Principles of Forensic Anthropology

Instructor: Brian Pierson, Ph.D.

Course Description: This course is an introduction to forensic anthropology, a subdiscipline of physical anthropology concerned with the identification of human remains in medicolegal contexts. Forensic anthropologists assist medical examiners, coroners, and law enforcement agencies in the recovery, identification, and interpretation of decomposed or fragmented human remains. This course reviews the historic development of the field and the techniques forensic anthropologists use to determine age, sex and physical characteristics of an individual from their skeletonized remains, as well as methods for positive identification, estimating time since death, and determining cause and manner of death. Case studies will be used to illustrate the application of specific field and laboratory techniques. The course is organized into fourteen units of study, each of which corresponds to approximately one week of lectures.

Course Goal: To give you a broad understanding of forensic anthropology and its role in the medicolegal investigation of death.

Course Objectives: To familiarize you with the methods forensic anthropologists use to recover, identify, and analyze human skeletal remains, with a specific focus on remains of medicolegal significance. By learning basic fundamentals of human osteology and their application in specific case studies, you will develop an understanding of the potential, as well as the limits, of forensic analysis of human remains.

Measureable Outcomes: By the end of the semester, you will have developed (as determined by written examinations) a broad knowledge of the field of forensic anthropology, and an appreciation of its importance to the medicolegal investigation of death. You will know the principal steps in conducting analysis of skeletal remains, and be aware of recent developments in the field.

UCLA Extension Contact for this Course: Melony Varnado, Program Representative
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Student Records: Students can access and update student records by visiting: www.uclaextension.edu and clicking on My.Extension on the left navigation bar. My.Extension lets you view your grades, request an official transcript, change credit status on a current course, obtain enrollment verification, update your personal information, and much more.

Student Conduct: By enrolling in this course, all students are expected to have reviewed the Student Conduct and Sexual Harassment information provided in the current Quarterly catalog (print or online) under “General Information.”
Accommodations: If you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the UCLA Extension Disabled Student Services at: (310) 825-7851 or via e-mail: access@uclaextension.edu.

Required Text
Byers, Steven
2011 Introduction to Forensic Anthropology, 4/e

*Additional Required Readings will be placed on Blackboard as .pdf files

Examinations and Grading: your grade in the course will be determined by your scores on two in-class written tests and a final exam, computed as follows: In-class tests: 25% (x 2), Final Exam: 50%. Please note that make-up tests will only be considered for students with written documentation of medical or family emergencies.

Units and Reading Assignments (Subject to change)

Readings marked with an asterisk (*) will be online as .pdf files

I. What is Forensic Anthropology and who practices it?  
History and Growth of the Field

Text: Forward and Chapter 1, pp. 1-10

II. Basic Data Collection Protocol in Forensic Anthropology

Text: Chapter 1, pp. 10-27  
Skim Chapter 2 (Basics of Human Osteology and Odontology)

III. Are the Remains of Forensic Significance?  
Human vs. Nonhuman; Recent vs. Historic or Prehistoric

Text: Chapter 3

IV. Field Recording and Recovery of Remains

Text: Chapter 4
V.  Mass Disasters and Human Rights Violations


Exam 1

VI.  Estimating Time Since Death

Text: Chapter 5

VII.  Laboratory Analysis of Remains: Preparation, Sorting and Basic Description

Text: Chapter 6
Determining Ancestry: A First Step
Text: Chapter 7

VIII.  Sex, Age at Death, and Living Stature

Text: Chapters 8, 9, and 10

IX.  Trauma Analysis in Forensic Anthropology
Cause and Manner of Death; Distinguishing Antemortem, Perimortem, and Postmortem Damage

Text: Chapter 11

X.  Gunshot, Blunt and Sharp Force Trauma; Strangulation

Text: Chapters 12-14

Exam 2

XI.  Postmortem Damage to Human Remains: Dismemberment, Fragmentation and Burning; Scavengers and other Taphonomic Processes

Text: Chapter 16

XII. Personal Identification in the Medicolegal Context

Text: Chapter 15 and 17

XIII. Positive Identification using Antemortem/Postmortem Comparisons

Text: Chapter 18

XIV. Professional Ethics and Forensic Anthropology in Academia: Past Lessons and Future Prospects

Text: Chapter 19


Final Exam