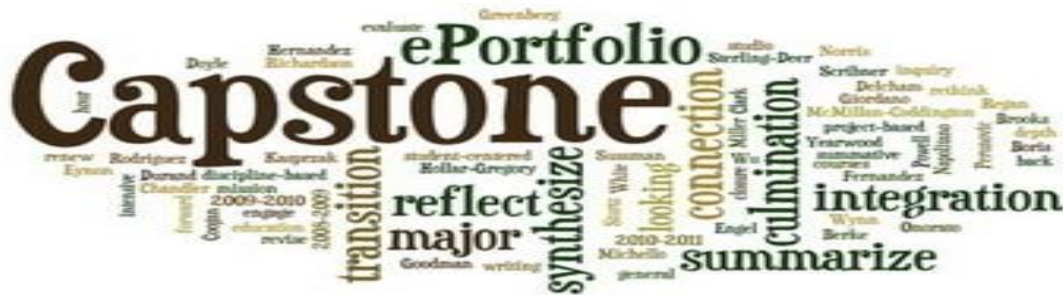


The Writing Center @ KUMC

THE CAPSTONE PROJECT



Definition: A capstone is a high point or crowning achievement. In academia, it is a paper/thesis that represents the culmination of study in a program.

History: “Capstone” entered the lexicon in 17th-century England. It referred to the capping or topping of a wall by means of a stone. In the late 19th century, the word appeared in America. By the late 1980s and 1990s, U.S. schools commonly required a research paper called a capstone.

Use: A capstone emphasizes critical thinking, reflection, studiousness or learning, and storytelling. It focuses on the integration of coursework in a summative conception that puts a coherent cap on one’s education. Structure varies depending on the discipline. Whatever the structure of a capstone, an education may somehow be incomplete without it. Very importantly, a capstone pulls together research as a “transformative” experience. That is, it gets students ready for graduate school, publication, and/or problem solving within a specific discipline. The key here is preparedness—via a combination of multiple skills—for application to life.

Not Just Another Paper: The capstone is a synthesis of years of study. Research makes the synthesis possible. And synthesis makes the research indispensable and justifiable. It’s much more than raw data.

Getting Started—Choosing a Topic: Make a list of all the academic papers you have written. Write a brief description of each paper and/or major exam from your classes. Keep the research papers close by. Then brainstorm, whether your ideas are general, specific, or competing with each other. Start with an opinion or personal experience but delve into its meaning. Find a project that can be completed in a semester or two, depending on your degree requirements. Don’t choose a topic that has been done to death. Talk

with faculty and peers. Now write! Make lists of keywords, explore thoughts-feelings in a journal, idea map, or other modality. A systematic approach will help you make the right choice.

Time: Set aside a generous amount so you can do the required reading. Time is a crucial factor in the success of a capstone—a productive use of time! It's easy to be ineffective, procrastinate, or lose motivation. The best advice is to a) plan ahead, b) start early, c) allot enough time for faculty to read and respond to your drafts (respect their time constraints), and d) have a daily/weekly schedule in which you prioritize your work. When you're feeling burned out, use your time productively to talk with peers about their work, organize files (including the use of "necessary" and "tangent" research material), and make lists to manage your tasks.

Research: Collect up-to-date references on the topic. Produce citations. Take good notes. Create a matrix to help you analyze the similarities-differences of studies. Work with librarians regularly to optimize your searches. Use other strategies to maximize time and quality of research.

Drafting: Write the intro and conclusion last. If you choose to write the intro first, then be sure to write it last as well. In other words, if writing the paper without an intro is harder, write the intro first but be sure to return to it in the final stages. And make sure it says what the project is all about. If you choose to write the intro last, consider starting with the literature review or methods but proceed in a semi-organized fashion. And above all, proceed by trusting in the process of writing. Most who write a capstone or thesis are never totally sure of what they're doing. This is the first time in their life that they're attempting to write such a paper. Remind yourself constantly that if you have a plan you can give life to this grueling work. When your mind says, "I can't write this thing!" that's precisely when you have to trust in the process, which often means taking a leap of faith. That's precisely how all writers feel each time they tackle a new project. They come to value, even love, that heady feeling of a leap into the unknown. It's how all good writing is created. With each success, you build upon success.

Revision: Because a capstone has many parts and can be lengthy, it needs a good amount of revising and editing. See our handout "[Revision: Art and Craft](#)."

Conclusion: Break down the project into component parts that you can work on individually, but remember to work on all the parts in the context of the overall goal. Build in time to examine and reflect on the results of your work with each component. Above all, choose a topic that matters to you and your field. Stay objective but write like it matters—like it matters a lot!