

# HDO MA CAPSTONE GUIDELINES

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## What Is an HDO Capstone Project?

The Capstone Project is your chance to apply what you have learned in HDO to a topic that is understudied or could use a new approach. HDO's coursework, alongside your own original research, will allow you to address an organizational problem in a new way, one that employs Liberal Arts approaches.

You will work with an academic advisor and a second reader (see below) of your choice to (1) articulate your research question; (2) develop research-based expectations or a formal hypothesis; and (3) decide how best to present your research.

The end result of the Capstone is a research-based literature synthesis, an empirical study, or, in some cases a "white paper" or a creative-arts project that will help your audience understand a workplace problem more effectively using the lens of the humanities and/or social sciences. Completion of the Capstone signals that you have the ability to intensively research and write-up an answer to a question you have posed about organizations.

**Please see the Program Manager if you would like to review examples of Capstones or Capstone posters from past students. There are also helpful links throughout this document.**

## How do I identify a topic or problem?

First, let's distinguish the difference between a topic and a problem: A topic is what you are writing about broadly; a problem is the way that a topic is complicated by a set of factors. You will need both a topic and a problem to complete your Capstone Project successfully. (In other words, if there's no problem, there's no need to study the topic!)

Some students come into the HDO program with a topic or problem in mind; others use course content and conversations with faculty and colleagues to decide on a topic. Regardless of where you sit on this spectrum, you will need to determine and refine your approach to this subject area by getting to know your area of interest, exploring previous approaches to the problem, and considering how to explore that problem in a novel way.

Throughout your first two semesters in the program, you will work with your advisor to determine both a topic and problem, as well as a way to study the area that is (1) doable in the allotted time-frame, and (2) effective and influential in terms of the methodologies used.

It is up to you to decide on a topic. The Program Director, Program Manager, and HDO faculty are available to brainstorm on these issues. Simply set up a meeting time. Members of our External Advisory Board are also available; please contact the Program Manager to set up a meeting with an Advisory Board Member.

### What type of product should I produce?

The answer to a question about type of product depends on your goals. Below are two of the most common options:

- **LITERATURE SYNTHESIS:** Based on secondary research (meaning a review of existing studies or writings on a topic), this project aims to answer a new, unique question by pulling together (synthesizing) research that has already been done. (NOTE: Some professors refer to this as a “literature review;” we call it a “synthesis” to emphasize the active work you do to bring together different works that speak to your unique question.) Among other goals, work of this type might point out critical limitations in our understanding of a problem, may develop research-based policy suggestions, or may set-up the next type of study that researchers should do.
- **AN EMPIRICAL REPORT:** This type of Capstone Project sets up a question whose answer depends, in part, on the findings from original data collection done through interviews, a survey, an experiment, content coding, or participant observation. In these instances, the data inform what one reads in existing studies.

There are other options for Capstones besides the two just named; however, for the next two, we ask that students seek and obtain permission from the Director (in consultation with their advisors) to undertake these approaches:

- **“WHITE-PAPER-STYLE” PROJECT:** For this type of project, students have taken up a question that tends to be fairly specific to their organization, and the audience for the work is focused on colleagues or superiors in that organization. The Capstone will resemble a literature synthesis but addresses, typically, a narrower question than the more common synthesis might do. Special permission is required for this type of Capstone to ensure that the project meets HDO’s standards for academic rigor and that the student does indeed have permissions from their organization.

- **MULTIMEDIA:** Some students have used video, digital media, or other non-written modalities to explore and present a human-centered organizational challenge or problem. Students have, for example, developed prototypes for games or produced short films. This research requires special permissions to ensure that the creative arts-based project fits with the types of research questions HDO students pursue and also that there is a clear plan for a required accompanying written product that successfully frames and explains the work.

## What content should be included? How should it be written?

The two most common type of Capstone Projects will include most of the following:

- Title
- Introduction/Overview
- Background on the organization or topic
- Problem and original approach
- Methods of investigation
- Results/Recommendations
- Bibliography
- Tables, Images, and Figures as needed

The choice and ordering of sections and the writing style are determined by the type of product you produce. You will also want to review this with your advisor.

Typically, Capstones that are **Empirical Reports** follow the “IMRD” format (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) and are written in a fairly impersonal style and formal tone. Specific questions of style, such as the use of first person or the best way to reference your own experiences in the text, should be discussed with your Capstone advisor.

A **Literature Synthesis** will also follow an academic tone and style but *may* not have a "Method" or "Results" sections. The specific form a literature synthesis takes can be determined in consultation with the advisor. Generally, these syntheses will have an introduction that lays out the question and why it needs to be answered; the introduction will also provide a thesis statement (or argument) that organizes the subsections that follow. After presenting an organized description of findings from the literature, the paper will close by discussing what has been learned and the implications of the insights.

(Talk to the Director and your advisor for content advice for any of the alternative Capstone formats needing special permission, as described above.)

All Capstones typically draw on both published sources as well as the writer's experience to build a case for addressing the problem, choosing an investigative approach, interpreting the results of the investigation, and looking toward future action. We want your Capstone to connect with real issues you have dealt with or wonder about in organizational life.

## Who is the audience?

For the typical Capstone, students have more than one audience in mind; speak with your advisor to seek their perspective on the best combination of audiences to keep in mind as you write. Here are some possible audiences to consider:

- **Academics:** The audience, in this case, would be your advisors and readers like them who have academic training and expertise. The writing centers on producing generalized conclusions based on your research.
- **Professionals:** Many HDO students also want to write for an audience of professionals in their current or desired career field. Students may wish, for example, to recommend and/or implement their ideas into workplace settings. The audience, then, are the organizational people who will read and benefit from your inquiry. The audience may be people you know and work with, or it may be people who review your application to new jobs.
- **Public:** Finally, we hope all students – even those writing primarily for an academic audience – will find ways to make their work and writing accessible to non-academics who may be outside of the students' professional sphere (e.g., your family, your friends). All students are required to present their research in a poster as part of graduation, and they will describe their work to people who view the poster. These sessions frequently include the families and supporters of all graduating students.

### **IN ALL CASES, REMEMBER:**

*The goal of the Capstone Project is to explain and explore the ways that research in the humanities and social/behavioral sciences can more deeply inform human experiences at work.*

## How long should it be?

Successful Capstone Projects typically run between 30 and 40 pages, double-spaced, with one-inch margins and 12-point font. Depending on the project, papers might substantially exceed 40 pages, but this should be discussed with the advisor and may indicate that you have not sufficiently narrowed your research question. Papers that are substantially shorter than 30 pages are, in all likelihood, not fully developed.

NOTE: If you get permission to do some sort of creative arts project, you will be expected to write a shorter academic paper (approximately 15 to 20 pages) that explores the underlying reasons and processes behind your project.

## How do I find an advisor and a second reader?

*Capstone Advisor:* At the beginning of your coursework, you will be assigned a preliminary faculty advisor based on your interests and the characteristics of your emerging Capstone topic. You may approach another faculty member to act as your Capstone advisor if you find someone better suited to your project, or someone with whom you feel more comfortable working. The Capstone advisor will work with you throughout your coursework, supervising you as you plan and develop your project. The advisor will also lead the evaluation of your Capstone deliverable and presentation.

*The Capstone advisor must be selected from HDO-affiliated faculty.*

*Second Reader:* As the name implies, the second reader acts as an additional set of eyes on your work. This ensures that progress to your degree is not in the hands of only one individual, but more importantly, this is an opportunity to expand the types of experts who review and comment on your Capstone. In general, students should select second readers to cover areas in which the Capstone advisor is not as strong. Thus, the Capstone advisor may have subject knowledge, while the second reader brings understanding of methodology. The Capstone advisor and second reader may have knowledge of two different disciplines/fields on which the student draws. Generally, the second reader tends to ask different types of questions about the work compared with your primary advisor.

*The second reader may be a faculty member, or with permission, an advisory board member or a member of your professional environment. We do not recommend that work supervisors act as second readers.*

## What if my Capstone project involves studying people or an organization?

As noted, some projects involve *primary research*, that is, gathering new data through interviews, surveys, ethnography, or participant observation. This is called “human-subjects research.” When human subjects are involved in your planned research, you should consult with your advisor and the University’s [Institutional Review Board](#) as early as possible. The University requires all researchers to gain permission before engaging in human-subjects research. Your first-semester Qualitative Research course should provide some initial guidance on human-subjects research, as will your advisor (if they have expertise in original data collection); but you are always free to speak with the Program Director to ensure that you have the support you need to submit an application.

*Note:* Some data access first requires permission from an organization before a student can, for example, recruit participants or review documents. If you plan to do work that depends on permissions from an organization, talk to your advisor about the feasibility of your plans and the realistic likelihood of obtaining data access. Sometimes organizations will balk at your requests due to (understandable) concerns about confidentiality/trade secrets, adverse publicity (remember there is a public poster presentation), or your role within the organization (e.g., are you asking for data that concerns a subordinate?). Hence, do not assume that getting data-access permission from an organization – yours or any other – will be a seamless and quick process. Discuss these issues with your advisor or other HDO personnel.

Again, not everyone’s Capstone will use human-subjects research and need IRB approval. As you get closer to your “pitch” in Spring, you will know better what approach is right for you. Just know that many students have successfully navigated IRB to conduct *small-scale* projects for their Capstone. If this approach appeals to you, do not let an IRB application stand in the way.

## What about the poster?

In addition to the written Capstone paper, you will create a visual representation of the project and its results through a professional poster. During your graduation weekend, you will present your Capstone to the general public by way of the poster session.

Therefore, you will transform your written Capstone paper into a poster and prepare a brief and effective oral overview of your project (an “elevator speech”).

Your poster should offer a succinct overview of the problem addressed in the Capstone; the methodology you used to examine that problem; the results of your research and work; and the implications for future research and progress in addressing the problem.

We will provide more information, including a poster template, to you as we get closer to the poster session.

## What is the approval process? How is the Capstone project graded?

The process of planning, researching, analyzing, and writing your Capstone project takes considerable time, effort, planning, and communication with advisors. Your progress on your Capstone will be reviewed several times during your time as an HDO student. However, the Capstone project itself is not graded; it is either approved (passed) or not (failed).

At the end of the Fall and Spring semesters, the teaching faculty conduct a student review to evaluate students' performances in classes and their communication with advisors. After these meetings, you will receive an email from the Director with a brief progress report. During these semesters, it is important to meet with your advisor regularly to develop a problem you are interested in exploring. *These meetings and communications assist a student in the successful completion of the HDO program, and students should listen to feedback with a mindset that sees it as useful and critical to project success.* As the timeline below indicates, at the end of the Spring semester, you are required to present the plan for your Capstone project.

Sometimes during the Spring, Summer, or Capstone-focused Fall, a student's advisor may become concerned about a student's progress. In such situations, advisors are encouraged to contact the HDO Director and Program Manager. In some instances, advisors will be asked to document their concerns in written form, and the advisor and HDO personnel will work to identify corrective actions, communicate these to the student, and do what it takes to keep the student on track. In this, as noted above, students should respond to even critical feedback and commentary with an open mind and a desire to improve their work.

## Other matters

If you are not yet fluent in a citation style, talk to your advisor about the format that will be expected for your Capstone (styles vary). Proper citation practice is incredibly important to a successful Capstone, and this is all the more the case in the era of AI. Unless your advisor explicitly indicates otherwise, AI is not authorized for purposes of writing up your Capstone insights and ideas. If you have questions about boundaries for authorized use, please talk to your advisor and, if necessary, the Program Director.

## **CAPSTONE MILESTONES**

*(Note: dates are guidelines only; speak to your advisor for specific milestone planning)*

### **Fall Semester 1**

During Orientation, the HDO faculty will meet with students to discuss nascent Capstone ideas. Additionally, students will likely be called on to present casual descriptions of their potential areas of interest to each other.

*September 15: Preliminary faculty advisors assigned*

Two to three weeks after Orientation, the HDO Graduate Advisor and Director will assign a provisional faculty advisor to each student, based on the student's interests. We use the term "provisional" because, if a better fit arises as the project comes together, a student may change advisors in consultation with program staff.

*October 1: Secure meetings with your faculty advisor*

Each student should meet one-on-one with their assigned provisional faculty advisor. Please arrange to meet with your advisor at least twice in the Fall semester.

*December 1: Ensure your second meeting has occurred/is planned for December*

Students should meet for at least a second time with their faculty advisor and discuss where their interests stand now that the first semester is complete. If some topics seem promising to the student and advisor, consider developing an initial reading list to begin diving into a given area.

### **Spring Semester**

*February and March: Capstone meetings continue; consider project progress reports*

During the Spring semester, students should continue meeting with their advisor and honing their ideas. Ideally, they should come to each meeting with a progress report of what they have done and what they plan to do so that Capstone planning becomes more formalized.

*April 1: Familiarize yourself with IRB application procedures*

Students who expect to do a research project that involves original data collection on human subjects (e.g., interviews, surveys, participant observation) should begin reviewing requirements for an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application. (IRB is not required if students plan to do a literature synthesis/review.) Discuss your plans with your advisor and read more about IRB [here](#).

Note: the timing of the actual IRB submission depends on when you are hoping to begin collecting data. If you plan to do data collection in early summer – because your Capstone planning is very far along – then your IRB application should be submitted near the end of the term (but you probably want to wait to submit until after the “pitch” day, as described below, since that is an opportunity for feedback on your project). Most students submit IRB in early- to mid-summer. **In any case, leave sufficient time in your planning for IRB approval, even though most applications qualify as “exempt.”** For example, if you submit an application in mid-July, you may not hear back until late August, depending upon demands on the IRB office.

*May 1: Formalize your current thinking on your Capstone*

The end of Spring term marks the **first formal presentation of your Capstone plan**. You will “pitch” your current ideas to fellow students and a panel of HDO faculty during the Saturday of the last weekend of the term.

The pitch will generally cover the following components, and students may share with their advisor an informal Capstone proposal that also does the following:

1. introduces and motivates the topic chosen for the Capstone by discussing the scholarly literature or model(s) that informs the research question (including literature from HDO classes). (In other words, how is the student using scholarly literature to define, contextualize, and understand the significance of the research?);
2. describes potential methods to be used (if empirical research will be done), and presents any initial findings (if applicable);
3. discusses a likely timeline for the project; and
4. discusses the contributions of the project.

## **Summer Semester**

*June 15: Schedule meetings with your advisor for the summer*

*August 1: Start thinking about whom to select as a second reader*

Based on their informal Capstone proposal—and in discussion with their faculty advisor—students should select a second reader to help guide and evaluate the Capstone project. As discussed in the Guidelines (above), the second reader is often associated with the HDO program, usually another professor, but sometimes another expert. The important thing is that they help to **expand the types of expertise and perspectives** of the people formally reviewing your work.

For instance:

- If your Capstone advisor specializes in qualitative research but you are conducting a survey, your second reader should probably have quantitative research experience, especially survey methodology.
- If your Capstone advisor does theoretical work but your Capstone involves empirical research (interviews, surveys, other sorts of primary data collection), your second reader should probably have empirical research experience.
- If your Capstone advisor is an expert in (say) cognitive psychology, but your Capstone also involves questions about organizational structure, your second reader should probably have experience in the latter.
- If your Capstone advisor is an academic, but your Capstone is in a specialized area such as nonprofit fundraising, you might consider a second reader who understands applications to that context.

HDO is all about crossing disciplines to create a stronger understanding of how people work individually and collectively. So, the second reader should support those aims by giving you the expertise of an additional field.

*August 15: Develop a timeline for your own use*

Consider using a “backward design” approach to mapping out your plans for completing the Capstone. You will need a rough draft by late October (see below). Given this, plan steps that need to happen by mid/early October, by mid/late September, and by early September in order to meet the rough draft-deadline. Include time for data analysis if you are collecting any data; schedule in meetings with your advisor and/or second reader if that will help keep you on track. Below is one approach others have taken:

Capstone Step	% Complete	Due Date	Completion Date
Introduction	10%		
Research / Literature Review	20%		
Hypothesis	5%		
Methods	10%		
Discussion	10%		
Conclusions / Path Forward	10%		
Future Research/Limitations/Acknowledgements	10%		
Abstract	5%		
Final Proof / Submit as Draft	5%		
Incorporate Advisor / 2nd Reader Comments	10%		
<b>Receive Approval to Issue as Final Revision</b>	<b>5%</b>		

**Fall II Semester**

***NOTE: Specific Fall II deadlines and details will be announced at the start of the fall semester.***

Early to Mid-September: *Confirm your second reader selection.*

Late October: *First draft of your Capstone project to your faculty advisor and second reader.*



Mid-November: *Complete and submit a poster.* (This is a visual representation of the *key finding(s)* of your research.)

Mid/late November: *Your advisor should have given you feedback; schedule a meeting if you need more information on how to revise.*

Late November/early December: *Turn in final draft of Capstone Project and complete Signature Page. CONGRATULATIONS!*