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# M.A. Communication and Business Leadership

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Capstone Handbook for Students

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                             |    |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Dear Reader                 | 1  |
| Course Overview & Rationale | 2  |
| CBL-5950                    | 4  |
| CBL-5960                    | 6  |
| On the Nature of Group Work | 7  |
| Grading Policies            | 8  |
| Tips to Succeed             | 9  |
| Acing the Analysis          | 11 |

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DEAR READER,

This handbook is designed to serve as the go-to resource for students enrolled in CBL-5950 and CBL-5960, the two capstone courses in High Point University's M.A. Communication and Business Leadership program. It provides an overview of the course rationale and, most crucially, offers an in-depth look at the processes behind assessing the quality of students' case study analyses throughout the semester. As such, this document is of supplementary nature to the course syllabi, where semester-specific assignments and schedules can be found.

For additional questions or comments, please don't hesitate to email the Capstone Experience Director, Dr. Tanisha Watkins at [twatkin1@highpoint.edu](mailto:twatkin1@highpoint.edu)

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## COURSE OVERVIEW & RATIONALE

In many graduate programs, the capstone project is an integral component of the degree curriculum and necessary for degree attainment. The same is true for this program. The MA-CBL curriculum centers the capstone project as a unique opportunity to apply case study methods, communication, and business leadership principles to organizational problems. The MA-CBL capstone project is designed to encourage students from diverse academic backgrounds to work together in small groups to come up with innovative solutions to real-world problems, all while gaining valuable insights into the demands and responsibilities of the working world. The capstone experience provides students the opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge they have learned throughout the program and showcase their preparedness for their upcoming professional endeavors.

Capstone projects can take many forms. For students to best demonstrate their enhanced critical thinking and strategic writing skills, this capstone project will revolve around case study methodology. Case studies and case-based learning (CBL) have a long tradition as opportunities for students to apply their knowledge in ways that promote higher-level cognition. According to Yale University's Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning:

"There are a number of benefits to using CBL in the classroom. In a review of the literature, Williams (2005) describes how CBL: utilizes collaborative learning, facilitates the integration of learning, develops students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn, encourages learner self-reflection and critical reflection, allows for scientific inquiry, integrates knowledge and practice, and supports the development of a variety of learning skills. [...] Other studies have also reported on the effectiveness of CBL in achieving learning outcomes (Bonney, 2015; Breslin, 2008; Herreid, 2013; Krain, 2016). These findings suggest that CBL is a vehicle of engagement for instruction and facilitates an environment whereby students can construct knowledge."

The aim of CBL-5950 is two-fold: to a) introduce students to the case study method and b) teach students the ins and outs of building and leading effective teams. This course first teaches students how to learn using case studies, and, second, provides students various opportunities to apply the skills and insights thus gained to the analysis of issues, challenges, and opportunities surrounding team functioning in all spheres of social life.

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The follow-up course, CBL-5960, then further develops students' leadership capabilities, with a particular focus on ethical decision-making and persuasive storytelling.

Both CBL-5950 and CBL-5960 are one-credit courses. Each course meets once a week for 50 minutes during the first 10 weeks of the fall and spring semesters. Most weeks, students will tackle a different case study every class. Cases will be chosen from a wide variety of industry settings. Students may analyze industry juggernauts like Airbnb, Google, or Disney, as well as little-known niche organizations in fields like tech, fashion, sports, or video games. Students will be asked to format their analyses in a visually appealing manner. Since that may mean different things to different people, instructors will provide examples throughout the semester of visually engaging work. Students should aim to incorporate visual persuasive tactics into their work, so it makes someone else excited to read it. Canva is highly recommended here.

Given the short nature of the capstone courses, it is easy to get behind, therefore, students are expected to attend all class sessions, be that in-person or online. More than one absence not excused by some form of medical documentation will result in dismissal from and failure of the course in question. Students should refrain from asking instructors to make exceptions as this is a program specific guideline. When students need medical accommodations to be excused from class, they should contact High Point University's Office of Accessibility Resource and Services.

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CBL-5950

In CBL-5950, students will receive a letter grade for this course: A-B-; anything below a B- or 80% constitutes failure of the course. Students need to earn an 80% or higher, in all assignment categories to pass the course. Student performance is assessed as follows:

- A portion of a student's grade will be determined by their group(s)' case analyses throughout the course. Students will work in groups as they learn the basics of case study analysis. Each student is expected to make meaningful contributions to every group assignment. Students will work in groups of three. Students will be randomly assigned to a group at the beginning of the semester.

*\*The instructor also reserves the right to move students based upon educational needs that benefit all group members.*

- Attendance and participation will also be used to calculate a student's final grade. Students are allowed to miss only one class. Additionally, students will be evaluated after each class on their contribution to class discussions.
- Individual assignments including weekly prep work and the final case analysis are the final components that comprise a student's grade.
- Students must pass the final 72-hour case analysis to pass this course. You also must receive at least a cumulative B- in all of the assignment categories to pass this course. This means students can pass the final but if any of your assignment categories percentages are below 80% they will not pass the course. There is no exception to this policy, therefore students should monitor their grades closely and speak with their instructors as soon as they can if they have concerns about their performance.

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The CBL 5950 final case study is structured as follows:

- Students will work individually to complete a case study analysis over the course of 72 hours on the first weekend of Fall Break. It is the student's responsibility to plan accordingly. Instructors are not responsible for making accommodations for students' scheduling conflicts.
- In addition to a written case analysis, students will produce a video of themselves delivering a presentation on their analysis and recommendations. This video should be engaging, visually appealing, and concise.
- Students will record themselves by using a video-conferencing tool or any other suitable software of their choice. Students should check the settings to ensure their face is visible while speaking and their speaker thumbnail is not covering text while they are talking. Students will upload their video to YouTube and include the link on the last page of their written analysis. The video should be unlisted so everyone with the link can view it. If the link doesn't open, students automatically receive a 0 on this portion of the final.
- Students must earn an 80% or higher on both the written analysis and the video presentation to pass the final case analysis.
- Students must pass the final to pass the class. Students will not be allowed to continue in the program, if they do not pass CBL-5950. Students will be allowed to do a 24-hour revision ONLY if one section of their analysis is preventing them from passing the final.
- The final case analysis will be graded by the student's instructor who will use the course rubric to evaluate the case submission. Students should familiarize themselves with the metrics on the rubric to ensure they are meeting assignment expectations.

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## CBL-5960

In CBL-5960, student performance is mostly assessed the same way as it was in CBL 5950, with a few exceptions to the final case study analysis.

The final case study is structured as follows:

- Students will work in groups to conduct their final case analysis.
- Groups will provide a written analysis and give an in-person group presentation.
- This presentation will be given in front of industry experts and leaders from diverse corporate backgrounds who will be well-versed on the case as well as the case methodology principles students have learned throughout the year.
- The panel of experts, along with the group's instructor, will grade the group's written analysis and in-person presentation. Group members will also provide a peer evaluation of each member's performance.

Students must receive an 80% or higher on all final assignments to pass the final and the course.

- Students must pass the final to pass the class, therefore effective teamwork and collaboration is essential. Groups will be allowed to do a 24-hour revision ONLY if one section of their analysis is preventing them from passing the final.
- If a student does not pass CBL 5960, they will have the opportunity to retake the class in the summer. Students will need to pass CBL 5960 to be awarded their MA-CBL degree.

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## ON THE NATURE OF GROUP WORK

You may wonder why we require a reasonable portion of your grade to come from group work. The reality of the matter is this: 98% of you will work in industries and jobs that require you to play well with others, get the best out of peers and subordinates, and take on team leadership roles. This is your practice ground.

Effectively working in groups is essential to achieving success in capstone. Students are expected to use their communication and leadership skills to collaborate to produce master's level work. Here are a few guidelines governing groupwork:

- Developing a strong sense of self-awareness is essential to building great teams. Self-aware people are more successful, more confident, build better relationships, and are more effective leaders. To be a leader and good team member, take time to analyze your strengths and weakness, commitment, and the best way you contribute to your group's success. Remember your work ethic impacts the grade of others.
- According to Dr. Carla Patalano, SPHR, SHRM-SCP, in her article *Taking the Groan out of Group Work in Graduate School*, it might be helpful to create written, agreed-upon expectations. These expectations should cover the what, when, who, and how elements of tasks to be performed. This is also the time to iron out specifics like response time expectations, workload, and delivery methods.
- Graduate students are held to very higher academic standards. Gift authorship is one of the most common kinds of unethical behavior seen in academia. In this practice, an author is added to a paper when they have not actually made a contribution to the work. Students should make meaningful contributions to each case analysis and avoid engaging in practices that consistent gift authorship.
- Managing organizational and group conflict is a necessary skill for emerging leaders. If group conflict occurs, students should use their conflict resolution skills to reach a mutual solution. Students can involve their instructors if problems persist.

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## GRADING POLICIES

Receiving an advanced degree, requires showing proficiency in advanced level thinking. To assess students' capstone performance, instructors take a systematic approach to evaluate student work and utilize a proven tool to assign numeric scores to student work. Grades are a reflection of student knowledge, capabilities, and work ethic. To get the best possible grades, students should make sure they understand all assignment instructions, review assignment rubrics, and utilize all course resources when completing analyses.

If a student has a concern about their grades, they should first talk with their capstone instructor about the matter. If the concern is not resolved through this interaction, the student should then go to: the Director of the Capstone Experience, then the Dean of the School of Communication; then the Provost, which is the final step in the grievance process. Bypassing any of these steps—going directly to the president, for example—will not resolve the issue and will only delay resolution. Senior administration will not deal with grievance issues unless it has been discussed at the appropriate level.

For this course, a student should pursue the following process:

1. Talk with the instructor of the course.
2. Talk with Dr. Tanisha Watkins who serves as the Director of Capstone Experience
3. Talk with Dr. McDermott, who serves as the Dean of the Nido R. Qubein School of Communication.
4. Talk with Dr. Erb, who serves as the Provost of High Point University.  
Dr. Erb's decision is final.

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## TIPS TO SUCCEED IN CAPSTONE

Students who perform well in capstone have strong writing skills. Master's students are expected to demonstrate well-honed writing skills in all assignments, especially in their capstone analysis. The strongest analyses are proficient in real-world business communications and the use of APA formatting. Additionally, it is important to write papers with a strong professional voice. This voice should include unbiased, high-level and evidence-based writing that reflects the epitome of good grammar, syntax and tone (Davenport, 2022.). To help your professional voice shine in your case study analyses, consider these tips from Purdue University communication professor, Dr. Debra Davenport (2022):

### **1. Use proper syntax.**

Syntax is “the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in a language.” Syntax is an important aspect of writing that helps to ensure clarity. Incorrect syntax often results in sentences and paragraphs that do not make sense, and this can pose serious perceptual issues for professional communicators.

### **2. Follow the rules of punctuation.**

Common errors in case analyses include incorrect placement of quotation marks and erroneous use of the comma and occasional run-on sentences.

### **3. Don't solely rely on software to correct your writing.**

Certainly, tools such as spell check, grammar check and Grammarly have some benefit, but they cannot replace firsthand knowledge and mastery of proper writing.

Don't hesitate to seek writing coaching if you have questions or concerns about your level of writing. As graduate students in a masters-level communication program, writing excellence should be a top priority.

It is important to be aware of your writing strengths and weaknesses. By taking an informed and proactive approach to your writing, you will strengthen your academic performance, hone your professional and communication skills and enhance your career.

Here are additional writing resources:

- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/683/1/>
- <http://blog.apastyle.org/>
- <http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/scholarlyvoice>
- <http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/scholarlyvoice/tones>

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#### **4. Learn to master argumentative writing.**

In your case analyses, you are trying to convince the author of your point of view. You are not summarizing. Make sure you are clearly conveying your position and providing strong evidence to support and prove your stance.

Students who succeed in capstone devote time to learn the details of case study methodology. Learning to do case analysis well requires weekly hours of planning, reading, studying, writing, and rewriting.

#### **5. Know the basics.**

Once you learn how to structure case analyses, you can then let your creativity soar. You should be able to do this quickly because case analysis is very formulaic. To learn the formula, students should keep up with their readings, use the outlines provided in their textbooks, and model instructor-provided materials. Adequate study and preparation time outside class is also essential.

#### **6. Know the different types of case analysis approaches.**

In capstone I, you will learn about three different case analysis approaches. Each type has a particular way it should be written. Successful students know the mechanics of each case type and make sure they are accurately represented in their written analyses.

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## ACING THE ANALYSIS

As previously noted, capstone analysis is very formulaic. To ace the class and the final, it is important to become familiar with how to format your case. Below is a general outline of the key components you are expected to provide in your case analysis. Some components will vary slightly depending on the case approach used in your analysis. You will learn about these distinctions in class. Here is a general template you can use to guide your analysis:

1. Cover page
  - a. Attention-getting that would make someone want to read more.
2. Table of Contents
3. Overview
  - a. 4-6 sentences that quickly orients the reader to the core issue of your analysis.
4. Position statement with criteria
  - a. A declarative sentence or two that lets the reader know where your stand and the criteria used to support your position.
5. Analysis of criteria
  - a. Strategically written paragraphs that prove your position
6. Recommendations
  - a. Short term first, then long-term ideas (literally call them that, using headers). These need to be specific and address the issues you discussed in your analysis.

Finally, even the best ideas can go unheard if they are presented poorly, thus being able to communicate your case analysis orally and visually is critical to your capstone success. The following comments are by no means an exhaustive account of what constitutes an effective presentation. As graduate students, you should have a good idea of what is good and bad practice when delivering content to an audience using visual aids. Still, here are some reminders:

1. In the days of Canva, there's no excuse for not at least trying to put together visually captivating slides. PowerPoint and even Google are also good assets to use. Docs tend to look antiquated compared to what Canva offers.
2. Less text, more talking: slides are merely there to help remind the audience of what you are talking about, NOT to compete with your voice for their attention.
3. Don't read straight from the slides.
4. Don't sound like you're just reading your notes.
5. Use images instead of text where appropriate and possible.
6. Stick to keywords on slides, NOT full-length prose.

Follow these ten tips for better presentations:

<https://visage.co/11-design-tips-beautiful-presentations/>

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