



Summer Assignment
Capstone Senior Research Seminar with Dr. Wilson
2024-2025

Please read this entire document carefully before you begin work.

What Capstone Is For

When you take the Capstone Research Seminar in 12th grade, you will spend all year working on an original research project. It will be related to a real-life problem of global significance. Your goal is to generate *new* knowledge. (Unlike most class projects, this one won't just restate existing knowledge.) This knowledge should shed light on some issue that affects real people's lives.

Generating new knowledge requires more than studying a topic in a general way. It also requires (1) deciding on specific questions to ask about the topic and (2) developing a plan for gathering specific evidence—from the world itself, not from books—to answer those questions.

By the middle of the 2024-2025 school year, you will start to gather your evidence. Then you will analyze it and report your findings. Your work will culminate in a presentation to the Wardlaw-Hartridge community in the spring, followed by a research article we will publish for you in the *Capstone Research Journal* at the end of the year.

Let's be real: This will be a lot of work. You should understand and commit to that from the beginning. But when the year is done, you will have an enormous and well-justified new source of confidence as you head to college.

Your Task This Summer

Before the 2024-2025 school year begins, you will spend part of your summer writing a Preliminary Research Proposal. That's your summer assignment. You will submit your proposal for a formal grade in the second week of school.

In your proposal, you will identify the following key things about the research project you would like to undertake:

1. The general topic you would like to investigate
2. How this topic relates to a real-world problem of global significance
3. Your (current) key sources of information about this topic and this problem
4. How you hope to explore this topic through *qualitative* research (see below)

You will find detailed instructions for creating your Preliminary Research Proposal at the end of this packet. Be forewarned: Doing this assignment well takes longer than you may expect. Start early during the summer and give yourself plenty of time to reflect, write, and revise your work over the course of weeks and months. It will make a difference.

To help you with the process of creating your proposal, I will offer monthly virtual office hours on Zoom in June, July, and August. These optional drop-in times are *for you*. Please feel free to attend for any reason that would be helpful. You may drop in to ask a specific question, to get feedback on your early ideas, or just to introduce yourself or say hello (which is not a bad idea). No appointment is required during one of these office hours, which are tentatively scheduled for the following times:

- June 26 (Wednesday), 2:00-3:30 p.m.
- July 16 (Tuesday), 4:00-5:30 p.m.
- August 21 (Wednesday), 7:00-8:30 p.m.

All times are Eastern (i.e., Edison time). Confirmation of the times and links to the Zoom meetings will be distributed to you by email.

What You Need to Understand About Qualitative Research

Before you try to develop your Capstone research topic, you need to understand that your project will involve *qualitative* research. You will engage in this research according to the norms of either the [social sciences](#) or the [humanities](#), depending on your chosen topic.

Because most of us have spent a lot more time thinking about **quant**itative research methods, the nature and goal of **qual**itative research can be tricky for new scholars to grasp.

What's the difference? First, as the name suggests, **quant**itative research involves counting things and doing math. That makes it useful in a specific way: "Quantitative research generates factual, reliable outcome data that are usually [generalizable](#) to some larger populations," [explain](#) Marja J. Verhoef and Ann L. Casebeer (1997). In other words, quantitative scholarship aims to produce large-scale, big-picture knowledge about things that are likely to be true again and again.

In contrast, **qual**itative research is about studying particular things, not things in general. Its goal is to give "due emphasis to the meanings, experiences and views of all the participants being studied." (That's Verhoef and Casebeer again.) It produces knowledge that should be [transferable](#) but not necessarily generalizable.

Another way to put this: Qualitative research is about describing, not counting or predicting. (It comes from the Latin word *qualis*, meaning "what kind," as opposed to *quantus*, "how much.")

Don't misunderstand: Like quantitative research, qualitative research obeys certain rules for producing valid results. But instead of describing a whole population, qualitative researchers typically describe in depth the experiences of a relatively small number of specific people.

Students often worry about this. It can seem like qualitative research must be less objective than quantitative research. "Numbers don't lie," as the saying goes, but "people do." Surely qualitative research will be more prone to bias, exaggeration, and misrepresentation than quantitative research is. Or perhaps qualitative research, focusing on specific experiences, might not have much relevance at all to the larger world.

Such skepticism makes sense, but in fact, all kinds of crucial knowledge about the world come to us through qualitative scholarship.

A qualitative research study, for example, might be an oral history project in which a handful of older people recalled what their community was like when they were young, providing historical insights (e.g., about the local emotional impact of an economic depression or war) that could never be learned another way. It might be a study for which an anthropologist watched and carefully described the behavior of strangers, generating important clues, though not numerical data, about the unspoken values of their society. It might involve reviewing government documents to understand education policies that affect millions of people. Or it might involve an in-depth analysis of interviews with workers in a single nonprofit group, explaining the new kinds of challenges nongovernmental organizations may face in the 2020s. Any of these studies could

advance our understanding of the world in powerful ways, even if they don't have the kind of predictive value that quantitative studies aim for.

Indeed, even quantitative-focused scholars depend heavily on qualitative knowledge. Qualitative research helps them understand how to ask more relevant research questions, how to interpret anomalies and exceptions in their data, and why humans perceive the world as they do. Qualitative scholarship, in fact, is what allows quantitative researchers to identify and account for their own biases as they work.

But let's be clear. There's a simple practical reason you will be engaged in qualitative research this year. Generating large enough datasets for valid quantitative social science research is very difficult for high school students. It normally takes large amounts of time and, often, money. Even well-funded teams of scholars in universities may struggle to recruit enough subjects to produce statistically valid quantitative research studies. By limiting your Capstone project to qualitative research, we're making your job a lot easier from the start.

(There is another reason, too. Quantitative research often poses more difficult ethical problems than qualitative research does. We'll talk about various potential ethical issues later this year. For now, you will just want to keep in mind that your Capstone research project *probably* needs to involve adult study subjects, not minors.)

How to Write Your Preliminary Research Proposal

Before the first day of class this fall (September 4, 2024), you will write your Preliminary Research Proposal. This document is a very basic road map for the year ahead. Even if you later have to depart from your original plan—which happens often—writing this proposal during the summer will give you a big head start on the new year. You will turn in your Preliminary Research Proposal for a formal grade during the second week of the new school year, but a polished draft needs to be ready on day one.

Make sure your Preliminary Research Proposal meets **both** of the following requirements.

First, *all* the writing in the document must be your original work, with *no* assistance from AI (and no plagiarism from other sources, of course). We will talk about writerly ethics and other professional norms during the coming year, but for now, you need to err on the side of caution. If you have any questions about what's appropriate, you can always ask.

If I suspect that the writing in your proposal is not entirely yours, I reserve the right to make you rewrite it, whether or not I can prove the suspicion. If I can *prove* the use of AI or plagiarism, you will receive an F for the assignment, but you will still be required to write a new proposal before advancing to the next assignment in the course.

Second, your Preliminary Research Proposal must be formatted correctly according to [APA Style](#). (Please follow the link to find helpful information about basic elements of APA Style, along with sample formatted papers.) Based on the publication guidelines of the American Psychological Association, APA Style is widely used by scholars and publishers in the social sciences, much as MLA Style is widely used in the humanities. It provides a standard “language” that makes it easier for scholars to decode and evaluate each other’s work.

We will follow APA Style as much as possible in Capstone. For the Preliminary Research Proposal, you aren’t expected to be an expert in APA Style yet. But you are expected to make a good-faith effort to follow basic APA guidelines. I strongly recommend studying the APA’s annotated sample student paper ([PDF](#)) as a model for your work. Allow extra time for this if you haven’t worked much in APA Style before.

Many helpful guides to APA Style, besides the ones linked here, are available online. However, you can get a head start on the autumn by going ahead and ordering your copy of the [Concise Guide to APA Style](#) (7th edition), which is one of two required textbooks for Capstone. The retail price is \$32. Please obtain a print copy, not an e-book.

What Your Preliminary Research Proposal Must Include

Your Preliminary Research Proposal must include the following elements, in order, in the form of a clearly written academic paper:

1. **Title Page.** (Consult the APA Style resources for guidance.)
2. **Your General Topic.** (About two paragraphs, with appropriate citations.) Clearly identify and describe the subject you want to investigate in your Capstone research project. Be as specific as you can, providing your reader with any important background information, definitions of key terms, etc. All of this section should be in your own words; **do not** quote directly from any sources. However, for **all** specific information you mention and **all** concepts you paraphrase, you must cite your sources appropriately in APA Style. Study

[these pages](#) at the APA website for information about citing sources in your main text, and [these pages](#) for information about how to compile a reference list (similar to an MLA Style works-cited page) at the end of your document.

3. **How the Topic Relates to a Real-World Problem.** (About two paragraphs, probably with citations.) Clearly explain why understanding your general topic matters for understanding or addressing a specific issue that affects real people. Also explain how this topic and problem have global significance—meaning either that they affect many parts of the world *or* that they affect a specific part of the world outside the United States. As in the first section, this section should be written entirely in your own words, and any information drawn from specific sources (rather than [common knowledge](#)) must be cited appropriately in APA Style.
4. **Key Sources of Your Current Information.** (About one paragraph, ending with a short bullet-point list.) Clearly describe the primary sources of information you *currently* are relying on for understanding your topic. These may include books, documentary films, magazine articles, podcast interviews, previous courses, personal experiences (e.g., internships or family connections), or many other kinds of sources. They should include **only** sources you have actually used already. At the end of your paragraph describing them, include a bullet-point list identifying the top three or four specific sources you have used so far to understand the topic. It's important to be honest; you and I *both* need to be able to assess what additional research you will need to do in order to understand your topic more fully.
5. **How You Hope to Explore the Topic.** (One or two paragraphs.) As clearly as you can at this early stage, explain how you would like to learn more about the topic through **new original** research—*not* by reading what other scholars have already written about the topic. In general, this means identifying (1) a key source of firsthand information (e.g., workers in a certain industry, government documents on a certain website, cultural artifacts available in a certain museum, people in a certain community, etc.) and (2) a specific means of getting the information from that source (e.g., surveys, Zoom interviews, site visits, archival research trips, etc.). Naturally, we will spend a lot of time talking about the research process, and your thoughts at this stage in the process will be imperfect. That's OK.
6. **Reference List.** (Starting at the top of a new page, under the heading "References.") At the very end of your document, provide an alphabetized list of **all** the sources cited in the rest of your Preliminary Research Proposal, following APA Style. This section is equivalent to the works-cited page of MLA Style. Note: Creating and correctly formatting this list will take more time than you think. For an explanation of the elements each entry in the list

should include, click [here](#) and [here](#). For examples of what entries for different kinds of sources should look like, study [this PDF](#). This kind of work requires attention to detail.

When you draft your Preliminary Research Proposal, leave yourself plenty of time to revise and edit the document before the first day of class—at least a week after you finish your complete rough draft. In particular, make sure the entire document makes sense when you re-read all the sections in order. Each section should complement and help explain the other sections, not contradict them. *All* sources cited in the body of the document should also be cited correctly in the reference list at the end.

When properly formatted in APA Style, your Preliminary Research Proposal is likely to be about five pages long. That is an estimate, not a limit.

How the Proposal Will Be Graded

In general, the grading in Capstone next year will be based on university norms. College professors are less likely than secondary teachers to employ rubrics in grading because they want to see evidence that you can apply your existing knowledge and skills in *new* ways without explicit directions from a teacher. There can be a lot of different ways to write a good university-level paper, and there can be a lot of different ways to write a bad university-level paper, while technically complying with a professor’s directions. This can make rubrics difficult to apply.

That said, in at least some cases in Capstone, including the Preliminary Research Proposal, your work will be graded with a rubric for the sake of transparency. Your summer work will be assessed using this matrix:

	Sophisticated (A+)	Strong (A)	Competent (B)	Acceptable (C)	Incomplete (D)	Unsubmitted (F)	Total Possible
Depth of analysis of problems, topics, and concepts	30 points	29 points	26 points	23 points	20 points	0 points	30 points
Effective use of evidence (including correct citations)	20 points	19 points	17 points	15 points	13 points	0 points	20 points
Rigor of ideas and clarity of reasoning	20 points	19 points	17 points	15 points	13 points	0 points	20 points

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High writing quality and careful organization, formatting, and proofreading	30 points	29 points	26 points	23 points	20 points	0 points	30 points
<i>Total Possible</i>	<i>100 points</i>	<i>96 points</i>	<i>86 points</i>	<i>76 points</i>	<i>66 points</i>	<i>0 points</i>	<i>100 points</i>

Late assignments will be assessed a penalty of 5 points per day, in keeping with the History Department's standard policy. After two weeks, late assignments will not be accepted, and a grade of zero will be assigned.