

Independent Work in the
Department of Religion

Princeton University 2024 - 2025
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The Study of Religion: An Overview

Princeton University has long been committed to the idea that religion, like politics or art, is an important sphere of life and merits systematic attention within the curriculum. The primary responsibility for instruction in this area has, for nearly eighty years, been entrusted to the Department of Religion, which belongs to the Division of the Humanities. Our charge is to do our best to examine religious life, the diverse forms it has taken in different cultures and historical periods, and the questions it poses for theoretical, ethical, and political reflection. As a humanities department, rather than a seminary or theological school, we appeal to the same standards of historical and philosophical scholarship found in neighboring disciplines.

The Department of Religion aims for our students to gain content knowledge with respect to religious traditions, practice, history, ethics, and philosophy, across time periods and cultural settings. In addition, we intend for our students to develop an understanding of the history of the academic study of religion and its crucial methodologies and purview. Beyond the inherent value of these mutually-constitutive sets of goals, we want the development of this content knowledge and facility with religious studies as a field to cultivate methodological tools that students will take with them into other parts of their academic lives and their eventual careers: an abiding intellectual curiosity; self-motivation and initiative in research; a habit of close reading and critical empathy in the assessment of both secondary and primary sources; facility with questions of race, gender, and class; and the ability to make clear, cogent, and successful arguments both in writing and in discussion.

The interdisciplinary nature of the Department and of its faculty – whose backgrounds and research interests in the study of religion include history, anthropology, philosophy, literature, politics and ethics – means that we tend to attract majors who are a diverse group. Despite a range of interests and approaches, the Department has a strong sense of community and collegiality that is actively fostered by faculty, staff and students, both undergraduate and graduate.

Goals of Independent Work in Religion

Independent research and writing provides students with an opportunity to develop sophisticated skills in assessing and exploring closely both secondary and primary sources; to gain experience in original research; and to develop skills as critical thinkers, careful readers and interpreters, and authoritative writers. Students in the Department of Religion learn to navigate the conventions of religious studies as an academic field and make interventions into the understanding of the cultural and intellectual landscapes of diverse religious traditions.

Because the study of religion is interdisciplinary by nature, research for independent work may involve critical readings of major theoretical and philosophical texts, archival research, close work with primary texts in the original languages, and ethnographic or sociological research. Students in Religion gain critical research skills appropriate to the specific topic and approach required by their particular focus. Please note that some methods of inquiry, primarily those pertaining to fieldwork, require the approval of the University's [Institutional Review Board \(IRB\)](#), which oversees research involving human subjects. The IRB's approval process may delay the start of research, so advance planning is required for projects requiring such methodologies.

Practical Considerations

Students may feel that writing a junior paper during Spring semester and a thesis over the course of a year are daunting tasks, but with good planning, a well-formulated research question, and ample use of the resources provided – in particular, your adviser – these can be an enjoyable and rewarding experiences.

While independent work is *independent* in its conception, research, and writing, the following guidelines should offer some practical advice to students writing works of this scope for the first time.

Finding a topic

One of most difficult stages in the process of writing an independent work project is finding a suitable subject of inquiry. It is paramount that you be enthusiastic about the topic you plan to write on, but it is equally important to approach the topic from a scholarly perspective that brings the sources and methods of the academic study of religion to bear. The courses you have taken are a good starting point for further investigation: consider questions raised in a course that you would like to explore, or topics that have remained unaddressed in ways that you would like to see.

Juniors will develop a research topic for their Spring JP during the Junior Colloquium. Seniors should use the suggestions from the Junior Conversation to explore potential thesis topics during the summer and be prepared to talk through ideas with the Director of Undergraduate Studies early in the fall. Keep in mind the strong suggestion that independent work take place within the context of your area of focus within the major, and that you are expected to have taken the relevant coursework in preparation for the work. This is particularly important regarding the thesis.

The assignment of advisers is made by the Director of Undergraduate Studies at the beginning of Fall semester for seniors, following your initial meeting, and for juniors prior to the start of Spring classes in January. While the DUS makes adviser assignments, students are encouraged to suggest possible advisers. Indeed, looking over our faculty's areas of research is one good way of beginning to arrive at a topic yourself, if you are stuck: consider the types of work that our faculty does as a way of imagining what you might like to work on. Information regarding our faculty is available [on the department web site](#).

Once advisers are assigned, it is important to meet with your adviser as soon as possible to talk about ideas you are thinking of working with.

Formatting a Research Question

The next stage is to become acquainted with the relevant primary and secondary literature related to your topic so that you can begin to move from topic to a refined research question. Ask yourself: What have other scholars said about the topic? What sorts of sources and methods have they used? What questions remain open that you wish to pursue? Are there two or more conflicting perspectives, which you may be able to reconcile or can you provide definitive support for one over the other(s)?

Formulating a clear and concise research question is a critical stage in the process of independent work. While your topic may be very broad, your research question will serve as a focusing lens. A properly constructed question gives direction to the research and focus to the writing. It provides the catalyst for the argument, around which the thesis is built. A well-formulated research question helps you define the scope of your work; it may suggest a structure and direct you to particular sources. Your goal in the JP or thesis will be to weigh the evidence and offer your answer to this question.

As your research continues you will focus your topic still further; sometimes, what you had planned as a portion of the project may emerge as the primary focus. This is to be expected, so you should be open to following exciting leads, provided that you remain in control of the process.

Writing a Proposal

Students complete proposals for both pieces of independent work. In these proposals, students set out their research question, suggest sources, and set forth a plan for writing. The proposal is not a contract – it is a preliminary map or plan laying out where you think you are, where you wish to go, and how you plan to get there. The exercise of drafting a proposal compels a scholar to refine their research question and formulate a clear plan for the research and writing.

All juniors complete a JP proposal as part of the Junior Colloquium; details for that proposal are provided in the colloquium syllabus. The thesis proposal will be due to your adviser in early October. Individual advisers may work with their advisees to handle the thesis proposal in whatever way works best for the student and the project, but conventionally proposals are five pages long and should include at least:

- A description of topic, scope of the project, and planned methodology.
- A discussion of how your coursework has prepared you to pursue the topic.
- A brief survey of sources and discussion of the kinds of evidence you plan to use.
- A discussion of the contribution your work will make to the existing scholarship in your area.
- A preliminary bibliography.
- A preliminary writing plan or chapter outline.

Working with Your Adviser

What advisees can expect of their advisers: Advisees can expect to meet with their advisers regularly, to have drafts read within a reasonable, agreed-upon amount of time, to receive detailed and constructive feedback. Although your adviser is your primary sounding-board in this process, you should take advantage of the human resources at Princeton and seek advice from other members of the faculty within the Department and beyond.

What advisers can expect of their advisees: Advisers can expect an advisee to take the initiative, to cooperate in setting up a detailed work schedule, to keep to the general departmental schedule for the completion of independent work, to show up punctually for scheduled meetings. Advisers will expect to be given a reasonable amount of time to read and comment on drafts.

All scholars work in different ways: you and your adviser may decide to meet more or less frequently, to have more or less frequent writing deadlines throughout the semester or year. What is important about your advising relationship is that you and your adviser communicate actively and remain on the same page: that you receive the type of support and advice that you need and that your adviser, in turn, feels that you are actively committed to advancing the project (demonstrated by meeting agreed-upon deadlines and arriving to meetings prepared).

The Process of Writing

While there is no single correct way to write a thesis or a JP, it is essential to begin the actual writing at an early stage, since the processes of research and of writing are intimately linked.

The best of academic writing combines thorough research, clear argumentation, and conviction of the significance of the intellectual contribution. One good way to acquire the skills of the art of academic writing is to bring a new depth of vision to one's reading. Take a work that you have found powerful and persuasive, identify what makes it so for you, and emulate the author's strengths.

Your research question is the catalyst of the entire thesis and will guide the course of the research and writing. Your primary goal is to answer your research question satisfactorily. A strongly formulated presentation of your thesis should take the form "I argue that / I claim that / I prove that..." rather than "I examine / juxtapose / survey / study / shed light on." Remember that your goal is to offer a plausible and persuasive interpretation of your data rather than absolute proof that your hypothesis is correct.

The Structure of Independent Work

While the JP and the thesis require different structural approaches due to their considerably different lengths, it is useful to recognize that the basic structural components are the same.

The Introduction

The Introduction is part and parcel of a piece of independent work. In it you set forth (1) the research question; (2) how previous literature addresses the question, and where it falls short; (3) your methodology: how you intend to go about answering the question in a different way. Finally, you may delineate the scope of your research: explain what is not going to be discussed, and why.

Note: A preface (which is optional) is different from the Introduction. In your preface you may choose to describe your intellectual autobiography – the process that led to the writing of your project – and thank your parents, friends, and professors. Prefaces are more common (and typically more appropriate) for theses than for JPs.

Particularly with respect to theses, the Introduction is often the last part to be completed, since it offers a panoramic overview of the project.

The Body

The structure of your JP or thesis will depend on the nature of your project. Each part of a JP will present evidence toward an essential component of your overall argument; these may be demarcated with section headings. A typical thesis in the Religion Department contains a number of chapters. Keep in mind that as you continue the research and writing the structure of your sections or chapters may change: what began as a small component may emerge as a topic in its own right, requiring a full-fledged section or chapter.

Make sure the structure of your argument is sound: avoid offering conclusions that do not actually follow from the propositions; circular argumentation; and overstating the evidence. Try to anticipate objections and respond to them in the course of each chapter. Be sure to present the opinions of your interlocutors as generously and accurately as possible.

Conclusion

In the Conclusion, you may wish to summarize in brief what you have done, but that is not the main objective of this part of your paper. More important is to demonstrate what your work's implications may be for further research, and what questions remain open.

Bibliography

Every piece of independent work must include a list of works cited and consulted. Be sure to consult a style guide such as the *Chicago Manual of Style* for proper format.

Submitting Independent Work

Guidelines for submission of independent work – including deadlines and submission instructions – are updated annually and provided to all majors; these are available in the documents posted at <https://religion.princeton.edu/undergraduate/forms-downloads>. Please note that both the JP and the senior thesis have specific formatting requirements; detailed instructions and example templates are available at <https://religion.princeton.edu/undergraduate/independent-work>.

Evaluation of Independent Work

In the case of the junior paper, the adviser grades the work and provides a substantive written comment outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, as well as suggestions for further research. The culminating event of the JP process is the Junior Conversation, during which the student, having received their grade and comments, will discuss the project with their adviser and a second faculty member who will not have read the paper. Details on the Junior Conversation are provided in the Junior Conversations Memo, updated for each class year and available at <https://religion.princeton.edu/undergraduate/forms-downloads>.

The senior thesis is evaluated by the student's adviser and by a second faculty reader, both of whom provide substantive written feedback outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, and suggestions for discussion during the subsequent senior comprehensive oral. The adviser and reader, in conversation with the department faculty, determine the final thesis grade following the senior comprehensive oral. Details on the Senior Comprehensive Examination are provided in the Senior Comprehensive Examination Worksheet, updated for each class year and available at <https://religion.princeton.edu/undergraduate/forms-downloads>.

Grading Standards for Independent Work in the Department of Religion

Good independent work in the Department of Religion possesses four distinguishing qualities:

- It is based on independent research and thinking. This encompasses thorough and careful use of both primary and secondary sources.
- It states, clarifies, and defends an argument that pertains to a significant aspect of the study of religion.
- It is well-written, offering a balanced evaluation of the evidence.
- It demonstrates in-depth content knowledge relevant to the topic at hand. This includes both knowledge of the cultural and intellectual subjects of research and the body of scholarly work that pertains to them.

What the letter grades mean

The Undergraduate Announcement assigns each letter grade a verbal equivalent that can help students understand the standards faculty use to evaluate written work. “A” means outstanding, “B” means good, “C” means acceptable, “D” means minimally acceptable, and “F” means failure. When grading independent work, the faculty takes these stipulations seriously. This entails awarding grades according to the standards of the scale: “A’s” are awarded only to those papers that the grader can honestly claim to be outstanding examples of humanistic scholarship when judged by standards appropriate to undergraduate work, and so on.

What an “A” paper is like: An “A” paper is outstanding in the sense that it satisfies all of the standards implicit in the basic formula and does so to the highest degree. Such a paper would therefore be elegantly written, based on research and thinking of a highly original kind, state and clarify a highly interesting thesis, and defend that thesis with especially persuasive argumentation supported by the thoughtful use of evidence. An “A+” paper would have all of these features while also displaying at least one characteristic that lifts it above the level of most excellent work by undergraduates over the years. An “A-” paper would be excellent in most respects but something less than an “A” in one or more respects. For example, an “A-” paper might be elegantly written, based on research and thinking of a highly original kind, state a highly interesting thesis in a clear way, and include a good deal of impressive argumentation, but not succeed in responding appropriately to one of the more important objections that could be raised against the main thesis. It might fail to qualify its main thesis in ways that would be required to secure the perfection of the paper’s argument, or it might be outstanding in most respects while falling-short of elegance stylistically.

What a “B” paper is like: A “B” paper is good in the sense that it satisfies all of the standards implicit in the basic formula and does so to a respectable degree. Such a paper would typically include careful but not elegant writing. It would be based on research and thinking that shows some originality. It would state and clarify a reasonably interesting thesis. And it would seriously engage with potential objections. A paper that had most of these traits but also had some flashes of excellence would qualify for a “B+.” A paper that had most of these traits but also had some more serious flaws would merit a “B-.” Such flaws might include occasional infelicities of style, excessive dependence on suggestions made by the adviser or in existing scholarship, some degree of confusion in the interpretation of evidence, or discernible gaps in the argumentation.

What a “C” paper is like: A “C” paper is acceptable in the sense that it shows evidence of sustained effort to inquire into the subject matter and to write a serious paper about it. But a “C” paper shows only modest or uneven success in meeting the standards implicit in the basic formula. Most such papers are marred by somewhat awkward, stilted, or unclear writing, an ill-chosen main thesis that is either relatively uninteresting or too ambitious to defend adequately, and an argument that has trouble withstanding close scrutiny. A paper that had most of these traits but a few of the traits associated with “B” papers would deserve a “C+.” A paper that had most of these traits but one or two more serious flaws would call for a “C-.”

What a “D” paper is like: A “D” paper is minimally acceptable in the sense that it barely counts as completion of the assignment. For a paper to receive a “D,” it must show some evidence of an attempt to satisfy the standards implicit in the basic formula. For example, the student must have studied the materials being discussed with some understanding. The paper must be of roughly the expected length and pertain to a topic in the study of religion. But “D” papers are seriously flawed in some way and perhaps in more than one way. They may be carelessly-written, lack a clearly identifiable thesis, fail to anticipate possible objections, or suffer from some combination of these weaknesses.

What an “F” paper is like: An “F” paper is a failure in the sense that it falls entirely short of satisfying the standards implicit in the basic formula.

Funding for Independent Work

Majors who require research funding for independent work may apply to the Religion Department, other individual academic departments, and other offices and programs on campus through the Student Activities Funding Engine (SAFE). Religion majors are particularly encouraged to explore funding available through the [Center for Culture, Society, and Religion](#). The online application process requires a full account of your research proposal, a detailed itemized budget, a planned itinerary if travel is involved, and the name of your thesis adviser. We encourage you to start working on your application materials early so that you have ample time to meet the strict deadlines set by the various funding sources.

Resources

Religion Librarian

The Religion Librarian, Wayne Bivens-Tatum, is available for guidance and to offer suggestions regarding resources for research in religion.

Wayne Bivens-Tatum
B-8-N Firestone Library
609-258-6367
rbivens@princeton.edu

Graduate Student Liaison

Each year, the Religion Department employs one of our graduate students to serve as a liaison with our undergraduate majors. The Graduate Student Liaison will organize events for the majors, including writing sessions, and can serve as a resource for writing and research advice. The Graduate Liaison for 2023-24 is Faiza Masood, fmasood@princeton.edu.

Writing Center

The Writing Center offers free one-on-one conferences with experienced fellow writers trained to consult on assignments in any discipline. Special 80-minute conferences are available for JP and senior thesis writers at any stage in the writing process, who may sign up to work with a graduate student fellow from the department of their choice at <https://writing.princeton.edu/undergraduates/writing-center>. Additionally, Independent Work Mentors from the Writing Center prepare workshops and programming to aid juniors and seniors in their research. Students should regularly check or subscribe to the [Princeton Undergraduate Research Calendar](#) (PURC) for upcoming programming, which cover topics ranging from preparing funding proposals to note taking, and from making an argument to draft review.