

# Syllabus: Introduction to Computational Biology (BIOL 493)

January 23, 2008

## 1 Instructor contact information

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Office hour: any time but you can drop me an e-mail before you come

E-mail is the best way to contact me.

## 2 Meeting time and place

Irving I 303

2.67 hours lecture and 1 hour of computer lab per week: days/time to be announced.

3 credits

## 3 Course Description

Computation has been used in biology since 1960's. In the recent years, computational biology has been moved into the central domain of biological science. The boom in computational biology is motivated by both availability of enormous data set (bioinformatics) and complexity of biological systems (simulational studies). Programming skill is essential in computational biology, but it may not be readily accessible to most biologists without guidance. Yet, practical programming skills needed for biological problems are relatively simple. It can be learnt and applied for their own biological research without formal computer science courses. The course will expose students to the first-hand experience of programming, specifically tailored for biological applications. The goal of the course is that students without any previous programming experiences become able to apply the programming skills to solving their daily biological problems.

First, we will cover basic unix environment. Then, we will cover simulational approaches with C, using ecological and evolutionary examples. Finally, we will learn higher-level languages, such as Perl and

R, which are useful for large-scale data analysis and visualization. In each section, we will begin with biological questions, and then we will investigate how to approach the problem. The underlying theory or statistical techniques will be discussed, and programming techniques and algorithms will be explained. We will employ several programming languages (C, perl, R), which have strengths and weaknesses and complement each other.

The students should have elementary knowledge of computers (e.g., how to use keyboard, mouse, etc), but are not expected to know how to program or work within unix computer environment. During the class, we will meet in a computer lab, and access unix server, but students are encouraged to use their own computer.

## **4 Approximate schedules**

Week 1. Unix environments 1:

- Unix basic commands, text-editor

Week 2. Unix environments 2:

- setting up compiler environment

Week 3. Basics in C

- variables, flow control
- Birth-death models

Week 4. Basics in C

- conditional, logical expression
- quick R tutorial

Week 5. Basics in C

- Functions, arrays
- Logistic birth-death model

Week 6. Basics in C

- Pointers, Dynamic memory allocation
- Genetic drift, random walk, Wright-Fisher model

Week 7. Algorithms

- random number generation
- Review of Probability distribution

Week 8. Algorithms

- hash, sorting
- optimization tips

Week 9. Structure

- data structure
- Foraging model
- Evolution of Altruism and group selection

\*\* Midterm project problems are handed out in the beginning of Week 9, and due in two weeks

Week 10. Using libraries

- GNU scientific library (GSL)

Week 11. Perl basics

- text handling

- regular expression

\*\* Midterm project due before the first class of this week

Week 12. Application of perl to DNA sequence analysis

- Bioperl

- interface to genbank

Week 13. Application of perl to DNA sequence analysis

- sequence manipulation

Week 14. Visualization and statistics with R

- Elements of R - Graphics

\*\* Final project problems are handed out in the beginning of Week 14, and the results are due after 2 weeks (in the beginning of the final exam week)

Week 15. Visualization and statistics with R

- Basic statistics - Simple simulations with R

Finals.

\*\* Final project are due in the beginning of the final exam week

## 5 Course readings/materials

Textbook:

Wilson, W. 2000 Simulating Ecological and Evolutionary Systems in C. Cambridge University Press.

Additionally, there are a couple of useful books. No need to get these for the course, but they may be useful for your future references:

- Kernighan, Brian W. and Dennis M. Ritchie. 1988. The C Programming Language. 2nd ed. Prentice Hall PTR.
- Koenig, Andrew. 1989. C Traps and Pitfalls. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Dalgaard, P. 2002 Introductory Statistics with R. Springer-Verlag, New York
- Schwartz, R. L. and T. Christiansen. 2001. Learning Perl. O'Reilly and Associates.

## 6 Course goals

Students will learn basic programming skills useful for biological problems. After the completion of the course, students should understand how to abstract biological phenomenon and should feel comfortable in developing computer simulation, or make programs for biological data analyses.

## 7 Instructional methods

Students will learn through lecture, reading, and group discussion.

## 8 Course policies

You are expected to attend lectures and participate in discussion. You are expected to arrive at lecture on time.

## 9 Requirements

All students will be required to do readings and homework assignments. I encourage students to work on the homework assignments together. You are likely to “feel” the real meanings of concepts or techniques by exchanging different ways of interpreting them with your colleagues. Since practical skills are acquired only by doing them by themselves, there will be homeworks throughout the semester, and approximately 1/3 of grades comes from the homework assignments.

Additionally, part of the grade is based on two programming projects (midterm and final).

## 10 Evaluation/Grading

Student performance will be evaluated with the following factors

30% assignments

30% midterm programming project

30% final programming project

10% participation to group discussion

**Assignments:** Majority of learning will come from homework assignments. I will assign homeworks after each lecture. The majority of homeworks is application of the concept from the lecture to solve some small programming problems. Each homework may take from 10 min. to 3 hours depending on the complexity. Although the total number of homeworks is not pre-determined, I expect that there will be at least  $h = 15$  homeworks. Completion of each homework earns  $30 / h$  point (approximately 2 points per homework).

**Final and midterm programming project:** I will hand out 2 biological questions for each project, and students will choose to work on one of them. The students are allowed to work on the projects for two weeks, and at the end, students are required to submit the source code, results of analysis, the answer to the biological question, and brief interpretations of the results (1-2 pages). Students are expected to show the competency in programming and their ability to approach biological problems through the computational techniques learned in the class (or by themselves). Each project will be graded between 0-30 points, according to the correctness of the answer, scientific interpretation of the results, elegance and efficiency of the approach and source codes.

**Group discussion:** The class will be interactive, and there will be opportunities for students to discuss pros and cons of different approaches to solve biological problems of algorithms. I expect that all students will participate in the discussion. The volume of comments is irrelevant, and thoughtful, constructive comments are evaluated high. Maximum of 10 points.

**Final grades:** A:  $\geq 90$  points, B:  $\geq 80$  pts, C:  $\geq 70$  pts, D:  $\geq 60$  pts, F:  $< 60$  pts.

Students are required to obtain  $\geq 60$  points to pass the class. Students are not evaluated relative to the class mates; they are not enemies, but they are your colleagues. I will not modify this absolute scale (i.e. no curving).

## 11 Support Services

If you require more assistance than can be provided in class, lab and office hours, you may want to contact Student Support Services (<http://www.uaf.edu/sssp/>).

## 12 Disability Services

If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Office of Disabilities Services (203 WHIT, 474-7043). We will work with this office to provide reasonable and appropriate accommodation to students with disabilities.