

ENVS*3310 - Soil Biodiversity and Ecosystem Function

Winter 2026 Course Outline

Section: 01

Credits: 0.50

Land Acknowledgement: Guelph

The University of Guelph resides on the ancestral lands of the Attawandaron people and the treaty lands and territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. We recognize the significance of the Dish with One Spoon Covenant to this land and offer respect to our Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Métis neighbours. Today, this gathering place is home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and acknowledging them reminds us of our important connection to this land where we work and learn.

Calendar Description

Soils are the site of complex interactions between minerals, water, air, organic matter and living organisms. This course will focus on the organisms that live in the soil and their activities in soil ecosystems, soil as a habitat for organisms, the key role of microorganisms in nutrient cycles and plant-microbe relationships and will review basic soil microbial and ecological principles.

Prerequisite(s): 10.00 credits including (1 of AGR*2320, ENVS*2060, SOIL*2010)

Department(s): School of Environmental Sciences

Lecture Schedule

TuTh 10am-11:20am in MINS*037 (1/5 to 4/21)

Lab / Seminar Schedule

Day	Time	Location
Th	2:30-3:30	ALEX 030

Day	Time	Location	Sections
			01

Instructor Information

Adam Gillespie

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Textbooks

Group	Title	Author	ISBN
Required	SOIL MICROBIOLOGY, ECOLOGY & BIOCHEMISTRY (available online in library)	Paul, Eldor	9780128234150

Learning Resources

Required Resources

Soil Microbiology, Ecology and Biochemistry, 5th Edition. (2024) Paul, Eldor Alvin, editor.; Frey, Serita D. (Serita Driver), editor.; Elsevier. (available online)

Global Soil Biodiversity Atlas (<https://www.globalsoilbiodiversity.org/atlas-introduction>)

Digging into Canadian Soils (<https://openpress.usask.ca/soilscience/>)

Campus Resources

If you are concerned about any aspect of your academic program: Make an appointment with a Program Counsellor (<https://www.uoguelph.ca/uaic/programcounsellors>) in your degree program. If you are struggling to succeed academically: There are numerous academic resources offered by the Learning Commons (<https://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/using-library/spaces/learning-commons>) including, Supported Learning Groups for a variety of courses, workshops related to time management, taking multiple choice exams, and general study skills.

Cost of Textbooks and Learning Resources

Textbook / Learning Resource	Required / Recommended	Cost
Soil Microbiology, Ecology and Biochemistry, 5th Edition. (2024) Paul, Eldor Alvin, editor.; Frey, Serita D. (Serita Driver), editor.; Elsevier. (available online)	Required	\$0
Global soil biodiversity atlas	Recommended	\$0
Digging into Canadian Soils	Recommended	\$0

All resources are available online free of charge

Course Learning Outcomes

1. Understand terms associated with the soil microbial environment.
2. Identify types and interactions of organisms in the soil food web.
3. Interpret and integrate modern concepts about soil microorganisms and nutrient cycles.
4. Understand the importance of soil microbial communities to environmental sustainability and function.

Lecture Content

Module 1: Microbial Environment

Week 1-3

Topics

1. Soil Habitat
2. Water
3. Aggregation

Readings

Chapter- 2,8

Module 2: Energy

Week 4, 5

Topics

1. Redox
2. Metabolism
3. Respiration

Readings

Chapter 9

Module 3: Soil Organic Matter

Topics

1. What is it
2. Development
3. Stability
4. Nitrogen, Phosphorus

Readings

Chapter 12-16

Module 4: Ecology

Weeks 9, 10

Topics

1. Ecology
2. PGPR
3. Mycorrhizae
4. Rhizosphere

Readings

Chapter 3-6, 10, 11

Module 5: Applications

Weeks 11,12

Topics

1. Models
2. Soil Health
3. Composting

Readings

Chapter 17,18

Lab / Seminar Schedule

SEMINAR ASSIGNMENT: MICROBES IN THE NEWS

ASSIGNMENT PURPOSE: News about major breakthroughs or applications in microbiology and related fields is discussed in the popular news, including online publications, newspapers and periodicals. The purpose of this assignment is to encourage you to find an article that fits your interests and to discuss these contemporary issues in microbiologically related sciences.

Task: Students will find a pop news article that highlights a key scientific publication in environmental and/or soil microbiology. Please verify the paper with the instructor and provide the link for the class to read a week ahead of time. Students will prepare a 10–12-minute presentation for the class, which will be followed by a student-led class discussion (2-5 minutes) about the news topic, and the selected publication. This exercise will encourage independent research, develop critical thinking skills, foster class discussion, reinforce public speaking skills and promote collegiality.

CONTENT FOR THE PRESENTATION. Regardless of design, make certain that the presentation is informative. Anyone listening to your talk should learn about your event easily without needing additional resources. Questions to address in your talk may include:

What is the news?

What is the scientific publication associated with this news?

Where did it occur?

What organism(s) are involved?

What is it significant?

What experiments were involved?

Why did you select this topic?

Please prepare 2 questions to discuss with the class.

FORMAT FOR THE ORAL PRESENTATION

Regardless of design, make sure that the presentation is informative. Anyone listening should learn all about your selected topic without requiring additional resources.

Powerpoint presentation can be used. If powerpoint, bring a USB key class, or email it to me ahead of time.

Presentation should be 10-12 min long. Keep an additional 2-5 minutes will be given for discussion.

Keep visual aids simple and straightforward

Eliminate all elements that are not essential to the communication of the idea, and present only 1 idea at a time.

Highlight important cues with bright colors

Lettering: for best legibility use lowercase letters, only use capitals where normally required.

Use large font to be seen on screen

Oral presentation grading will be based on these items:

Prepared and knowledgeable.

Presentation creative and effort obvious

Presentation within the time limit

Displays enthusiasm and expression

Clear introduction and conclusion

Organized and good use of A/V aids

Appropriate gestures and eye contact

Clear voice, good speed and volume.

LISTENING TO & GRADING OTHER STUDENT PRESENTATIONS

Students will be required to participate in grading other student presentations. Just as your classmates will listen respectfully to you, you are asked to listen to them with attentiveness and courtesy. After hearing about each news story, you will have ample time to ask additional questions and discuss the assigned paper.

GRADES: Marks will be given for the quality and content of the oral presentation and for the participation in the discussion.

Term Paper

TERM PAPER ON FABRIC DECOMPOSITION EXPERIMENT

Introduction:

This experiment is based on an outreach initiative from the National Soil Conservation called 'Soil your Undies'

From the website (<https://soilcc.ca/soilyourundies/2017/soil-your-undies.php>):

Soil Your Undies is a fun soil science experiment that investigates biological activity in farm fields, backyard gardens or anywhere soil is found. To get started, all you need is a pair of new, 100% white cotton undies, a shovel, and a flag to mark the site. After a couple months buried, there shouldn't be much left of your undies if there is good biological activity in your soil.

Our Experiment:

We are going to set up an experiment to run for the first 6 weeks of class to compare the decomposition of different fabrics. We have three different kinds of cloth: cotton, linen and rayon. Look them up, and research from what materials they are made!

We will cut and weigh squares of fabric, and bury them in soil with 3 different treatments:

Control

Grass seeds

Nitrogen fertilizer

After 6 weeks (after reading week) we will disassemble the pots, examine, weigh and compare the fabric remnants.

Term Paper:

Due: TBA (end of term)

Your term paper will be in the form of a scientific report where you will report on and discuss the results you have found. You will use what you have learned in the course, and you will be expected to find research and journal articles to help explain the results.

Your term paper should be 8-10 pages long (excluding tables and figures). Use 12-point font, 2 line spacing. Include a title page, table of contents, page numbers, headings and subheadings, and reference list. You should have at least 6 references, not including web sources.

Tips for writing a technical paper

Introduction:

Introduce subject.

Indicate why the subject is important.

Preview the topics in order they will be presented. Obvious thesis statement

Make a hypothesis!

Materials and Methods

Describe the setup of the experiment Include how the data was collected

Results and Discussion

Present results in graph or table format

Discussion should relate to existing knowledge and highlight any differences.

Conclusion:

Summarize points in the text.

Ensure points appear chronologically No new material presented.

References:

Acknowledge all new facts or ideas in the text Prepare a complete reference list.

FORMAT FOR THE PAPER

The paper must be a 8-10-page document (8.5" by 11"). You should print the paper single sided. Carefully consider appearance, design, organization, and content.

Keep the text brief but informative.

Review your work to make certain no grammatical or spelling errors are present.

Read your work or have a friend read it before you submit it!

DO NOT PLAGIARIZE. You will receive a ZERO for this assignment if you plagiarize work from another source.

REFERENCES.

Use the Canadian Journal of Soil Science (this is an 'author- year' system for references, also known as the Harvard format). Please include DOI where available.

Assessment Breakdown

{NOTE: instructor can add another row by hitting "TAB" button when they are at the end of the row}

Description	Weighting (%)	Due Date
Quiz 1	15%	Jan 22
Quiz 2	15%	Feb 12
Quiz 3	15%	Mar 12
Quiz 4	15%	Apr 2
Microbes in the News	20%	Variable
Paper on Fabric Decomposition Experiment	20%	Apr 7 (Dropbox)

Last Day to Drop Course

The final day to drop Winter 2026 courses without academic penalty is the last day of classes: April 06

After this date, a mark will be recorded, whether course work is completed or not (a zero is assigned for missed tests/assignments). This mark will show on the student's transcript and will be calculated into their average.

Standard Statements for Undergraduate Courses

Academic Integrity

The University of Guelph is committed to upholding the highest standards of academic integrity and it is the responsibility of all members of the University community – faculty, staff, and students – to be aware of what constitutes academic misconduct and to do as much as possible to prevent academic offences from occurring. University of Guelph students have the responsibility of abiding by the University's policy on academic misconduct regardless of their location of study; faculty, staff and students have the responsibility of supporting an environment that discourages misconduct. Students need to remain aware that instructors have access to and the right to use electronic and other means of detection.

Please note: Whether or not a student intended to commit academic misconduct is not relevant for a finding of guilt. Hurried or careless submission of assignments does not excuse students from responsibility for verifying the academic integrity of their work before submitting it. Students who are in any doubt as to whether an action on their part could be construed as an academic offence should consult with a faculty member or faculty advisor.

The Academic Misconduct Policy (<https://calendar.uoguelph.ca/undergraduate-calendar/undergraduate-degree-regulations-procedures/academic-misconduct/>) is outlined in the Undergraduate Calendar.

Accessibility

The University promotes the full participation of students who experience disabilities in their academic programs. To that end, the provision of academic accommodation is a shared responsibility between the University and the student.

When accommodations are needed, the student is required to first register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS). Documentation to substantiate the existence of a disability is required; however, interim accommodations may be possible while that process is underway.

Accommodations are available for both permanent and temporary disabilities. It should be noted that common illnesses such as a cold or the flu do not constitute a disability. Use of the SAS Exam Centre requires students to make a booking at least 10 days in advance, and no later than the first business day in November, March or July as appropriate for the semester. Similarly, new or changed accommodations for online quizzes, tests and exams must be approved at least a week ahead of time. For students at the Guelph campus, information can be found on the SAS website. (<https://www.uoguelph.ca/sas>)

Accommodation of Religious Obligations

If you are unable to meet an in-course requirement due to religious obligations, please email the course instructor within two weeks of the start of the semester to make alternate arrangements.

See the Academic calendar for information on regulations and procedures for Academic Accommodations of Religious Obligations (<https://calendar.uoguelph.ca/undergraduate-calendar/undergraduate-degree-regulations-procedures/academic-accommodation-religious-obligations/>).

Copies of Out-of-class Assignments

Keep paper and/or other reliable back-up copies of all out-of-class assignments: you may be asked to resubmit work at any time.

Drop Date

Students will have until the last day of classes to drop courses without academic penalty. The deadline to drop two-semester courses will be the last day of classes in the second semester. This applies to all undergraduate students except for Doctor of Veterinary Medicine and Associate Diploma in Veterinary Technology (conventional and alternative delivery) students. The regulations and procedures for course registration are available in the Undergraduate Calendar - Dropping Courses (<https://calendar.uoguelph.ca/undergraduate-calendar/undergraduate-degree-regulations-procedures/dropping-courses/>).

Email Communication

As per university regulations, all students are required to check their <uoguelph.ca> e-mail account regularly: e-mail is the official route of communication between the University and its students.

Health and Wellbeing

The University of Guelph provides a wide range of health and wellbeing services at the Vaccarino Centre for Student Wellness (<https://wellness.uoguelph.ca/>). If you are concerned about your mental health and not sure where to start, connect with a Student Wellness Navigator (<https://wellness.uoguelph.ca/navigators>) who can help develop a plan to manage and support your mental health or check out our mental wellbeing resources (<https://wellness.uoguelph.ca/shine-this-year>). The Student Wellness team are here to help and welcome the opportunity to connect with you.

Illness

Medical notes will not normally be required for singular instances of academic consideration, although students may be required to provide supporting documentation for multiple missed assessments or when involving a large part of a course (e.g., final exam or major assignment).

Recording of Materials

Presentations that are made in relation to course work—including lectures—cannot be recorded or copied without the permission of the presenter, whether the instructor, a student, or guest lecturer. Material recorded with permission is restricted to use for that course unless further permission is granted.

Resources

The Academic Calendars (<http://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/?index>) are the source of information about the University of Guelph's procedures, policies and regulations which apply to undergraduate, graduate and diploma programs.

When You Cannot Meet a Course Requirement

When you find yourself unable to meet an in-course requirement because of illness or compassionate reasons please advise the course instructor (or designated person, such as a teaching assistant) in writing, with your name, id#, and e-mail contact. See the Undergraduate Calendar for information on regulations and procedures for Academic Consideration. (<https://calendar.uoguelph.ca/undergraduate-calendar/undergraduate-degree-regulations-procedures/academic-consideration-appeals-petitions/>)