

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 almost all circumstances, my initial answer will be an unequivocal “no.” In the document that follows, I outline the reasons for my modal answer of “no,” the less common times when my answer may be “yes,” and the procedures I require of students that want to turn a “no” into a “yes.” Incidentally, students that read this document and take it seriously are much more likely to end up with a “yes” in the first place. If you make it to the end of the document, then you will learn the procedures for requesting an independent study from me.

Why Do I Say “No?”

First, let’s define an independent study. Webster defines an independent study as: *a course of study done by a student without an instructor or with help from an instructor but not as part of an organized class*. We probably know that much, so what other elements make an independent study unique?

- **Your professors are almost never compensated for independent studies.** You may not know this, but your professors are contracted to teach a certain number of courses per year. Along with that come significant expectations for us to produce original research and provide service to the university by serving on committees, advising students, and other administrative functions as they arise. This means that I am working additional time without additional pay when I supervise independent studies. If I do not have additional time, then one or more of my other contracted duties would also be affected.
- **Independent studies are privileges, not rights.** It should be an honor to get extra, exclusive time with a professor that is an expert in a topic of interest to you. You may think this is silly, but giving a decent percentage of our time to one student is not trivial given our other personal and professional responsibilities. In an ideal scenario, you should also do more work and learn more from an independent study than you might in an ordinary course. So, in that sense, you get more return on your investment.
- **Independent studies should be based on a serious student interest in a narrow topic.** Independent studies are not simply professors teaching a regularly offered course to one person. They should be much narrower and focused on a topic that is only of interest to the most serious students. If you “need” the independent study to graduate and “want” to convince a

professor (like me) to work with you, then I suggest you look at their CV ([see mine here](#)) and figure out their expertise.¹ Next, you should get serious and find something you are interested in that fits with the professor's research and teaching interests. If you cannot do that, I would suggest finding another professor or rethinking your need for an independent study.

What Does it Take for a “Yes?”

You must convince me that my time will not be wasted. It may seem harsh, but it boils down to this. Remember, I am doing this on my own dime, and it will take additional time away from either my family or my other contracted duties. In rare instances the *need* for an independent study will be clear (e.g., no courses from certain sub-fields were offered during the normal academic year), but most of the time you will need to demonstrate to me *why* you *want* to do one with me.

I provide more detailed criteria below, but the best way to convince me (and others, I presume) is to develop a well-researched proposal that is based on some political science phenomenon that is very interesting to us both. If you propose a topic that is clearly outside my expertise, then I will assume you are not serious and failed to read my CV. Put simply, you must take this seriously and leave no room for me to regret my decision to work with you for free.

Procedures for An Independent Study with Dr. Wimpy

The following are a list of procedures that I require before agreeing to an independent study. Note that these apply no matter the circumstances with respect to you “wanting” or “needing” the independent study. Failure to follow these procedures will result in me declining to work with a student.

1. Prepare a typeset **proposal** that is no longer than two pages in length. The proposal must be proofread and free from errors.² It **must** include the following headings: Statement of Purpose & Goals, Discussion of Subject, Statement of Interest, and Proposed Deliverables. I will discuss these sections of the proposal in turn:
 - a. **Statement of Purpose & Goals:** This section tells me why you need or want the independent study. Keep in mind that the distinction between *need* and *want* matters here. If you tell me you *need* the independent study to graduate, then I will check that you had ample opportunity for a course that would satisfy that need during the regular term. In almost all cases this changes what you consider a *need* to a “want.” You “needed” to better plan your academic schedule based on the degree requirements. Now you “want” to rectify your mistake by taking the independent study. That is fine, most professors will get this dilemma, but be honest! Then you can proceed to tell me why you want the independent study and what you hope to accomplish.
 - b. **Discussion of Subject:** Here, you should tell me about the subject that you want to study. As noted above, it will need to be one in which I have particular expertise. I want to know what you know so far, and I want to see that you are willing to do some legwork to convince me that the topic is worthy of study.

¹If you do not know what a “CV” is then you should learn. In short, a CV (stands for curriculum vitae) is an academic résumé where we keep track of our scholarly careers—which for many of us amounts to our life's work. They are great shortcuts for learning about your professors!

²I do not care too much about what “style” you use to organize the proposal in terms of formatting and citations (if applicable). Just be consistent and reasonable. If you want some guidance, see the political science style guide [here](#).

- c. **Statement of Interest:** This should flow right from the previous section and explain your own interest in the topic. If you are not interested then it will not be fun.
 - d. **Proposed Deliverables:** Here, you should propose what the deliverables are to be for the independent study. These most often include a research/term paper or a series of shorter papers. It could also include actual exams or other methods of evaluation. I, of course, reserve the right to make the final decision on deliverables.
2. Schedule a meeting with me to discuss your proposal. You can do that by e-mailing me or by going [here](#) and filling in your proposed time and information.
 3. If I end up saying “yes” to your proposal you will need to obtain the independent study form from the main Political Science office in HSS 3007.
 4. Schedule a time for me to review the form and sign it.
 5. Return the form to the main Political Science office in HSS 3007.

Final Remarks

Independent studies can be rewarding for both students and professors. They can also be lots of work, and before we both commit to doing the work we need to have a strong understanding for what it will entail. For my part, I need to know that the independent study will be worth taking my time from something else important to me, and I want to ensure that it is something to which you are committed. If we can align on these goals, then I am always happy to further the learning experience for committed students.