

Doing an Independent Study with Dr. Wimpy

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So you need an independent study?

I am often approached by students who want to complete an independent study with me. In most cases, they “want” to do this because they “need” a certain amount of credit for a given sub-field to graduate. In other cases it is a matter of convenience in scheduling or professor.

While I understand these issues, an independent study should be much more than just a way to fulfill degree requirements. Here’s what I look for and expect:

What Makes a Good Independent Study

Clear Research Question: You should have a specific research question or topic you want to explore in depth. “I need comparative politics credits” is not a research question.

Genuine Interest: I want to see that you’re genuinely curious about the topic, not just trying to check a box.

Preparatory Work: You should have already done some background reading and have a sense of the existing literature.

Realistic Scope: The project should be ambitious enough to be worthwhile but manageable given the time constraints.

The Application Process

When you approach me about an independent study, please include:

1. **A 1–2 page proposal** outlining:
 - Your research question
 - Why you’re interested in this topic
 - Preliminary literature you’ve identified
 - Your proposed methodology/approach
 - Expected deliverables
2. **Your academic background** relevant to the topic
3. **Your timeline** and how this fits with your other commitments

What to Expect

Regular Meetings: We’ll meet bi-weekly to discuss progress, challenges, and next steps.

Substantial Reading: Expect to engage with 15–20 academic sources minimum.

Written Work: Usually a substantial research paper (20–30 pages) or equivalent project.

Presentation: You may be asked to present your work to other students or faculty.

When I Say No

I may decline to supervise an independent study if:

- The proposal lacks focus or genuine engagement.
- You haven't demonstrated preparatory work.
- The topic falls too far outside my expertise.
- I don't have the bandwidth to provide adequate supervision.

Alternative Suggestions

If an independent study isn't the right fit, consider:

- **Directed readings courses** for exploring a literature
- **Research assistant positions** to gain hands-on experience
- **Thesis work** if you're looking for a capstone experience
- **Existing courses** that might meet your needs

Remember: an independent study should be an intellectually rewarding experience for both of us. If you're just looking to fulfill requirements, there are likely better options available.