

AP Capstone™

Have you heard about the AP program's new diploma program, AP Capstone? Is this just an IB clone or something more interesting? And will completing AP Capstone get you into college? We'll explore those questions here. Read on for a complete guide to AP Capstone!

What Is AP Capstone?

AP Capstone is the AP program's new diploma program. **A diploma program is a program that signifies you completed a certain set of requirements in high school to earn an advanced diploma.** (This is in addition to your basic high school diploma.) Probably the most well-known advanced diploma program is the International Baccalaureate (IB) program.

Perhaps to compete with IB, the AP program launched its own diploma program, AP Capstone, in fall 2014. While the regular AP program allows students to choose whichever AP classes they want to take and doesn't have any overarching structure, **AP Capstone requires you take a certain number of AP classes and meet certain requirements to earn the AP Capstone advanced diploma.** You have to take skills-based and subject-based AP classes to earn the Capstone diploma.

Specifically, AP Capstone includes two foundation courses – AP Seminar and AP Research – to enhance four subject-specific AP courses (in any subject) for **a total of six AP courses.**

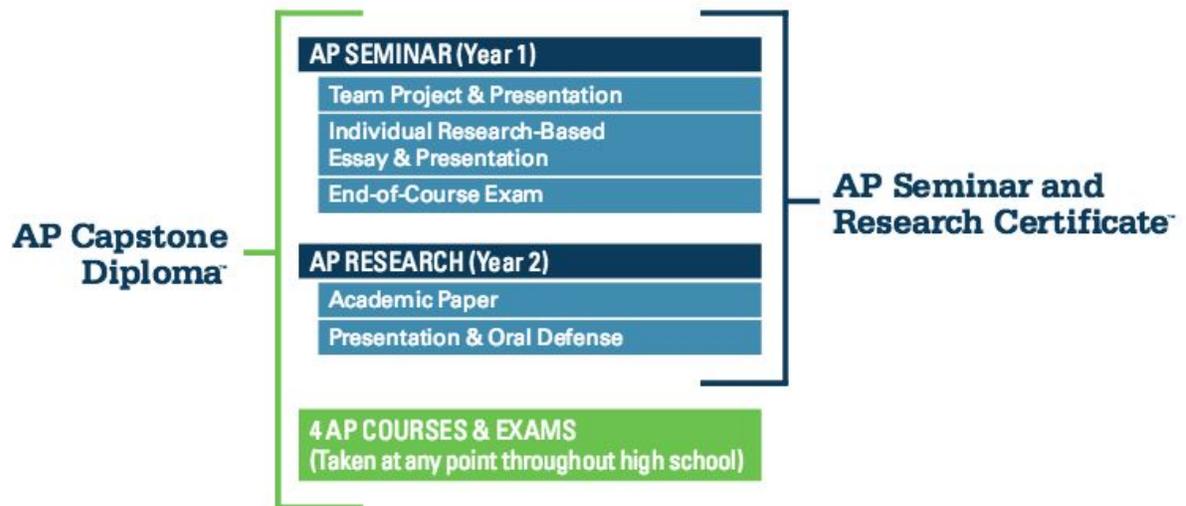


Diagram via [College Board](#).

College Board says of the program: “[AP Capstone] cultivates curious, independent, and collaborative scholars and prepares them to make logical, evidence-based decisions.” In other words, **AP Capstone is working to bring some thematic unity to the AP program.**

Typically, students will choose AP classes that are interesting to them and treat them as totally separate entities. They don’t have to make connections between their AP classes or the skills they require. By including AP Seminar and AP Research, the Capstone program aims to make AP a more cohesive high school program.

AP Capstone also includes a 5,000 word research paper, which is quite similar to IB’s extended essay. Additionally, some of the curriculum aligns with new common core standards – a bid to make AP Capstone competitive and desirable to schools in today’s changing education world.

How AP Capstone Works

To get the AP Capstone diploma, you take two special AP courses. You'll take AP Seminar in 10th or 11th grade, followed by AP Research in the 11th or 12th grade. (You can't take both in the same grade; AP Seminar has to come before AP Research!)

In addition to AP Seminar and AP Research, you have to take four AP classes of your choosing at any point in high school. This means you could simply take one AP course each year (freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior) or pack them into your last two years of high school. **If you receive a 3 or higher on all these exams, you will receive the AP Capstone Diploma.**

(Of course, there is nothing preventing you from taking more than four AP classes if that's what you want to do. You just need a minimum of four to get the AP Capstone diploma.)

If you receive scores of 3 or higher in AP Research and AP Seminar, but don't take four other AP classes or don't get high enough AP scores in them, you'll get the AP Seminar and Research Certificate, which shows you gained college-level academic and research skills.

The Two Capstone Courses – AP Seminar and AP Research

Both AP Seminar and AP Research aim to create a college-like academic experience right in your high school classroom.

The AP Seminar and AP Research classes are the main distinguishing features of AP Capstone. These courses give students additional skills to use in other AP classes and college, but aren't based in specific subjects (e.g. math, language arts, science, or social studies).

They aim to help students do the following:

1. Analyze topics through different lenses for greater meaning or understanding
1. Plan and conduct a study/investigation
1. Propose solutions to real world problems
1. Collaborate to solve a problem
1. Plan and produce communication
1. Integrate, synthesize and make cross-cultural connections

Let's take a look at each class to learn more.

AP Seminar Overview

In Seminar, you'll develop analytic and inquiry skills, exploring two to four issues chosen by you or your teacher, depending on how your teacher runs the class.

The class focuses on themes based on student interests, local and/or civic issues, global or international topics, and concepts from other AP courses. For example, **you might explore the question of whether national security is more important than a citizen's right to privacy; or whether genetic engineering is a benefit to society.** Both topics would draw from multiple subjects (social studies, science, ethics) and allow you to look at issues through many different lenses.

During the course, you also complete a team project, an individual paper and presentation, and take a final AP exam. The AP Seminar Exam score is based on all three components and is reported on [the standard 1–5 AP scoring scale](#).

AP Research Overview

You have to take AP Seminar before you can take AP Research. While Seminar introduces you to discussion, research, and presentation skills, **AP Research allows you to design, plan, and conduct a year-long research-based investigation on a topic that interests you.**

You'll build on skills from AP Seminar by learning about research methodology, using ethical research practices, and analyzing the information you find to write and defend your argument.

Get ready to spend a lot of time in the library!

For your research paper, you can dig into a topic you already studied in a different AP course, or come up with your own topic that combines different subjects.

At the end of the research investigation, you'll write a paper of about 5,000 words, then present and defend it. [The AP Research Exam score](#) is based on the paper, presentation, and defense, and is reported on the standard 1–5 AP scoring scale. So note that, unlike AP Seminar, **there is not a formal AP Research exam.** Your paper and presentation will be the exam!

How Popular Is AP Capstone?

The AP Capstone program is quite new, as it only debuted in 2014. **Currently, [about 300 American schools, 15 Canadian schools, and 30 other international schools](#) have the program.** Considering [894 schools in the US alone have IB](#), AP Capstone is pretty small in comparison. That said, the program will likely grow and expand quite a bit in the next few years as more schools choose to implement it.

Some states don't have any AP Capstone schools yet. several (like Missouri and Utah) have just one participating school, while others have quite a few. (Florida has almost 100!) It will be interesting to see if the state representation evens out in the coming years or if Capstone becomes very popular in certain states and rare in others.

How Capstone Differs From “Regular AP”

The basic AP program is more flexible than AP Capstone.

The regular AP program is an “a la carte” program – you can choose which AP classes to take and how intense you want your schedule to be. Some students might just take 1 or 2 AP classes in high school, others could take over 10. It all depends on how much you want to challenge yourself, how many AP courses your school offers, and which subjects you're interested in.

The success of a student is judged by how they do on each exam – **students aren't expected to take a certain number of AP classes or get a certain average score.** In short, the basic AP program is quite flexible and can fit the needs of many students.

In contrast, AP Capstone is a diploma program with stricter requirements. If you don't take the right AP classes or get high enough AP exam scores, you won't earn the Capstone diploma.

How Similar Is AP Capstone to the IB Program?

You may be wondering how similar AP Capstone is to the IB program, since they are both advanced diploma programs. We'll run through some of the main similarities and

differences since many students considering IB might also consider AP Capstone, and vice-versa.

Similarities

Both programs function pretty similarly. **Students take advanced classes in high school (marked as either AP or IB), and then take an exam for each class at the end of the year. For both AP Capstone and IB, you have to obtain a minimum score on your exams to earn the diploma.** For IB you have to earn at least 24 points total on your exams (IB exams are scored from 1 to 7), for Capstone you need a 3 or higher on each exam.

Each program also requires a long piece of writing, though AP Capstone's 5,000 word research paper is longer than IB's [4,000 word extended essay](#).

Finally, both programs include subject-based and skills-based courses – though IB has one skills-based course, Theory of Knowledge, while AP Capstone has two – Seminar and Research.

Differences

The IB program requires some of your courses be more difficult, while there's no distinction between standard level and higher level courses in AP Capstone. **To earn an IB diploma, 3 of your 6 courses have to be designated "higher level,"** while three can be "standard level." For the AP Capstone diploma, you can choose the four additional AP courses you want to take, even if [they are known as easier exams](#).

Also, AP Capstone does not have any extracurricular requirements whereas IB has the Creativity, Action, Service program, which essentially requires extracurricular activities.

Another major difference between the programs is that AP Capstone has no requirements as to the four additional AP classes you take, whereas **in IB you need to take courses [from six specific subject areas](#).** So while you could get the AP Capstone diploma with all humanities or all sciences classes if you wanted, IB requires courses taken from across the board. For this reason, the IB Diploma is arguably more comprehensive.

Finally, the IB program is more established, since it's a much older program. **While many colleges are likely familiar with IB, you may have to explain AP Capstone a bit more on your applications** so colleges know what it is and how it's different from regular AP.

Should You Take AP Capstone?

So now, the big question: if your school (or a school nearby) is offering AP Capstone, should you take it?

Before deciding, consider the cost – you're committing to taking at least 6 exams to earn the diploma. At \$91 per exam, that's significant! **Whereas by taking regular AP classes you can decide each year how many AP classes to take and whether you can afford them, for AP Capstone you're committing to a set number.**

Speaking of which, are you up for six classes? With regular AP you can drop out of any one class at any point, but with Capstone you need 6 courses to finish the diploma. Think hard about whether that's a commitment you're willing to take on.

Also, who at your school is teaching AP Research and/or AP Seminar? Those courses are a big part of the Capstone experience, so if the teacher isn't great you might want to skip Capstone and just take regular AP courses.

Since this is a new program, **expect some kinks and growing pains in the first few years.** Be especially cautious if you're a current sophomore or junior looking to jump into AP Capstone. Talk to your guidance counselor and the Seminar and/or Research teachers to get a sense of what AP Capstone will be like at your school and if you want to do it. If you're a freshman or younger, you have more time to wait and see how well the program does at your school and at the national level.

Will Colleges Care?

Similar to IB, since AP Capstone is only offered at a select few schools, **colleges won't be specifically looking for AP Capstone** or favoring it, since not all students have access to it.

Still, if you take Capstone, aspects of the program – especially the long research paper – will likely look desirable to most colleges. The independent research AP Capstone requires could be the topic of a college essay or at least something substantial to talk

about in an interview. However, like we mentioned earlier, since AP Capstone is new, **make sure you explain what it is on your college applications, so colleges realize that you undertook an advanced diploma program.** Odds are, that will look pretty good to them!

Also, remember that colleges will look at your schedule in the context of your school, so **as long as your schedule is as challenging as possible – whether you're in Capstone or not – you are setting yourself up for success.** It may be that taking AP Capstone will push you to take more AP classes, making your schedule look more challenging in the context of your school.

If your school does have Capstone and you opt to not take it, make sure you are taking a challenging mix of AP and honors courses so it doesn't look like you slacked off.