

## CAMB 6980 Student and Mentor FAQ

[Adapted from Jan Burkhardt]

### Course Director:

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**Synopsis:** Each student will meet weekly with one or more faculty mentors (set-up in advance of enrolling in the course) and discuss research papers on a topic of mutual interest. The grade will be based on the mentor evaluation, a final paper, and a final presentation. Details are below.

### Important Dates:

**First and only organizational meeting is 10:15 AM Thursday, Sept 11, 2025. By Zoom**

Topic: CAMB698 Zoom

<https://penncmedicine.zoom.us/j/95468521818?pwd=NUduQ2JVdWc4NmJVRTVjYkNrSEY0Zz09>

Meeting ID: 954 6852 1818

Passcode: 12345

If you cannot attend this meeting, we can meet individually.

**Paper summary:** Please send me a synopsis or brief outline (2-3 sentences) of what you plan to write by **Friday Nov 14<sup>th</sup>**, so I can see that you are thinking about what to write.

**Papers due:** By **Thurs, Dec 11<sup>th</sup>**, the day of the final presentations, so I can read them before grades are due. If you have a legitimate reason for an extension (e.g., fellowship application, health issue, family issue), I am happy to work with you provided you just communicate with me. I have *never* denied an extension request. Several students per year usually need extensions. However, it's better if you can get the paper done so that (1) I can give you a grade and (2) you can be done and enjoy your break. There is a deadline for me to turn in final grades; please help me to meet that deadline.

**Final presentations:** **Thurs, Dec 11<sup>th</sup>, 10:15am, in person Stellar-Chance 204** (can be rescheduled as needed; this is just a placeholder; I will check with your availability, and it may be two dates depending on number of students). Required for students and, *if at all possible*, mentors. Date subject to change once we see what schedules and mentor availabilities are; may be broken up into two days if enrollment is large.

**Mentor grade recommendations:** After the final presentations, please email me 1 paragraph of comments/recommendation for grading ASAP. There is a deadline to turn in final grades before the winter break; please help me to meet that deadline.

## Students FAQs:

**Expectations:** The main goal of this course is to meet with your faculty mentors (in person or on whatever virtual platform you choose) and read papers to dig into a topic of interest for you both. This course has tremendous flexibility provided you are meeting that main goal. No one will be counting the number of papers you read, nor is anyone going to keep track of the number of meetings you have other than you and your advisor. However, what you learn and how intellectually engaged you were in the topic will come through in the paper you write and the presentation you give. At the end of the course, you will write a ~12 pp double-spaced (not counting references) review style-paper and give a 12-15 min general scientific talk on your topic of study. We will provide you with both a letter grade as well as written feedback and comments to help you improve both your presentations and your writing.

### 1. How many times should I be meeting with my faculty mentor?

Students and mentors typically meet once per week, but the schedule can be flexible. However, you should be meeting *on average* at least once per week.

### 2. Are small group discussions OK (e.g. including postdocs or other students in the lab)?

Yes, of course! However, this is not an excuse for you to sit there while faculty and postdocs talk. You need to participate and be a major player in these faculty/student discussions, even if there are postdocs or other students involved, too. My concern is that you are engaged in the discussions; everything else is flexible.

3. How many papers should I be reading per week? Most students read at least 20 papers during the semester (so ~ 2/week) and then digest almost as many more on their own when they go to write the paper. How you discuss the papers will vary tremendously. You may not discuss every figure in a paper. You may even spend most of your time dissecting out one single important figure from a paper. That will depend on you and your advisor and what you are interested in and what is important and relevant to your discussion.

4. Who should pick the papers? Usually mentors pick papers at the beginning to introduce students to a topic and then it slowly blends to a mix of faculty and student chosen papers.

5. What is expected from the 12-15 min talk? The audience is diverse, so make the talk friendly to a general scientific audience. Pick and choose some aspect of what you learned that was interesting and develop the presentation along those lines. You cannot go over everything you learned in 15 min, so don't try. What I want to see is some evidence that you were intellectually engaged and that you learned something. Don't be afraid to take a perspective (more on that below). Try to have fun with it. Also, try to keep it to 15 min. Please plan to be there for everyone's final talks that day. Having an audience to ask questions and interact with is what makes this part of the course

rewarding.

There is no one “right” way to format the talk. Don’t stress about that. Creativity is encouraged. However, this is not a research-in-progress talk, nor should it be a talk focused largely on your thesis lab’s research. The course is for you to read mainly *outside* papers from a broad range of labs to learn a new field, not to just read papers from your thesis lab that you need to read anyway. Please don’t bias the talk toward your own research or your lab’s research. That’s not what is expected here.

6. What is expected of the review article? The idea is to synthesize what you read. Demonstrate to us that you dug into the topic, learned, and were intellectually engaged. Take a perspective on the topic. For example, a student could frame the paper from one of the following angles:

- What is known about this topic and what is contentious? (don’t be afraid to pick a side)
- Historical perspective—How has this field changed? Or, how has some old dogma been changed in the recent past?
- How has the science influenced medicine or *vice versa*?

Take a look at review journals like *Curr Opin Cell Biol*, *Nat Cell Biol*, *Trends Cell Biol*, etc. Model figures can be very helpful but not necessary; use your judgment as to whether to include figures or not. Please include complete citations with complete references and titles (*Ann Rev Cell Biol* Endnote/Zotero/etc. style is recommended). The suggested length is ~12 double spaced pages (1 inch margins with Arial 11, Times New Roman 12, or similar size readable font) plus references. Model figures are not required but are encouraged if it helps you explain the ideas in your paper.

7. How am I going to be graded? The grade is about 40% paper, 40% mentor evaluation of effort during the readings and 20% final presentation. Intellectual engagement (which often translates into effort) is the most important criteria for grading. Your mentor will have a major say in your grade, but there needs to be evidence (i.e. paper and presentation) to back it up.

## **Mentor FAQs:**

Thanks for agreeing to mentor a student in CAMB 698 this semester. Hopefully the info below will answer many of your questions, but please feel free to contact me at any time. One of the things that make this class work is the centralized organization and grading, but that assumes that all the faculty/student pairs are following the same set of expectations. Your role is very important — in the handful of cases where a student has struggled in this class, it has usually been because the mentor has dropped the ball. If unforeseen problems arise, please let me know sooner rather than later so that we can work together to adjust as needed.

1. How often should we meet? How many papers should they read?

Students and mentors typically meet about once per week, but the schedule is flexible. Note that if you are meeting significantly less than once a week, you may be shortchanging your student. Most students read at least 20 papers during the semester (~ 2 per week) and then digest almost as many

more on their own when they go to write the paper. I hope that you can encourage them to work toward “active reading” to facilitate discussions rather than the student sitting there slavishly going through the paper figure by figure.

## 2. What exactly are the expectations for the students?

Students write a review article (~12 pp double spaced) based on their reading. I look for evidence that they really engaged the literature, and brought something of themselves to it (i.e., they thought about what they read). It should not just be a dry summary. They will also give a ~15 min oral presentation. This is just a flavor of what they read and allows them to get some presentation experience in front of the other students, and emphasis should be on clarity for the uninitiated.

## 3. What are the deadlines?

Please see the first page above. Please note these dates are subject to change once we determine availability of students for final presentations. It is highly encouraged for you to come to the final presentation *if at all possible*. We may need to move this around a bit to accommodate other finals and mentors' schedules. If you absolutely cannot come, please identify someone (another faculty, senior postdoc, etc.) who can come in your place. The discussion during the presentations helps make this experience worthwhile for the students, and for that we need bodies in the audience.

## 4. Beyond reading with the student, what do I do? How much help should I provide with the paper?

Feel free to help with content of the talk and the paper, but do not do it for them. At this point, some students struggle with organizing so much info, and your guidance will be very useful. My attitude is that it's more important for the students to learn than to be perfect, so use your own judgment on how much to help.

## 5. How does grading work?

The grade is about ~40% paper, ~40% mentor evaluation of effort during the readings and ~20% final presentation. I grade all the papers and talks, looking largely for *evidence that they dug in and engaged the literature*. I will ask you what grade you feel the student should receive, based on effort in each part of the course. I obviously will weigh your input very heavily, and will work with you if I see things differently, which is unexpected.

I hope this course is useful to you and you all have a great semester. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns and we can work together to address them.