Course FAQs

Do I need to buy the course textbook?
It depends on how well you want to do in the class (some people are happy with a C, some will not settle for less than an A), for how much time; how much biology you have had, how "good" you are at biology, etc. Some people need to have a book in front of them; some people find it difficult to translate one book's figures to another's. All of those factor in. Having a textbook to bring to lab also helps in numerous lab assignments.

If biology is not your cup of tea, and you want to maximize your grade in the class, I say BUY THE BOOK. When you have invested some $ in a class, you are also more likely to invest time and effort. If $ is a real problem (and you don’t have an i-phone….or eat out…) then consider renting the textbook, buying the previous edition of the textbook, or getting a different biology textbook—in that order.

What does the last exam in the course cover? Is it cumulative?
There are 3 lecture exams in the course, averaged together to make up 50% of the class grade. Each lecture exam covers the 6-8 chapters/topics covered in each third of the class. No exam is cumulative; I will not ask questions about atomic structure (covered in 1st third of semester) in exam 2 or 3. However, words and terms that you learn in the earlier weeks of the course may well continue to show up in later weeks. For example, you are expected to remember what an ion or a cell is from the first third of the course when such words are used in questions in lecture exam 3.

Do you grade exams on a curve?
Exam grades in the class almost always do NOT follow a bell curve in which the bulk of the class scores are “in the middle.” In a class of 60, the usual trend is for about 10-15 students to get As and Bs, maybe 5 to get Cs, 10-15 to get D, and 20+ get F. (Number of F grades on exam does decrease by exam 3, although you can guess why—people have dropped the course by then.) Therefore, what I have always done is that the top score in the class becomes 100%. This usually means that about 5 points out of an 80 point exam are “free.”

Will there be extra credit opportunities in this class?
Occasionally there are extra credit opportunities on lab and online assignments—probably never in lecture exams. Extra credit opportunities are offered to everyone in the class, never on an individual basis. Due to way I calculate grades on spreadsheets, I do not drop the lowest grades of lab or online assignments, so I think the occasional extra credit offered is a fair trade.
How should I address the instructor?
Please address me as “Professor Lee/Chen” (either last name is fine) or “Dr. Lee/Chen.” As much as I enjoy being on first name basis with students, over the years I have felt that it is good practice for students to address instructors in the “most conservative” and respectful way. When you go on to other classes, and jobs, you do not want to make the mistake of assuming that first name basis is acceptable. Plus, I am getting old enough to be a parent to many if not most students.

In the same way, I would also like to strongly encourage students to watch the way emails are addressed and written to instructors. “Hey Mrs. Lee, can u pleez let me take the quiz late….” etc. (“No.”) I shake my head as I read it, wondering how this student might address a prospective employer.

What should I avoid doing in this class unless I want to see M. Lee Chen’s “mean side” (and become an unwelcome topic of conversation at the Chen dinner table)? (This last question is not frequently asked, as in “FAQ,” but the answer is important to me.)
I know that as the instructor, I should be the most dedicated person to the course, putting in more time than my students. I also realize that students have many other things going in their lives besides Biology 130. However, every semester I find a few, or even several, students who try to take some shortcuts. (aka, cheating.) Probably the most common is copying lab assignments. I make it quite clear in writing and in speech that lab assignments should be completed and written by each student. People will work together—after all, that is part of what the lab environment fosters. But I expect answers on each lab assignment to be original and individually worded (or drawn, as the case may sometimes be), and not copied versions of another student’s work. Lab assignments with copied answers will receive “0” grade. Repeated offenses will lead to a failed grade in the lab portion of the course. I reserve the right to withhold the A grade from anyone who has participated in academic dishonesty: copying or allowing someone to copy.

Lab quizzes and exams are also subject to these rules.