

**The Capstone Project: an Overview**

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## **Table of Contents**

- 1. MLA Capstone Project: an Overview**
- 2. Capstone Project Proposal**
- 3. Capstone Thesis: A Guide to Writing Introductions**
- 4. Submitting the Capstone Project**
- 5. Capstone Project Timetable**
- 6. Capstone and Graduation Deadlines**
- 7. Incomplete Capstone Projects and Master's Thesis Registration**

## **1. MLA Capstone Project: an Overview**

The Capstone Project is the culmination of the MLA student's interdisciplinary graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Within the program, each MLA student constructs a curriculum around a concentration, a central theme that ties together most of the nine courses required for a degree. The topic of the Capstone Project should reflect this concentration in some way although the project need not build directly upon research or projects completed in earlier MLA coursework. It is important, however that in the project's preface or introduction, all students should describe how their courses contributed to the evolution of their Capstones.

Capstone Projects are different from Master's theses. One central difference is that they must be multidisciplinary. By integrating two or more academic disciplines into a Capstone Project, each student realizes the mission of the MLA Program itself: to provide a place for students to create their own graduate curriculum across the arts and sciences. MLA students also tend to be generalists rather than specialists, which leads to different expectations for the scope of their knowledge of literature from disciplines within their concentrations. While it is expected that MLA students should have a good working familiarity with the literature in their fields, their knowledge of the literature in their fields does not need to be as exhaustive as for students writing Master's theses or doctoral dissertations.

There are two common approaches to writing Capstones, and each approach has some general guidelines. In the first approach, the Capstone is an extended research paper, based on primary and/or secondary sources. It is suggested that students who select this option limit the length of their Capstones to 25-30 pages. Capstones should not be shorter than 25 pages, and some students may elect to complete Projects that are longer than 30 pages. Usually, however, it is best for students write a focused, high-quality research paper that can be completed in a timely fashion. In the second approach, students write a more creative Project. For example, some students write a series of short stories or poems, or a memoir. In this approach, students should supplement their writings with a short (10-15 pp.) analytical piece that surveys some important literature in their fields of interest and explains how their creative pieces compare with that literature. There are many other possibilities for Capstone Projects; samples are on file at the MLA Program office.

Students should establish more specific guidelines for their Capstone Projects in conjunction with their primary faculty readers. For example, documentation format is usually dictated by the reader, and by the central disciplines in which the student is working. Faculty readers should also approve each Project, from the focus of the topic, to the methods, sources, and preliminary theses or purpose. To facilitate this process, students are asked to prepare a 3-5 page Capstone proposal, which they must submit to their readers and to the MLA Program for

approval. Students should also meet regularly with their readers to ensure that their Projects are progressing according to plan.

There are three options for the completion of the capstone within the 9 course unit program. Some students complete their Capstone Projects by registering for an Independent Study under the supervision of their primary faculty reader and with the support of their secondary reader. Other students may register for a course that parallels the focus of their Capstone Project, and write their Capstone as a course requirement, with the agreement of the instructor. Finally, students may also register for the MLA Capstone seminar that is taught through the MLA Program. If an MLA student pursues a project in the MLA Capstone Seminar, they must still secure the support of a primary reader, but the instructor of the MLA Capstone Seminar can sign as the secondary reader. The seminar serves as a guide to planning and writing a Capstone Project, and facilitates peer review of drafts.\* The Capstone Seminar does not replace close contact with faculty readers, but supplements this contact with a focus on the writing and revising process. In each of these cases, the student must submit a Capstone Proposal for their readers' approval before they begin to write their Capstone Project. The project proposal should be approved by the reader(s) and then submitted to the MLA program director before the end of classes in the term prior to the term in which the Capstone will be written.

Clearly, the relationship between the MLA student and the faculty reader is critical to the successful completion of the Capstone Project. We at the MLA Program are eager to answer any questions about proposed Capstone Projects, the procedures and responsibilities of a faculty reader, or the standards for Capstone Projects. Please address any questions to the MLA Program, (215) 898-7326.

\*Please note that students selecting the option of the Capstone seminar must have secured their faculty readers and also must have an approved Capstone proposal at the time of the first class meeting of the seminar. Students who do not meet both of these requirements will not be permitted to take the seminar.

## 2. Capstone Project Proposal

As an extended piece of research and a creative exercise in multidisciplinary scholarship, the Capstone Project represents the culmination of your work in the MLA program. These characteristics also make it imperative that you have a clear, focused plan for your Capstone before you begin to research and write it. For this reason, the MLA program requires you to submit a Capstone proposal, 3-5 pages in length, to your faculty readers and to your MLA advisor, at least one month before the start of the semester in which you intend to complete the project. Below are some guidelines and advice for preparing the proposal. (Please note that some of these guidelines may need to be modified slightly for Capstone Projects that are not research projects.) If you have any questions or concerns, please contact an MLA advisor.

**1. Provide a clear description of your Project's topic or focus:** You should frame your Project by identifying the topics that you will include in your research. You can also do this by explaining why you will study certain topics, not answer certain questions, or use a particular set of sources. Often, scholars identify broad issues that motivated their study, and then set limits on their present study. It is far better to set a narrow study and to thoroughly explore it than it is to delineate a broad scope and to conduct a shallow or haphazard investigation.

When you situate your research and frame your reader, you need to be aware that you are writing interdisciplinary theses. Your readers may not be as familiar with the conventions of interdisciplinary research as they are with conventions in their own discipline, so you may need to use your introduction to describe the research design and benefits of interdisciplinary research. Look for models of interdisciplinary introductions for ideas about how to frame an interdisciplinary study.

**2. Describe your preliminary hypothesis or main research questions, if you are writing a research paper:** Writers often feel uncomfortable when they are asked to give preliminary hypotheses in a proposal, since they may not have completed their research yet. Bear in mind that your preliminary hypothesis is not your final conclusion. Instead, it represents the claim that will guide your research. You may feel more comfortable giving a series of questions that you hope to answer in your Capstone Project in lieu of a thesis. Be sure that you do not omit this information, since your proposal will be judged on the likelihood that you can complete your proposed Capstone successfully. It will be very difficult for your readers to make this assessment without seeing your thesis or research questions.

**3. Explain how your project derives from your courses:** Your Capstone Project should reflect, in some way, your main concentration in the program. This ensures that your courses have prepared you to research and write your project. Some courses may have introduced you to a topic, while you may have learned important theories or methods of analysis in others. When you describe the significance of your Capstone Project, you should be sure to address this question. (You may need to think creatively here, especially if your Capstone Project is creative or unusual in some way. You should feel free to discuss your ideas with one of the MLA advisors.)

**4. Establish the significance of your study:** Throughout your introduction, you need to motivate your reader to read your Capstone. You can do this by discussing the significance of your study. What makes the issues you be discussing important? Are you taking a side in a current debate? Will you develop a thesis that will help to answer an open research question in your fields? Study how writers in your fields discuss the significance of their research if you need models. Since you are writing interdisciplinary Capstones, you can also explain the significance of combining two or more disciplines in your research. What do you gain from interdisciplinary research that you would not have from research in one discipline? Why do your disciplines fit well together?

**5. Sources and methodology:** If you are writing a research paper, you need to give your readers a clear overview of the sources that you will use to conduct your research. Different disciplines require different kinds of information. For example, in history you would need to discuss the dates, provenance, and intended audience of your primary sources. In anthropology or folklore, you would need an ethnography that describes your informant's position in a community and the community itself.

Methodology is a technical term for the methods that you use to identify and analyze information from your sources. Some methods are qualitative, while others are quantitative. For example, if I were contrasting the gender roles in two different pieces of travel literature from the 19th century, I would be using a comparative methodology. People who are conducting interviews would need to describe their methods of selecting people to interview and analyzing the information from the interview, as well as consider whether they were planning to have observation sessions as well. If I were counting the number of legal cases that fit into certain categories and using statistical methods to analyze changes over time in the cases, I would be conducting quantitative research. If you're using a specific, well-established theory to analyze your evidence you should introduce it in your methodology

section. The best way to decide how to describe your methodology is to study the introductions of similar studies, since different disciplines have different terminologies and conventions.

**6. Include a literature review:** Briefly summarize your key scholarly sources and tell how they are informing your thinking at this preliminary stage. Literature reviews serve several important purposes. First, they show your readers that you have good working knowledge of the major sources in your fields, and they help to ensure that you are not simply reproducing another scholar's work. Second, they help you to frame your research with reference to other works in your field. You may be able to establish the significance of your research by demonstrating that you are addressing an open (or debated) question in the field of sociology, for example. Since the Capstone is an interdisciplinary thesis, you may need to discuss works from several different fields that help to inform your approach. If your Capstone is a collection of short stories or poems, you can discuss other authors' work that informs your writing in some way.

**7. Attach a preliminary bibliography or works cited page:** This reference list cites sources of what is "out there" on your topic and that you believe you might refer to in doing this research. This list should not be simply a duplicate of the sources you've selected or highlighted in your review of the literature, but also give a broader picture of the research areas informing (or that you imagine might inform) your own perspective. That is, imagine how your readers might draw connections as they scan your source-list: beyond demonstrating that you can give proper attribution to leading thinkers in a particular field, this list suggests you are capable of making creative connections across works of scholarship. (The bibliography is not included in the suggested length for the Capstone proposal.)

### **3. Capstone Project: A Guide to Writing Introductions**

As an extended piece of research and a creative exercise in multidisciplinary scholarship, the Capstone project represents the culmination of your work in the MLA program. These characteristics also make it imperative that the introduction to each Capstone sets up the thesis clearly. While conventions for introductions differ from discipline to discipline, especially with regards to writing style, there are some common traits of introductions that stand as guidelines for the Capstone introductions.

**1. Explain the development of your project:** What issues or questions were you first interested in exploring, and how did your interests develop and change over time? You should discuss how your understanding of your topic changed and developed during the research and writing processes. In this regard, you need to describe how your coursework contributed to your Capstone thesis. If you prefer, you can place this reflection on your coursework in a preface that comes before your “Introduction.”

**2. Situate your readers and frame your research:** Carolyn Collette & Richard Johnson introduce “situating” and “framing” in their *Common Ground: Personal Writing & Public Discourse*. When you situate your readers, you enable your readers to find themselves in your project by using certain terminology, defining certain terms and concepts, and alluding to key debates in scholarly literature. Throughout your introduction, you need to keep your readers’ needs, responses, and interests in mind in order to place them in your writing.

Framing is an easier concept to understand and implement in your writing. When you frame your research, you identify the topics, sources, and methods that you will include in your research. You can also do this by explaining why you will not answer certain questions, study certain topics, or use a particular set of sources. Often, scholars identify broad issues that motivated their study, and then set limits on their present study. It is far better to set a narrow study and to thoroughly explore it than it is to delineate a broad scope and to conduct a shallow or haphazard investigation.

When you situate your research and frame your reader, you need to be aware that you are writing interdisciplinary theses. Your readers may not be as familiar with the conventions of interdisciplinary research as they are with conventions in their own discipline, so you may need to use your introduction to describe the research design and benefits of interdisciplinary research. Look for models of interdisciplinary introductions for ideas about how to frame an interdisciplinary study.

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**5. Establish the significance of your study, and gain the interest of your readers:**

Throughout your introduction, you need to motivate your reader to read your thesis. You can do this by discussing the significance of your study. What makes the issues you will be discussing in your Capstone important? Are you taking a side in a current debate? Will you develop a thesis that will help to answer an open research question in your fields? Study how writers in your fields discuss the significance of their research if you need models.

Since you are writing interdisciplinary theses, you can also explain the significance of combining two or more disciplines in your research. What do you gain from interdisciplinary research that you would not have from research in one discipline? Why do your disciplines fit well together?

You can also increase your reader's interest in your research by developing an interesting or creative hook into your first paragraph. Common techniques include telling an anecdote, including a quote, describing some key debates in dramatic detail, etc.. You need to identify the interests of your audience and the conventions of your discipline to devise an appropriate strategy for hooking your reader. One common rule for creative introductions is that you need to be sure that your creative hook has a clear link to your specific topic or approach.

#### 4. Submitting the Capstone Project

We attempt to mandate few requirements for the Capstone Project and to accommodate the varied writing and presentation styles of our MLA students in their final projects. However, as our student body increases and our alumni files swell, we must now ask that you comply with the following standards **prior** to the submission of your approved Capstone Project to the MLA program advisors. These formatting requirements will facilitate the proper cataloguing of your research.

Your **Final Capstone Project** must:

- be submitted in a see-through binder -- one in which the pages cannot be removed -- preferably with a black or navy spine
- have a cover sheet with the following information:
  1. title of the project
  2. an explanation of the title if not obvious
  3. your full name
  4. full date of submission, e.g. December 5, 2007
  5. the words: MLA Capstone Project;  
University of Pennsylvania
  6. 1st reader: his/her name, department
  7. 2nd reader: his/her name, department
- include a description of how your coursework contributed to your Capstone thesis. How have your interests developed and changed as a result of your coursework? If you prefer, you can place this information in a preface that comes before your "Introduction," or in the "Introduction" itself.

After these preliminaries, your project may then follow the format agreed upon by you and your readers/advisors.

## **5. Capstone Project Timetable**

The following provides a suggested timeline for completing your Capstone Project over the course of a single semester. Students writing their Capstones as part of an independent study might find this to be particularly helpful for planning their time. Students taking the Capstone Seminar will more or less follow this timeline as it is drawn from the Seminar syllabus. Please note that this schedule presumes that you have already completed your Capstone Proposal. Feel free to talk with one of the MLA advisors if you have any questions about anything contained within this timetable.

### **Week 1      Write your preface**

- Write a short description of how your coursework and reading in different disciplines has led to your current formulation of your Capstone topic. This description frames your research (identifies the sources of your ideas as well as your own motivation/rationale for pursuing the topics you have chosen) and will form the basis for the Preface to your Capstone. The Preface should also describe the possible contributions your Capstone will make (to a field, to several disciplines, to a scholarly debate, etc).

### **Week 2      Write your thesis statement**

- Your thesis statement is a multi-part statement in which you assert the central argument, position, or stance that you will advance in your work.
- Also, during this week, you should create a preliminary map of your argument's line of development for your Capstone. Think of this as a "big picture" road map for the Project. Identify the places where you feel uncomfortable with your projected organization.

### **Week 3      Create a working bibliography: Planning your research**

- Type a Working Bibliography using the proper documentation format for your field (consult with your Primary Reader here) - identify your key scholarly sources (at least 3), scholars whose names come up repeatedly in your research, who are influencing your work on your Capstone in some way.

You might find it useful to arrange a time in VanPelt Library for Bibliographic Instruction. A reference librarian will provide conceptual strategies and subject-based tips on searching for scholarly sources across the disciplines.

### **Week 4      Meet with your readers**

- Arrange a meeting with both of your readers sometime during the week (or with just your Primary Reader if the Secondary Reader is not available) to discuss the preface, bibliography, and thesis statement. Make whatever revisions are necessary in light of the feedback from your readers during this week as well.

### **Weeks 5-7 Create your first complete draft**

- Continue writing.

### **Weeks 8-9 Meet with faculty readers**

- Provide your readers with a copy of your draft and arrange to meet with them for their feedback.

### **Weeks 10-11 Write penultimate draft**

- Revise your draft in light of the feedback from your readers.
- During this time, be sure to double check that you have submitted the proper forms for graduation, certificate, notice on transcript, etc. with the MLA advisors.

### **Week 12 Discuss penultimate draft with faculty readers**

- Get final feedback from your readers

### **Week 13 Make final revisions**

- You are in the home stretch at this point. Complete final draft during this week.

### **Week 14 Final Draft Due**

- Submit the final draft to your readers for their approval.

### **Week 15 Submission (last day of classes)**

- Submit the final copy to the Program Director with the signed Form 500

## 6. Capstone and Graduation Deadlines

Generally speaking, during the semester in which you are enrolled in your sixth MLA course (for full-time students, this is typically your second semester in the program), you should select your faculty readers and submit a completed faculty reader agreement (Form 400) to the MLA office.

If you intend to enroll in the Capstone seminar, you should have an approved Capstone proposal with you at the first class meeting of the seminar. In addition, you will need to meet with one of the MLA advisors before you are permitted to enroll in the Capstone seminar.

During the semester in which you intend to graduate, you should complete and submit a graduation application. When your Capstone is complete, your faculty readers need to complete the final Capstone approval form (Form 500).

All Capstone and graduation forms are available online at <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/CGS/downloads/> and in the CGS office.

Graduation Term	<b>Spring</b> (May graduation)	<b>Summer</b> (August grad)	<b>Fall</b> (December grad)
Copy of approved proposal due in MLA office	November of previous Fall term	April of previous Spring term	July of previous Summer term
Capstone project completed and approved	End of Spring term classes	End of Summer term classes	End of Fall term classes
Online Graduation application	February 1	August 8 or <b>February 1</b> <b>For those who intend to participate in May Commencement</b>	December 1
Faculty Reader Agreement (Form 400)	First day of Spring classes	First day of Summer classes	First day of Fall classes

Bound Capstone Project and Reader Approval Form (Form 500)	Last day of classes	Last day of classes	Last day of classes
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## **7. Incomplete Capstone Projects and Master's Thesis Registration**

Students who fail to complete Capstone projects before the final deadline for the term in which they register for the Capstone Seminar or a Capstone Independent study must remain active students in all subsequent terms in order to complete their MLA program and graduate. In brief, Capstone Projects are projects which you complete by enrolling in a 1 c.u./1 term course, and the Capstone is due approximately two weeks prior to the end of term to permit us to process the grades and audit students for graduation. Previously, if a student failed to complete the Capstone, an Incomplete grade was registered and the student was permitted to remain active without enrolling in coursework in future terms. We will continue to allow students to receive Incomplete grades for Capstone projects; however, any student that has an Incomplete Capstone must register for Master's Thesis in the subsequent term and for each and every term thereafter until the completed and approved Capstone is submitted to the MLA Program.

Master's Thesis Registration will cost \$611.00 for each term in the 2007-08 Academic year and will offer you access to all University facilities and permit you the use of all available student services. Furthermore, you will remain an active full-time student while enrolled for Master's Thesis. This policy brings CGS in alignment with the policy of other graduate degree programs in the School of Arts and Sciences, and ensures you of having uninterrupted access to university resources, including the library, as you complete your Capstone Project.

In addition to the requirements for enrollment in each term during which students continue to work on the Capstone, the new policy will affect graduation posting. Students must reapply for graduation in the term during which they plan to complete the Capstone and their graduation will be posted for that term. Previously, students were rolled over and their graduations were post-dated. This practice was unique to the MLA program and we are making every effort to streamline procedures and bring our practices in line with the other programs at Penn.