Grading Rubric for grading the ZOL415 News & Views paper: 20 points total.

The goal of a N&V paper is to critically evaluate & explain the contributions of one specific target article (TA).

The TA must be an original research report published in a refereed science journal within the last two years. An original research report will have Methods, new Results not previously published, and Conclusions about the implications of the new Results. For this class, you should not do a literature review. Focus on your one TA, using its introduction to help you set the stage on the state of affairs (conventional wisdom or nagging problem) before the TA (the text and lectures might also be helpful for some subjects). Keep in mind that this N&V is a paper about a paper (the TA).

You need to convince readers that they want to read your N&V analysis because they will learn interesting and useful things if they do. In the real world readers can decide to skip your paper and read something more interesting instead.

(scoring rubric) Goals

(1 pts) Does the Title catch the reader’s interest as well as hint at the general content of the paper? The Title needs to be intriguing and a little bit cute but not too cute to be effective.

(1 pts) A brief, 1-3 sentence pseudo-Abstract previews the general issue or problem and attempts to draw the reader in further by hinting at what they’ll learn if they stick it out and read the rest of the N&V paper.

(4 Pts) The first paragraph serves as a true Abstract and previews the entire paper very superficially: What was the state of affairs before the TA and the general problem addressed by the TA? Specifically, what questions are being asked and hypotheses tested by the target article? What is the “bottom line” on how the target article is going to advance our understanding, solve a problem, change the way we do things and set the stage for further progress (this may or may not correspond to what the authors assert, depending on the validity of their methods, logic and conclusions – you need to critically evaluate this and make your own judgments)? By this point you have to have “set the hook” and “made the sale,” otherwise the reader will flip the page and read some other more interesting article!

(4 Pts) The next few paragraphs summarize the state of affairs before the target article. This shouldn’t be just lots of true facts. You have to use pertinent information carefully to effectively set up the problem and set the stage for what follows.

(5 Pts) The next few paragraphs give an overview of what the authors of the TA did, the logic for setting up the study, their specific hypotheses, the their methods for testing their hypotheses, what they found and how they interpreted their results. You should critically evaluate all of these, but in most cases it is best to hold criticism till later, when you take up the issue of what needs to be done next. Avoid filling space with irrelevant details; focus on things that are essential for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the TA. If you encounter arcane methods and statistics, just do your best to understand them, acknowledge your limitations and trust the authors provisionally (“The statistics were beyond me, but they are conventional and if they were done correctly then …”). Make sure that you introduce and cite the target article properly the first time, and that you list the reference properly at the end of your paper.
(5 Pts) The final few paragraphs give your evaluation of the strengths and weakness of the TA. Are the authors’ conclusions sound? – why or why not? Do you come to different conclusions? – if so what are they? Think carefully about whether there are alternative hypotheses that are equally compatible with the results. What needs to be done next? If the TA is perfect, then use it as a stepping stone to the next big question. If you think the TA had some methodological shortcomings, propose a better way to do the study next time.

Your ability to do all of this effectively will depend on your writing skills. This is not a writing class, I cannot teach writing in this class, and I will not score your writing skills separately. However, if you have good ideas in your head but can’t communicate them effectively because of weak writing skills, your scores will suffer at every turn. I will simply provide the following evaluation: My evaluation of the extent to which poor writing skills obscured potentially good ideas:

You can get help with your writing at MSU’s Writing Center: http://writing.msu.edu/

There is a nice little paper on scientific writing that you can search out at several places on the www: The Science of Scientific Writing
George D. Gopen and Judith A. Swan

The subtitle is very important: If the reader is to grasp what the writer means, the writer must understand what the reader needs.

This subtitle suggests where you should go first for help with your writing – a reader! After you have polished your working draft a bit, ask a classmate or roommate, or friend to read it and tell you if it effectively told them something interesting and maybe even important. Then polish it some more and bring it to our scheduled “walk-in clinic.” Please be aware that I will have very little time available per student and my advice will be very superficial.