

# **IR6690 Capstone Course Departmental Guidance**

## **2020-2021**

### **PURPOSE & DESCRIPTION**

The Capstone course is a three-credit hour course accounting for three of the thirty-six credit hours required for graduation in the MSIR program. Students must enroll in the Capstone course during their final semester/term in the program. All core classes must be completed prior to enrolling in the Capstone. While students may take their 11<sup>th</sup> course and the Capstone (12<sup>th</sup> course) in the same term, it is not recommended due to the workload in the Capstone.

The Capstone course is the culminating feature of the MSIR program. It is intended to demonstrate and reinforce the student's mastery of the ability to research and write at the graduate level in the field of international relations. All MSIR students entering the program in or after Term 1 of 2018 must complete either a Thesis or the Capstone (the Thesis option is not available to Troy Online students).

The Capstone paper is a research paper. It is not a descriptive paper, a policy paper, an advocacy paper, or an historical narrative. It does not merely summarize the work of others. Rather, it is a causal research paper employing a rigorous research design to test a hypothesized causal relationship between variables. The Capstone paper will draw upon the methodological principles covered in IR6601: Research Methods in International Relations, as well as the substantive expertise developed in other courses in the MSIR program.

### **PROCESS**

The Capstone paper comprises 100% of the Capstone course grade. The paper must earn a grade of "B" or better for the student to graduate. At the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> week in the online Capstone course, students will submit their completed Capstone paper to the instructor.<sup>1</sup> If the instructor determines that the paper merits a "B" or better, the paper will be sent to a second MSIR faculty member for grading. If the second faculty member agrees that the paper merits a "B" or better, the student will have passed the course. If the second faculty member assigns a grade below "B," then the paper will go to a third MSIR faculty member whose assessment will determine whether the student passes or must re-take the course.

Note that if the instructor determines originally that the paper does not deserve a "B" or better, then the student will receive the assigned grade and need to re-take the Capstone course. The grade received will affect the student's overall GPA. As the MSIR program requires students maintain a 3.0 GPA and receive no more than six credit hours of grades below "B," failure to pass the Capstone could result in the student having to take additional courses to restore the

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<sup>1</sup> On-campus sections of the Capstone should check consult with the instructor as to the week for paper submission.

student's GPA to 3.0 or academic suspension if the student already has six credit hours with grades below "B."

The last day to drop/withdraw from an online class is usually the Friday of the 6<sup>th</sup> week of the term. Students should consult the Troy Academic Calendar to determine the specific deadline for their term/semester: <https://www.troy.edu/academics/calendar.html>

## **TIMING**

While the online Capstone is a 9-week course, the final paper is due at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> week so that there is sufficient time for grading prior to the end of the term. Six weeks is a short amount of time to execute a research project and write a research paper from scratch. Students are urged to think about the Capstone well prior to the term they enroll in the course and to read the academic literature on their topic of interest so as to be able to draft a literature review early in the course. With this, it will be a good idea for students to check the Troy course schedule in advance to determine who the instructor of the Capstone will be in the term the student plans on taking the Capstone, so that the student might contact the scheduled instructor to ensure the planned topic is appropriate.

Given this short time, one approach to the Capstone project is to build on the research design developed in the student's Research Methods in International Relations course. Therein, students must create a research design but are not required to execute that design. Students would be expected to update the design based on feedback from the instructor and then to execute the design for the Capstone project. Students may not simply recycle a paper from a prior course and turn it in as the Capstone paper; however, students are encouraged to choose a topic within which they have developed some expertise during their other courses in the MSIR program.

Instructors in the Capstone course will often set forth a timeline for sections of the paper; for example, the literature review might be due at the end of Week 2, the research design might be due at the end of Week 3, and a full draft might be due at the end of Week 5. Consult the syllabus in your course to determine the schedule your instructor has adopted. Do not fall behind; there isn't time to catch up.

## **PAPER FORMAT**

- Per the Catalog, the paper is expected to be "5000+ words," which typically equates to around twenty double-spaced pages.
- The instructor will designate any specific formatting requirements.
- Check the syllabus in your course regarding what citation systems are permitted. Many instructors require use of the American Political Science Association (APSA) citation system. The APSA style manual is available at <https://connect.apsanet.org/stylemanual/>

## **KEYS TO SUCCESS**

- In choosing your topic, make sure that you choose something for which data exists. This means you should not choose a current or future event as your central topic. While you can analogize a current or future situation to an historical case, the subject of your research would be the prior case.
- Keep your project simple. You should not aim to change the entire international relations discipline.
- Ensure your paper maintains objectivity. Your goal is to “test” a hypothesis rather than to “prove” a theory. A negative result (i.e. the evidence does not support the hypothesis) is an important outcome – it does not mean your paper has failed.
- Be sure you have each of the sections required in a research paper; failure to include a section will likely prove fatal to the paper.
- The capstone is a place to demonstrate your skill at academic inquiry, not political punditry. Packing your paper with partisan talking points, bombastic language, and/or information sourced from blogs and opinion pieces is a way to virtually guarantee a failing grade on the capstone.
- Write simple, clear sentences that state your argument or present supporting evidence. Do not overcomplicate your text; present ideas with as much clarity as possible.
- It is imperative to stay in contact with the instructor during the Capstone course. Because the course grade is entirely dependent upon the paper, there is no room for miscommunication.
- Pay close attention to instructor feedback. If something is unclear, ask questions.
- Proofread your paper carefully. Proof separately for substantive content, logical organization, grammar, and spelling. Poor proofing suggests lack of effort and creates a negative impression among both readers and graders.

## **MODEL OUTLINE OF CAPSTONE PAPER**

The following presents a model outline of a Capstone paper. Your individual Capstone course instructor may have specific requirements that differ from this model, so be sure to consult your individual course syllabus and the directions provided by your instructor.

### **Abstract**

The abstract should be a one-page, one-paragraph summary of the Capstone paper.

### **I. Introduction**

The introduction should explain the purpose of the paper, what the topic is, and why it is important or interesting. It should clearly state the research question motivating the paper. It should typically end by providing a road map of the organization of the remainder of the paper.

## **II. Literature Review**

The literature review should not just summarize the scholastic literature on a particular topic but should integrate it into a coherent narrative. A collection of paragraphs each summarizing a different source is NOT a literature review; it is an annotated bibliography. The literature review should focus on scholastic sources (such as the peer-reviewed journals in JSTOR). A review of news articles and internet sources alone is insufficient. The literature review's bounds should be informed by the research question: do not include articles in the review that are irrelevant (even if you spend two hours reading them). Do not "cherry-pick" only the articles that support your theory; include relevant material representing all the different points of view. Conclude by explaining how the Capstone paper's research fits within, or adds to, the existing literature.

## **III. Research Design**

### **A. Research Question, Statement of Theory, and Hypothesis (or Hypotheses)**

The Research Question drives the entire paper. It should be stated clearly in the introduction to the paper. The literature review should naturally segue into a discussion of the research undertaken in the Capstone paper. Thus, the Research Question will appear again at the start of the Research Design section, followed by the presentation of the theory that you think may provide the answer to this question. Explain the logic of the theory and identify other possible answers to the Research Question than that proposed in your theory. Explain what controls you will use to account for these alternatives. State the hypothesis (or hypotheses) you will test in this paper in a clear, empirically observable, manner specifying the relationship you expect to find.

### **B. Explanation of method**

Specify the particular method you will use (e.g. process-tracing, time-series case study, regression analysis, etc.). Justify your choice of cases, including the scope and temporal domain.

### **C. Conceptual definitions**

Often you will need to define the key concepts in your theory. You may choose to follow definitions in the existing academic literature that you reviewed, or you may decide these definitions are improper, in which case you need to provide and justify your own definitions. For example, if you were testing democratic peace theory, it would be important to define "democracy."

### **D. Identification of variables**

Specifically identify your dependent variable, the primary causal variable(s) in your hypothesis/hypotheses, and the control variables you are using. Explain why you have chosen the control variables that you include.

**E. Explanation of measurement of variables**

Specify in an exact, detailed manner how you are measuring each of the variables in your study. If you are using qualitative measures, state with precision the criteria distinguishing the qualitative categories. Explain why these measures are valid and reliable measures for the concepts of interest in your theory.

**IV. Analysis, Findings, & Discussion**

Execute the research design and assess the evidence. Note any difficulties, such as incomplete data or inconsistent data and how you resolved these issues. This is where you would present charts, graphs, or tables to illustrate the data assessment. Discuss whether you have found the hypothesized causal relationship. Return to the Research Question and provide an answer. Be sure to provide an objective assessment of the data – not an argument in favor of your theory. Discuss whether your findings are consistent with other studies and, if not, why this might be.

**V. Conclusion**

Briefly summarize the main points of your research project. Consider the practical implications of your research and possible directions for further research.

**References**