

Capstone in American History

Spring 2025

Lead Professor: Tracey Trenam

Section Professors: TBD

Course Description

This course is the capstone seminar for students completing their MA in American History. Its sole focus is the production of either a substantial original research paper or a capstone project of comparable significance as determined by MA program faculty.

Recommended Reading

1. Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, Ninth Edition: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers*. Revised by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams, Joseph Bizup, William T. FitzGerald, and the University of Chicago Press Editorial Staff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Learning Objectives

With the project or paper completed by the student for the Capstone, each of the following objectives will be met:

1. Produce original and substantial research in primary sources
2. Demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the secondary literature (historiography) that original research engages
3. Produce writing that reflects an advanced understanding of history with appropriate CMOS (Chicago Manual of Style) formatting and citations

Course Information

The course content (the Capstone paper or project topic) is determined individually by each student in consultation with the section professor. Frequency and mode of personal interaction and feedback between student and section professor are to be determined on an individual basis by the section professor.

Final grades are determined by the section professor.

Course Requirements

Paper Track

Students choosing the paper option are required to produce a substantial (12,500–18,750 words, not including footnotes and bibliography) research paper based on the original use of primary sources, situated in the appropriate secondary literature (historiography), and written in clear and engaging prose with correct use of CMOS (Chicago Manual of Style) that reveals an advanced understanding of American history.

Mandatory steps

1. Class begins: Thursday, February 6
2. Watch Q&A Session One by Friday, February 14 (attending live is recommended)
3. "Elevator speech" video upload due Wednesday, February 12 (5% of grade)
4. Regular Friday check-in starting Friday, February 14 (5% of grade)
5. Formal proposal (topic, preliminary outline, preliminary bibliography) due Wednesday, February 19 (5% of grade)
6. Historiographical essay (approx. 2000 words) due Wednesday, March 5 (5% of grade)
7. Preliminary draft (approx. 7,500 words) due Wednesday, March 26 (20% of grade)
8. Optional second draft due Wednesday, April 2 (not gradable)
9. Final version due Wednesday, April 23 (60% of grade)

Project Track

Projects vary and must be decided in conjunction with the section professor. In addition to the project, students will also write a narrative (7000–8000 words/25–30 pages) to accompany the project.

Mandatory steps:

1. Class begins: Thursday, February 6
2. Watch Q&A Session One by Friday, February 14 (attending live is recommended)
3. "Elevator speech" video upload due Wednesday, February 12 (5% of grade)
4. Regular Friday check-in starting Friday, February 14 (5% of grade)
5. Formal proposal (nature, scale, significance, expected impact) Wednesday, February 19 (5% of grade)
6. Historiographical essay (approx. 2000 words) due Wednesday, March 5 (5% of grade)
7. Narrative first draft (25–30 pages). Alternatively, you may turn in 15 pages of your narrative first draft and half of your completed project. Please work this out with your section professor, due Wednesday, March 26 (20% of grade)
8. Optional second draft due Wednesday, April 2 (not gradable)
9. Final draft (narrative portion is the combination of items 5–7, above) due Wednesday, April 23 (60% of grade)

Grading and Assessment

1. Capstone paper option: 1000 points total, late submission penalty 5 points per day for any segment, or per missed "Friday check-in"
2. Capstone project option: Project 500 points, Narrative 500 points, late submission penalty 5 points per day for any segment, or per missed "Friday check-in"

Q&A Sessions

Professor Seman will lead three Q&A sessions on the course LMS throughout the semester. The first session is mandatory; it is highly recommended that you attend all three. Sessions will be recorded for future viewing.

1. Q&A Session One: Wednesday, February 12, at 8 p.m. ET
2. Q&A Session Two: Wednesday, March 5, at 8 p.m. ET
3. Q&A Session Three: Wednesday, April 2, at 8 p.m. ET

Assignment Descriptions

Friday Check-ins: Every Friday, you will complete a discussion board prompt about your weekly progress. This is a place to share your Capstone journey with your cohort and receive support. Your section professor may choose to communicate with you in this forum. If so, they will let you know.

Goals of weekly check-ins:

1. Share about the research or writing process or about the content of your paper or project. Relay your progress for that week.
2. Explain your plan for the following week. If you did not achieve your goals for that week, how will you make up for it the following week? Is there a specific amount of work that you hope to achieve in the following week?

Please check with your section professor for the appropriate length of discussion boards and any specific information they would like you to include in your posts.

Elevator Speech: The elevator speech is a two-minute pitch for your paper. This will include your research question, working thesis statement, and contribution to the field. You will record a video of yourself making this pitch and upload it to Open LMS.

Formal Proposal: No more than 10 pages. Most people end up with around 6 pages.

1. Working Title (this may change as the semester progresses)
2. Executive Summary / Thesis Statement (100–200 words)
Summary of your proposal in a few sentences, your research question, and a working thesis statement. We fully expect any working thesis statement that you write to change as you research, but it is good to have an idea of what you are arguing.
3. Context of Your Topic (100–200 words)

Where does the topic fit in the larger field of American history and in the appropriate subfields? For example, if you are writing about education during the 1960s, you will need to reference *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Movement. Is your topic original? Does it provide a new angle on something well-known, or does it break new ground? What gaps does your work fill?

4. Historiography (200-300 words)

What body of secondary literature does your paper or project engage? How will original research contribute to this secondary literature? What "gap" are you filling? What conversations are you joining? What will your work add to the existing scholarship your research engages?

This will be a brief version of the historiography paper you will write for your next assignment, and then incorporate into your introduction. Show that you know what other historians have argued about this particular subject and where your argument fits in with this.

5. Methodology and Sources (100-200 words)

Is there a specific methodology that you intend to use? Are you writing a social history? A political history? A military history? What primary sources will you consult, and where will you find them? Are there any potential obstacles, such as a lack of access to sources?

6. Relevance or Impact (**for projects only** – 200 words)

What will your project accomplish? Who will it reach? What will it transform?

7. Outline

Provide an outline of your paper or project narrative. It does not have to be detailed, but think about how you will organize this paper.

8. Timetable

Provide a research plan. This need not be in narrative form, a table or bullet points would suffice. Clearly write out your weekly research and writing goals. This is your roadmap. You may have to make adjustments as you progress, but it is important to have a schedule that you hold yourself accountable to.

9. Bibliography

Provide a list of secondary sources as well as published primary sources or collections. Everything you consider relevant to your topic should go in here, not just items you have already read. As you read, you will likely cross things off that aren't as relevant but show us that you have a working bibliography.

Historiographical Essay (Project and Paper Track):

The historiographical essay will be approximately 8 pages (2000 words) and provide a narrative discussion of the secondary literature of your topic and suggest how your research is in conversation with this secondary literature. Plan on discussing around 8 sources. This type of essay outlines the history of what has been written on a subject. It does not provide information on the subject. The historiographical essay evaluates what scholars have written and shows how your research builds on and contributes to the historiography.

Here are some questions to guide your historiographical analysis. As you review the secondary literature for this essay, ask these questions of that literature:

- What is the argument/conclusion?

- What is left out?
- What are the points of debate?
- What kinds of evidence are used?
- Is there any obvious bias?
- How do the secondary sources compare/contrast? How are they “in conversation”?
- Where are their arguments similar and/or different?
- Is there a debate or conversation among historians in the historiography you are examining?
- How does the time the historian wrote reflect the argument they are making? For example, why might historians of the 1930s have excluded the African American perspective in their histories? Why might historians of the 1960s suddenly start including the African American perspective?
- How has the historiography of your topic evolved over time?
- **How do you see your research for this Capstone contributing to this historiography?**

How to choose the books you include in your essay: Focus on the scholarship most important to your work for this essay, and include those works you have read in their entirety or are most familiar with. Choose the books that will be key to establishing your argument and which you use considerable portions of.

It is not expected that you will have read every secondary source written on your topic in order to write this paper. However, it is expected that you know about the body of literature on your topic. To get a sense of the scholarship that you will not read in its entirety, look at the table of contents and indexes, read the introduction, and skim sections of the books. We all end up with books that have only one or two relevant sentences or paragraphs. These books do not need to be covered in this essay. Rather focus on sources you will use in their entirety or even have one excellent chapter.

Preliminary Draft

For the project, your preliminary draft should consist of the following:

- Narrative of 5,000 words with footnotes formatted to CMOS standards (approximately 20-25 pages)
- Project draft to be determined by your section professor

For the paper, your preliminary draft should consist of the following:

- 7,500 words (approximately 25-30 pages)
- Footnotes formatted to CMOS standards
- Bibliography

Optional Second Draft (not graded)

What you submit for this, if you choose to submit it (it is optional), will be determined by your section professor.

Final Submission

Your final submission will demonstrate your mastery of historical research and writing.

Your final submission of the project or paper will include all revisions asked for by your section professor and will demonstrate original use of primary sources, your original research situated in the appropriate secondary literature (historiography), and clear writing with correct use of CMOS (Chicago Manual of Style) that reveals an advanced understanding of American history. It should be 12,500–18,750 words, not including footnotes and bibliography.

Note on using Microsoft Word

Cloud-based versions of Word, including that offered free by Gettysburg College, may not have the functionality required correctly to format a capstone paper. You may want to investigate Google docs, Apple or Corel products to assure you are able to format different styles of page numbers, captions and tables of contents before you begin your papers.

Course and Program Policies

It is the responsibility of students to know, understand, and abide by course and program policies.

For a full overview of program policies, review the Gettysburg College–Gilder Lehrman Institute Student Handbook.

Course correspondence

Correspondence with faculty and administrators should be formal. Include a subject line, addressee, and closing. Put the name and number of your course in the subject line.

Plagiarism and AI

This program uses Turnitin to check for instances of plagiarism and AI. Plagiarism and papers composed fully or in part by AI will not be tolerated. This includes self-plagiarism. A student caught plagiarizing or composing papers with AI for the first time may receive a zero on the assignment. A student caught plagiarizing or composing with AI for a second time may be permanently removed from the program.

Your section professor will set the policies for use of AI for research or purposes other than composing your papers.

Late work

Assignments should be submitted no later than 11:59 p.m. Pacific Time on the due date unless otherwise specified by your section professor. If you think you will be unable to submit an assignment on time, it is your responsibility to contact your section professor to

ask for an extension before the assignment's due date. Late assignments will be docked 5% if less than a week late, 10% if one week late, and an additional 10% for each subsequent week.

Grading scale

Letter Grade	Number Grade	Grade Points
A	95%–100%	4
A-	90%–94%	3.67
B+	87%–89%	3.33
B	84%–86%	3
B-	80%–83%	2.67
C+	77%–79%	2.33
C	74%–76%	2
C-	70%–73%	1.67
D+	67%–69%	1.33
D	64%–66%	1
D-	60%–63%	.67
F	0%–59%	0