

# **BINF 760: Machine Learning for Bioinformatics**

School of Systems Biology  
George Mason University  
Manassas, VA

**Instructor:** Chris Lockhart  
**Email:** clockha2@gmu.edu (preferred)  
**Phone:** TBD  
**Office:** Virtual  
**Office Hours:** By appointment

**Meeting Place:** Online via Zoom  
**Meeting Time:** 7:20pm – 10pm, Wednesdays  
**Course Website:** Blackboard

**Credits:** 3

## **Course Description**

This course will explore machine learning and data mining methods relevant to applications and problems in computational biology. Methods include decision trees, random forests, rule learning methods, support vector machines, neural networks, genetic algorithms, instance-based learning, Bayesian networks, and evaluation metrics for learning systems. Applications include cancer prediction, gene finding, protein function classification, gene regulation network inference, and other recent bioinformatics applications selected from the literature. In addition to lectures from the instructor, students will present papers from the literature and complete a machine learning project.

**Prerequisites:** Basic knowledge of molecular biology and experience in programming are expected. An understanding of the basic concepts of linear algebra and introductory differential equations is helpful.

## **Course Material**

Two recommended texts are listed below. Both are available to download without charge directly from the authors.

### **Recommended Textbooks:**

Bishop, C. M. (2006). *Pattern Recognition and Machine Learning*. Springer.  
Download at <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/people/cmbishop/prml-book/>

Shalev-Shwartz, S., & Ben-David, Shai. (2014). *Understanding Machine Learning: From Theory to Algorithms*. Cambridge University Press.  
Download at <https://www.cs.huji.ac.il/~shais/UnderstandingMachineLearning/>

## Tentative Course Topics

Lecture	Topic
1	Introduction to machine learning <b>No homework</b>
2	Linear regression <b>HW1 assigned</b>
3	Naïve Bayes <b>HW2 assigned</b>
4	Logistic regression <b>HW3 assigned</b>
5	Neural networks <b>HW4 assigned</b>
6	Principal component analysis Introduction to kernels <b>No homework</b>
7	<b>Midterm exam</b>
8	Support vector machines <b>HW5 assigned</b>
9	Decision trees <b>HW6 assigned</b>
10	Random forests <b>HW7 assigned</b>
11	Hyperparameter tuning Genetic algorithms <b>HW8 assigned</b>
12	Bayesian networks Hidden Markov models <b>HW9 assigned</b>
13	Clustering & k-means <b>HW10 assigned</b>
14	<b>Final project due</b> Case study Survey of recent ML developments <b>No homework</b>

Each lecture is a 2 ½ hour presentation with a 10-minute break.

## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Discuss various machine learning algorithms and identify their strengths and weaknesses
2. Design a machine learning pipeline, which includes dataset preparation, testing/training, performance evaluation, and hyperparameter tuning

3. Apply machine learning techniques to bioinformatics and computational biology problems
4. Appraise recent literature in bioinformatics and computational biology that apply machine learning

## Course Policies

**Grading scale (points):** A+ ( $\geq 97$ ), A (90-96.9), B+ (87-89.9), B (80-86.9), C ( $\leq 79$ ).

**Grading policy:** Students will be graded on homework (20%), a midterm exam (30%), a final project (30%), and class participation (20%).

- There will be 10 homework assignments, which will feature theoretical questions and programming exercises related to the weekly lecture. Each assignment will be equally weighted.
- The midterm exam will be administered half-way through the semester and will be a practical evaluation of material learned to date in the course.
- The final project will require students to complete their own machine learning project from topics prepared by the instructor. Students may pursue their own topics with permission. The project will be presented in a written report.
- Class participation will be met by asking questions during lecture or presenting results during class working sessions. Students are expected to contribute to discussion at least 7 times throughout the semester.

**Campus closure:** If the campus closes or class is canceled due to weather or other concern, students should check Blackboard and/or contact the instructor for updates on how to continue learning and information about any changes to events or assignments.

**Participation and make-up work:** In case of illness or quarantine, please contact the instructor to set up a plan for make-up work. Late assignments will not be accepted unless due to emergency, illness, quarantine, work-related, or other documented reasons.

**Course recordings:** All synchronous meetings in this class will be recorded to provide necessary information for students in this class. Recordings will be stored on Blackboard and will only be accessible to students taking this course during this semester.

**Other considerations:** If there are any schedule issues related to religious holidays, please inform the instructor the first week of class.

## Course Logistics

**Content distribution:** The course uses Blackboard for distributing lecture materials, submission of homework, and grading. Blackboard can be accessed by visiting <https://mymason.gmu.edu> and logging in with your MasonID and password.

**Virtual classroom and office hours:** Zoom will be used for online lectures and office hours. Zoom lecture links will be distributed by the instructor.

**Communication:** I will use Mason email to distribute class updates and communicate with students (see Email section in Student Responsibilities). If you wish, please share your name and gender pronouns with me and how best to address you in class and via email. I use he/him for myself, and you may address me as Chris or Dr. Lockhart in email and verbally. Communication over email is largely preferred, and I will respond to student emails promptly within 48 hours. It is helpful if you include “BINF 760” in the subject line.

## Course Technology Requirements

**Software and hardware:** This course uses Blackboard as a learning management system available at <https://mymason.gmu.edu>. Students are required to have regular, reliable access to a computer with an updated operating system (recommended: Windows 10 or Mac OS X 10.13 or higher) and a stable broadband Internet connection (cable modem, DSL, satellite broadband, etc., with a consistent 1.5 Mbps download speed or higher). Activities and assignments in this course will use web-conferencing software (Blackboard Collaborate and/or Zoom). In addition to the requirements above, students are required to have a device with a functional camera and microphone.

**Course-specific software:** This course will require students to use Python (the Python distribution from Anaconda <https://www.anaconda.com/> is recommended).

**Technical help:** If you have difficulty with accessing Blackboard, please contact the ITS Support Center at (703) 993-8870 or [support@gmu.edu](mailto:support@gmu.edu). If you have trouble with using the features in Blackboard, email [courses@gmu.edu](mailto:courses@gmu.edu).

## Student Responsibilities

**Email:** Students must use their Mason email account to receive important University information, including communications related to this class. Per University policy, I will not respond to messages sent from or send messages to a non-Mason email address.

**Academic integrity:** The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. Mason has an Honor Code with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. Three fundamental and rather simple principles to follow always are that: (1) all work submitted be your own; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the ground rules on a particular assignment, ask for clarification. No grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct. Plagiarism means using the exact words, opinions, or information from another person without giving the person credit. Writers give credit through accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes. Paraphrased material must also be cited, using the

appropriate format for this class. A simple listing of books or articles is not sufficient. Plagiarism is the equivalent of intellectual robbery and cannot be tolerated in the academic setting. If you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism, please see me, or consult the Academic Integrity website at <https://oai.gmu.edu/>.

**Disability accommodations:** Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. Disability Services is in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: [ods@gmu.edu](mailto:ods@gmu.edu) | Phone: (703) 993-2474.

## Student Services

**University writing center:** Take advantage of the Writing Center as you work on written assignments in this course. You can book a free 45-minute appointment to meet with a tutor on Zoom or to submit a draft for written feedback. Tutors will work with you on any phase of a writing project. They can help you develop your ideas, provide feedback on a draft, answer your questions, and show you strategies for brainstorming, organizing, drafting, revising, and editing. To schedule an appointment, go to [writingcenter.gmu.edu](http://writingcenter.gmu.edu), register with the center, and make an appointment using the online scheduler. Watch this short video (<https://youtu.be/LA-B0Szoe28>) for more detailed guidance on making an appointment and send any questions to [wcenter@gmu.edu](mailto:wcenter@gmu.edu).

**University Libraries:** University Libraries provides resources for distance learning students (See the Library website: <https://library.gmu.edu/for/online>).

**Counseling and psychological services:** The George Mason University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) staff consists of professional counseling and clinical psychologists, social workers, and counselors who offer a wide range of services (e.g., individual and group counseling, workshops and outreach programs) to enhance students' personal experience and academic performance (See the Counseling and Psychological Services website: <https://caps.gmu.edu>).

**Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA):** The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), also known as the "Buckley Amendment," is a federal law that gives protection to student educational records and provides students with certain rights (See the Registrar's Office website: [registrar.gmu.edu/ferpa/](http://registrar.gmu.edu/ferpa/)).

## Course Materials and Student Privacy

Video recordings of class meetings that are shared only with the instructors and students officially enrolled in a class do not violate FERPA or any other privacy expectation. Video

recordings that only include the instructor (no student names, images, voices, or identifiable texts) may be shared without violating FERPA (but see University Policies: Privacy, for some qualifications and recommendations). All course materials posted to Blackboard or other course site are private to this class; by federal law, any materials that identify specific students (via their name, voice, or image) must not be shared with anyone not enrolled in this class.

**Video conferencing or recordings:** Video recordings - whether made by instructors or students — of class meetings that include audio, visual, or textual information from other students are private and must not be shared outside the class. Live video conference meetings (e.g. Collaborate) that include audio, textual, or visual information from other students must be viewed privately and not shared with others in your household or recorded and shared outside the class.