

# Course Descriptions & Bios, Florence 2026

**Laura Sparks**

**Santa Rosa Junior College**

*Hello! I have always been passionate about sharing my love for astronomy with students, and I can't wait to get started with you in Florence. I have taught astronomy at Santa Rosa Junior College for fifteen years. I completed my bachelor's degree in Physics at Arizona State University and earned a master's in Physics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. My graduate research focused on high energy gamma ray astrophysics with the VERITAS gamma ray telescopes. I have also volunteered for the astronomy program at Bryce Canyon National Park, helping visitors from around the world understand and appreciate the wonders of the night sky.*

*Astronomy showcases the very best of humanity. Over the centuries, we have observed, worked together, gotten into fiery arguments, and continued to push the boundaries of human knowledge simply because we never grow out of being curious. Travel allows us to live the human stories behind all the great astronomical discoveries. I have personally visited many incredible astronomy sites from the Very Large Array in New Mexico to the ALMA telescopes high in the Atacama Desert in Chile. But of all the places I've visited, I'm most excited about Florence. Together, we will walk in the footsteps of Galileo as we explore the discoveries that changed the course of human history.*

## **ASTR 3: Stellar Astronomy**

*3 units, CSU/UC transferable (Physical Science GE). Grade or P/NP.*

This class covers the big ideas in astronomy: the birth of stars, supernovae, galaxies, the Big Bang, black holes, warped space-time, the cosmological horizon, dark matter, and how human beings measure and understand it all! The concepts in this class will challenge you to reimagine your place in the universe. If you enjoy fascinating thought experiments and brain teasers that have you pondering the mysteries of the cosmos, this is the class for you.

## **ASTR 4: Astronomy of the Solar System**

*3 units, CSU/UC transferable (Physical Science GE). Grade or P/NP*

The word "planet" means "wanderer" in ancient Greek. For thousands of years, people have observed the planets wandering through the stars, and wondered what it meant. This class will explore the history of astronomy, and the transformative period in the 1600's when Galileo observed the planets and proved that the Earth was not the center of the universe. If you are a stargazer and a dreamer who wants to understand more about what you see in the sky night after night, you will love this class. We will learn about the lunar phases, eclipses, the motion of the planets in the night sky, and how humans have used these to understand the nature of the universe. We will also explore the geology of the rocky planets of the inner solar system, the gas giants and icy moons of the outer solar system, and asteroids

and comets. The concepts are a little more “down to Earth” and relevant to everyday life compared to ASTR 3.

## **ASTRON 42: Life in the Universe**

*3 units, CSU/UC transferable (Physical Science GE). Grade or P/NP*

What is the origin of life on Earth? Is life possible on other worlds? How have we explored the solar system, and how can we find life on planets around other stars? This class will focus primarily on astronomy, but will also include concepts from biology, geology, chemistry, and physics. We will learn about the properties of Earth that make it uniquely suitable for life, and critically analyze other worlds that might be habitable both within the Solar System and beyond, throughout the Milky Way Galaxy. We will learn about space missions that are planned for the near future to hunt for life. This class touches on many of the concepts from ASTR 3 and ASTR 4, but always through a lens of the search for life beyond Earth.

**Naomi Bahm**

**Los Rios Community College District**

*Welcome Florence Study Abroad students! My name is Naomi Bahm, and I have taught in the Psychology Department at Cosumnes River College (one of four colleges in the Los Rios Community College District in the Sacramento Area) since January 2013. My background is interdisciplinary- my BA was a double major in Biology and Psychology (from the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, MN). I then served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the fisheries program in Cameroon, West Africa (teaching local farmers to raise Tilapia in derivation ponds) before heading to graduate school. I completed an MA and a PhD in Integrative Biology from UC Berkeley, where my dissertation research was conducted in the Psychology department. I used neuroscience methodology (EEG- electroencephalogram) combined with an assessment from developmental psychology (the Adult Attachment Interview). I am now also a certified trainer for the Adult Attachment Interview, and have co-hosted several two-week long training institutes in Canada, Australia, and the US, both in person and online.*

*I typically teach Biological Psychology (including labs), Research Methods, Developmental Psychology, Introductory Psychology, and Human Sexuality. In the past I have taught in the Biology departments of UC Berkeley and CA State University Sacramento, including Human Reproductive Biology and labs in Anatomy, Anatomy and Physiology, and Neuroanatomy (the brain and nervous system). I'm very excited to be teaching some of these classes in Italy, and I will strive to incorporate information, field trips, and local perspectives into all my classes to give students a more in-depth experience of Florence!*

## **BIOL 300: The Foundations of Biology**

*3 units, CSU/UC transferable.*

Did you know that Leonardo da Vinci trained in Florence? Some of his sketches and works are very relevant to biology, including the famous Vitruvian man (a proportionally accurate drawing), a fetus in the womb, and studies of human anatomy and physiology. This class for non-science majors explores

basic biological principles and how they relate to humans, such as human body systems, evolution, reproduction, and development. Topics also include an introduction to the philosophy of science; basic cell chemistry, structure, and physiology; basic genetics and some biotechnology principles. Additionally, ecology and human impacts on the environment will be discussed. We will visit at least one of Florence's Science Museums (such as Museo Galileo - Institute and Museum of the History of Science or Museo di Storia Naturale - La Specola) and you will have the opportunity to compare some of the local Italian flora (plants) and fauna (animals) with those you are more familiar with from California.

## **PSYC 356: Human Sexuality**

*3 units, CSU/UC transferable.*

This course offers a balanced scientific understanding of the biopsychosocial perspective on human sexual behavior from birth through adulthood. To understand the role of culture in terms of its impact on sexuality, we will discuss commonalities and differences between Italy and the United States from historical, cultural, sociological, psychological, and legal perspectives. Relatedly, we may visit the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of Florence, viewing ethnographic collections from many worldwide cultures. Many topics relevant to sexuality and sexual behavior will be addressed, including concepts of beauty, social media influences, culturally based gender norms, gender identity, sexual orientation, communication within relationships, reproductive health issues, intimate partner violence, pregnancy, sexual difficulties and solutions, birth control, and others. This course provides students with a solid base of factual, research based, up-to-date, nonjudgmental information about sex, sexuality, and relationships. You will learn about (and possibly visit) the former Asylum of San Silvi, the Manicomio di Firenze, ospedale psichiatrico, where people were housed for "mental disorders", which at the time included any sexual behavior considered to be deviant.

## **PSYC 372: Child Development OR ECE 312: Child Development (same class – student chooses designation)**

*3 units, CSU/UC transferable.*

Although many aspects of child development are universal, culture definitely leaves an important imprint. During this course, we will observe children, evaluate individual differences, and analyze characteristics of development using developmental theories and research. Topics covered include physical, cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional development for children from conception through adolescence with attention to both typical and atypical development in each domain. The influences of culture, family, and the interaction of biological processes and environmental factors will be studied, with a focus on comparing cultural aspects of children's experiences in Italy versus the United States. You will also learn about Florence's city orphanage (founded in 1445), the Ospedale/Museo degli Innocenti, and hopefully visit. This course is designed for those interested in having a foundation for early child care and education, teaching, and parenting.

## **Lisa Palmer**

### **San Mateo County Community College District**

*In high school, Lisa Palmer studied abroad with our consortium partner, AIFS, visiting, in one month, five countries, twenty-five cathedrals, and fifteen museums. She returned to her hometown of Seattle with her mind blown open, which likely helped her get into Stanford, where she majored in English. She returned to live and work in Europe during and after college, and her wanderlust has also taken her to Central and South America; Fiji, Australia, and Japan; and, last summer, Scotland, where, with her daughters, she hiked the 100-mile West Highland Way before seeing Taylor Swift play Edinburgh. Lisa's passion for learning about other cultures infuses her academic interests, as well. After Stanford, she earned an M.A. (Columbia University) in English and Comparative Literature, and a PhD (UCLA) in Comparative Literature, with a focus on Latin American, Italian, and American literatures.*

*Lisa has taught composition and literature for several decades, first as a graduate student at UCLA and then in the San Mateo Community College District. She was thrilled to teach with our program in Florence in 2011 and cannot wait to return to Florence in Spring 2026. As a former study abroad student, she knows that students would much rather explore the city than sit in a classroom, so she strives to make the city the classroom. She and her students will visit sites that are featured in the texts they read and go to places associated with the writers and film-makers they study. They will also blog, to describe, process, and share the life-changing experience that is studying abroad. Finally, Lisa's courses are ZTC (Zero Textbook Cost), so students don't have to pay for, or transport, textbooks.*

### **ENGL 110: Composition, Literature, and Critical Thinking**

*3 units, CSU/UC transferable; prerequisite: First-Year Composition*

This course, required for transfer, will give students an immersive introduction to Italian culture, history, and literature. We will read and discuss excerpts from classical and contemporary Italian literature including Dante's *Inferno*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the *Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, and Elsa Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* (TV series, novel, short story). As we read, watch, and analyze, we will visit relevant Florentine sites such as the church where Dante met Beatrice, the Medici palace, and Cellini's bust on the Ponte Vecchio.

### **ENGL 164: Creative Non-Fiction (Memoir Writing)**

*3 units, CSU/UC transferable*

Students will begin the semester by writing about how they feel as they embark on this adventure. Then, we will go outside to create literary "sketchbooks" in scenic and historic locations such as the Duomo, the Piazza Signorina, and the Ponte Vecchio. Throughout, we will follow Jhumpa Lahiri's (*In Other Words*) lead in describing our experiences. Student writing will include a memoir and a blog as well as creative assignments such as (1) Following Hemingway's example in "Hills Like White Elephants," write a story about a couple you see seated at a café in the Piazza Signorina; (2) Ask a barista for a restaurant recommendation, and write a dialogue about your interaction; (3) Imagine you are Galileo's ghost, returned to Florence. Write two pages describing your impressions of the city today.

## **LIT 441: Survey of Film**

*3 units, CSU/UC transferable*

Italian cinema is quite different from Hollywood cinema, and yet Italy has earned more foreign language Academy Awards than any other country. What makes Italian cinema so different and so special? This course will explore the history of Italian film and especially neorealism as seen in classic films such as *La terra trema*, *Ossessione*, *Roma città aperta*, and *Ladri di biciclette*.

## **Nicole White**

### **Contra Costa Community College District**

*Nicole White is a photography professor in the Art and Art Digital Media departments at DVC. She holds a BFA from Massachusetts College of Art in Photography, an MA in Art History from the University of Connecticut, and an MFA in Studio Art from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Nicole has traveled extensively in the United States, Europe, and South America. Some of her recent trips include driving solo across the country (and back again), Paris and the French countryside, Santa Fe, New Orleans, and Boston. This will be her second time participating in the Study Abroad program in Florence, Italy. Traveling has become a way for her to better understand the world, to document the world through her camera, and to see artworks of all types in person. She is excited to teach in Florence again, a city overflowing with art and architecture that will become the backdrop for her photography and art history courses.*

## **ARTDM 136: Introduction to Digital Photography**

*3 Units; Grade or Pass/No Pass; CSU/UC transferable*

*This introductory course focuses on the skills required to create effective digital photographs using digital cameras. Students will be introduced to the fundamental principles of image making, composition, color theory, color management, lighting, image processing, and output with a specific focus on digital photographic practice in fine art.*

This course fully integrates the experience of being in Florence. We will spend our time making photographs in various parts of the city to learn technical and aesthetic decision making, visit photographic exhibitions at museums and galleries, and learn how to correct our images using software and phone applications. The city gives us access to some of the most beautiful architecture, landscapes, and artworks in the world and we will capture them with our cameras.

## **ARTHS 196: History of Medieval and Renaissance Art**

*3 Units; Grade or Pass/No Pass; CSU/UC transferable*

*The course presents the history of Western art from the Early Christian Period through the Renaissance. Stylistic changes are related to significant social and cultural changes.*

*Consideration is given to the changing role of the artist, socially, culturally, and within patronage systems. ARTHS195 + ARTHS-196 = C-ID ARTH 110, CSU, UC*

Florence is the Renaissance city. There are critically important artworks by some of the most recognized artists in art history; Michelangelo, Ghiberti, Botticelli, Donatello, to name a few. The influence of the Medicis, a family central to the development of Florence, will also be critically examined. We will study the influence of social and cultural shifts through the way in which the world is depicted in painting and sculpture along with how messages are conveyed through architectural forms.