Honors Senior Capstone Guide

Many students find their senior capstone one of the most rewarding aspects of their college experience—and they appreciate producing something to show graduate school admissions committees and potential employers. Other students, however, can find writing a capstone frustrating and the final product disappointing (and so not useful professionally). The difference in capstone experiences often comes down to how well and how early students understand the nature of the project—and how readily they seek out the appropriate help when they encounter the inevitable problems.

That is where this capstone guide comes in; follow it and you are much more likely to be pleased with both your capstone and the experience of writing it. In addition to this guide, your most powerful tool for the completion of a high-quality capstone is your faculty mentor. Involve her or him in every stage of your project, from early planning through final analysis.

Important note: many students also have capstone requirements in their major that involve a research project or other final product that may be similar to the honors program capstone project. It is not our intention that honors students complete two totally separate capstone projects. However, ***You may not simply submit the capstone work you did for your major as your honors capstone work***. Instead, the honors program requirement is that students <u>extend and expand</u> the work they did in their major. Students will be required to submit their major-required capstone product at the beginning of the Hon401 course to ensure that they continue the development of their project to meet the honors program requirement.

This capstone guide is divided into five sections: **(I.)** the nature of your capstone's argument; **(II.)** how to research your capstone; **(III.)** establishing a relationship with your mentor; **(IV.)** how to present your capstone; **(V.)** self-assessing the various parts of yours written capstone. **(VI.)** The grade for the final capstone project.

I. THE NATURE OF YOUR CAPTSONE'S ARGUMENT

Originality of Argument

Original academic writing aims to contribute to the body of expert knowledge in one or more academic fields. A scholar is an expert who cares about originality because s/he wants to improve and expand the work that others have already done. This means an expert must be familiar with the existing work in the field(s), and must know how to use appropriate methodology to collect data and generate evidence for a new argument about the field.

What makes research *authentic*? What makes an argument *original*? For the purposes of your capstone, there are at least three ways of thinking about originality that will satisfy the requirements of the Honors Program:

A. The evidence that supports the argument is unpublished or new. This means you are addressing a relevant question in the field using materials nobody has previously consulted, collected, or considered important. This may be new data from lab or field research, a new archive of texts or visual materials, new interviews or personal investigations. This is a very common approach to originality in undergraduate work, especially if you are joining a large research project with a predefined hypothesis, such as those in natural and social sciences. Your work is to contribute to the power of the argument by showing how new evidence strengthens the hypothesis or confirms the theoretical framework. This may also apply to projects in textual scholarship including English, history, and philosophy, as well as anthropology or sociology, where you decide that a new body of materials will illuminate a question in a new way.

A.1 REPLICATION/CONFIRMATION STUDIES

Projects whose originality stems from newly collected data need not advance a new argument or viewpoint. There is great value in collecting additional data in support of an hypothesis or idea that is already commonly accepted. In fact, simply attempting to replicate another study with newly collected sources of information is worthy and important effort, especially in light of the ongoing so-called "replication crisis" in social and natural sciences. Projects that support (or weaken) already accepted ideas are important and can still easily quality as original. Such projects, however, should explicitly embrace the work of a replication study by identifying the existing scholarship they seek to replicate, detailing how their project will effectively replicate this work, and explaining why attempting to replicate this particular research is of value now.

LIMITS TO ORIGINAL DATA PROJECTS

It is important to note that originality is not a substitute for depth and rigor. However, simply generating data does not automatically qualify a project as original academic research (or as an acceptable capstone project). The data at the heart of your project data must come from appropriate and valid methods designed to address the scholarly question you have chosen.

Methodologies that are entirely appropriate for some research questions could be inappropriate in others. Generating original data through a methodology that does not fit your scholarly question would fall short of the capstone requirements. Let's say, for example, you wanted to know if a specific prison-based intervention successfully reduced recidivism of the formerly incarcerated. Interviewing prisoners participating about their plans for release could answer *some* questions about the intervention, but those interviews could *not* whether or not the

intervention was successful in reducing recidivism. That question would be better answered through a statistical analysis, comparing participants with similar situated prisoners who did not participate in the intervention. In a case like this, it may be a matter of simply re-framing the question from "Does intervention X decrease recidivism?", to "How do participants in intervention X perceive the program they are completing?" This is a perfectly valid, if smaller, research question.

The most successful research projects are those for which answers can be successfully sought. When it comes to an honors capstone, bigger is not necessarily better. There is a major danger in trying to do too much: your capstone could collapse under its own weight.

Most important of all, all academic research rests on a foundation, a knowledge base created by countless researchers that came before. *Students will be assessed on their mastery of the relevant prior literature* as much as on the methodology and execution of the project itself. Successful capstones generally devote much of the total page length to surveying existing knowledge around the chosen research question in a way that demonstrates the student's broad command of the relevant literature and its development over time.

If, to continue the example from above, your project employs interviews to answer a research question, your capstone must still detail both how your questions matters in light of existing research as well as why your methodology is an appropriate one for the question.

B. The argument combines existing knowledge (materials and methods) from disparate sources or even fields in some new, original, and useful fashion. This means that you demonstrate in your work a meaningful or revealing relationship between pieces of knowledge that currently exist unconnected in disparate places. Although the research materials or field-specific expertise may not be completely new, the connection you are making produces a new argument. This also means that simply reporting that literature exists on a topic in separate fields is not a way to produce new knowledge because such reports tell us nothing about how or why a bridge should be built between the fields of scholarship. This kind of approach is very common among scholars in the humanities (English, history, philosophy, communications, and the arts), who reach for arguments and materials conventionally used in related disciplines (e.g., literature and history, literature and philosophy, philosophy and media studies, history and anthropology).

C. Your work provides a history of a field or of an idea that reveals how the study and the knowledge in that field have gone through significant shifts, trends, or disconnections. For example, there have been dramatic changes in methodology, in ethical considerations of research, notions of evidence, influence of major scholars, etc. This option is much more difficult than either A. or B. because it presumes that you are a master of existing literature, and are on the verge of offering a methodological breakthrough. Although this is unlikely to be within the scope of an undergraduate project, it can be a useful way to set your sights on the demands of graduate-level work.

Depth and Rigor

In addition to having an original argument, your capstone will also need to be grounded in a body of evidence that has depth. Likewise, your evidence will need to emerge out of a rigorous methodology that is appropriate to your discipline and topic.

By depth we mean here that you have found and organized enough of the evidence that is available to you—given constraints of time, budget, and skills—that you can persuade your reader of your argument. Methodological rigor means here that in gathering and analyzing your evidence, you have adopted practices that meet two standards: first, the practices you adopt are those that specialists in the relevant field agree are likely to produce compelling or reliable arguments. Second, those practices match or align with your arguments; that is, your methodology is capable of achieving the stated objective of your capstone.

Consider this example: Sally Student wishes to explore the extent to which politicians who are Etruscan face anti-Etruscan sentiment (what Sally calls "Etruscan-phobia") in elections. She interviews four Etruscan politicians she happens to know and who have lost elections. Each politician reports they believe Etruscan-phobia explains their loss. Sally concludes she has all that she needs to argue in her capstone that Etruscan-phobia is keeping Etruscan politicians out of office.

Sally's evidence, however, lack depths and her methodology may lack rigor. Sally, for example, has not taken advantage of all the evidence readily available to her. She, for instance, might have easily determined—using publicly available sources—how many Etruscan politicians ran in elections and how frequently they won. Doing so would give her an independent source to check the accuracy of her four politicians' assessments. She might have done a content analysis of news reports of local elections that included Etruscan candidates to see if that coverage reflected or reported upon Etruscan-phobia. She might have consulted opinion polls about popular opinions of Etruscans. In short, by limiting her research to just interviews, she restricted the depth her capstone might easily have had. Another way to say this is that capstone projects, like all academic research, should employ the strategy of "multiple lines of evidence" as much as possible.

Moreover, Sally's chosen methodology lacked rigor. Without a careful methodology for selecting whom to interview and how many interviews to conduct (.pdf file), Sally cannot know how representative or revealing her interview subjects' experiences might be. Perhaps, for example, Sally was more likely to know young politicians because she herself is young. Her interview subjects, accordingly, might have lost their respective elections not because of their Etruscan backgrounds but because voters believed them to be too inexperienced for the office. This is an example of sampling bias and is a fatal flaw in her research design if not mitigated in some way. Because Sally's interviews did not emerge from a rigorous methodology, those interviews would make poor evidence with which to answer her stated research question ("Does Etruscan-phobia keep Etruscans out of public office?"). The bottom line is that to answer her original question, Sally would need to employ additional sources of evidence and/or adopt a more reliable methodology for her interviews.

It is important to note, however, that Sally's interviews could perhaps answer a different question, such as: "How do Etruscan politicians understand their electoral losses?" It is not *the number* of interviews that is the main problem with her methodology, it is that the choice of interview subjects are not well-matched to the research question. In fact, some qualitative research methods rely on just a handful of interviews. However, those interview subjects must be chosen carefully and must also be coupled with a "deep read" approach toward analyzing the content of the interviews.

Because styles, standards, and methods vary by discipline, your capstone mentor is the best guide in your pursuit of depth and rigor. Be sure to discuss the nature of your evidence (surveys, interviews, texts, laboratory data, government reports, specialized data sets, etc.) with your

mentor. Just as important is your method of analysis (deep read, content analysis, statistics, etc.), so you must discuss that with them as well. Informed by the capstone mentors and Hon401 instructors, the director of the Honors Program is the ultimate judge of whether a capstone project is of sufficient depth and rigor to satisfy the honors capstone requirement.

II. HOW TO RESEARCH YOUR TOPIC

A. Choosing the Right Database

Determining what has already been written about your topic and finding the evidence required to make your own contribution to your field will almost certainly require thorough research and may consume as much time as the research itself. Choosing the right database from the library at John Jay can profoundly shape how efficient (and quick!) your research is.

To see just how important your choice of database can be, watch this ninety-second video using a real-life example from a recent Honors Program capstone project at John Jay: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XiBJjjDlpg

This careful explanation from UCLA can help you make the most of your research time: http://guides.library.ucla.edu/databases/choosing

B. Choosing the Right Search Terms

Once you have found the best database(s) for your research, you will need to identify the most powerful search terms—or more likely, search phrases—for your research. In doing so, it's helpful to be aware of both the importance of **synonyms** in database searches and the differences between *keyword* searching, *phrase* searching, and *subject* searching.

Take a look at this video that uses, once again, a real world example of these issues. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YguZOi5XPZg

Finding the best combination of search terms and phrases often requires using what are known as Boolean operators. See here for a video discussing how to use Boolean operators: http://lib.colostate.edu/tutorials/boolean.html

For a careful discussion of how to construct an efficient research approach for database, see here: http://www.li.suu.edu/research-tips/Search-Strategies.html

C. Using Google Books

Google books is a powerful search engine that students frequently overlook. Here's a quick video showing you both why google books can make your research time more efficient in a capstone and how to do such a search. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAafWYik09g

D. Beware the "woozle"

If you remember the 100 Acre Wood, you likely remember the time when Winnie the Pooh and Piglet go hunting for a creature called the "woozle." Pooh and Piglet follow the woozle's tracks, and find in the course of their hunt that there are more and more tracks. Christopher Robin eventually has to break the situation down for Pooh and Piglet: instead of tracking the footprints of the woozle, they have instead been following their own!

Over time, the "woozle effect" has become a phrase meaning to make an argument through citation rather than through evidence. Over time, we see a citation of an idea so many times it leads people to believe something when in fact the notion lacks evidence. The claim is not backed on an original finding. Famously, for example, the <u>Vera Institute of Justice</u> found a "woozle" effect when measuring <u>human trafficking</u>. Although many reports on human trafficking cited studies, only one cited <u>original research</u>. The others simply cited other studies citing other studies—the <u>epistemological</u> equivalent of Pooh and Piglet's footprints. The authors of the Vera Institute concluded that little that passed for "knowledge" about the prevalence of human trafficking was, in fact, reliable and most reports likely significantly overestimated how frequently it occurred.

E. Meeting with a Reference Librarian

Both your "Originality" assignment and your "Literature Review" assignment will likely be easier and more useful if [you make an appointment with a reference librarian at John Jay](#). Each academic department or program at the College has a "library liaison" that can also be of assistance. See [here](#) for a list of library liaisons.

III. ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR MENTOR

Before you submit your "preliminary capstone mentor agreement," make sure that your Capstone Mentor and you share the same expectations for your working relationship. That

relationship will certainly evolve and change over time, but you should establish parameters early on to avoid possible frustration or confusion.

Also, please be aware that, in your mentor's assessment of your work, we will specifically ask them if you sought and utilized feedback from them, communicated with them frequently, and responded to communication and direction from them. Simply put, if you do not work closely with your mentor, it will hurt your grade.

You and your mentor should agree on the following:

1. How often will you meet in the Fall semester? In the Spring? Generally, the Honors Program recommends meeting twice a month in the Fall semester and weekly in the Spring semester.

2. How frequently will you be submitting updates to your Mentor? Generally, the Honors Program recommends sending updates every week in the Spring semester.

3. What will your mentor expect as preparation for these meetings? E-mailed notes on sources? Sample paragraphs? Generally, the Honors Program recommends that the student submissions in advance of a meeting be the basis for the discussion at those meetings.

IV. PLANNING YOUR CAPSTONE PRESENTATIONS

In the Spring semester, your Hon-401 professors and the Honors Program will ask you to give presentations periodically on your capstone project. Although the length and focus of these presentations will vary, they will all likely need to have the following elements.

1. An explanation of your topic and its significance
2. An explanation of your capstone's contribution to the existing literature by presenting both (1) the question(s) your capstone intends to answer and why those questions matter and (2) an explanation as to your answer to the question(s)
3. Explain how and with what means you will answer those questions: what evidence will you marshal, what methodologies will you employ, what approaches will you adopt?

Keep in mind the ways in which oral and written presentations differ.

The oral presentations of your capstone project need to be simpler and more clear than your written versions because most people have greater trouble assimilating complex ideas and arguments orally. You will have to make the connections between thought units particularly explicit and will have to lay bare the conceptual logic of your capstone.

Shorter, less complex sentences work better in oral presentations—even if they can bore readers in a written version of the same material. Remember to speak slowly enough that your audience can understand you: 125 words per minute is a good guide for calculating what you will say.

V. SELF-ASSESSING YOUR WRITTEN CAPSTONE

Assessing Your Introduction

1. Does your introduction work to grab the reader's attention?

2. Does your introduction locate your argument within the larger context of your field? Are the most significant issues introduced?

3. Does your introduction make the relationship between your capstone and existing scholarship clear?

4. Does your introduction make clear the evidentiary base and methodological approaches you use in your capstone?

5. Does your introduction answer the dreaded "so what?" question?   Have you carefully explained your capstone's significance?

6. Does your introduction provide a roadmap for the entire capstone?

Assessing Your Capstone's Internal Structure and Presentation of Evidence

1. Do the individual parts of your capstone follow a logical order? Or, in disciplines with a well-established presentation order (for example, "methods," "results," and "discussion" in many social science fields), does your capstone follow the conventions of your discipline?

2. Have you made the division between individual parts of your capstone clear?

3. Have you organized your paragraphs around a central idea expressed clearly in a topic sentence (also known as a "claim").

4. Have you provided the necessary textual evidence (as appropriate to your discipline) to persuade your reader that you are accurately conveying the argument of your sources? Have you properly integrated your textual evidence?

5. Are you certain that your evidence is relevant to your arguments?

6. Have you adequately cited your sources—even when summarizing or paraphrasing—so that your reader can easily know what are your original ideas and what are the ideas or words of others? Have you followed the citation conventions appropriate to your discipline? In short, have you avoided the various forms of plagiarism?

Assessing Your Conclusion

1. Does your conclusion provide a clear and thorough summary of the argument outlined in the introduction and developed in the body of the work?

2. Does the conclusion reinforce that you have delivered on the promises of your introduction?

3. Does the conclusion remind your reader how and why both your questions and your answers are significant and interesting?

VI. The grade for the final capstone project and capstone awards

Because Hon401 is the "capstone course," the grade on the final capstone project will factor heavily into the grade for the Hon401 course. The official policy on grading for the Hon401 course is found in the Hon401 syllabus. Students should be aware, however, that their final capstone project shall constitute <u>30% of the grade </u>of the Hon401 course. In addition, satisfactory completion of a capstone project is a strict requirement of the Honors Program. Those who do not complete a satisfactory capstone project are removed from the Honors Program, even if they earn a passing grade in the Hon401 course.

The grading for the final capstone course shall be collaborative between the faculty mentor and the Hon401 instructor. Your faculty mentor will be asked to submit a grade to the Hon401 instructor. This grade will be combined equally with the grade determined by the Hon401 instructor in the form of an arithmetic mean (average) to determine the overall capstone grade. In the event that the grade given by the faculty mentor and the grade given by the Hon401 instructor are different by more than 15 points (out of 100), the Director of the Honors Program shall intervene, read the capstone, and assign the final grade within the range of the two disparate grades. In addition to her/his own assessment of the capstone, The Honors Program Director will welcome all input from the Hon401 instructor and the faculty mentor when assigning the grade.

At the end of the year, students will be considered for honors capstone awards. These may be allocated in disciplinary categories or in content themes and will also include a "first prize" for the best overall honors capstone. Students must be nominated for capstone awards by their Hon401 instructors <u>and</u> their faculty mentors, with 8-12 finalists being selected by the Director of the Honors Program. When selecting the finalists, the Director will also consider each student's record of compliance with general Honors Program assignments, expectations, and deadlines regarding the capstone projects. To be considered for an award, finalists must present their capstone project in a 10-15 minute oral presentation during Student Research and Creativity Week. The selection committee for the capstone awards will consist of the Hon401 instructors and the Director of the Honors Program, as well as any additional faculty member or other person invited by the Director.

On behalf of all of the Honors Program faculty and staff, good luck on your capstone work. We hope that you, like so many students before you, will consider this the most rewarding academic experience of your career.

...so far.