

Independent Study – Liberal Arts

Criteria, checklist and samples

Criteria for Liberal Arts Independent Study Projects

- As with all Liberal Arts credit, except in exceptional circumstances, **the subject matter** of the proposed study should fall within the domain of the liberal arts, and should be approached from the point of view of one or more of the disciplines of Liberal Arts (e.g. one of the humanities, social sciences or natural sciences). In addition, the subject matter of the ISP should be different than, or more advanced than, what is available in any course taught as part of the regular curriculum.
- Except in exceptional circumstances, **the instructor** should be someone with expertise in the relevant liberal arts discipline (typically, a Ph.D.), hence, usually a Liberal Arts faculty member. ISPs for credit from any particular Liberal Arts department will, typically, be taught by faculty with an appointment in that department.
- The total amount of work involved (including meeting times and research and writing work) must be, roughly, equivalent to the amount of work the student would do in a typical Liberal Arts course. The standard in higher education in the U.S. for a credit hour is that students do 2-3 hours outside of class for every hour in class. Liberal Arts courses meet for 3 hours per week, with an expectation of 6-9 additional hours of out-of-class work, students will typically be doing a total 9-12 hours of work per week or 117-156 hours in a 13 week term. Since Wintersession courses in Liberal Arts also award three credits, the same total hour recommendation holds for them as well even though they only meet for five weeks.
- The student and tutor should **meet on a regular basis** for discussion. Usually, meeting at least once a week for an hour during Fall and Spring terms and 2 hours during Wintersession. Except in exceptional circumstances the ISP should occur **on campus**. If the student plans to travel or work off-campus, there must be a good rationale for the travel or off-campus site in terms of the content of the proposal (e.g. a study of art in the Louvre could appropriately be done in Paris). E-mail as a form of weekly communication with the instructor is not acceptable, except under exceptional circumstances, although Skype could be.
- The ISP must include a **significant amount of reading**. Except in exceptional circumstances, the readings will be either primary or secondary sources from the relevant area of liberal arts (e.g. art history, literature, psychology etc.). The ISP should, in addition, include also some mechanism to insure that students will seriously engage with the reading – e.g. response papers, study questions, directed discussion.
- The ISP must include a **significant amount of writing**, amounting to, roughly, 15-20 pages of text. This total amount can be broken down into a number of smaller papers or one large research paper. Faculty must give students feedback on their work at regular intervals over the course of the semester. This is especially important if the work includes a research paper (which is strongly encouraged). In that case, the paper should be worked on in stages (e.g. formulation of questions to be answered or a thesis, outline, draft, final revision based on instructor feedback).

The Independent Study Proposal Checklist

- ISPs for LAS, HAVC, or HPSS credit require **approval** by the relevant Liberal Arts Department Head. Consult with the Liberal Arts Division Office on approval for ISPs for LAEL credit.
- The ISP proposal should include **at least a page of description of the project**. If any of the above requirements are not met, the student must, in addition, say why the circumstances are “exceptional.”
- The ISP proposal must include a **bibliography** of texts to be read.
- If the ISP project involves travel, **the rationale for off-campus study** must be articulated, describing how the travel or location contributes to the project in an essential way and how the “meetings” will take place (e.g. twice a week for 3 weeks on campus in WS, or meetings by skype).

Env. Humanities/Futures/Spec. Fiction ISP Proposal

Environmental humanities and speculative fiction both aim to illuminate more desirable future worlds through awareness campaigning, creative storytelling, and the inventive communication of startling realities. As a biology and geology student similarly working to bring about a better, more considered future, it's crucial to be aware of the many divergent viewpoints from which ideas, objects, nature, matter, material culture, the Earth, and the life it harbors can be viewed. As a designer, it's even more essential to understand the breadth and depth with which one can exert influence on the many facets of the world—on the stones of the crust, the bacteria of laboratory culture dishes, the new materials of industry.

By exploring literary thought about the origins of the Earth, the depth of time, and the power of human agency, I'll be able to more accurately perceive the influence of modern life on Earth—the scale with which human industry is resurfacing the planet. This independent study will consist of three main areas of inquiry: interpretations of the past, commentaries on the present, and distinct glimpses of the future. Firstly, a study of the geologic past and of alternative histories of the Earth will ground this investigation in a discussion of the physical world; it will simultaneously allow for an appreciation of the size of things at present and an understanding of the context within which futures must reside. Similarly, reading speculative utopias and dystopias will provide a foundation on which to debate the environmental present. Finally, a reflection on the present primes for a consideration of the future, of where to go from here, of how to best proceed to avoid ecological catastrophe, suffering, and extinction.

This independent study will investigate the aesthetics of stones, the poetry of exobiology, and the technologies that inspire transhumanist agendas. It will cover a great deal of material from articles on environmental theory to fantastic imaginings about life in the time to come. Ultimately, however, the core of this study will focus on discussion of the present—the Anthropocene—and how multiple viewpoints (those of the scientist, the idealist, the artist, the mechanic, the explorer, etc.) generate a fuller picture of life, nature, and culture. The aim of this very full survey of contemporary literature responding to environmental themes will be the synthesis of ideas relating biology to geology, words to material, and creative practice to contemporary thought about technology, belonging, and permanence.

The concepts discussed in this project will build upon those of *Theorizing the Anthropocene*, a Literary Arts and Studies class taught by Nicole Merola in the fall of 2014. Readings from the attached list will be broken up into weekly blocks and organized by theme, beginning with works related to space and time and ending with works that marry more complex themes together. While a broad spectrum of media will be supplementarily referenced, this study will primarily explore literature with ecological undertones. In addition, short (1-2 page) essays will be completed each week in response to the texts presented. By the end of the study, enough resources will have been considered to undertake a larger scale written report in the form of a research paper (16-18 pages).

Preliminary Reading List for Env. Humanities/Futures/Spec. Fiction ISP

Category 1: Synthetic Biology/Evolution/Genetic Engineering and the Future

1. Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*. New York: Nan A. Talese, 2003. Print.

A mad scientist decides, based on visions of humanity's past and future, that it would be best to kill off all humans and replace us with our upgraded selves.
2. Ginsberg, Alexandra Daisy. *The Dream of Better*. PhD by Practice, Design Interactions, Royal College of Art. 2013. Electronic.

Doctoral thesis in which Ginsberg explores how visions of 'Better' shape the future. Special emphasis is placed on synthetic biology as an emerging technology with the potential to shape specific perceptions of future worlds.
3. Istvan, Zoltan. *The Transhumanist Wager*. S.l.: Futurity Imagine Media LLC, 2013. Print.

Themes of utopia and dystopia are explored when the protagonist's views clash with those of governmental theocracies. The novel explores how specific evolutionary trajectories may effect humanity in a near future.
4. Darwin, Charles, John Murray, J. F. Duthie, and William Hopkins. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, Or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1859. Print.

Seminal work of Charles Darwin in which he asserts and explains his theory of evolution by natural selection.
5. Alexander, Will, and Charles Bernstein. *Exobiology as Goddess*. San Jose, CA: Manifest, 2004. Print.

An extended poem using an alternative structure to celebrate biology and its relationship to space and time.
6. *Spore*. Wright, Will. Maxis, Electronic Arts. September 7, 2008. Video Game.

A game in which the single player designs and evolves a single creature through the cell, animal, tribe, civilization, and intergalactic empire stages of physical, social, and cultural development.
7. "The Future Is Wild." *The Future Is Wild*. BBC. N.d. Television.

A three-part documentary imagining how life might evolve in the future, provided the human presence on the Earth were to disappear. Aired in the US via The Discovery Channel, "The Future is Wild" investigates a world abandoned by humans from the point of view of a future scientist.

Category 2: Utopias/Dystopias

8. VanderMeer, Jeff. *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy: Annihilation; Authority; Acceptance*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

A complete investigation of wilderness and the complexities of human interactions in a dystopian world filled with secrets. This series touches on the troubles of a human past, the promise of a future in a new frontier, and the troubles that accompany attempts to reclaim a wild natural environment.

9. Canavan, Gerry, and Kim Stanley Robinson. *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

This book explores the complex relationship between science fiction, ecology, and environmentalism. It analyzes in a series of essays the ways in which humanity's contemporary milieu and creatives' visions of utopias and dystopias impacts a global perception of the future of life on Earth.

10. Otto, Eric C. *Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. Web.

This book explores themes of ecological degradation and environmentalism from within the reality of utopian and dystopian science fiction.

11. Bacigalupi, Paolo. *Pump Six and Other Stories*. San Francisco: Night Shade, 2008. Print.

A collection of short stories with dramatic dystopian environmental themes.

12. Brin, David. *Earth*. New York: Bantam, 1990. Print.

A science fiction novel about a dystopian human future where the world is simultaneously undergoing an ecological catastrophe and an intense energy crisis. The book cautions that human attempts to curb environmental disaster may in reality bring about extinction.

13. Robinson, Kim Stanley. *Future Primitive: The New Ecotopias*. New York: TOR, 1994. Print.

A collection of short stories examining unique, alternative future societies with environmentalism as a key value.

14. Weisman, Alan. *The World without Us*. New York: Thomas Dunne /St. Martin's, 2007. Print.

A speculative nonfiction work detailing the impact that removing human society completely would have on the Earth in the future, near and far.

Category 3: Deep Space, Time, and Geologic History

15. Landa, Manuel De. *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*. New York: Zone, 1997. Print.

A reinterpretation of the last 1,000 years of Earth's history. The novel focuses on matter, energy, and their interactions, and asserts that these concrete phenomena are continually changing forces behind the history of humanity.

16. Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

This book explores those things that are too spatially or temporally vast to be accurately understood. It investigates how this incomprehensible hyperobjects impact modern thought about global climate change and the Earth environment and human society, among other things.

17. Barnes, Julian. *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*. New York: Knopf, 1989. Print.

A short, disturbing painting of the history of the Earth from a truly alternative point of view.

18. Robinson, Kim Stanley. *2312*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

A long novel about the terraforming of Mars and the many ecological controversies that might accompany it.

19. Heringman, Noah. *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2004. Print.

An investigation of how "landscape aesthetics" contributed to the formation of both early geologic practice and literary romanticism in British poetry. Ultimately, the book explores how words as a cultural material contributed to an appreciation of nature, then environment, rocks, and landforms.

20. Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Buried Giant*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015. Print.

Kazuo Ishiguro's latest novel focuses on the rewards and pain of a life filled with memories. It challenges traditional perceptions of time and emotion by blanketing an archaic British landscape with a fog that challenges one's desire to see and experience the world clearly.

21. Ellsworth, Elizabeth Ann., and Jamie Kruse. *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life*. Brooklyn, NY: Punctum, 2013. Print.

A collection of images, short stories, and essays by more than 40 creatives who see the geologic present as a collaborator in their practice. **Making the Geologic Now** examines how individuals from art and design industries perceive and respond to the Earth's current environmental crisis.

22. Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

This book challenges traditional thought about rock and stone as inert material. It asserts that stones play a central role in the evolution of thought, society, the Earth, our everyday lives. This novel discusses how stones can transport people away from the now, throwing them into relationships with deep time and space and with intense materiality.

Supplemental Materials

23. Denes, Agnes. *Book of Dust: The Beginning and the End of Time and Thereafter*. Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop, 1989. Print.

An exploration of dust in all its forms, from the atoms that make up stars to the human matter we interact with on a daily basis. This book documents an artfully documented “cross-section of existence.”

24. Parikka, Jussi. *A Geology of Media*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

A book seeking to understand modern media realities by examining them through a geologic lens. The geologic lens dissects big data, deep time, and complex processes. In the same way, Jussi Parikka hopes it will illuminate modern media.

25. Thibault-Picazo, Yesenia. “*Craft in the Anthropocene*.” *Craft in the Anthropocene — Objects/Scenarios - Yeseniap*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Oct. 2014.

The thesis of a masters student studying “Material Futures,” **Craft in the Anthropocene** documents a body of creative work that accelerates geological processes in the hopes of producing rock samples representative of those that will be naturally produced over millennia in our contemporary epoch.

26. “Internet Archaeology.” *Internet Archaeology*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 May 2015.

A naive attempt to record the digital artifacts of the past for the internet archaeologist of the future.

27. *Interstellar*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Matthew McConaughey, Anne Hathaway, Jessica Chastain, Michael Caine. Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. and Paramount Pictures Corporation, 2014. Digital Download.

Astronauts sail through a mysterious worm hole in search of viable new worlds that will save humanity from the deadly ecological blight that is choking the Earth and its inhabitants to death.

Some of these books are available in the RISD and Brown Library system, while others are available for free electronic download online.