

Junior Papers:
Independent Work At Princeton University

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Princeton students are writers. They produce papers for almost every course they take, from humanities to engineering, and from introductory survey courses to the most advanced seminars. Faculty in all departments are committed to supporting and supervising this work.

In order to help prepare them for the many papers they will write, the university requires all students, including those enrolled for the degree of Bachelor of Science in Engineering (almost 18% of the undergraduate body), to complete a one-semester writing course. The vast majority of students meet this requirement in the freshman year. Most of the courses currently fulfilling the requirement, predictably, are literature courses; one of them, Literature 151, "The Craft of Writing," focuses particularly on the writing process. Lit 151 serves about 300 students annually in small sections where much attention is paid to individual progress. Beginning in 1986-87, several sections of Literature 151 are taught in computer laboratory classrooms. At the other end of their careers at Princeton, all seniors in the Bachelor of Arts program, and most students in the Bachelor of Science in Engineering program, produce a senior thesis, a substantial essay or report, usually 50-200 pages long, which is based on a year of independent research and creative activity in the discipline of the major. Whether they compose a piece of music or design a bridge, think about mathematical theorems or propose new national health insurance schemes, reinterpret a text or re-create history, Princeton seniors are required to reflect on their intellectual and creative activity in the form of a significant piece of narration. For most students--whether they enjoy the process of writing or see it as a nearly insuperable hurdle--the climactic moment of their undergraduate education comes when, thesis in hand, they knock at their advisor's door to present the magnum opus. Sometimes senior theses make a significant contribution to the discipline and are revised for publication.

Freshman composition and even senior theses are frequently required at other liberal arts institutions. But at Princeton a unique required writing experience intervenes in the junior year: Junior Independent Work, or the "JP" (junior paper) for short. Every BA junior registers for independent work in his or her major department, in addition to the normal load of four courses, and is assigned a faculty advisor. The nature of the written work to be undertaken, the structure of the experience, and the kind of supervision given to the writing itself varies from department to department. But by the end of the year, all juniors will have

written a total of 30-50 pages on topics they have conceived and researched on their own. Writing the JP is valuable for students both as a hands-on introduction to the discipline of their majors and as preparation for the rigors of the thesis.

You might expect the JP and the senior thesis to be recent additions to the Princeton curriculum, created in response to concerns over the decline in the quality of undergraduate prose. But that is not the case. Required independent work and writing for both juniors and seniors emerged decades ago, evolving from a revision of the curriculum that took place during the 1920's.

The history of that revision is worth recounting. In the summer of 1920, President Hibben along with Dean of the College Eisenhart and Dean of the Faculty Magie, began to discuss curricular proposals to complement the distinctive, but intellectually decentralized, system of small discussion classes, known as precepts, instituted by President Woodrow Wilson in 1910. They first considered creating a comprehensive, disciplinary honors program. But President Hibben disliked the notion of "honors"; in his view, any revision that strengthened the curriculum should benefit all students, and not just the highest achievers. He therefore proposed for all juniors and seniors 1) the institution of comprehensive departmental examinations, 2) the reduction of courses required from five to four, and 3) the addition of independent reading and study as preparation for the examinations. In presenting the changes to the faculty for a vote, Dean Magie argued that students would benefit from being "less hampered by the faculty" in their independent preparation for departmental examinations. Faculty objected that the program expected too much of American undergraduates, and that, contrary to Magie's view, it would ultimately impose even more work on the faculty. At President Hibben's insistence, however, the changes were adopted by the faculty and instituted in 1923.

The original revision did not call for students to produce independent written work. The catalogue for 1923-24 reads: "the student shall do additional reading and study in the general subject of his chosen Department. This reading will be supervised in a way which is determined by each Department for itself." The comprehensive examinations were to "consist of a number of papers sufficient to test the character and extent of his study and reading." The description of junior independent work for English majors in this catalogue, for instance, consists of a long list of required readings.

Within a very few years, however, departments as diverse as English and Biology petitioned for permission to require a written thesis of all seniors, and gradually other departments followed suit. Similarly, in 1929, the English Department began to include a junior paper in its catalogue description, and according to the catalogue of 1934-35, written junior independent work was also being required by Biology and Classics, though not yet by History or Modern Languages. In the catalogue of 1940-41, the idea of independent written work first found its way out of the departmental listings and into the general description of degree requirements:

"Most of the departments require as part of the independent study the writings of several essays or reports in the junior year, and in senior year the writing of a long essay or 'thesis'."

Today, while seniors still take departmental examinations, juniors do not, and the independent written work--the "JP"--which grew out of the old, common reading lists, is the hallmark of the juniors' upperclass status, the test and the symbol of their introduction to the scholarly company of their disciplines.

Junior independent work at Princeton takes many forms. As has been the case since 1924, each department determines the structure of its program. A few departments still set year-long projects, which usually divide for students into one semester of reading and one of writing. But many departments have found that this pattern of the single JP is not completely successful, even when it is carefully overseen by faculty members in individual conferences with their advisees. Asking juniors to tackle a long independent project, just as they are beginning to master the vocabulary and critical concepts of a discipline, is challenging. Most students need careful guidance in a field of inquiry still new to them. Left largely to their own devices, as they must be if their work is to be "independent," some will wander into obscure places or, confused, will procrastinate. Others, of course, will flourish in their new-found freedom. Each department makes its own fine adjustment in the definition of "independence," that is, in the balance between the student "unhampered" by faculty and the burden on faculty of extensive one-on-one supervision.

Most departments have settled on assigning two JP's, one each semester. The first is usually more closely supervised, the topic more restricted, than the second. An increasing number of departments are further dividing the fall semester's work into two or even as many as four or five shorter papers. In some departments, this pattern has been developed so that students can explore several critical topics otherwise not covered by their courses; other departments want to increase the supervision of reading and writing by creating more frequent opportunities for formal criticism from faculty advisors.

Independent work originally came into the curriculum at the expense of one course. It is thus ironic, but understandable, that in at least 12 of 29 departments--and again this is an increasing trend--the challenges to learning and teaching posed by junior independent work are being met by the reinstitution of a course, a junior seminar, in the fall term. The seminar is in some ways like the old reading list: it provides a common intellectual experience for the students as they embark on their major work. But the junior seminar offers the additional opportunity for group exchange, and for the integration of the junior class into the community of the department. The seminar often gives an introduction to the methodology of the discipline and provides heuristic tools which students can bring to bear on their papers. It is also a response to the perceived need for greater supervision of the learning experience without the cost of extensive faculty time for additional individual conference hours.

Even in the seminar, however, emphasis remains on the written work. Many of the seminars include student presentations of papers-in-progress. The Religion Department's seminar has become a consciously-taught course of instruction in process writing. The Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs and Public Policy runs both semesters of its Junior Independent Work as seminars; Policy "Conferences" and "Task Forces" are explicitly designed to help students develop techniques of field research and collaborative writing.

Whether or not Junior Independent Work is conducted in a seminar, the JP's in all departments are considered the central pieces of student work. Students meet individually with faculty advisors in one-on-one conferences to plan and develop their writing projects. Almost without exception, students are expected to build a bibliography and conduct library research. In some departments, this is also the time to begin laboratory or field research. The actual supervision of the writing process, however, varies widely even within departments. Some departments require outlines and drafts, for instance; in one or two cases, extensive revision is also mandatory. But in most departments, individual faculty decide how, and how often, to review students' written work. The individual JP conference usually begins as a place for fertile discussion of the topic. Some faculty then give attention to their students' writing process; others tend to think of the writing as a product to be evaluated. In either case, students and faculty members take independent work seriously. The exchange is intellectually stimulating, as students have their first opportunity to work closely with a faculty member on a serious and personally selected topic; faculty often report that the supervision of independent work is the most important teaching that they do.

Recently two departments, English and Religion, have undertaken experimental programs in Junior Independent Work, with grant support from the IBM Advanced Education Project, known at Princeton as Project Pegasus. In each case, faculty have been using computers to improve the teaching of advanced writing and research skills to juniors in their departments. We see these as crucial experiments, since most juniors are now using some form of wordprocessing for their papers; it makes sense to help students take advantage of the power of this writing technology in ways they have not discovered for themselves.

The Religion Department has constructed a cluster of PC computers for students in a renovated basement space and placed PC's in faculty offices. Alan Sponberg, the faculty member currently responsible for the project, writes, "The goal is to use the computers to facilitate the sustained writing process characteristic of independent work, the kind of writing where the student is expected to carry a project through successive drafts, learning through interaction with his advisor and other readers how crucial the process of revision is to serious scholarship." To enable that revision, Sponberg has created customized commands in the wordprocessor, WordPerfect, that enable faculty and peer

critics to imbed comments in the electronic texts "posted" for review on a shared computer account. These comments are displayed in the "window" that WordPerfect makes available. Sponberg has also developed a curriculum for the Religion Department's fall Junior colloquium which teaches students specific writing and research skills using the computer. These skills include building data-bases of research notes and bibliographic records with menu-prompted templates in WordPerfect and generating output of selected and sorted items in several different forms. One unexpected but very positive outcome of the project has been the sense of an intellectual community that has developed among the junior majors working on their JP's in the Religion Department's PC cluster.

In the English Department, William Howarth and his colleagues have taken a somewhat different approach to the teaching of revising and research skills. Using computers in the offices of faculty advisors, they have been transforming the individual JP conference into a writing tutorial which places the student in command of the text rather than the professor. With the student at the keyboard, the faculty member becomes a guide and coach in the process of considering and trying out strategies for revision. Department members have also been showing students how to use the outlining, merging and sorting facilities of WordPerfect and WordPerfect Library for researching, notetaking and planning their papers.

Even as the structure and the methods for teaching Junior Independent Work evolve with the changing times and technologies, however, the goal remains the same. The Junior Papers help Princeton faculty to instill in their students the lifelong quest for knowledge, passion for truth and desire to contribute to the shared discoveries of mankind which are the hallmarks of a liberal education.