C8600 Evolution of Communication

Convenor: Karen McComb

Essay ESS (80%) - 2000 words

Essays must not exceed 2,000 words in length and will count for 80% of the marks for the module. The title of your essay should be chosen from the list below (you may be able to choose your own title if you provide us with a brief 100 word plan in advance for approval, but in this case we would need to be convinced that your title will give you sufficient scope to demonstrate your knowledge of the module). The material and references that we have considered in lectures should give you a good background for getting started on the essay – but you will need to read more widely than this in order to perform at the highest level. Your ability to conduct your own literature search – e.g. using Web of Science (available via the Library website) and Google Scholar search engines – is an important part of what is being assessed. Your essay should demonstrate your ability to synthesise a good breadth of relevant literature into a coherent and well-reasoned account, and to think critically about the material; it should include a reference list that details (in scientific format) the references cited in the text of the essay. Most importantly, your essay should be enjoyable to write and exciting to read. We look forward to reading it!

Essay Titles 2021

Evaluate the evolutionary origins of singing behaviour in birds and mammals.

Evaluate the functional significance of vocal dialects in animals, using studies from both birds and mammals to illustrate your answer.

Is animal communication “honest”? Discuss in an evolutionary context, supporting your argument with a range of empirical studies on vocal communication.

Evaluate the relationship between social living and communicative complexity in the evolution of animal communication, using a range of examples to illustrate your answer.

Evaluate the contribution that studies of alarm calling have made to our understanding of the nature of animal vocal communication.

Evaluate the similarities and differences between human speech and other animal vocal communication systems.
Recent findings on the gestural communication of great apes have reinvigorated a centuries-old hypothesis that the origins of language may have been in gestural communication, rather than vocal communication. Critically evaluate the plausibility of the gestural origins theory of language origins.

Is language an evolutionary adaptation or a cultural invention? Why?

Gregory Bateson (1972, p. 411) wrote: “There is a general popular belief that in the evolution of [humans], language replaced the cruder [communicative] systems of the other animals. I believe this to be totally wrong.” Do you agree or disagree with Bateson, and why?

To what extent have ape language studies contributed to our understanding of the evolution of language?

FOR DETAILS OF ESSAY DEADLINES PLEASE REFER TO SUSSEX DIRECT.

Note: There are strict guidelines on copying material and all work is routinely checked for plagiarism. Up to date information on the University regulations concerning plagiarism and collusion that we will abide by can be found on the module website under the Assessment and Misconduct Information tab.

Project PRJ (20%)

This year you are required to submit a PowerPoint file that will count for 20% of the marks for the module. This file should consist of a short PowerPoint presentation, that would take circa 5-minute to deliver in person, containing between 5 and 10 slides. You should also add brief associated notes on what you would have said if you were delivering the presentation in person. In addition to the above, please add an extra slide giving one interesting question that you might have expected your audience to ask – and provide brief notes on how you would have answered this question. Associated notes for the complete presentation should not exceed 800 words in total.
In the presentation we would like you to describe an experiment (or series of experiments) from the literature on the evolution of communication that you consider to be particularly elegant, explaining what design features have prompted your choice. You are also asked to evaluate the significance of this experiment in advancing our understanding of the evolution of communication generally.

Marking guidelines for presentations are available at: http://www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/internal/students/examinationsandassessment

Good luck with preparing your presentation and we look forward to hearing it!