

Frequently Asked Questions about Graduation Project

The Graduation Project is required by the State Board of Education for graduation from all North Carolina high schools. This requirement is in effect for students who were ninth graders for the first time during the 2006-2007 school year and thereafter.

The state has set general parameters for the project and developed rubrics to be used to score each of the four components (research paper, portfolio, oral presentation, and product). The project is implemented and scored at the school level. The following FAQs are designed to give general information about Graduation Project. The best source of information about Graduation Project is typically each school's website because it will contain information about the logistics, due dates, and specialized requirements at that school.

What is the Graduation Project?

The Graduation Project, part of the North Carolina high school Exit Standards, is a culminating project that provides students with a means to demonstrate what they know and are able to do as they prepare to graduation from high school. A performance-based exit assessment, it consists of four components: research paper, oral presentation, product, and portfolio.

Who has to complete the Graduation Project?

All students who entered a North Carolina high school as a ninth grader for the first time during the 2006-2007 school year and thereafter.

When do students begin to work on the Graduation Project?

High schools typically begin preparing students for the Graduation Project in ninth grade through the use of interest inventories, instruction in how to conduct research, and introduction to the requirements of the project. The North Carolina Standard Course of Study in grades K-8 helps lay the foundation as students begin developing the skills necessary to succeed on the project. The Graduation Project will typically culminate in the senior year.

What is a Graduation Project Coordinator?

Although the specific duties of the Graduation Project Coordinator may vary by school, general responsibilities include the following: working with all members of the school community to facilitate completion of the Graduation Project; communicating with administration about Graduation Project; and maintaining current information about the status of the Graduation Project at the school, district, and state level. The coordinator serves on the school's Graduation Project Steering Committee and/or Graduation Project Advisory Board and is responsible for coordinating the establishment of local processes and procedures.

What are student responsibilities in relation to the Graduation Project?

According to the State Board/NCDPI *Exit Standards Implementation Guide*, student responsibilities are as follows:

- Follow school adopted procedures for Graduation Project
- Identify a topic and follow the school process for approval of the topic

- Provide documented parental approval of selected topic of research, product, and mentor
- Meet the school's timeline for completion of each of the four components and related processes – research paper, product, oral presentation, and portfolio
- Adhere to state and school requirements guiding each component
- Demonstrate competent/proficient skills in the completion of each component
- Demonstrate adherence to the locally developed ethical standards required when conducting research, producing a product, completed related documentation, and/or validating processes (p. 33)

What are parent responsibilities?

According to the NCDPI *Exit Standards Implementation Guide*, parent responsibilities for supporting their students in achieving the Exit Standards are as follows:

- Participate in awareness sessions (what parents can do to prepare their child)
- Access information (brochures, newsletter, video, etc.)
- Support their child in meeting the requirements of the Exit Standards
- Join a broad-based local work team, 15-25 individuals depending on school size, to serve on school improvement team (p. 2)

Because the Graduation Project is one of the Exit Standards criteria, schools will make every effort to make parents aware of requirements and invite them to learn more about how they can support their children in meeting these requirements. Schools may choose to have parents sign an Honor Code as well so that they have a clear understanding of the ethics involved in differing levels of students support.

Can students meet the requirements of the Graduation Project through specific programs at a school (for example, International Baccalaureate, Service Learning, CTE)?

It is possible that schools with these programs may allow students to use elements of those programs in completion of the Graduation Project. This is a question that should be directed to the Graduation Project Coordinator at the high school.

What is the research paper requirement of the Graduation Project?

According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction *Exit Standards Implementation Guide*, the research paper “requires students to develop and demonstrate proficiency in conducting research and writing proficiently about a chosen in-depth topic. A Graduation Project Steering Committee at the school sets parameters to guide the length, format, sources, writing style and other characteristics related to acceptable topic selection, research practices, and writing styles” (p. 32).

According to a handbook on implementing such projects prepared by the North Carolina Education Standards and Accountability (1997), the “research-based essay contains a thesis that the writer proves, or disproves, through research evidence. Selection of a topic takes considerable time; it should lend itself to performing or constructing a product. The essay uses the acquisition of knowledge through researching, writing, interviewing, and synthesizing and application of real world skills of time management, organization, self discipline, persistence, and problem solving” (p. 12).

What procedures should students use when selecting their topics?

The key to topic selection rests in the students being allowed to choose their own topics but doing so within academic standards and project guidelines. Among its many goals, the Graduation Project is to be a learning stretch, so even though some students may wish to pursue their life's interest, it may be in their best interest to pursue a new area or at least a new angle on an "old" topic. For example, if a student has been taking karate lessons since he/she was six years old, then the student may find another topic more of a stretch than continuing to research karate. The student could research a topic completely unrelated to the martial arts or at least study another martial art that might or might not have a correlation with karate. Many students who choose a topic with which they are very familiar do weak research, erroneously thinking they already know all there is to know about a topic from their years of experience.

Still, beginning with current student interests is an acceptable starting point for topic selection. Schools may provide career interest inventories or other inventories/surveys (many of which are available on-line) to help students discern their areas of interest. The Career Development Coordinators, as well as the Student Services Department, should be good sources for such tools.

It may be best for students to submit several possible topics so that the student's Graduation Project Advisor can discuss options and help the student select the best one. Experience has revealed that unless students are fully vested in the topic, they will lose interest and abandon the plan. In fact, students have been known to ask to "switch" topics very late in the process; this request has proven repetitively to create unmanageable stress on the student.

What are the qualities of a good essential question or topic?

In general, an effective topic goes beyond the compilation of information and requires synthesis, critical questioning, and deepened understanding. Some qualities of a good essential question or topic are the following:

- The topic is of personal interest to the student
- The student knows enough about the topic to get started but can still benefit through further research
- The topic is global enough to be researched but narrow enough to allow time for depth
- The topic lends itself to other components of the Graduation Project such as development of a product and the oral presentation
- The topic is a good match for the kind of research required
- The student would not encounter unreasonable expenses
- The topic is intellectually engaging for the student and allows him/her to stretch and grow

What is the portfolio requirement of the Graduation Project?

Because self-reflection is an integral part of the learning process, students are required to document their process and the progress they make while working on the Graduation Project. They will show evidence of their growth by keeping a folder of "reflective writing or logs and other forms of student documents" (NCDPI, 2006, p. 32). Schools will give students clear instructions about what kinds of documents will be acceptable. Also, schools will address what kinds of documents will help show the process at various stages of completion. Schools will determine whether the folder is electronic or "hard copy."

What documents should be included in the portfolio?

Many schools have elaborate portfolios that contain numerous “official” documents, while other schools limit the number of documents the portfolio includes. The portfolio may include items such as the following: title page, topic approval form, mentor approval form, letter of intent, parental consent, product log, mentor log, and self-reflection.

Some schools require a resumé, a “clean” copy of the research paper, a presentation outline, and numerous other forms documenting the process. Some forms are completed throughout the process and are collected for inclusion in the portfolio. Others are done just before the entire project is completed.

The state is clear on the purpose of the portfolio, and the state rubrics are equally clear in requiring students to meet standards in format/appearance, organization, completeness, student growth, student reflection, and information/technology/communications literacy.

What format should the portfolio take?

This is a school-based decision. As long as the portfolio format allows for documentation of student growth over time as well as the process taken to complete the Graduation Project, any format may be used to suit those purposes.

What is the product requirement of the Graduation Project?

The product requirement challenges students to create a tangible product related the field of study and/or research topic selected by the student. In fact, it should be a logical extension of the research paper. According to the NCDPI *Exit Standards Implementation Guide* (2006), the product might be in the form of a service which benefits the school or community, and it should “allow him or her to show applications of learning, and reflect that the student has spent substantial time completing it” (p. 32). The North Carolina Education Standards and Accountability Commission (1997) explains that “The product or project may incorporate the experiential, performance, or experimental real world skills of patience, responsibility, enthusiasm, time management, problem solving, practice and independence” (p. 12).

How many hours should the product entail and how are hours “earned”?

Like the paper length, the state documents do not delineate the number of hours students should spend developing the product; however, the state does strongly recommend a minimum of fifteen (15) hours. Fifteen hours does seem to be the norm statewide. Students seem able to produce a meaningful product in that amount of time.

Students often ask what constitutes time spent on the product. It is easy to “fudge” and “pad” the product log, as students readily discover. For example, if a student has to go to a store to purchase some building supplies for the model camera they are making, the student can log hours for the errand. However, advisors and judges should watch for students listing unusually long time for such errands. Product logs should allow students to record multiple dates and times of work; in fact, some schools require a mentor or advisor signature to verify time spent. In addition, some schools place a limit on how many hours out of the required number may be devoted to one particular activity such as job shadowing.

What are some possible products?

The list of possible products is vast and various, and the gamut runs from tangible to intangible, short-term to long-term. In other words, the key to effective products is to allow for individual differences and creativity.

Many products are actual physical objects that students create such as displays, models, art objects, charts, board games, crafts, costumes, booklets, and notebooks. Other products are performance-based such as fashion shows, musical and dance performances, athletic demonstrations, and culinary endeavors. Still others may be time logged in a particular activity such as job shadowing, internships and apprenticeships, and service learning. The latter category may result in a physical manifestation such as a scrapbook or journal of the experience that includes documentation of the student's experience.

In all cases, the product should have a viable and logical link to the research topic and thesis. Students do seem to struggle with developing products that have relevancy to the topic while being an effective extension of their learning.

Some specific sample products might include the following examples:

- Topic:** Middle school girls' self-esteem
Product: A spiral-bound booklet of 20 lesson plans teachers could use to help with surrounding pre-teens' body image (All lessons followed a prescribed format including name of lesson, lesson objective, estimated time, materials required, and instructions/procedures.)
- Topic:** The impact of the Special Olympics
Product: A digital scrapbook of student's experiences volunteering at the state Special Olympics over the course of two weeks in the summer
- Topic:** The influences on Handel's musical composing
Product: The performance of Handel's "Rejoice Greatly, O Daughter of Zion" on piano with written and oral explanations
- Topic:** Getting published
Product: A CD that delineates the steps needed to get something published, complete with strategies, graphics, and other visuals
- Topic:** Starting one's own illustration company
Product: A portfolio of graphic pieces needed for the company: business cards, letterhead, company brochure, postcards, ads, etc.
- Topic:** The impact of slavery in America
Product: A bound journal with numerous entries of a hypothetical slave, created to capture the historical time and events
- Topic:** The third-world disease known as IDD (iodine deficiency disorder)
Product: A public awareness campaign and fundraiser on the disease that resulted in a donation through Key Club International to UNICEF to help fight IDD
- Topic:** The issue of teen crime and delinquency
Product: A booklet that included drawings (interior and exterior), equipment, resources, and activities for effective urban teen centers

What is the oral presentation requirement of the Graduation Project?

In a formal presentation, each student provides an analysis of his/her process in completing the Graduation Project, as well as his/her self-growth from topic selection through project completion. Judges will be allowed to ask impromptu questions at the conclusion of the presentation. The North Carolina Education Standards and Accountability Commission (1997) explains that “The Review Panel and portfolio experience provides the student with an opportunity to synthesize the essay, project, and self growth journey using communication skills related to fluency, flow, knowledge, depth, listening, explaining, defending, and comprehending real-world skills in a holistic application” (p. 12).

How long should student presentations last?

The state rubrics do not delineate a time frame, but the rubrics do state that students should stay with the prescribed timelines. A typical timeframe is eight (8) to twelve (12) minutes, including time for the question-and-answer period. Schools should consider their time limitations and the number of seniors on a presentation cycle in determining time limits.

Who can attend the student’s presentation?

This is a school-based decision. It is not uncommon for parents and/or mentors to attend the presentation in addition to the Review Panel of Judges. However, guests will be excused from the room at any time discussion of the presentation takes place.

How will the Graduation Project be evaluated?

Each of the four components of the Graduation Project (research paper, portfolio, oral presentation, and product) will be evaluated using the state-approved rubrics in addition to any school-developed requirements. Schools will provide further details about what (if any) components of the Graduation Project might be attached to particular courses. After all four components have been assessed, students will either “meet” or “not meet” requirements for the project.

What will happen if a student does not meet the requirements for the Graduation Project?

Schools will have in place a process for students to re-do parts of the project which do not meet requirements.