Assignment #2:
A Researched Science Essay for the General Public
10-12 pages

For this assignment, you will investigate some area of research in science, mathematics, or engineering (preferably something that is going on here and now at MIT), and you will write an essay about it for a general audience. Through this assignment, you will gain experience in:

- going out and researching a topic “first hand” (more about this below);
- finding and using additional (e.g., published) sources of information about your topic; and
- presenting a highly specialized and technical subject in a way that is both accessible and interesting to a general audience.

Your first task will be to find a topic that interests you, and that you think could be the basis for an intriguing and informative essay for people who have little or no previous acquaintance with this general subject. If you are involved with a UROP, you could write about something related to that. However, there are endless other possibilities. Another suggestion for finding a topic would be to browse the website of a department you’re interested in and check the links to research labs and groups in that department. Read about the research that’s going on in those labs and groups until you find something that especially interests you.

Next, you will need to begin researching your topic. You can do this by reading articles about it and by visiting a lab or group that is carrying out research in this area and talking with one or more people that are involved in the work. I recommend that you email someone (e.g., a postdoc or graduate student listed on the lab’s website): explain what you’re working on and ask whether you can drop by to visit and find out more about their work. Perhaps one of the more senior members of the group (i.e., a professor or research scientist) would also be willing to meet with you. If you need me to help facilitate this contact, let me know. I can, for example, make the initial contact with a member of the research group, explain the assignment, and ask whether he/she would be willing to have you contact them to arrange to visit the lab and talk with someone.

With some preliminary background on the topic, you should be able to decide on the specific focus and audience of your essay. Remember that the notion of a “general audience” can be viewed as a continuum: some “general audiences” are more “general” than others. The audience of Discover magazine is quite different from the
audience of Technology Review. Where would you imagine your essay (article) appearing? Don’t approach this as a “report” on an area of research in science or engineering at MIT. Rather, the essay should reflect your own idea about how to present a technical subject in an interesting, engaging, and informative way to your target audience.

Your essay is likely to need subheadings and illustrations to highlight key information.

The first version of the essay should be double-spaced and, of course, it should have a captivating title.

**NOTE:**
MIT is a large and complex organization. In addition to departments, you could look for a topic by browsing the websites of some of the independent labs, programs, and institutes, e.g. CSAIL (Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Lab), the Media Lab, the McGovern Institute for brain research, among others. Each of these is made up of many research groups, with each group having its own specific focus.