
Independent Study Guidelines

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Introduction

An independent study is a good way to study a topic in which you have some special interest. You might want to study a topic in greater depth than is done in a regular class or study a topic that is not covered in a regular class at all. Many students also use an independent study to pick up an extra credit in cases where that is necessary.

The main problem students have with independent study courses is with getting something accomplished. It is very easy to put an independent study aside when your other, traditional courses are demanding a lot of attention. However, if you do that week after week, you will find that by the end of the semester you will not have spent any significant time with your independent study. Although independent study courses are typically only one credit they still require some investment of time and effort.

These guidelines define my requirements for independent study courses. These requirements are intended to insure that you make steady progress with your study and that you have something to show for your study by the end of the semester. These guidelines also define my grading criteria for independent study courses.

Goals

The primary goal of an independent study is education. Your study will be considered a success based on how much you learn during it. This means that it doesn't matter how much you know about the subject you are studying before hand. If you know almost nothing about the subject, you might only need to learn the basics of it in order to have a successful study. If you already know a lot about the subject, you will be expected to delve into it even more. An independent study is not about documenting what you already know. It's about learning something new.

Throughout your independent study I will ask you to define goals for yourself regarding what you want to learn or what you want to accomplish. I will ask you to refine these goals in an ongoing manner to make them specific and realistic. However, you do not need to actually accomplish your goals in order to get a good grade. When you start your study you may not have a very clear idea of what you want to accomplish or of the difficulty involved in getting there. That is fine. You might find once you get into your study that the goals you had in mind are inappropriate or too complicated.

I encourage you to evaluate your goals on a weekly basis and even to completely redefine them as you proceed through your study. Of course it is nice when you can accomplish your initial goals, but that is

not necessary for my considering your study a success. In fact, it is possible for your study to be a relative failure even if you do accomplish your stated goals! How successful your study is depends on what you learn during it and not on what you actually accomplish.

Nevertheless I feel that creating and revising goals for yourself is very important. It will help you to focus your efforts and thus get more out of your study. You should consider a long term goal that will help you define your entire study and one or more short term goals that will serve as reasonable stepping stones toward your long term goal. Even if you later change your long term goal and abandon the direction you are going in favor of some other direction, having that goal there will help you organize your thoughts and help prevent you from spinning your wheels. In the end you can have a very successful study educationally even if you end up changing direction several times during it. The key factor is that you keep moving!

Class Organization

Since my primary concern is that you make steady progress my only requirement for independent studies is for you to send me weekly progress reports. (You will also need to formulate an initial long term goal in order to register for the course). Your progress reports should have two parts: they should describe what you have done during the past week and they should outline what you intend to do during the next week. If you find yourself changing your long term goal, you should mention that in your progress reports as well.

Your progress reports do not need to be long. Two or three paragraphs will probably be sufficient in most cases. However, you should try to be as specific as you (reasonably) can and you should include supporting materials as well if appropriate. For example, if you are pursuing a study about programming and if one week you wrote a particular program, include a copy of that program with your progress report. Don't worry if your work is unfinished. You can include a more refined version of your work in a later progress report. All I am looking for is documentation on what you are doing in your study. The need to provide this documentation will help you to focus your efforts and keep you moving. It will also make it easier for me to come up with a meaningful grade for you.

My role in your study is to act as a consultant. I can offer you suggestions about how to get started or how to get unstuck if you find yourself unsure how to proceed. I will also let you know if your progress seems less than desired or more than strictly necessary. However, it is not my role to teach you the material. In an independent study you teach yourself. Although it is helpful to me if you pursue a study in a subject that I know something about, that is not strictly necessary.

I will give you feedback on a weekly basis, mostly by responding to your progress reports with comments, etc.

Grading

Your grade will be based on how much it appears you have learned during the study, based mostly on your progress reports. Depending on the topic you are studying I may or may not ask you to demonstrate your work as well. I will let you know about that well before any demonstrations are required.

Your default grade in an independent study is B. To get this grade you need to show reasonably steady educational progress during the study. If your progress is more than just "reasonable" you might move into the A range. If your progress is consistently disappointing you might move into the C range. Lower grades are possible, but to get them you would have to more or less stop work on your study entirely and ignore all of my messages to you about it.

Independent studies are supposed to be fun and I don't want you to worry about grades too much while pursuing them. If you work on your study with reasonable diligence you will get an A or a B.

Time

The main problem students have with independent studies is in finding the time to work on them. If you are pursuing a one credit independent study---by far the most common type---then you should expect to put in about 2-3 hours of time per week on it. I strongly advise you to explicitly schedule that time so that you don't end up putting your study off week after week! Because your study is only one credit, I won't be expecting miracles in terms of what you can accomplish each week. Naturally you will not be putting as much work into your study as you might in a 3 or 4 credit course. The key to success is in your making steady, even if slow, progress.

Learning how to budget and manage time to make an independent study a success is an important part of the experience. It is likely that most of what you will learn in your life will be learned independently and without the help of a formal class. This experience with an independent study will help you develop those important skills. Learning how to do that is even more important than learning whatever topic you have put before yourself.

Conclusion

Learning is fun and exciting. I hope you find these guidelines to be an effective way to structure your independent study so that you can get what you want out of it. I look forward to working with you.