

MSU College of Agriculture
SCIENTIFIC WRITING: WORKSHOP
HRT 860
Spring 2026

PART 1: COURSE INFORMATION

MEETING FORMAT

One session per week, 1 1/2 h, to be arranged among participants.

INSTRUCTOR

Steve van Nocker
Email: vannocke@msu.edu

OFFICE HOURS

I welcome all questions/concerns/discussions! Drop-in office hours are (generally) 1 P.M.-5 P.M. Mon-Fri. My physical office is A390 PSS. Meetings can also take place in my zoom room (msu.zoom.us/j/8142146184). Please email me to set an appointment during these hours.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Writing engaging and effective scientific papers is one of the most important components of academic success! This small-group workshop will train graduate students in scientific writing through reading and analysis of representative publications from a variety of general and specialized journals. Students writing a paper, thesis, dissertation or grant proposal will distribute these to other students in the group. The writing will be discussed and suggestions for improvement will be made collectively by instructor and class members.

REFERENCE/COURSE MATERIALS

The main reference for the course is '*Modern Scientific Writing*', in development by the instructor. Other free and online-accessible references will be used variously throughout the course. Articles published in scientific journals should usually be available through the MSU library (<https://libguides.lib.msu.edu/eresources/ejournals>).

COURSE SETUP AND STRUCTURE

This course will be delivered in-person, synchronously with a zoom option for those students outside of the E. Lansing area. We will use D2L for sharing of documents.

PART 2: COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Acquire and demonstrate an understanding of the following principles that are central to scientific writing:

- *Understand and appreciate the components of a good scientific story*
- *Recognize tense and voice in scientific writing*
- *Be able to judge appropriate balance between general background and specific detail*
- *Understand various manuscript architectures*
- *Recognize specific RCR issues related to writing and publishing*
- *Recognizing elements of an effective figure caption*
- *Recognize appropriate language in discussion of trends, significance and statistics*
- *Understand the distinctions between specific data descriptors such as 'suggest', 'indicate', 'show', etc.*
- *Learn what to include or omit from Results, Methods, Discussion etc.*
- *Understand the importance of accuracy in detail*
- *Recognize process involved in selecting an appropriate journal for publishing research*
- *Learning basics of the peer review*
- *Recognize elements of a cover letter that interests the editors and reviewers*
- *Understand how to craft an effective response to reviewer comments and editorial decisions*
- *Learn techniques and approaches to critique and evaluate your own writing*
- *Appreciate various techniques for bypassing 'writer's block'*

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By successfully completing this course, students should be able to:

- *Compose a scientific story based on their own research/proposed research*
- *Use appropriate tense and voice in their writing*
- *Be able to balance scope and detail in writing a literature review*
- *Compose a scientific paper within a prescribe architecture*
- *Avoid common mistakes related to RCR in writing*
- *Understand how to compose an effective figure caption*
- *Be able to use appropriate language in discussion of trends, significance and statistics*
- *Write manuscript sections (Results, Methods, Discussion etc.) with appropriate content*
- *Use appropriate detail in writing*
- *Select an appropriate journal for publishing their research*
- *Understand how their papers, grant proposals, etc will be reviewed and assessed*
- *Write a cover letter that interests the editors and reviewers*
- *Write an effective response to reviewer comments and editorial decisions*
- *Critically evaluate their own writing*
- *Use various techniques for bypassing 'writer's block'*

You will meet the objectives listed above through a combination of the following activities in this course:

- *Complete each class assignment in advance and be prepared for discussion.*
- *Attend each class, in person if possible. When you must miss a class, notify instructor in advance, complete the assignment for that class in advance, and join by zoom if possible.*
- *Contribute your draft writings for review by the class.*
- *Review and critique your fellow students' writings and provide feedback to the student prior to the class.*

PART 3: COURSE OUTLINE/SCHEDULE

COURSE SCHEDULE

We will meet each week of the spring semester, starting the second week of classes, and not including spring break. There is no set schedule/plan by which the topics will be covered! Instead, topics will be covered at a time when most relevant for the trajectory of the course.

PART 4: GRADING POLICY

GRADING

Grades are PASS/FAIL and will be determined based on the following percentages: Attendance (25%), Contribution of writing (25%), Evaluation of peer writings (25%), and Other assignments (25%), as described in the grade point assignment scale below.

GRADE POINT ASSIGNMENT SCALE

Attendance:

Students attending at least 11 classes in person or by zoom: full credit (25%)

Students missing more than 2 classes: 5% of final score will be removed for each class missed.

Contribution of writing:

Students showing willingness to frequently contribute their writing will receive full credit (25%)

Students contributing writing only infrequently will receive 20%

Students not contributing their writing will receive 0-20%.

Evaluation of peer writings:

Consistent, thorough review of peers' writings: full credit (25%)

Inconsistent or incomplete review: 0-20%

Other assignments:

Consistent and thorough completion of other assignments: full credit (25%)

Inconsistent or incomplete assignments 0-20%

<i>Grade Point</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Pass/Fail</i>
4.0	91-100	P
3.5	86-90	P
3.0	81-85	P
2.5	76-80	P
2.0	71-75	P
1.5	66-70	P
1.0	61-65	F
0	0-60	F

PART 5: COURSE POLICIES

ATTENDANCE

An overview of MSU attendance policies is available at this web site.

<https://msu.edu/unit/ombud./classroom-policies/index.html#attendance>

MSU attendance policies directly address the following circumstances:

- Grief Absence Policy <https://reg.msu.edu/ROInfo/Notices/GriefAbsence.aspx>
- Observance of Religious Holidays <https://reg.msu.edu/ROInfo/Notices/ReligiousPolicy.aspx>
- Participating in Field Trips, Rehearsals, and Performances,
- Participating in Athletic Competitions
- Medical Excuses and Emergences, <https://msu.edu/unit/ombud./classroom-policies/index.html#related-medical>.

I recognize that circumstances may arise that require you to miss a class, sometimes on short notice for complex reasons. Therefore, students may miss up to two class sessions without it adversely affecting their attendance grade (see above). *Discussion is difficult if more than one or two people are missing during a session! Zoom option is always available for students who need it. Valid reasons to join by Zoom include living far off campus (eg KBS), down with cold, flu, covid etc, taking care of sick family member. I don't expect you to join when you are traveling professionally, eg to professional meetings etc. although you are welcome to.*

PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

During all classes, I expect students to be fully engaged and prepared to discuss writings and assignments. Students are encouraged to ask questions of the instructor and their peers.

Active participation includes, but is not limited to, the following behaviors:

1. Asking and answering questions of the instructor and peers.
2. Bringing forth new ideas, information, or perspectives to academic conversations
3. Discussing your readings and reflections with instructors and peers
4. Questioning information presented and discussed
5. Assuming responsibility for personal behavior and learning

While discussing peers' writings it is important for all participants to exercise:

- Respect for themselves, each other
- Openness and a positive attitude toward new ideas and other's ideas
- Flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity
- Good communications amongst themselves.

PART 6: COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY POLICIES

DIVERSITY EQUITY AND INCLUSIVENESS

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion are important, interdependent components of everyday life in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CANR) and are critical to our pursuit of academic excellence. Our aim is to foster a culture where every member of CANR feels valued, supported, and inspired to achieve individual and common goals with an uncommon will. This includes providing opportunity and access for all people across differences of race, age, color, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, religion, national origin, migratory status, disability / abilities, political affiliation, veteran status and socioeconomic background.

COMMITMENT TO INTEGRITY: ACADEMIC HONESTY

Article 2.3.3 of the Academic Freedom Report states that "The student shares with the faculty the responsibility for maintaining the integrity of scholarship, grades, and professional standards." In addition, our academic unit adheres to the policies on academic honesty as specified in General Student Regulations 1.0, Protection of Scholarship and Grades; the all-University Policy on Integrity of Scholarship and Grades; and Ordinance 17.00, Examinations. (See Spartan Life: Student Handbook and Resource Guide and/or the MSU Web site: www.msu.edu.)

Therefore, unless authorized by your instructor, you are expected to complete all course assignments. Students who violate MSU academic integrity rules may receive a penalty grade, including a failing grade on the assignment or in the course. Contact me if you are unsure about the appropriateness of your course work. (See also the Academic Integrity webpage.)

ACCOMMODATIONS

From the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD): Michigan State University is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services and activities. Requests for accommodations by persons with disabilities may be made by contacting the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities at 517-884-RCPD or on the web at <https://www.rcpd.msu.edu/>. Once your eligibility for an accommodation has been determined, you will be issued a Verified Individual Services Accommodation ("VISA") form. Please present this form to the instructors at the start of the term and/or two weeks prior to the accommodation date (test, project, etc.). Requests received after this date may not be honored.

MANDATORY REPORTING

"MSU is committed to fostering a culture of caring and respect that is free of relationship violence and sexual misconduct, and to ensuring that all affected individuals have access to services." Therefore, there are certain circumstances where I (instructor) am a 'mandatory reporter', meaning that there are limits to confidentiality under a defined set of serious situations. Details on mandatory reporting can be found at <https://oie.msu.edu/resources/mandatory-reporters.html>

OTHER POLICIES

All other general college and university policies applicable to this course are available at <https://www.canr.msu.edu/academics/courses/policies>. Please review these policies.