

PSYCH 1140 FWS: Why Do We Speak?

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Class Hours: MWF 2:40-03:30 p.m.

Class Room: Uris 331

Course Description

Where did vocal communication come from? What evolutionary pressures and biological constraints organize the emergence of vocal communication as a phenomenon that spans many species? Despite decades of study, debates about the rise of vocal communication continue. Could speech (and its precursors in other animals) arise from specific genes, or is it a general feature of cultural transmission? Did dinosaurs communicate vocally? Is communication inherently honest or did it evolve to deceive others? Are communication systems designed to transfer information or to facilitate social bonds? Our readings will draw from book chapters, scientific papers, and New York Times op-eds. Writing assignments will emphasize concisely articulating the implications of scientific findings, proposing new research, and conveying new scientific ideas to the public in accessible language.

This course will introduce you to college writing through the lens of psychology. We will use both formal and informal writing to enhance comprehension of the topics we cover and the scientific studies we read, as well as a way to lead into classroom discussion. Over the course of the term we will learn how to read, interpret, and analyze scientific writing. You will also produce a variety of writing samples of your own, from informal blog posts to a formal research proposal of your own ideas. This will provide experience writing for different kinds of audiences, while continuing to build competence in articulating a thesis and structuring an argument. The writing, time management, and critical thinking skills gained in this class will be highly applicable to future courses, and those in other departments (though formatting and citation style may vary). For those interested in continuing in the sciences, this class will also provide a hands-on approach to actively learning and practicing the basic skills that will be useful in higher-level classes.

Learning outcomes

Become a better reader. By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Find the main points of a manuscript
- Concisely summarize scientific findings in an accessible way
- Read critically, and formulate good questions for future study

Become a better writer. By the time you finish this course your papers should demonstrate that you can:

- Place your writing within a theoretical background to frame your argument
- Clearly articulate a thesis and organize your statements

- Use appropriate arguments and evidence, as well as style, for the field of psychology
- Cite your sources correctly
- Improve your own work, and that of your classmates, through proofreading and revision
- Craft powerful sentences

Readings

Selected readings will be posted on Canvas, and will range from New York Times articles to book chapters to scientific studies. Some of the reading will also include information about writing and style.

A note about electronic devices

Please refrain from using laptops, cell phones, or other electronic devices during class time unless specifically instructed otherwise. Studies show that these can have detrimental effects on learning, both for yourself and those who happen to be sitting around you. We will, however, discuss and reference the readings.

Writing assignments

Description of required writing

This course is designed to introduce you to writing at the college level, within the field of psychology. As such, we will be doing a lot of writing! Our eventual goal is to see the practice of reading, writing, and discussion as a set of interlinked processes. Through these practices, you may become a more organized thinker and academic contributor. Informal writing may include summarization of readings, responses to discussion questions, active reading and annotation, connecting concepts in the class, or describing an interesting instance of animal communication. Formal writing assignments will move us from writing generally about a topic to popular science pieces or analyses of conflicting theories. We will move beyond writing for the public and start to write at an academic level, writing literature reviews and crafting a research proposal towards the end of the semester. I will emphasize the *writing process*, from brainstorming to drafting to revision. In all we will write five essays, with at least four additional drafts. Beyond that, I encourage you to *have fun* with your writing! Pay close attention to what sparks your interest and search for readings and topics that reflect them. Avoid the path of least resistance. The more dedication you put into this class, the larger the payoff in terms of improving your writing skills over the course of the semester.

Conferences

Students taking First-Year Writing Seminars are required to meet twice (minimum) in individual conferences with their instructors about their writing. You can, at any point, visit my office hours or schedule a meeting with me to consult about research topics, outlines, or drafts.

Lateness and absences

Try to arrive in class on time. Latecomers can be distracting in small seminars. If you miss a class, you are responsible for finding out from other students what happened. I will **not** be recording classes and zooming into class will not be possible. I will post class materials and assignments on Canvas, but much of our class work will occur in discussions – thus attendance is highly important. If you know ahead of time that you will not be able to make it to a particular class, we can make arrangements. Consistent lateness, and/or more than three unexcused absences will lead to a lower final grade in the class.

Grading

As this is a writing class, the vast majority of your grade will stem from your writing work. Please be aware that work submitted late, whether homework or essay, will result in penalties to your grade. I will allow 1 late assignment over the course of the semester with no penalty, but this does not include drafts because our in-class work will depend on drafts of your writing.

Grade breakdown:

- Participation (**30%**) – including participation both in class discussions and small groups. While this doesn't necessarily mean that you must speak up in class every day, you should, at a minimum, contribute to class discussions once or twice a week. 10% of your participation grade will stem from your group-led class discussion of the readings, with the remainder coming from your class contributions.
- Homework assignments (**5%**) – these will be brief questions posted to Canvas on the discussion readings.
- Essays (**65%**) – Your first essay will be graded based on completion. Your second essay is worth 5% of your grade, your third essay is worth 20% of your grade, your fourth essay is worth 25% of your grade, and your last essay is worth 15% of your grade. Grades for essays will take into account work leading up to the final product such as brainstorming, drafts, peer editing, and annotated bibliographies, as well as the final essay itself.
 - Grades on essay drafts: As these are *drafts* and not the final version of your essay, they are not expected to be polished writing, nor will they be worth as many points as a final version. Grades will be assigned on the basis of completeness and the quality of feedback that you provide to peers on their essay drafts.

The grading scale cutoffs (minimum required percentage):

100% A+	87% B+	77% C+	below 70% D
93% A	83% B	73% C	below 60% F
90% A-	80% B-	70% C-	

Extra credit I will offer up to 5% extra credit added onto your final grade for participation in psychology experiments through the Psychology Department's SONA website (<https://cornellpsych.sona-systems.com>). Each SONA point corresponds to 30 minutes of participation in studies – and 1% added on to your final grade. Therefore, you can receive credit for a maximum of 5 SONA points.

University policies and regulations

The instructor respects and upholds University policies pertaining to the observation of religious holidays; assistance available to the physically handicapped, visually and/or hearing-impaired student; and regulations relating to the prevention of plagiarism, sexual harassment, and discrimination based on race or ethnicity. All students are advised to become familiar with the respective University regulations and are encouraged to bring any questions or concerns to my attention.

Note to students with disabilities: If you have a disability-related need for reasonable academic adjustments in this course, provide the instructor with an accommodation notification from Student Disability Services. Students are expected to give two weeks' notice of the need for accommodations. If you need immediate

accommodations or physical access, please arrange to meet with the instructor within the first two class meetings.

All the work you submit in this course must have been written for this course and not another, and must originate with you in form and content with all contributory sources fully and specifically acknowledged, as stated in Cornell's Code of Academic Integrity (<https://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/dean/academic-integrity/code-of-academic-integrity/>). In this course, violation of academic integrity can lead to an "F" on the assignment or for the entire term. Collaborative work of the following kinds is authorized for the course: peer review and critique of students' essays by one another, and when approved by the instructor in particular cases, collaborative projects by pairs of students.

The Cornell Writing Centers

The Cornell Writing Centers (WC) provide support for individuals at any stage of the writing process. It is a free resource available to everyone on campus – faculty, staff, graduate and undergraduate students – for nearly any kind of writing project: applications, presentations, lab reports, essays, papers, and more. Tutors (trained undergraduate and graduate students) serve as responsive listeners and readers who can address questions about the writing process or about particular pieces of writing. They can also consider questions of confidence, critical reading, analytic thought and imagination. Writing tutors also have experience working with non-native English speakers. During the academic year, the WC staff are available Sunday - Thursday (<https://knight.as.cornell.edu/wc#tutoring-schedule>). Writers can schedule appointments or drop-in at a convenient time. For more information or to schedule an appointment, go to: <https://knight.as.cornell.edu/wc>

Student-led discussions

In order to foster deeper reading, critical thinking, and better understanding of the structure and wording of scientific studies, we will have several different changes for student-led discussion of the assigned readings. This is part of becoming a well-rounded writer. Being able to read, write, and voice your ideas are all important facets in developing your skills and confidence as a writer in an academic field.

You will be assigned to lead discussion once during the semester. This will be done in small groups (dates for these are marked * on the schedule below). During this discussion, you should summarize the main points of the readings, walk us through any graphs or figures, provide appropriate background material, and suggest several questions that the class can discuss.

“A discussion question is one that invokes thought, synthesis, criticism, integration, comparison, evaluation, debate, distress, and hollering.”

– *Esther Thelen*

Class Schedule

Note that classes marked with an * are student-led discussion of the readings.

Readings are due on the Wednesday of the week that they appear in the schedule. It is extremely important that you have done the assigned readings prior to class. The readings will serve as a foundation for our class discussions; lecture and class activities will provide much material that is not duplicated in the readings.

Week 01, 08/22 - 08/26: Identifying communicative systems

- Rogers & Kaplan 2002 Chapter 1, What is communication?

Week 02, 08/29 - 09/02: Units of communication

- Essay 1 due Monday (Identifying communication)
- Rogers & Kaplan 2002 Chapter 2, Signals and Sensory Perception
- Ruben (2016). How to read a scientific paper. *Science*.

Week 03, 09/05 - 09/09: Introduction to animal communication

- No class Monday (*Labor Day*)
- Laidre & Johnstone (2013). Animal signals. *Current Biology*.

Week 04, 09/12 - 09/16: Signals and context I: Intentionality *

- Townsend et al., (2017). Exorcising Grice's ghost: an empirical approach to studying intentional communication in animals. *Biological Reviews*.

Week 05, 09/19 - 09/23: Signals and context II: Honesty *

- Essay 2 due Monday (Intentionality)
- Krebs & Dawkins, (1984). Animal signals: mind-reading and manipulation. *Ecology: An evolutionary approach*.
- Blumberg & Alberts, (1997). Incidental emissions, fortuitous effects, and the origins of communication. *Perspectives in ethology*.

Week 06, 09/26 - 09/30: Communication as regulation: learning a signaling system

- Rogers & Kaplan 2002 Chapter 6, Learning to communicate
- Savage & Yeh, (2019). Novelist Cormac McCarthy's tips on how to write a great science paper. *Nature*.

Week 07, 10/03 - 10/07: Linguistic communication *

- Essay 3 due Monday (Info transfer)
- Pinker 1994 Chapter 9, Baby born talking — describes heaven
- Christiansen & Chater 2022 Chapter 5, Language evolution without biological evolution

Week 08, 10/10 - 10/14: Nonverbal communication

- *No class Monday (Fall Break)*
- Morris (2022). How a visual language evolves as our world does. *The New York Times*.

Week 09, 10/17 - 10/21: Are there parallels between animal and human communication?

- Marler (1970). Birdsong and speech development: Could there be parallels? *American Scientist*.

Week 10, 10/24 - 10/28: Evolution of communication I

- Rogers & Kaplan 2002 Chapter 7, The evolution of communication
- Hockett (1960). The origin of speech. *Scientific American*.

Week 11, 10/31 - 11/04: Evolution of communication II

- Imbler (2021). Neanderthals listened to the world much like us. *The New York Times*.

Week 12, 11/07 - 11/11: Evolution of communication III *

- Weishampel (1981). Acoustic analyses of potential vocalization in lambeosaurine dinosaurs (Reptilia: Ornithischia). *Paleobiology*.

Week 13, 11/14 - 11/18: Peer review

- *Optional*: Greene 2013 Chapter 5, Choose your words with care

Week 14, 11/21 - 11/25: Final essay assignment

- Essay 4 due Monday (Research proposal)
- *No class Wednesday or Friday (Thanksgiving Break)*

Week 15, 11/28 - 12/02: Writing final essay

Week 16, 12/05 - 12/09: Final essay workshopping

- Final essay due Monday by 4:30 PM (Dinosaur communication)
- *No class Wednesday or Friday*

This is a preliminary calendar. I reserve the right to change due dates, assignments, and readings as necessary as the semester progresses. I will update the syllabus on Canvas accordingly.