Welcome to BIOL 423! The purpose of this upper-level seminar is to explore the many facets of biogeography while improving your skills in reading primary literature and in expressing your thoughts in multiple forms, including discussions, writing assignments, and presentations.

Biogeography is in some ways the oldest form of biodiversity science, and trying to understand why organisms occur where they do lies at the heart of multiple subdisciplines of ecology and evolution, including conservation. And aside from that, it’s just plain awesome. I hope you love it as much as I do.

You will drive the course. After a couple weeks of introduction, you will choose the papers we read, the topics you write about, and the discussions we have. And since I can’t imagine teaching a course about biodiversity without going outside, we will take a weekend day trip to Castalia Prairie, by far the nicest remaining prairie in Ohio.

Course goals
This course aims to develop your:
1. awareness of current questions and approaches in biogeography, and how biogeographic questions permeate biodiversity science;
2. information literacy; i.e., your ability to discover and access background information on academic topics;
3. ability to evaluate and respond to texts critically;
4. writing and presentation skills, especially as they apply to the biological sciences;

Attendance
Because student involvement in discussions is central to a seminar course, your presence at all regularly scheduled class meetings is critical. Missing more than two regularly scheduled class periods will be grounds for a failing grade (I strongly urge you not to miss any class periods). If you have a legitimate reason for missing class, you must let me know in advance of the class period to be missed (real emergencies excepted). If you absolutely must be absent more than twice, you will need to provide adequate documentation to substantiate your absence (for example, a letter from one of your class deans).
Please arrive to class on time. Again, because student participation is essential in this course, arriving in class more than 10 minutes late will be considered an absence.

**Required readings**
For each class period except for the last week of classes, we will read a scientific article. Other background readings may also be necessary on occasion. All readings will be posted as .pdf files or links on the class Blackboard page.

**Student discussion**
All seminar courses are driven by discussion. The most effective and enjoyable seminar courses are those in which all members actively participate. Because student discussion forms the backbone of seminar courses, it is expected that all students will participate in every discussion during the semester. Your meaningful participation in discussion will depend upon reading all of the assigned materials before you arrive in class. Also, on any given topic, the quality of your discussion will carry more weight with your fellow students (and with me) than the quantity of your discussion. Please remember two other salient facts concerning any discussion: (1) listening is as important to discussion as talking; and (2) be respectful of others at all times.

Although I will nudge discussions when appropriate, I would prefer that students provide most of the guiding force for the direction of discussions.

**Assignments**
This course is officially designated as Writing-Advanced (WAdv), and hence writing is strongly emphasized. All writing assignments must be completed in a word processor, using Times New Roman, 12-point font, with double spacing.

There are four categories of assignments in BIOL 423:

1. **Reflection pages**—For each article you read (except the ones you present yourself), you will be required to turn in a 1-1.5 page (not more, not less) reflection of the article before the discussion of that article. This assignment is meant to keep you in the constant habit of writing. Organizing your thoughts and being concise are the main goals of these reflections—I expect to see your reactions to and questions about each article in a logically organized fashion. I am much less concerned about content and sentence structure, although the latter should improve during the course of the semester.

2. **Letters to the editor**—For each article that you present (a total of two during the course of the semester), you will need to prepare a 2-4 page letter to the editor outlining your review of the strengths and weaknesses of the article before you present the article. However, you will also turn in a revised letter due one week after the discussion of the paper. This will give you a chance to hear and incorporate the criticisms of other readers, in addition to your own, and it will also give you a chance to revise your writing. A grade will only be assigned to the final draft. In these letters, I expect to see attention paid to organization and sentence structure, since such letters would normally be published publicly in a journal.
3. **Course project: a proposal to study a problem in biogeography**—Each student will also pursue a semester-long project involving the submission of a brief paper, in the style of the introduction of a grant proposal to study a problem in biogeography. Each student will select a topic in consultation with me, and will then be responsible for submitting an 8-12 page proposal introduction by the end of the semester. This multifaceted project will also involve a literature search, abstract, figures, multiple drafts, peer review, and a short presentation during the last week of class. The ultimate goals of this project are to expose students to a biogeographic problem in depth, while also providing experience in synthesizing background material and convincing an audience of the importance of studying a problem.

4. **Leading discussions**—Each student will lead two classroom discussions during the semester. As part of this, students should present a 5-10 minute introductory presentation (using PowerPoint or a similar program) on the article and should have a plan for guiding the discussion.

**Literature cited format**

All sources used, whether written or otherwise, must be cited in all papers and presentations. The literature cited is not necessary for the Reflection pages, but is necessary for other written assignments. The literature cited should appear at the end of the text. In all cases the literature cited should follow the format of the journal *Journal of Biogeography*; specific instructions and examples can be found here: [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1365-2699/homepage/ForAuthors.html](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1365-2699/homepage/ForAuthors.html)

**The Honor Code**

The Honor Code will be strictly adhered to in all assignments. Briefly, that means that all work you produce will be your own, that all sources are cited, and that important ideas that have influenced your thinking are acknowledged as part of your work. Remember that for all work you submit, you must write in full and sign the following: “I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment.” In cases where assignments are handed in electronically, you should type the Honor Code statement and paste in a scanned copy of your signature.

Although you have been at Oberlin several semesters, it never hurts to revisit the **Honor Code carefully**:

[http://www.oberlin.edu/studentpolicies/honorcode/](http://www.oberlin.edu/studentpolicies/honorcode/)

**Field Trip**

We will take one weekend afternoon field trip to Castalia Prairie, which is approximately 75 minutes west of Oberlin. Once we decide on a date for the field trip (definitely in September), we will meet in the Commons area of the Science Center (in front of the Science Library) at the agreed-upon time and take an Oberlin turtle top to the site.

**Field trip attendance is required,** and is treated the same way as classroom attendance; the only legitimate excuses for missing field trips are for members of Oberlin sports teams or students in
the Conservatory who have a game or performance scheduled for the same time as a field trip. Please let me know if these situations apply to you.

The field trip will happen rain or shine, so prepare and dress accordingly. Proper footwear will increase your enjoyment of the outdoors immensely; I would advise against sandals or other open-toed shoes. Also remember to bring water, snacks, bug repellent, and sunscreen if you would like or if you need them (I will not provide these items). If you are allergic to insect stings, you are required to bring the proper medication along with you on all field trips. Please arrive on time, as we will leave promptly at the agreed-upon time.

**Grading**
The grade breakdown will be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing (50%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection pages</td>
<td>200 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letters to the editor</td>
<td>200 points (100 pts. each)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course project (written portions)</td>
<td>100 points</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Presentations (25%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leading discussions</td>
<td>200 points (100 pts. each)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final presentations</td>
<td>50 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| Course participation (25%) | 250 points |
| Total points = 1000 points |

Individual grades will only be given on final drafts of written work. However, I still expect you to complete and turn in the preliminary drafts at the assigned time. The final grade for a given assignment will be dropped one letter for every previous part of that assignment (e.g., outline, first draft, etc.) that you fail to make a good faith effort to complete and turn in on time.

**Course participation grade**
Aside from the four types of assignments outline above, students will also be graded for the level and quality of their participation in discussions and group projects. As detailed above in the Student discussion session, it is expected that students will make an effort to participate in classroom discussions, as well as in the online question-and-answer forum. I reserve the right to lower the course participation grade if students do not participate regularly in discussion.

**Seeking outside help for writing**
The staff of the Oberlin Writing Center are available during the semester to discuss your writing; for location and availability, visit [http://new.oberlin.edu/arts-and-sciences/departments/rhetoric/writing-associates-program/writing-center.dot](http://new.oberlin.edu/arts-and-sciences/departments/rhetoric/writing-associates-program/writing-center.dot)

I strongly encourage you to take advantage of this excellent resource.
**College writing requirements**
This course is listed as a Writing Advanced (WAdv) course. For College of Arts and Sciences students, it is important to realize that earning certification in writing proficiency in this course is separate from your final course grade. Thus, passing this course **does not guarantee** writing certification. However, it is likely that obtaining a high grade in this course will entitle you to writing certification. Detailed information on Oberlin writing requirements can be found at the following address:


**Students with special needs**
Any student with a special need that s/he feels needs accommodation should both inform me and the staff at Student Academic Services in Peters Hall.