Northern Arizona University

Department of English

Professional Writing Program

CAPSTONE PROJECT

As shown in the Program of Study, every student taking the MA in English, with emphasis in Professional Writing, must complete a Capstone Project. The best time to complete this project is after taking ENG 526 and toward the end of the full MA, such as the last or next-to-last semester of the degree.

The Capstone Project is NOT a “class”; it is an individually completed research project, putting all that the student is learning in his or her other classes to some practical use, in line with the student’s professional experiences and goals.

The Capstone Project can be completed many ways, but the most common way is through ENG 685. The number ENG 685 exists in several forms at NAU. This can be confusing for students and faculty alike. Some other English Department areas offer ENG 685 as a class, but this class largely overlaps with our ENG 526 class, and hence is inappropriate for students in the Professional Writing area.

The Capstone Project is an individual effort by an individual student, working with an individual faculty member, to solve some problem or answer some question of actual interest and value to both the faculty member and the student. Think of a capstone project as a major component of a portfolio of work that the student can rely on in the job application process. The problem or question that underlies a capstone project can take many different forms. No two look exactly the same. Many are quite unique. All that really matters is that the student and the faculty member agree on the details of the project.

The process for creating a Capstone Project for a Professional Writing student is as follows:

The student comes up with what he or she thinks is a valid question or problem. The student then locates a faculty member willing to supervise the student’s work on that problem.

The student prepares a detailed project proposal, covering such elements as the nature of the problem or question to be studied, the method or rhetorical perspective for gathering data or doing analysis, the data required to study the problem or question, how the data will be gathered and analyzed, the timeline for all this work, the basic sort of result that is expected, etc. There is no set or mandatory form—it depends on the specifics of the project the individual student is doing.
The student and the faculty member must come to agreement on the details of the student's proposal. Often, this takes some time and multiple versions of the proposal, as the student refines it, with the faculty member's guidance.

This proposal must be generated and completed the semester BEFORE the project itself is to be done. When the proposal is ready, the faculty member submits it to the Department Chair as a request for an ENG 685 for the following semester. When the proposal is approved by both the faculty member and the Department Chair, that approval generates an individual permission number, which the student uses to register for ENG 685 the next semester.

The approved proposal becomes in effect a contract between the student and the faculty member for the work done in ENG 685. Whatever the approved proposal says is what the student must do, no more—and no less. When the work is done, the faculty member gives the student a grade in ENG 685 and the Capstone Project is done. ENG 685 is graded on a Pass/Fail basis.

An Example:

First of all, a warning, note, or disclaimer: an example is a sample, not a model. Each Capstone Project is different. No two Capstone Projects look the same.

A student was working in a large company and found that the informal writing style typical of social networking, such as tweets, e-mails, texts, etc., was creeping in to the professional writing of the company. The student felt this was a problem. The student, working with a faculty member, designed a set of questionnaires, and gathered a set of samples, both of text messages and company documents, to show concretely how this problem was affecting the company. The result of this project was a training program on this issue to be delivered to company personnel.

Another student could do another Capstone Project starting right where the first student left off. This second Capstone Project would be to monitor the delivery of the training program, the data would be gathering pre- and post-training-program company writing samples and analyzing them to see if the company writing was any better after the training program was delivered. The result would be an analysis of the effectiveness of the training program.

For more information, please contact Gregory.Larkin@nau.edu