

San José State University
Justice Studies Department/Forensic Science Program
FS 173-01 Death Investigations-CRN 27774 Spring 2022

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| Instructor(s): | Rosa Vega |
| Office Location: | Health Building 207, Online |
| Telephone: | N/A |
| Email: | rosa.vega@sjsu.edu |
| Office Hours: | Before and After Class, Online |
| Class Days/Time: | Thursdays 1800-2030 Hours |
| Classroom: | Health Building 207 |
| Prerequisites: | FS 11 (FS majors and minors) or JS 10 (JS majors and minors), upper division standing |

Course Description

Fundamental theories, principles, and techniques of medicolegal death investigation. Topics include Coroner/Medical Examiner laws of California, recording a death scene, collecting evidence from the scene and the body, autopsy, determining cause and manner of death, working with law enforcement and other government entities, maintaining chain of custody, and preparing written reports. Case studies will be used to illustrate methods of investigation and special problems encountered.

Course Format

Course meets once weekly for lecture, guest speakers, and practical exercises. Canvas is required for accessing some course materials and submitting assignments.

Course Learning Outcomes (CLO)

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

CLO1 Distinguish Coroner and Medical Examiner systems, and analyze the roles of each system.

CLO2 Explain legal mandates and medicolegal terminology.

CLO3 Identify and differentiate common wounds, signs of death, decomposition stages, and injury patterns.

CLO4 Utilize best practices for processing death scenes and carrying out related tasks.

CLO5 Explain the professional relationships between medicolegal death investigators, law enforcement, and other government entities.

Required Books & Recommended Texts/Readings

- Bucholtz, A. (2015). *Death Investigation: An Introduction to Forensic Pathology for the Nonscientist*. Waltham, MA: Elsevier/Anderson Publishing.
- DiMaio, D. & DiMaio, V. J. (2001). *Forensic Pathology, Second Edition*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- *Academic Forensic Pathology* (Journal)

- *Forensic Magazine*
- Links to additional readings will be posted on the Canvas class website. It is the student's responsibility to check the website frequently for new postings.

Library Liaison

Nyle Monday nyle.monday@sjsu.edu, [Forensic Science Lib Guide](#)

Course Assignments

1. Exams (40%): Two midterms, one final exam. Format may include multiple choice, fill-in, short answer, short essay, and diagrams. (all CLO)
2. Practical Exercises (25%): Hands on exercises in recognizing signs of death, decomposition stages, wound patterns, identification methods, report writing and evidence collection. (CLO 3 & 4)
3. Reading Notes (20%): Students will submit details reading notes for all required readings.
4. Group Presentation (5%): Topic to be determined. Details and guidelines will be provided. (all CLO)
5. Final Mock Death Scene Exercise and/or Narrative (10%) (CLO 4)

Success in this course is based on the expectation that students will spend, for each unit of credit, a minimum of 45 hours over the length of the course (normally three hours per unit per week) for instruction, preparation/studying, or course related activities, including but not limited to internships, labs, and clinical practica. Other course structures will have equivalent workload expectations as described in the syllabus.

Final Examination or Evaluation

Students will participate in a mock death scene final project and/or narrative assignment, and take a final exam.

Grading Information

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| A plus | 97-100 |
| A | 94-96.9 |
| A minus | 90-93.9 |
| B plus | 87-89.9 |
| B | 84-86.9 |
| B minus | 80-83.9 |
| C plus | 77-79.9 |
| C | 74-76.9 |
| C minus | 70-73.9 |
| D plus | 67-69.9 |
| D | 64-66.9 |
| D minus | 60-63.9 |
| F | <60 |

All assignments are graded based on adherence to accuracy, directions, thoroughness, thoughtfulness, clarity, and logic.

Extra Credit

Extra credit opportunities may be available throughout the semester and will be used to augment the final grade up to 4%.

- Interview a professional in the death investigation field and write a 3-5 page, typed, double-spaced synopsis of their experiences and perspective. Include reflection on your interests in the field, and if/how they have changed.

Professor will provide list of professionals-Criminalists, Autopsy Technician, Homicide Detective, CSI Officer, Medical Examiner and Death Investigator

Classroom Protocol

- No cell phones in class: Turn them off and put them away.
- No photography is permitted of the cases presented.
- Plagiarized work will result in a 0 on the assignment, and will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct.
- Late work may be submitted but will be marked down 10% for each week that it is late.
- Make-ups for exams will generally not be possible unless extraordinary, documented circumstances exist.
- Handle personal business before you begin an exam. A student who leaves the classroom *for any reason* during an exam will be presumed finished with the exam.

Zoom Classroom Etiquette

- **Mute Your Microphone:** To help keep background noise to a minimum, make sure you mute your microphone when you are not speaking.
 - **Be Mindful of Background Noise and Distractions:** Find a quiet place to “attend” class, to the greatest extent possible.
 - Avoid video setups where people may be walking behind you, people talking/making noise, etc.
 - Avoid activities that could create additional noise, such as shuffling papers, listening to music in the background, etc.
 - **Position Your Camera Properly:** Be sure your webcam is in a stable position and focused at eye level.
 - **Limit Your Distractions/Avoid Multitasking:** You can make it easier to focus on the meeting by turning off notifications, closing or minimizing running apps, and putting your smartphone away (unless you are using it to access Zoom).
 - **Use Appropriate Virtual Backgrounds:** If using a virtual background, it should be appropriate and professional and should NOT suggest or include content that is objectively offensive or demeaning.
- Technology Requirements**
- Students are required to have an electronic device (laptop, desktop or tablet) with a camera and built-in microphone. SJSU has a free equipment loan program available for students.
 - Students are responsible for ensuring that they have access to reliable Wi-Fi during class and tests. If students are unable to have reliable Wi-Fi, they must inform the instructor, as soon as possible or at the latest one week before the test date to determine an alternative. See Learn Anywhere website for current Wi-Fi options on campus.

University Policies

Per [University Policy S16-9](http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf) (<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf>), relevant university policy concerning all courses, such as student responsibilities, academic integrity, accommodations, dropping and adding, consent for recording of class, etc. and available student services (e.g. learning assistance, counseling, and other resources) are listed on [Syllabus Information web page](http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo) (<http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo>), which is hosted by the Office of Undergraduate Education. Make sure to visit this page to review and be aware of these university policies and resources.

Instructor

Rosa Vega earned her MS degree in Criminal Justice Administration with a concentration in Forensic Science Administration from Loyola University New Orleans, and her BS in Administration of Justice with a minor in Physical Anthropology from San Jose State University. Rosa is the Chief Medical Examiner-Coroner Investigator for Santa Clara County where she has worked for almost 17 years. She currently supervises 11 investigators. Her SJSU office is Room 207 Health Building.

FS 173-01 Death Investigations, Spring 2022 Course Schedule

Schedule is subject to change

| Week | Date | In-Class Topics | Due | Readings, Assignments |
|------|------|--|--|--|
| 1 | 1/27 | Introduction and Class Overview TV vs Real Life-The Death Investigator | | Body of Proof Assignment DiMaio Ch 1 Bucholtz Ch 1 |
| 2 | 2/3 | Coroner vs. Medical Examiner-Origins | Body of Proof Report Reading Notes | Canvas Reading |
| 3 | 2/10 | Reportable Deaths-CA 27491Legal Mandates Class Exercise | | Bucholtz Ch 2 Bucholtz Ch 3 |
| 4 | 2/17 | Death Scene Investigations Cause, Mechanism & Manner of Death Class Exercise | Reading Notes | Canvas Reading Study for Midterm |
| 5 | 2/24 | Midterm 1 | Reading Notes | DiMaio Ch 2, 4, 7 Bucholtz Ch 4, 7 (pg. 121-131) |
| 6 | 3/3 | Signs of Death & Injury Patterns- Class Exercise | Reading Notes | Prepare for Class Presentation |
| 7 | 3/10 | Project: ME vs. Coroner Presentations | | Canvas Reading Bucholtz Ch 5 |
| 8 | 3/17 | The Autopsy-Guest Speaker | Reading Notes | Canvas Reading Bucholtz Ch 6 |
| 9 | 3/24 | Positive Identification Class Exercise | Reading Notes | |
| 10 | 3/31 | NO CLASS- Spring Break | | Study for Midterm |
| 11 | 4/7 | Midterm 2 | | DiMaio Ch 9 Bucholtz Ch 7 (pg. 132-144) |
| 12 | 4/14 | Traffic Fatalities Introduction to Report Writing Class Discussion/Exercise | Reading Notes | DiMaio Ch 23 Canvas Reading |
| 13 | 4/21 | Drug Fatalities Introduction to Report Writing- Continued | Reading Notes | Canvas Reading Study for Midterm |
| 14 | 4/28 | CSI Guest Speaker | | |
| 15 | 5/5 | ME-Coroner Office Tour | | |
| 16 | 5/12 | No Class- Study for Final | | Study for Final |
| 17 | 5/19 | Narrative Due & Final Exam | | |