

## Guidelines for PHYS 539 -- Special Topics Seminar

Updated: 06 August 2013

Corbin Covault

This is a short summary of the guidelines for setting up and coordinating PHYS 539, otherwise known as "the Reading Course".

PHYS 539 provides a mechanism for letter-graded graduate course credit for guided independent study on specific advanced topics. An individual course can be established for 1, 2, or 3 credits (usually 3-credits). Any faculty in the physics department can offer a Reading Course at their own discretion. There is no limit to the number of PHYS 539 courses a student may take during their time in the PhD program. Students who are interested in establishing/registering for a given Reading Course should consult directly with faculty to negotiate and plan for such a course well before the start of a given semester. Details are provided below.

There are certain advantages of offering PHYS 539 instead of PHYS 601 for your students who are looking for non-dissertation course credit but who are otherwise not planning to completely fulfill this by enrolling in regular graduate courses. One important advantage of the Reading course is that students who take PHYS 539 earn a letter grade (A,B, etc.) that contributes to the minimum 24-credits of letter-graded coursework that each student must complete (12 credits if the student enters with a masters). In contrast, students who enroll in PHYS 601 earn only a Pass/No-Pass grade. The other main advantage is that the study is structured and the topic of the course is listed on the student's transcript. Finally, depending on the topic and the structure of the course, students taking PHYS 539 may petition to have the course counted toward their "B"-list departmental course requirement.

The main disadvantage of PHYS 539 relative to PHYS 601 is that it requires a certain level of pre-planning and a commitment to structure and effort on a single topic that is not really implied in for the non-letter graded PHYS 601.

Any number of students may be enrolled in a particular reading course offered by any particular faculty, although many reading courses include only one student. It's also possible that students who are working in other groups might be interested in your reading course. Reading courses are offered solely at the discretion of the faculty and do not count toward the faculty departmental teaching commitments. Just as for any other course, tuition is charged and so resources need to be allocated to cover these tuition costs.

As a student, if you want to establish a Reading Course with a given instructor, here are the steps you need to follow:

Step 1: Negotiate with the given faculty, and agree on the main topic, and a preliminary reading list.

Step 2: Work with the instructor to produce a single document (plain text or whatever) that includes the following components:

- (a) The topical title of the course (limited to 30 characters)
- (b) An indication of the total number of credits awarded (1, 2, or 3).
- (c) The names of the students(s) who plan to enroll.
- (d) A short paragraph that describes the topic.
- (e) A planned reading list. This can include journal papers, textbooks, or any other agreed-upon materials.
- (f) A description of the criteria by which the work will be evaluated for a letter-grade. This can include, for example, work-problems, a short paper, a presentation, weekly discussions of the reading, or any combination of the above. Whatever the student and the instructor agree upon, that's fine.

The level of detail for all the of the above should be such as to correspond to not more than one page of text.

Step 3: The faculty member should relay this document to the Graduate Program Director to indicate a willingness and a plan to offer the course for a given semester. This document should be submitted as soon as possible but not later than a FULL WEEK before the start of the semester.

Step 4: The Graduate Program Director will review the document and then will work with the registrar to establish the given course on SIS with the proper topic. This usually take a few days.

Step 5: Once the registrar establishes the course, with the correct instructor and topic listing, the student can register as usual for the course using SIS.

Copies of the course description document will be placed in the students' departmental record file(s).