make the most of what university offers – is to attend class.**

Classroom Interaction

Talking is good, and has worked for millennia. So you can put your hand up at any time, and instructors will frequently ask the class questions and expect old fashioned verbal responses. We like to talk.

But we will like Poll Everywhere <http://www.polleverywhere.com/>, software which enables you and us to do both these things in a slightly more anonymous way by text, twitter or web interface. How to do this is on the Tech FAQ page on the course blog. Send answers by text to **37607**, by tweet to “**@poll**”, or via the web from a laptop or G3 phone to <http://PollEv.com/SiOW>.

In most classes we will also have a Poll Everywhere channel for you to ask open-ended questions (the ‘**Comment Wall**’). We will attempt to monitor this back channel in real time during class. If you feel too nervous to stick your hand up, use this channel.

Course blog

<http://www.personal.psu.edu/afr3/blogs/SiOW> This can be read by anyone anywhere, but you can only post to it if you are registered on this course. Note that the posts will have to be done with your PSU ID and so will not be anonymous. To post something, log in at <http://blogs.psu.edu>.

Assessment

40% Digital Expression All of the written work and much of the exchange of ideas in this course will take place on the course blog. Students are required to write posts and comment on the posts of others. This participation will be assessed three separate times during the semester according to the rubric below. Your best score from among the three periods will be taken as the mark. Initial blog posts (see below) are NOT included in the first blog period.

Within a scoring period, the minimum requirement is ONE entry and three comments. Note that this level of participation would achieve a frequency score (see Rubric) of ACCEPTABLE (C; 70-79 pts). MORE THAN ONE entry and THREE comments PER WEEK are required to achieve a frequency score of EXCELLENT (A; 90-100 pts). You can check how many posts you've made, and when, on the 'Contributions' page on the class blog. The assessment periods are defined by DATE – comments on entries from earlier periods are welcome and will be assessed in the period in which they are made.

4% Initial Blog posts This task is just to ensure you can work the blog. Post an entry which explains (i) why you are doing this course and (ii) why you are not planning to be a Science major, AND post a comment on someone else's post. **The entry must include a picture and at least one live link, and the comment must include at least one live link.** This assignment is not graded – you get marks for simply posting an entry (50%) with a photo (20%) and a live link (5%), and for posting a comment (20%) with a live link (5%).

20% Class tests There will be four of these during the semester, administered via Angel, so they can be taken on any internet-connected computer within the specified 24-hr period that the test is live. These will be multi-choice questions, open-book **[you can consult anything you want except each other]**, and will cover the material covered since the last class test. You can take each test twice in the 24-hr period; we take your best score. The best two scores from the four class tests go to your class test grade.

0% Pop-quizzes These will occur within class times throughout the semester, usually without warning. They are intended to provide you and the instructors with immediate feedback on how you are getting on. The score you get on them does NOT count towards the final grade.

16% Attendance Students are expected to be in class *on time* and remain in the classroom *throughout* the entire period. This will be assessed by awarding **4%** for completing each of **4** pop-quizzes. There will be more than four pop-quizzes throughout the semester. Your presence will be determined from the sheet attached to each quiz which you must hand back at the time.

20% Final Exam This will consist of multi-choice questions in the style of the class tests and will be administered via Angel in the same way as the class test *but it will cover the entire content of the course.* The final exam will be available for all of the final exam week,

10% Extra credit This can come from three sources, to maximum 10%.

(1) Individual blog posts that are particularly lucid, stimulating or lateral (max 5% per post).

(2) Suggested exam questions. These should be multiple choice, in the style of the questions in the quizzes and e-mailed to Dr Read at least one week before the final exam. If they are different from any questions you've already had, and they get used (or something close to them), you get the extra credit, at 2.5% per question. Sending lots of (good) questions increases your chances of hitting on questions I'll use. You'll get up to 10% extra credit and know the answers!

(3) Finding a mistake in a class test or the final exam. If you think you have found a mistake, e-mail Andrew outlining your reasoning. If you are the first to raise the argument, and he buys it, he will email the class explaining why and how the marks will be adjusted. Andrew rarely makes mistakes. Max. 5% per error.

Thus:

Best 1 of 3 Blog periods	40%	=max 40%
Best 2 of 4 class tests	10% each	=max 20%
Final 'at home' test	20%	=max 20%
Initial Blog post	4%	=max 4%
Attendance	4% for presence at up to 4 pop-quizzes	=max 16%

Extra credit is added, up to 10%.

Grades will appear on Angel though out the semester. Andrew is the only instructor involved in assessment. The undergrad teaching assistants are NOT involved.

Blog Scoring Rubric

Criteria	Unacceptable (0-69 pts) D or fail	Acceptable (70-79 pts) C	Good (80-89 pts) B	Excellent (90-100 pts) A
Frequency	No or infrequent participation	In a scoring period, one entry and three comments	In scoring period, 1 entry per week 3 comments per week	In scoring period, >1 entry per week >3 comments per week
Entries	No or few entries	Entries are adequate, but reflect superficial engagement with the material	Entries are well developed and engaged with the material; lacks conceptual clarity	Entries are conceptually sophisticated, engaged in a substantive way with the material
Comments	No or few comments on blogs of others	Comments are shallow contributions to the discussion; does not enrich discussion	Comments elaborate on existing posts with further comment/observation. Many extend beyond personal reaction	Comments analyze the posts of others, extend the discussion in new directions, relate to previous online or classroom discussion
Content Contribution	Posts irrelevant information, tangential to discussion	Repeats some previous content, does not add substantively to the discussion	Content is factually accurate, but does not include much conceptual nuance or development	Posts draw directly upon the material to make a creative and substantive point that extends beyond the material
Clarity & Mechanics	Unclear, disorganized, unedited, URLs given without hotlinks	Open and respectful tone, some typos, some organization	Organized, well-edited and thoughtfully composed	Organized around a central point/argument, concise, even striking formulations, clear, easy to read style
Reference & Support	No or few references or support for position	Appeals to personal experience, but not to the work/experiences of others	Incorporates the work/experiences of other students, scholars and experts	Uses references to literature, readings, personal experience, experts, etc. in ways that strongly support the main position
Connections	Establishes no or few connections with other blogs, websites, articles, etc.	Infrequently establishes connections to other blogs, websites, articles, etc.	Regularly establishes connections to internet resources and other sources of contemporary culture, news and politics	Consistently draws course material into connection with issues of the day by integrating references to blogs, websites, articles, scholarship, etc.

This rubric is lightly modified from the one constructed by Dr Chris Long, Philosophy Dept, PSU <http://tinyurl.com/3nmm4or>

For examples of great entries and comments from last year, see links and thoughts at [http://www.personal.psu.edu/afr3/blogs/SIOW Reflections/how-to-get-an-a-on-the-blog/](http://www.personal.psu.edu/afr3/blogs/SIOW_Reflections/how-to-get-an-a-on-the-blog/)

Digital Expression

We are deliberately broad minded about what the blog posts might concern (within the broad constraint that they be relevant to the course). There are two types of posts, entries and comments. Posts might cover, for example, reaction to the course material, disagreements with what the instructors have said, questions, background material missed in class, different perspectives, verifying cases, contrary examples, cool things going on elsewhere in science – or in the non-science world – which might be of interest in the context of this course. Confused about something in the course? Post the question to the class. Instructors will get involved too. Indeed, we expect to iterate between blog and class. The right post could send the class off in new directions. In short: Create, Reflect, Connect. And be grateful that for once, your hard work can be read by more than the person who marks it.

Initial Blog Posts

This requirement is simply to ensure that we have a chance to work out any tech problems – at our end or yours – early on. Create an entry on the blog which explains (i) why you are doing this course and (ii) why you are not planning to be a Science major, AND post a comment on someone else's post. You might, for example, agree with their post, express surprise, or give them a better reason. The entry must include a picture and at least one live link, and the comment must include at least one live link. If you have problems, see *Blog and Tech Help* below.

Paid work opportunities for 2012

I will look to recruit teaching assistants from this year's class to help with the blogging next year. I will in the first instance offer this to those with the highest scores this year. This will be an exciting opportunity to get paid while building a vitae line – and most importantly, to continue thinking about science.....

Instructor blog http://www.personal.psu.edu/afr3/blogs/SIOW_Reflections/

This site (live linked from the course blog), summarizes the history, rationale, and background for this course. Andrew will blog about how he thinks the course is going, why things are being done the way they are, and student reaction. This is where generic feedback on tests and the blog will appear, together with grade distributions. You (and anyone else on the planet) are very, very welcome to post comments, anonymously if you want. The aim is to provide a real time portal for student feedback. Use it. Nothing on this website is subject to assessment – say what you want.

Free lunch

You can take Andrew to lunch, with everything paid for by the nice people at the Eberly College of Science. For details, see <http://science.psu.edu/current-students/Lunch.html>.

Honors Option

Schreyer students who want to Honors Option the course must see Andrew in the first week (or email a.read@psu.edu). <http://www.shc.psu.edu/students/courses/honorsoption.cfm>

How to get help

Course administration and assessment: contact Dr Read (at end of class or by e-mail a.read@psu.edu)

Course content: There are various options here.

- Put your hand up in class! This approach is an oldie but a goodie
- Ask using the on-line real time Poll Anywhere back channel during class time
- Post a question direct to the Course Blog
- Post a comment to the Instructor Blog
- Ask the relevant instructor at the end of class
- E-mail the relevant instructor. They may well post the question and reaction on the course blog.
- E-mail either of the TA's. They may well post the question and reaction on the course blog or Angel.

Blog and Tech help: See FAQ page on course blog, which has links to further help if needed. If that doesn't help, email the class TA's, Cally or Suzanne crp5166@psu.edu, sxz5046@psu.edu.

Important dates

Late Drop Deadline – November 11

Withdrawal Deadline – December 9

Deadline for Initial Blog posts– Noon, Wednesday August 31

End 1st Blog Assessment period – Noon, Friday September 16

End 2nd Blog Assessment period – Noon, Friday October 21

End 3rd Blog Assessment period – Noon, Friday December 2

Class Test 1 – Monday, September 12

Class Test 2 – Monday, October 10

Class Test 3 – Monday, October 31

Class Test 4 – Monday, December 5

Final date for e-mailing Dr Read potential exam questions [extra credit] – Monday, December 5

Final Exam - available 24 hours/day December 12 through December 16.

Deadlines for on-line tests and exams are hard deadlines. When a test goes dead, it's gone.

Grading Scale

Final grades will be assigned based on the following percentages

A	95-100%
A-	90-94.9%
B+	87-89.9%
B	83-86.9%
B-	80-82.9%
C+	75-79.9%
C	70-74.9%
D	60-69.9%
Fail	<60

There will be no expected mean. If you all get A's, I'll be delighted. If you all get D's, I'd be disappointed, but well, you'll all get D's.

The class tests and final exam will consist of 28 questions, but we take the mark out of 25. Thus, you can get three questions wrong for free. Your score only starts to dip below 100% when you get the 4th question wrong. There is no extra credit for class tests (maximum 100%). This system allows us to stretch you and force you to think hard, and to better evaluate our teaching, without brutally penalizing you for the odd incorrect answer. Note this system very effectively rewards people who get only a few questions wrong. It has very little impact on scores when a quarter or more of the questions are answered incorrectly.

E-mail

Important notifications will be made in **class and by email to your PSU accounts**. It is your responsibility to check your email frequently (daily). Under NO circumstances will failure on your part to read an email count as extenuating circumstances.

Missed class and assessment

If you miss class for any reason it is your responsibility to catch up on what you missed, and you will need to get notes from another student. There will be lots of pop quizzes – if you are missing more than the odd one, you are not coming to class enough and you will consequently not get full marks for attendance.

There are no make-up class tests for this course. Since we take the highest marks from 2 of the 4 class tests spaced predictably throughout semester, you have to be REALLY unlucky for life's catastrophes to stop you

getting two scores. Do not miss class tests lightly – the unexpected always strikes, especially near the end of semester. If a technical problem occurs during a class test, send me an email IMMEDIATELY. This is your proof that a problem occurred and will permit me to help you complete it.

If you are unable to take the final exam, please inform me at least ten days in advance, so other arrangements can be made for you. If you are unable to take the exam over the scheduled five days for some good reason (extremely foul and extraordinarily persistent weather, emergency, chronic illness), please email a.read@psu.edu and/or leave me a voicemail 814 867-2396 so we can work to reschedule. You must do this before the end of the exam period. Note, however, that there is a five day window in which to complete the test, and it can be done from anywhere in the world. This means that very few of life's difficulties are likely to get in the way of completing this test. If a technical problem occurs during a final test, send me an email IMMEDIATELY. This is your proof that a problem occurred and will permit me to help you complete it. Do not leave the test to the last minute.

Instructors and your classmates will appreciate it if you need to stay away from class because you have an infectious illness like flu. The above arrangements enable you to do this without impacting on your marks – so long as you have been regularly attending when healthy. ***The way to succeed in SC200 is to come to class whenever you are healthy.***

Poll Everywhere <http://www.poll everywhere.com/>

If you access this via your laptop wirelessly through the university (www.poll4.com), there is no charge. If you use a G3 phone, you may have a charge. If you access this by text from your cell phone, there is the standard rate text message, so it may be free, or up to twenty cents on some carriers if you do not have a text messaging plan. Poll Everywhere is very serious about privacy. We cannot see your phone numbers, and you'll never receive follow-up text messages other than perhaps a text that your vote was received or that you did something wrong.

Academic Integrity

All Penn State policies regarding ethics, honorable behavior and academic integrity apply to this course (see links below). Be aware that academic dishonesty is not limited to simply cheating on an exam. To quote directly from the Faculty Senate Policies for students. "Academic integrity is the pursuit of scholarly activity free from fraud and deception and is an educational objective of this institution. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarizing, fabricating of information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, having unauthorized possession of examinations, submitting work of another person or work previously used without informing the instructor, or tampering with the academic work of other students." For any material or ideas obtained from other sources, such as the text or things you see on the web, in the library, etc., a source reference must be given. Direct quotes from any source must be identified as such, usually in "quotes". All exam and class test answers must be your own, and you must not provide any assistance to other students during tests. Any instances of academic dishonesty WILL be pursued under the University and Eberly College of Science regulations concerning academic integrity.

<http://www.psu.edu/ufs/policies/> <http://www.science.psu.edu/academic/Integrity>

Nondiscrimination Statement

The Pennsylvania State University is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. It is the policy of the University to maintain an academic and work environment free of discrimination, including harassment. The Pennsylvania State University prohibits discrimination and harassment against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Discrimination against faculty, staff or students will not be tolerated at The Pennsylvania State University. Direct all enquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policy to the Affirmative Action Director, The Pennsylvania State University, 328 Boucke Building, University Park, Pa 16802-2801, Tel (814) 865-4700.

Eberly College of Science Code of Mutual Respect and Cooperation

The Eberly College of Science Code of Mutual Respect and Cooperation embodies the values that we hope our faculty, staff, and students possess and will endorse to make The Eberly College of Science a place where every individual feels respected and valued, as well as challenged and rewarded. It is available at <http://www.science.psu.edu/climate/code-of-mutual-respect-and-cooperation-1>.