

PHYS431L
Modern Physics Laboratory
Fall 2026

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Dates and Location:

Tuesday & Thursday 1PM – 4:50PM
Building: Physics – Room 208

Office Hours: By appointment
Office: Physics Building – Room 416

Course Hours

The lab course takes place Tuesdays and Thursdays in Physics 208 (with additional experiments in Physics 207 and Physics 305). Both time slots are for working in the lab (there is no lecture component to the course).

Course Objectives

The purpose of this course is to provide a laboratory experience that brings together the physics concepts taught in previous lecture courses, and approaches the experience of an experimental physics research laboratory. You will have succeeded in this course if, at the end of the semester, you are able to do the following:

- Design and carry out laboratory experiments using modern techniques
- Analyze experimental data properly
- Prepare professional-level laboratory reports and oral presentations

Working in the Lab

This class will challenge you to carry out experiments independently, working in small groups. All of the required equipment will be at your disposal. The instructor will be there to answer your questions and make sure that you are capable of performing the experiment safely and without damaging the equipment. However, it will be your responsibility to design and assemble the experimental apparatus and decide on the best data-acquisition procedure and data-analysis methods.

It is of the utmost importance that you come to the lab prepared. There will be brief write-ups provided for each experiment, giving a broad overview of the objectives of each experiment. These write-ups are just starting points: they are not complete instructions or lab manuals, and they do not provide all the background information you need to perform and understand the experiments. You will need to do your own research and reading to obtain this information.

Manuals are available in the laboratory for the equipment that you will be using. These are your primary resources for operating the equipment and should be studied before doing the experiment. Also available in the lab are textbooks and other scientific background reading for each of these experiments. You are welcome to use these materials as a starting point or to find your own sources for the relevant science. You may not borrow manuals and reading material from the lab.

You are also welcome to talk to your instructor at any time about the experiment and the scientific background. The instructor will be available during the scheduled lab time, during office hours, and at other times by appointment. The instructor is there to help and to make sure all the required equipment is available and properly functioning; it is up to you to perform the experiment and do the research required to understand it.

For the first part of the semester, you will work on a series of two-week experiments. You will rank your preferences for the experiments that you want to perform, and groups will be assigned to take your preferences into account as much as possible.

In the second part of the semester, you will work on a longer project, exploring one of the earlier experiments in greater depth or using the available equipment to explore a different scientific topic. You will choose your partners and will work as a team to independently determine the scientific goals and plan of action for the project.

You will work with your partner in the lab, performing the experiments and projects together, and helping each other to understand the science. However, laboratory reports, pre-labs, proposals, and the final presentation are your own work.

Course materials, announcements, and grades will be posted on the course Blackboard site. It is your responsibility to check the site and keep up to date with the course requirements.

Lab Safety

Your highest priority when working in the lab must be to do the work safely. It is important to get the labs done, but it is not worth risking your life or your health for it. We would also all be happy if you finish the experiment without damaging the equipment.

If you are not certain that you can do something safely, then don't do it. Ask the instructor (or TA if available) for help if you are unsure about the operation of any equipment or tools. It is much better to be too careful than to not be careful enough.

There is a separate handout on specific safety guidelines. You are required to read and understand this, and to follow all the safety rules.

If you are observed working unsafely or contributing to unsafe behavior, you will be required to stop the lab immediately and leave for the rest of the day. If you can convince the instructor that you can continue the work safely, then you will be allowed to complete the experiment during the make-up week. Repeated unsafe or reckless conduct may result in dismissal from the course.

Course Requirements

Pre-Labs

For each of the experiments, you will be required to hand in a pre-lab report. This report must include the following:

- An explanation of the purpose of the experiment
- A brief overview of the theories and principles underlying the experiment
- An outline of the planned experimental approach
- Sketches or diagrams describing the experiment
- Safety measures to be observed.

The report should be no more than four pages long (with exceptions in cases with a real need for additional space). You do not need to include a cover page for your pre-lab. Pre-lab reports must be submitted electronically to the course Blackboard site.

At the beginning of each experiment, one student may be randomly selected to briefly summarize to the class the purpose and background for the experiment that they are about to perform.

Before you perform the experiment, the instructor will discuss your pre-lab with you to make sure that there are no issues that will compromise your safety or prevent you from completing the work. You will not be allowed to carry out the lab if the instructor believes that you are not prepared to perform the experiment safely. You may be allowed to perform a make-up experiment later, if you demonstrate at that point that you are prepared.

Lab Notebook

You are required to obtain and use a standard laboratory notebook for this course. The UMBC bookstore sells lab notebooks, and they can also be obtained online or at many office supply stores. Practicing scientists often need to come back to their notebooks years later in order to recall the details of the experiments that they did; you should strive to have your notebook entries complete and clear enough to meet this standard. You must make every effort to record and describe everything that you're doing. Draw or take pictures. Even if information is stored in a computer, it should be printed out, as a picture, graph, table, etc., and taped into your notebook. All entries should begin with the date that the entry is made.

It is a good idea to plot your data as you acquire it. This way, you will immediately see where more data is required and if there are any apparent systematic errors that could be fixed. This will slow down the data acquisition somewhat, but it will be much more efficient in the long run than having to come back and start all over again when you find out that the data was problematic or incomplete.

In real-world research, lab notebooks are the official record of the experiment performed and are the primary piece of legal evidence used to settle priority disputes, or if there is an accusation of research misconduct. It is therefore forbidden to alter lab notebook entries, including tearing pages out of the book, or even erasing entries – anything that you don't want to keep should be crossed out with a single line.

I will randomly ask to read and sign your lab notebook at any time during the semester. At the end of the semester, I will review your lab notebooks. You will receive a grade of 0 to 10 based on maintaining an exceptionally detailed and well-organized laboratory notebook and good class participation throughout the semester.

Lab Reports

A complete laboratory report is required for every experiment and project completed. There is no specific template for the report (apart from the cover page). Rather, the report should be prepared in the format and style of a scientific paper.

There is a separate handout explaining the requirements and expectations for the reports.

The handout includes a rubric, which will serve as the basis for grading the reports. Each of the criteria will be evaluated as “Not addressed,” “Novice,” “Intermediate,” or “Proficient,” and the evaluations will serve as the basis of your score on the report. Not all of the criteria will be given equal weight, and the conversion of the evaluations to a score will be based on the instructor’s judgment. There is an expectation that your report-writing skills will improve over the semester, so, later in the semester, you will have to get better evaluations in order to get a high score than you do earlier in the semester.

Reports must be submitted electronically to the course Blackboard site. All submitted reports will be scanned for plagiarism using the SafeAssign application. Late reports will be accepted only in the case of a documented issue or problem.

Make-up labs will be given only in the event of a documented issue or problem. You must notify the instructor as soon as possible if you are going to miss a lab or have missed a lab because of an unexpected issue. Going out of town for a recreational trip is not a valid reason for requesting a make-up.

A make-up class day will be available before the start of projects to redo an experiment, if desired, or to make up for any experiments that were missed (for a valid reason) at the beginning of the semester.

Final Project and Proposals

Before beginning the project, you will be required to hand in a project proposal. The proposal must include the following:

- A project title and list of group members
- An explanation of the goals of the project
- An explanation of why these goals are important or interesting
- A brief overview of the scientific theories and principles underlying the project
- A step-by-step outline of the planned experimental approach, including an estimate of the time required to complete each step
- A list of the laboratory equipment that will be used, and a list of any additional materials, supplies, equipment, or other resources that will be required
- A summary of any special hazards that may be encountered in the experiment and any other safety considerations

The proposal should be no more than five pages long. You do not need to include a cover page for your proposal, but you must add student name, project title, and a project abstract at the beginning.

During the week before the project begins, you will meet with your instructor to review your proposal, make any necessary changes, and plan your work for the next three weeks. Proposals must be submitted electronically on the Blackboard course website.

During a project, it often becomes clear that changes to the plan are needed. That's fine, as long as you've discussed any major changes with the instructor.

Oral Presentations

Ungraded presentations will be required from the students during the semester, depending on the progression of the experiments.

At the end of the semester, each student on the course will make a final presentation of their project. Presentations will follow the format of a typical research talk given by a scientist at a conference. There is a separate handout with guidelines and grading rubrics for presentations. Presentation slides must be uploaded to the Blackboard by the end of the day before the presentations.

Deadlines

Deadlines will be posted on a blackboard but, in general, they follow:

- Pre-labs: by Tuesdays 11 am, the day the experiment begins.
- Reports: by Fridays 11:59 pm, in the last week of the experiment.

Grading

There are no exams in the course. Your percentage score will be calculated as follows:

- Lab notebooks: 10%
- Pre-labs (4): 20%
- Final lab reports (4): 30%
- Project proposal: 10%
- Final project report: 20%
- Final oral presentation: 10%

At the end of the semester, you must have turned in all the experiments and project reports. If you miss even a single report, you will automatically get a C or lower in the course, regardless of the scores that you got for the other reports.

If you complete all reports, your percentage score will be converted to a letter grade as follows:

- 90% and higher: A
- 80% and higher: B
- 70% and higher: C
- 50% and higher: D
- Below 50%: F

Academic Integrity

Lab reports, pre-labs, and presentations must be your work alone. It is cheating to copy somebody else's data, analysis, or text, in whole or in part; to use unattributed material from other sources, including the internet. It is a serious violation of academic integrity and scientific standards to alter your laboratory data in any way after the experiment,

including the selective omission of data. Reckless and deliberately unsafe behavior in the laboratory is also a serious violation and may result in dismissal from the course.

By enrolling in this course, each student assumes the responsibilities of an active participant in UMBC's scholarly community in which everyone's academic work and behavior are held to the highest standards of honesty. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and helping others to commit these acts are all forms of academic dishonesty, and they are wrong. Academic misconduct could result in disciplinary action that may include, but is not limited to, suspension or dismissal. To read the full Student Academic Conduct Policy, consult UMBC policies, or the Faculty Handbook (Section 14.3).

Accessibility and Disability Accommodations, Guidance and Resources

Accommodations for students with disabilities are provided for all students with a qualified disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA & ADAAA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act who request and are eligible for accommodations. The Office of Student Disability Services (SDS) is the UMBC department designated to coordinate accommodations that creates equal access for students when barriers to participation exist in university courses, programs, or activities.

If you have a documented disability and need to request academic accommodations in your courses, please refer to the SDS website at sds.umbc.edu for registration information and office procedures.

SDS email: disAbility@umbc.edu

SDS phone: [410-455-2459](tel:410-455-2459)

If you will be using SDS approved accommodations in this class, please contact the instructor to discuss implementation of the accommodations. During remote instruction requirements due to COVID, communication and flexibility will be essential for success.

Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment, and Gender Based Violence and Discrimination

[UMBC Policy](#) in addition to federal and state law (to include Title IX) prohibits discrimination and harassment on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity in University programs and activities. Any student who is impacted by sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, sexual exploitation, gender discrimination, pregnancy discrimination, gender-based harassment, or related retaliation should contact the University's Title IX Coordinator to make a report and/or access support and resources. The Title IX Coordinator can be reached at titleixcoordinator@umbc.edu or 410-455-1717.

You can access support and resources even if you do not want to take any further action. You will not be forced to file a formal complaint or police report. Please be aware that the University may take action on its own if essential to protect the safety of the community.

If you are interested in making a report, please use the [Online Reporting/Referral Form](#). Please note that, if you report anonymously, the University's ability to respond will be limited.

Notice that Faculty and Teaching Assistants are Mandated Reporters with Mandatory Reporting Obligations

All faculty members and teaching assistants are considered Mandated Reporters, per UMBC's [Policy on Sexual Misconduct, Sexual Harassment, and Gender Discrimination](#). Faculty and teaching assistants therefore required to report all known information regarding alleged conduct that may be a violation of the Policy to the Title IX Coordinator, even if a student discloses an experience that occurred before attending UMBC and/or an incident that only involves people not affiliated with UMBC. Reports are required regardless of the amount of detail provided and even in instances where support has already been offered or received.

While faculty members want to encourage you to share information related to your life experiences through discussion and written work, students should understand that faculty are required to report past and present sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, stalking, and gender discrimination that is shared with them to the Title IX Coordinator so that the University can inform students of their [rights, resources, and support](#). While you are encouraged to do so, you are not obligated to respond to outreach conducted as a result of a report to the Title IX Coordinator.

If you need to speak with someone in confidence, who does not have an obligation to report to the Title IX Coordinator, UMBC has a number of [Confidential Resources](#) available to support you:

[Retriever Integrated Health](#) (Main Campus): 410-455-2472; Monday – Friday 8:30 a.m. – 5 p.m.; For After-Hours Support, Call 988.

[Center for Counseling and Well-Being](#) (Shady Grove Campus): 301-738-6273; Monday-Thursday 10:00a.m. – 7:00 p.m. and Friday 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. (virtual) [Online Appointment Request Form](#)

Pastoral Counseling via [The Gathering Space for Spiritual Well-Being](#): 410-455-6795; i3b@umbc.edu; Monday – Friday 8:00 a.m. – 10:00 p.m.

Other Resources

[Women's Center](#) (open to students of all genders): [410-455-2714](tel:410-455-2714);

womenscenter@umbc.edu; Monday – Thursday 9:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

and Friday 10:00 a.m. – 4 p.m.

[Shady Grove Student Resources](#), [Maryland Resources](#), [National Resources](#).

Child Abuse and Neglect

Please note that Maryland law and [UMBC policy](#) require that faculty report all disclosures or suspicions of child abuse or neglect to the Department of Social Services and/or the police even if the person who experienced the abuse or neglect is now over 18.

Pregnant and Parenting Students

UMBC's [Policy on Sexual Misconduct, Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination](#) expressly prohibits all forms of discrimination and harassment on the basis of sex, including pregnancy. Resources for pregnant, parenting and breastfeeding students are available through the University's [Office of Equity and Civil Rights](#). Pregnant and parenting students are encouraged to contact the Title IX Coordinator to discuss plans and ensure ongoing access to their academic program with respect to a leave of absence – returning following leave, or any other accommodation that may be needed related to pregnancy, childbirth, adoption, breastfeeding, and/or the early months of parenting.

In addition, students who are pregnant and have an impairment related to their pregnancy that qualifies as disability under the ADA may be entitled to accommodations through the [Office of Student Disability Services](#).

Religious Observances & Accommodations

UMBC [Policy](#) provides that students should not be penalized because of observances of their religious beliefs, and that students shall be given an opportunity, whenever feasible, to make up within a reasonable time any academic assignment that is missed due to individual participation in religious observances. It is the responsibility of the student to inform the instructor of any intended absences or requested modifications for religious observances in advance, and as early as possible. For questions or guidance regarding religious observances and accommodations, please contact the Office of Equity and Civil Rights at ecr@umbc.edu.

Hate, Bias, Discrimination and Harassment

UMBC values safety, cultural and ethnic diversity, social responsibility, lifelong learning, equity, and civic engagement.

Consistent with these principles, [UMBC Policy](#) prohibits discrimination and harassment in its educational programs and activities or with respect to employment terms and conditions based on race, creed, color, religion, sex, gender, pregnancy, ancestry, age, gender identity or expression, national origin, veterans status, marital status, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, or genetic information.

Students (and faculty and staff) who experience discrimination, harassment, hate, or bias based upon a protected status or who have such matters reported to them should use the [online reporting/referral form](#) to report discrimination, hate, or bias incidents. You may report incidents that happen to you anonymously. Please note that, if you report anonymously, the University's ability to respond may be limited.

Source: <https://ecr.umbc.edu/sample-title-ix-responsible-employee-syllabus-language/>