Writing an Independent Study in Psychology: A Major’s Guide

An I.S. for the Psychology Department is going to vary depending on your focus and your results, but there are several things that you should expect as you move forward with this process. This guide has been created by senior psychology majors as a resource regarding some of the major steps you will encounter as you complete your Independent Study project.

The information in this guide should be seen as informative, NOT stressful. Keep the closest deadlines in mind rather than obsessing over everything at once, and make goals as you go.

The best advice we can give is to keep notes throughout your entire process, back up your work using multiple drives or a cloud system online, and focus on the tasks at hand as they come rather than looking at the big (huge!) picture too early.

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Getting Started

Your first step will be selecting a topic. While this can be daunting, try not to feel like your I.S. topic needs to be absolutely perfect and all-inclusive. It should be something that you will continue to find interesting throughout the next year, and it should not be so broad that you struggle with understanding the theories and models behind your methodology.

**Key Advice:** Pick a subject you found interesting during one of your 300-level courses, and read. Pay close attention to any “future research” ideas in the discussion sections of other literature!

If you are lost, try to start out broad and then hone in on a subject. The field of psychology is typically divided into several subject areas, or fields. Many journals will publish work specifically from these fields, which can be a helpful resource as you decide what specific areas you find most interesting.

Use the Journal Finder to search for journals with a specific focus area at: www.wooster.edu/academics/libraries
Browse the APA’s divisions/interest groups, many of which overlap by topic, at: www.apa.org/about/division/index.aspx

At the College of Wooster, your coursework will fall across these different fields as you decide which areas are most interesting for you. Our professors each specialize in specific areas, so you can try to take courses in the areas you find most interesting.

Check out the current faculty and staff, and be sure to visit their individual websites: www.wooster.edu/academics/areas/psychology/faculty

**Key Advice:** After selecting a topic, you should also plan out the measures you will use, as well as the statistical analysis that will go along with interpreting your findings. This should be part of your planning process to ensure success after you collect your data.

Your Advisor

During your junior year, you will be asked to submit a brief proposal regarding your interests and what you are planning on pursuing for I.S. This information will be used by the department to assign you an I.S. advisor, who may be someone different from your prior academic advisor.

The psychology department meets during one of the last weeks of the spring semester to select advisors. Every member of the psychology faculty will see your proposal and any notes that you submitted, and they will do their best to assign each student an advisor with relevant interests.

Your new advisor will contact you to let you know that you will be their advisee. When you are contacted will depend on your advisor’s individual preferences; they may contact you immediately, or may wait until after finals are over.
**Pre-testing Approval**

After you have selected your topic, you will need to receive approval if you plan on working with any human participants or animal subjects. Anyone seeking to conduct research with human participants will need to receive approval from the College of Wooster’s Institutional Review Board, called the Human Subjects Research Committee (HSRC).

- Approval is required before any data collection can begin
- The committee reviews proposals as they are submitted, and typically meets twice a month

Your project will require either an exempt form or a full review by committee. If you will be working with individuals who are under the age of 18, requesting sensitive information, or using any kind of “invasive” measures, you will need full review and should turn in your HSRC proposal as early as possible.

If you want to collect data before winter break, you should aim to submit your HSRC form by October 1st. If you must collect data following winter break, your HSRC should be completed before you leave for winter break. Remember that it can take as long as three weeks for them to respond, that revisions may be needed, and you cannot begin data collection until this process is finished.

**Copeland Funding**

Grants are available through the Copeland fund for costs that are beyond what would normally be expected from a research project. For up-to-date information on deadlines and how much funding will be available for your class year, check online: [www.wooster.edu/research/copeland](http://www.wooster.edu/research/copeland)

From the College of Wooster website, “Preference will be given to proposals that (a) involve the completion of projects of unusual distinction and promise and (b) demonstrate why the project involves expenses above and beyond those normally incurred in undertaking I.S.”

Copeland Funding will NOT typically give out grants for you to pay your participants, but may provide money for a ‘lottery’-style drawing for your participant pool.

Funding is distributed via a reimbursement system, so it is important to recognize that even if you receive funding, you will need to pay up front. Plan your finances accordingly.

**Copeland Funding Deadlines** (as of 2013):
- October 1st for the fall program, and April 8th for the spring program
You can also consider other undergraduate research funding options. Visit www.apa.org/research/funding for a database of grants and scholarships. Use their search feature to look for funding geared specifically towards undergraduate research.

**Collecting Data**

Data collection can be daunting, but try not to let it overwhelm you!

Create your spreadsheet for data collection before you even begin collecting results, and add to it as you go. This can often most easily and cleanly be done using Excel. Organization is key. The more you do early on, the less you will have to panic about when it comes time to run your statistics.

Many psychology majors begin testing before winter break. If you can begin data collection by November 1st, you will be able to begin your results section prior to winter break. If you are going to begin data collection after break, make sure your HSRC approval is finalized in time for you to begin as soon as you are on campus after winter break.

**Using Sona systems** (www.wooster.sona-systems.com) for data collection allows you to recruit College of Wooster students as your participants. You will automatically be registered in preparation for data collection, but then you must be proactive in creating as many time slots as possible and then requesting available rooms for your testing.

**Amazon’s Mechanical Turk** (www.mturk.com) is an alternative, online testing service that allows you to post your study as a “job” online for users around the world (or across the United States depending on your preferences) to complete. This can give you access to a larger, more diverse sample. If you are interested in using this service, determine if an online service would work with your study and discuss this option with your advisor.
The Structure of an I.S. for Psychology

Your I.S. will be in APA style, with a few minor exceptions that can be found online: www.wooster.edu/academics/areas/psychology/IS

While it is not always required for every psychology lab course, you should highly consider purchasing the latest edition of the APA Style Guide. The Purdue OWL also has many helpful guides for writing in APA style, available online.

Your APA style I.S. will not be any specific page length when you are finished, and it will basically follow the format you have learned for writing lab reports – introduction/literature review, methods, results, and discussion.

Your final I.S. is due the Monday you return from Spring Break. You should have a full draft of your final paper before break begins.

Introduction/Literature Review

The terms “introduction” and “literature review” are often (but not always) used interchangeably. For your I.S., this is just like the introduction section of a lab report, except that it will be much longer and more in-depth than anything you have written so far. Feel free to continue to refine your introduction throughout the rest of your writing process.

Timeline & Length: Turn in a 20-25 page, full draft before winter break.

Method

You will typically include three sections, in this order: Participants, Materials, and Procedure.

Participants: A brief overview of who your participants were; you can include things such as percentage by gender and age range here, or species if you have worked with animals.

Materials: Describe the scales or other materials you used to assess your participants or subjects. You can use subsections within your materials section to add clarity if you have many measures, or your materials section may be very brief if you had a more simple and easy to explain measure.

Procedure: Actually outline what you did and how you did it. Try not to be redundant since you have already described your participants and measures. Tie together how you sampled your participants and used your materials to conduct your study.

Timeline & Length: Turn in a full draft before winter break. This will be approximately less than five pages, but will definitely vary depending on your study.
Results

You will write your results section after you finish collecting data, typically following winter break. Be concise here, and use tables and figures as they help clarify your findings. Remember that this is solely a statement of your results without any interpretation at this point.

Timeline & Length: You will talk with your advisor about setting deadlines. Your results will vary greatly in length depending on your actual findings, especially if you are going to use figures and/or tables.

Discussion

Your discussion section should follow a pattern opposite from the introduction – begin by explaining specifically what you have found, and then continue to expand from there into how your findings relate to the literature you explored in your introduction.

Do not feel like you need to have a specific paragraph for limitations to your research; instead, weave future studies throughout as they make sense with regards to your findings and the background literature.

End your discussion section on a high note, with a statement of why research in this domain is important and how you have contributed.

Timeline & Length: You will talk with your advisor about setting deadlines. Your discussion will also vary in length depending on your actual results, but it should be long enough to truly explain how your results fit with the prior literature in this field.
Orals

This information will basically answer your questions about what orals are and when they happen. Do NOT feel like orals should be a focus while you are working on your project! After the months you have already put into your I.S., you will be very familiar with your topic. Orals should be an opportunity for you to explain your process, as well as how your research fits in with prior literature.

1. After I.S. Monday, you will hear from your advisor regarding your second reader. This will be another member of the psychology department who will read your I.S., and you will only meet with them and your advisor.

2. You will be responsible for scheduling a time for orals with your advisor and your second reader. Orals begin the second week back following spring break, and continue throughout the remainder of the semester depending on your scheduling.

3. On your scheduled date, you will spend one hour with your advisor and second reader having a conversation about your study, the theories and models behind your methodology, your results, and the rest of your process.

4. After one hour, you will be officially informed whether you have passed or failed I.S. This will be based on whether you have successfully completed the requirements for an I.S. in psychology OVERALL, with orals as an additional opportunity for you to defend your work.

You will learn whether you received satisfactory/good/honors closer to the end of the semester, after the department meets to discuss how many of each title are being awarded. Your performance at orals will have less influence on your satisfactory/good/honors status than your performance throughout the entire I.S. process. Thesis projects completed at many other institutions do not have such a grading system, so you should be immensely proud of your work regardless of the letter that you are assigned.

Orals can be stressful, but after completing your entire project they should not be something that you are preoccupied with at any point in the process. This information should help you feel informed, not encourage you to become overly stressed about orals while you are working.
Symposium and Beyond

The Senior Research Symposium is held on a Friday approximately one month following I.S. Monday, with registration a couple of weeks in between.

The psychology department does not require seniors to participate in the symposium, but it is an excellent opportunity for you to show your work to the campus community via a poster or oral presentation.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to submit an abstract of your work online which will be used when assigning your project to a session. This abstract will also be available online as part of a program for the symposium.

Posters can be printed through the College of Wooster IT department, and must be sent to print at least on day in advance. They will be swamped with posters before symposium, so make sure you pay attention to any deadlines they may enforce. Posters are paid for from your campus printing account, and currently cost about $28 on average. You will be required to stand at your poster for a two-hour long session during the day of symposium, and you will not be allowed to select this time.

Oral presentations typically consist of a 12-minute PowerPoint presentation, followed by three minutes of questions and answers. The school will assign you participate as one of three presenters in a session, and you must arrive to your session early to set up your presentation beforehand. If your research was directly related to your advisor’s area of interest, you may also be invited to participate in a session where your advisor will give a brief overview of their research followed by your 10-minute presentation.

In addition to symposium, you may want to consider additional conferences or publication for your project. Many professional conferences have poster sessions, and if you already have created a poster for the symposium you are more than qualified to attend these conferences.

Talk to your advisor, and never be afraid to submit an abstract to any conference that is relevant to you and is located somewhere convenient for you!
General Guide for an I.S. Timeline

This timeline is a very basic example of how your own I.S. will progress. Work with your advisor to create weekly writing goals, and always double-check campus deadlines online. Whether you begin actual data collection earlier or later, you will be able to succeed as long as you keep track of your work and have a plan for reaching your sampling goals throughout the process.

Spring of Junior Year

Submit a proposal for I.S. that relates to a professor’s research ……………………………. April
Find out about I.S. advisor selections………………………………………………………….. End of the year

Fall of Senior Year

Submit application for Copeland Funding (if applicable) ………………… Early fall, check online
Submit HSRC approval ……………………………………………………………. October-December
Begin testing ……………………………………. Pre- or post-winter break (November - January)
Full draft of introduction & methods sections ……………………. Before winter break (December)
Finish testing, begin results & discussion sections ……………………. Mid-February (or earlier)
Final, full draft of I.S. ………………………………………………. Before spring break (early April)
I.S. Monday (final deadline) …………………………. Monday following spring break (late April)
Orals …………………………………………………………… begins one week following I.S. Monday
Symposium ……………………………………. approximately one month following I.S. Monday