Biology 221 student guide

The purpose of this guide is several-fold: I want to answer some questions I’m frequently asked, clarify some misconceptions, and give you some tips that may help you be a better student in this class, and in general.

Some parts of this guide are pretty blunt, but my intent isn’t to offend you or hurt your feelings. I simply want to us all to be on equal, level ground going into this class.

Part I: Summary

Your grade in this class is combined from your performance in both lecture and lab. While lecture emphasizes physiological process, and lab emphasizes anatomical structure, exams are ultimately based on your ability to synthesize the material and think critically about it.

Grades are not curved in this class, at least not in the sense that I give a predetermined number of As, Bs, Cs, etc. In other words, you’re not competing against your classmates for your grade. I do take the difficulty of the exams into account in determining your final grade, so you’re really competing against yourself and the exam.

Because each class is different (i.e., one class may do quite well on a given exam, but in a different semester a different class may not do very well at all on an exam of similar difficulty), it is impossible to talk to you about final grade distributions, or in some cases, even grade cutoffs. Yes, an 80% is always a B, but like I said, I take the difficulty of the exams into account, some students who earned high Cs may be bumped up to a B, for example. Again, because of the nature of each individual class, I cannot say until the end of the semester what the final grade distribution is.

There are instances in which a student may do far better than they expected to, or—similarly—instances in which a student may do far worse than they expected to. If you fall into the latter group, there is good news and (perhaps) not-so-good news. The good news is that your failure in this class is absolutely not a reflection of your self-worth, and does not mean that you’re a bad person. Nor does it mean you won’t succeed in life. It does, however, mean that the responsibility lies with you to figure out why you’re not doing well in the class, and make the appropriate changes. I can help with that, to a point, but it’s ultimately your job.

As I said above, Biology 221 has a lecture and lab component, each of which is challenging in its own right. You probably have heard rumors from other students regarding the difficulty of the class, the difficulty (or unfairness) of the instructors, the trickiness of the exams, etc. I caution you to listen to these rumors with
extreme skepticism as they are often biased. Do not believe what anyone other than your instructors tell you about the course.

I’ve now taught this class over 15 times, and the following pages contain things I’ve commonly heard from students, and my response to those requests, statements, and perceptions. Again, some of my answers may seem overly blunt, but in some cases, no discussion is really required.

Part II: General Class Information

1. Where can I find information (assignments, etc) for this class?

Generally your assignments are found on Mastering A&P (http://www.masteringaandp.com). However you’ll be taking lab quizzes and lecture exams that (obviously) will be given in lab and lecture, respectively.

2. How do I register for Mastering A&P?

During your first lecture period, I give detailed instructions for registering on Mastering A&P. If you miss those instructions, the final page of my syllabus gives those instructions again (including your Course ID), and the same information is given in the first few pages of your textbook as well.

3. I took Anatomy and Physiology in high school; I don’t understand why I have to take it again.

Many high school A&P courses may cover similar material and may even use the same textbook as Biology 221. However my expectations are probably quite different. My exams specifically address synthesis and critical thinking, and studies have shown that high school classes (even AP classes) test at a lower level in Bloom’s taxonomy. So, don’t automatically assume that because you did well in high school Anatomy and Physiology (or biology) that you’ll necessarily do well in this class.

4. Does it matter that I have different instructors for lecture and lab?

No. Each lab section covers the same material each week, so you’re not missing anything by not having your lecture instructor for lab. Keep in mind that just like you, your instructors are individuals and may have different teaching styles, but the material that is covered is mandated by the state of California, so you won’t be put at a disadvantage in the class in any way.
5. *I have a training scheduled for two weeks for work, can I attend Professor Baker’s lecture for those two weeks? You cover the same things right?*

Professor Baker and I are mandated by the state of California to cover certain topics in this class, but that’s where the similarities end. We are different people with different teaching styles, and different ways of how we think the class should be run. What’s more, we are not covering the same topics at the same time. **You absolutely cannot choose which lecture you attend based on work schedules, or your own preference—you must attend the lecture section you are enrolled in.**

**Part III: Office Hours**

6. *I can’t make any of your scheduled office hours; can I schedule additional time with you?*

Maybe. Professors at community colleges have heavy teaching loads, as well as committee and administrative obligations. Thus, our schedules are not always as open as you might think. If there is a time we can mutually agree to meet, that is fine, but don’t count on being always being able to schedule office hours at any time of the day.

7. *I missed the lecture on __________, can you go over it with me during office hours?*

No. Office hours are run in a question-answer format, where you come with specific questions about things you didn’t understand, and I clarify those “sticky” points. Do not expect extensive tutoring, or for me to re-deliver a lecture on anything. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to get the notes from another student and do the appropriate work outside of office hours to try to understand the material. After that, if you are still having trouble, I’ll answer a reasonable number of questions during office hours. When you come to office hours, have specific topics and questions in mind; do not come with a vague idea of topics you want to cover.

8. *I don’t have any questions so I don’t need to come to office hours.*

Neither of these assumptions is true. Even if you’re earning good grades, you very likely do have questions about something, and almost all students benefit from coming to office hours and having even the smallest questions answered in a one-on-one format.
Part IV: Lecture and Notes

9. *How do I use your PowerPoint slides?*

To be honest, every semester I am tempted to not give you PowerPoint slides at all. This is mostly because I am not convinced they are overly helpful to you (see #10 below). The best way for you to learn in this class is to take as many of your own notes as possible, and use those to guide your studying. I view them a bridge between the main concepts and your own active learning. **So, my best suggestion is to use them in any way you feel is helping.**

10. *You give us the PowerPoint slides, so I can learn just as well without coming to class.*

This is absolutely not true. **The slides contain most, but not all of what you need to know.** Coming to lecture gives you the missing pieces to put together a complete puzzle. What’s more, reading slides (or the textbook) is nothing more than passive learning (studies show that very little if any learning happens as a result of highlighting the textbook). Because I test on your ability to think critically and synthesize the material, you must **learn actively**: writing notes, quizzing one another, interacting with your professor in lecture. Your own solo studying can supplement these activities but are in no way a good substitute for them.

11. *May I record your lectures?*

If you think it will help, go for it. However, I see little value in listening to recorded lectures, as it’s a very passive act. Your best bet is to spend time engaging in active learning.

12. *Gosh Dr. Russell, I still don’t believe you. I know I can learn just as well on my own, without coming to lecture.*

**Good luck: history is NOT on your side on this one.** While it’s **possible** to do well in Biology 221 by not coming to class it’s **highly unlikely**. Unless you have mastered the material in this class somewhere else, it’s likely you won’t be able to achieve even an average grade using this strategy. Study methods that reliably got you As in high school (or in other classes at OCC) may not be enough to get you Cs in Biology 221. This class is particularly challenging, and requires more active learning than you may be used to. This is probably why many students are so stunned after receiving their grade on Exam 1. Simply studying the book, slides, or listening to my lectures will leave you woefully underprepared for the exams in this class. Unfortunately, if you do not change your study habits for Exam 2, the cycle only perpetuates itself, leading to frustration and disappointment.
13. I'm a kinesthetic (auditory, verbal) learner, and I can't take notes like I'm used to in lecture.

This is something I hear often regarding both note-taking and exam-taking (see below). There’s no doubt that people learn in different ways, but I caution you to not tie yourself to a particular learning style. In other words, if you feel you learn best by doing (kinesthetic learner), don’t tune out in lecture because it’s auditory. There’s little to no evidence to suggest that people learn better using their identified learning style, so don’t count on this to get you through the course, and—perhaps more importantly—don’t use this excuse as your scapegoat if you don’t pass the course.

Part V: Exams

14. How do I study for your exams?

This is probably the question I’m asked the most often, but at the same time, it’s the question I like answering the least. The primary reason for this is that every student has his/her own way of learning and what works best for one may not work the best for you. You’re enrolled in this class to learn Anatomy and Physiology, but you’re also a student learning how to learn. This takes practice, and unfortunately for most of us, it isn’t a skill that comes overnight. For the vast majority of students, learning how to learn effectively is a skill that takes years to develop, and because of the nature of this class it will require you to develop a set of skills you likely have not used in the past.

Regardless of how you learn the best, it will almost certainly involve some sort of active activity. My very general advice would be to avoid passive studying, engage in active learning, and do it often (i.e., daily or nearly daily). It would be unreasonable of me to expect you to study for 4 hours a day, but you almost certainly have 10 minutes during which you could answer a practice essay question, or re-read a section of the text you’re having problems with. Great musicians didn’t become great by practicing once a week, and you won’t become great at Anatomy and Physiology (or any subject for that matter) by practicing once a week. You must practice often.

15. I failed the first exam. Can I still pass your class?

While it’s mathematically possible for you to pass the class if you fail the first exam, the sad truth is that it’s unlikely. Historically, students tend to do about the same from exam to exam, meaning that if you fail one exam you’re more likely to fail subsequent exams. That is (here’s the good news), unless you make drastic changes to your study habits. If your method of studying resulted in a less than satisfactory grade, you have no reason to think that repeating that behavior again will somehow—magically—result in an A on the next exam. It's never too
soon to make changes that will (hopefully) result in a better grade on your next exam.

16. I studied your notes but you didn’t test us on them at all, therefore your exam tricked us.

No, it didn’t. You simply weren’t as prepared as you should have been. Every single question I ask you on your exams can be answered using information from my lectures. However, I absolutely am not testing you on your ability to memorize the material. I am testing your ability to think critically and synthesize. There are a few questions on each exam that you can answer by memorizing the material, but the rest involve your ability to reason your way logically through the material. I’ll talk about this more below, but my intent as your instructor is not to trick you. I do however expect you to learn the material, and if you want an A in the class I expect you to demonstrate mastery of that material.

17. I missed a lecture/lab exam. Can I take a make-up?

Making up an exam is only a possibility for a college-recognized reason. If you are an athlete, have a medical emergency, or something similar, you will be considered for a make-up exam. If you have a vacation planned you will not be able to take a make-up. Lecture exams can be made up on a single day at the end of the semester (this date will be announced during the first lecture, and can be found on the syllabus). Lab exams usually must be made up in another lab class during the same week, but see your lab instructor for more details/instructions.

18. Can I have a “do over” on the exam I failed?

I don’t know why but this is a common request. No, you cannot try again on an exam.

Part VI: Miscellaneous

19. I don’t do well with concepts; I do better memorizing facts.

I’m sorry, but—and this will sound incredibly blunt—you should consider another career path. By its very nature, biology is a conceptual subject and a complete understanding requires that you can relate concepts to one another and think critically about them. I do not expect you to leave this class an expert in anatomy or physiology, but there are concepts we discuss that any student who passes the class should understand.
20. For an introductory course, you expect way too much from us.

Sorry, that’s not how it works at a good college. In high school, straight memorization probably worked really well for you, but in college you're preparing for the real world. Specifically, you need to know how to apply knowledge to new situations, and there’s no reason to NOT learn that in Biology 221.

21. How close was I to an (A, B, C, etc.) in your class? Or: What were the cutoffs?

This isn’t something I (or any other instructor) likes to share. It’s not that I’m hiding anything from you—why would I?—but rather because it saves a lot of hassle on my part, and a lot of frustration on your part. As I said in Part I, your grade in this class is based on your academic performance and is slightly adjusted based on the difficulty of the exams as judged by me. Your grade will never be rounded down.

22. Will you bump my grade up? I really need a C (B, A) in your class!!

No, so don’t even ask. Every student in class would like an A, but needs at least a C. I get that. However, YOU are responsible for your grade. If you don’t show at least an average understanding of the material (a C grade), it’s not MY responsibility to round you up.

23. I need an A in your class. Instead of the C I earned, will you give me an F so I can retake the class?

Again, no. Giving you a grade other than what you earned goes into a very grey area for me, so I say ‘no’ primarily to protect myself. But, I also do it to protect you. I have heard from previous students who have gone on to medical school, physical therapy programs, nursing school, etc., that admissions committees don’t just write off a bad grade if you repeat and get an A. In fact, that F you’re asking me to give you might hurt you worse than you think, and you might be better off with the C.

24. Can I do more extra credit work to bring my grade up?

Again, don’t even bother asking. To be fair, every student needs to be given the same opportunities, so we are unable to offer any additional extra credit to help any one student. To keep your grade high, you should do as much as you can to stay caught up. That includes reading everything I suggest, like this document. Once you’ve finished reading it, you need to send me an email to tell me your favorite vacation destination, or place you’d like to visit. This is your first 5-point assignment.
25. Your comments on “Rate My Professor” tell me I do not have a hope of passing your class. They also tell me you’re a bad professor.

Full-time faculty (like me) are evaluated on a regular basis by our peers (other professors), our administration, as well as by the students in our classes. The college administration does not, however, look at websites like Rate My Professor, therefore neither do I. The comments I receive from students (and peers and administrators) during my periodic evaluations do go into my permanent file and are read by my Dean.

That said, on sites like Rate My Professor, it is likely that students who were severely disappointed in the class for some reason are more likely to post, thus skewing the “random” sample towards students who would give negative comments. Similarly, on my in-class evaluations, there always somewhat unconstructive comments like, “This class is really hard!” (I can’t change the course material—it will always be hard!) or contradictory comments like, “He talks too softly,” and “He talks too loudly.” It’s important to remember that teachers, just like anyone, are all different, and they will always have different teaching styles.

Because of the large number of comments that are unhelpful and contradictory, I do not often read all of these comments. If you feel strongly about something, either positive or negative, the best thing to do is to send me an email or greeting card after the semester ends with your constructive comment. Positive comments are uplifting (despite what you may think, I am human), and even a constructive negative comment presented in this way will cause me to take pause and self reflect on my teaching style.

Part VII: Helpful Links

Why you should throw your highlighter away:
http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/01/130110111734.htm

How to learn study skills:
http://carelibrary.com/Care_Library/How_to_Learn_Study_Skills.html

Studying hard without burnout:
http://www.scotthyyoung.com/blog/2014/04/01/study-hard-no-burnout/

The myth of learning styles: