

MATH 218D-1: SPRING 2026 SYLLABUS

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Office Hours: See the course website
Course website: <https://services.math.duke.edu/~jdr/2526s-218/>

Description

This is an introductory linear algebra course that will focus on concepts, methods, and applications. Gaussian elimination is presented as the fundamental process for solving systems of linear equations. Deeper understanding is developed by examination of matrix factorizations, orthogonality, and associated vector subspaces. Least squares problems, eigenvalue problems, the singular value decomposition and principal component analysis will also be studied as fundamental tools for solving data-driven applications. Computational considerations will be a major source of motivation for many of the techniques covered in this course.

This course will be more applied and computational than *Math 221* (for students heading to a math major), which goes into much more depth on theory and develops skills in writing rigorous mathematical proofs. *Math 218D-1* is also different from *Math 218D-2*—we will spend less time covering differential equations in favor of topics more relevant to data science and statistics.

Textbook

The official text for the course is *Introduction to Linear Algebra* (6th Ed) by Gilbert Strang, Wellesley–Cambridge Press/SIAM (2016). However, we will follow Strang only loosely. Another good reference is the online text *Interactive Linear Algebra*, by Dan Margalit and Joe Rabinoff; it can be found here: <https://services.math.duke.edu/~jdr/ila/>.

Organization

This course consists primarily of **two 75-minute lectures** and **one 75-minute problem session** each week.

Lectures focus on new theory, concepts, and techniques. They are held in large groups of around 50 students. Your **attendance** in the lectures is mandatory, in the sense that I'll expect you to know what happened in each lecture.

Problem sessions are devoted to working through homework problems with the help of a teaching assistant and your classmates. Problem sessions are meant to be entirely interactive, with students working in small groups. For these reasons, **attendance** in your problem session is required.

Homework will be assigned weekly and posted on the web page above. The homework is where you will directly engage with the concepts, and is absolutely essential for learning the material. As such, expect to spend **8–10 hours** each week on the homework. You can think of the homework as *practice for the exams*: you can take shortcuts to decrease the amount of time it takes, but you will get out of the homework what you put into it. You are strongly encouraged to *collaborate with your classmates* on homework assignments! I do not expect you to be able to finish the homework on time if you do it by yourself.

All homework will be submitted and graded on **Gradescope**. PDF submissions written directly on a tablet are ideal; otherwise, you will need to take photos of your homework or scan it in. Raw photos are

very hard to read and are **not accepted**: you must use a scanner or an app. I recommend *Scannable* or *TurboScan* on iOS or *Genius Scan* on Android. You will also need to **tag your submissions** on Gradescope to indicate which problems are found on which page—otherwise the graders waste an enormous amount of time searching for your solutions.

Brief **quizzes** will be given every week during the problem session. These are group quizzes, meaning that you will solve the problems in a group with 2–3 other classmates. They will consist of one or two problems designed to check basic understanding of what happened in the previous two lectures. They are meant to oblige you to review your notes before the problem session.

There will be two **midterm exams**. Each exam will focus on the material covered after the previous exam, but due to the cumulative nature of the material, you will be responsible for knowing all of the material covered up to that point. Midterm exams will take place during the problem session time slots. Only **simple calculators**¹ are allowed on exams (although they're usually not necessary); if you don't have one, you can buy one for \$4 on [Amazon](#). You may also bring a 3 × 5" index card covered with whatever information you like. No other materials are allowed on the midterm exams.

The **final exam** will cover all course materials, except those specifically excluded in class. A **two-sided 8.5×11" note sheet** is allowed on the final exam, as well as a **simple calculator**; all other aids are prohibited.

Most **course materials** will appear on the course website. I will use **Canvas** for the gradebook, announcements, Ed Discussion, and two prerecorded Zoom lectures.

Grades for class work will be weighted as follows:

| | |
|-----|------------|
| 25% | Homework |
| 5% | Quizzes |
| 20% | Midterm 1 |
| 20% | Midterm 2 |
| 30% | Final exam |

Cutoffs for letter grades will be determined at the end of the semester, subject to the following guarantee: a final score of 90% or above will merit at least an A-; 80% or above is at least a B-, etc.

Course Schedule

A calendar outlining the materials covered each day, the relevant sections of Strang, the midterm and final exam dates, and more can be found on the course webpage.

Policies

Late homework: It is very important *not to fall behind* in the course material. However, I recognize that for some reason or another you're occasionally not able to devote the necessary time to the homework. For that purpose:

- Every student starts the semester with 9 Late Homework Tokens. You can see them on the Canvas gradebook.
- Each token is worth a 24-hour extension on one homework assignment.
- You can't use more than 3 tokens on a single homework assignment: all homework must be turned in within 72 hours of its due date so the graders can grade it.

¹Namely, calculators that have no linear algebra functionality.

- If you're sick, you can send me an incapacitation form for more tokens. And you can always email me if you have exceptional circumstances.

You don't have to take any action to use a homework token—they're automatically updated on Mondays when I download the grades from Gradescope.

If you **miss a midterm examination** (and have a University-approved excuse), you must take a **make-up midterm** during the following week.

Your **final exam score** will count for **half of your lowest midterm score**. More precisely, your final exam score will replace the lowest 10% out of the 40% of your final grade that is determined by the midterms, assuming you performed better on the final than on your worst midterm. For example, if you scored 50% and 80% on the midterms and 90% on the final, then your first midterm score would effectively be computed as $70\% = \frac{1}{2}(50\% + 90\%)$.

Collaboration on homework assignments is encouraged: please work in groups! However, all students must write up their own work, in their own words. Collaboration of any kind on exams is strictly prohibited; suspected instances will result in a referral to the Office of Student Conduct. Please refer to the [Duke Community Standard](#).

Use of AI on homework assignments is **not allowed**. The main reason for this policy is that asking ChatGPT how to do your homework problems is a terrible way to learn the material: seeing a reasonable explanation is *not* the same thing as engaging with the material. I mostly will not attempt to enforce this rule, since I do not expect offenders to perform well on the exams anyway. A much better way to find answers to your questions is by *asking a human*, in office hours (see below).

Students with special accommodations on examinations will take their tests in the **testing center**. Please note that the testing center requires you to make a reservation at least one week in advance—since all exam dates are on the website, I encourage you to **book your spot now**. When making a reservation, please use your **lecture section** and not your discussion section as the class number (entering the discussion section will generate an email to your TA, who cannot approve a booking).

How to Get Help

Your first stop for help should be **office hours!** Joe, Ruilin, and your TAs will be holding plenty, and you should not hesitate to show up with questions and chat with the other students there. If you can't make the scheduled office hours, send us an email and we'll set up a meeting.

If you have questions, post them on **Ed Discussion**, available as a tool on Canvas. It's likely that your classmates will have the same question, or maybe one will know the answer, so it's much better to post the question than to email one of us; plus, you'll likely get a quicker response on Ed Discussion. You can post anonymously if you wish, but I expect that **all of you will get stuck at some point**, so there's no shame in using your name.

The Math Department operates several **Help Rooms** to provide assistance to students in lower-level courses. Students are invited to drop by the Help Rooms whenever they are open. No appointment is necessary. Link:

<https://math.duke.edu/undergraduate/help-tutoring/help-rooms>

The **Academic Resource Center** (ARC) offers free services to all students during their undergraduate careers at Duke. Services include Learning Consultations, Peer Tutoring, Learning Communities, ADHD/LD Coaching, Outreach Workshops, GRE/MCAT Prep, Study Connect, and more. Because learning is a process unique to every individual, we work with each student to discover and develop their

own academic strategy for success at Duke. Contact the ARC to schedule an appointment. Undergraduates in any year, studying any discipline can benefit! <https://arc.duke.edu> • theARC@duke.edu • 919-684-5917 • 211 Academic Advising Center Building, East Campus – behind Marketplace.