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Carnegie Mellon University

English

Master of Arts in

Professional Writing

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Why Choose Professional Writing?

The short answer is that we can offer you one of the best, most flexible educations in professional writing available. You'll work with distinguished faculty in small classes, develop both foundational and specialized skills relevant to your career goals, and have the advantage of tapping into our almost 30 years of experience educating professional and technical writers. We firmly believe that you, like our current students and close to 400 alumni, will find the program to be a strong launching platform for an interesting, varied, and rewarding communications career. Our particular strengths include the following:

Flexible Curriculum

Professional Development

Emphasis on Writing as a Foundational Skill

Faculty Expertise in Document and Web Design

Distinguished and Diverse Faculty

Strong Grounding in Rhetoric

Excellent Student Faculty Ratio

Focus on Applying Theory and Research to Practice

In this booklet, you'll learn about a few of our staff graduates and how the M.A. in Professional Writing honed skills related to their professional career at Carnegie Mellon University.



Kurt Larsen ('03)

Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Studies,
College of Engineering

Why did you choose the M.A. in Professional Writing (MAPW) program?

I was in a different graduate program, but not feeling connected to it, when I took an elective class in professional writing. I quickly felt a strong draw to the content and outcomes of this course and decided to re-direct my path. The following semester, I took two more courses from the MAPW program and decided to apply.

How did the MAPW program hone particular skills?

The MAPW program has significantly improved my oral and written skills, which help me a great deal in my job. I often have to compose professional communications to students, faculty and parents. So understanding my audience and addressing them appropriately is paramount. The courses I completed helped me build a toolkit of skills across a number of modalities including visual, oral and written mediums.

What advice can you give to staff members who are considering the MAPW program?

Consider balance. At times, I took only 1 class per semester. This was helpful when work was busy and I also needed to attend to family life. I didn't feel overwhelmed and felt I was still able to delve into the coursework.

Also team projects with full-time students can present scheduling challenges. But the strategic use of connectivity and productivity software can mitigate most issues.



Bridget Decker ('03)

Director of Web Communications,
College of Engineering

Why did you choose the M.A. in Professional Writing (MAPW) program?

I chose the M.A. in Professional Writing program because I was interested in developing and honing my writing, design, and communications skills. I had an undergraduate degree in biology with a minor in writing. I was interested in science writing and other types of writing and communications, and the MAPW was a good fit for filling in any gaps I had for pursuing a career in writing and communications rather than in biology. I chose the MAPW in particular because it was both flexible and robust. I would develop a strong core foundation while also having the opportunity to explore areas of interest, such as design and web communications.

How did the MAPW program hone particular skills?

The core curriculum helped me to deepen and refine my knowledge of writing style and grammar and introduced me to design and information hierarchy concepts. I learned how to use specific software tools in addition to skills for communicating with likely future colleagues such as designers, web developers, and other creative and technical professionals. I practiced producing the best possible work on tight deadlines, working with clients, collaborating with teams, and how to learn and adapt to new software and technology. I acquired a range of tools and strategies for communicating clearly and effectively.

What advice can you give to staff members who are considering the MAPW program?

I highly recommend the program and believe you will be able to apply what you learn to your work almost immediately. I suggest working with the program advisors on how to organize your schedule to successfully balance your academic and professional workloads. I encourage you to seek opportunities within your position to either take on new projects or improve on projects with the skills you gain in the program. Be creative in how you approach an internship, as you may be able to explore a new area of interest while maintaining your current position.



Kelly B. Delaney ('09)

Assistant Dean,
IDeATe

Why did you choose the M.A. in Professional Writing (MAPW) program?

My undergraduate education was in writing so in thinking about a graduate program, I knew that was the area that I wanted to pursue. During my undergrad, I had focused on fiction writing, but through coursework discovered that I had stronger interests and skills in various forms of non-fiction writing, specifically communicating information and facts to an audience.

How did the MAPW program hone particular skills?

It greatly increased my ability to write coherently and efficiently. It also helped me to better understand how to manage projects and teams. An additional, unexpected benefit was that it gave me a great deal of insight into the experiences of the faculty and students here, which helped me to grow as a staff member working with those populations.

What advice can you give to staff members who are considering the MAPW program?

For many staff members at CMU, communicating is a huge part of their jobs. They can save a lot of time and spare a lot of confusion if they can understand better the mechanics and art of writing well. I would urge any staff member to at least take the Style course. If they're unsure about committing to the full degree, Style will give them a good sense of the experience of the program and if it's something that they would want to pursue. At the very least, the course will give them a strong set of skills for communicating both at work and in life.

I also recommend that staff members study the full financial implications of using the tuition benefits and associated taxes and compare them to their academic and professional goals. It was important to me to finish as quickly as I could, but that required me to take on a greater amount of financial responsibility because of the tax exemption limits for graduate tuition.



Hannah Diorio-Toth ('17)

Communications Manager,
College of Engineering, CMU-Africa

Why did you choose the M.A. in Professional Writing (MAPW) program?

I wanted to expand my skill set as a writer to further my career. I had earned my undergraduate degree in English and had several writing positions post-grad, but was looking for a program that would give me more expertise in my desired field.

As a staff member, I also loved that furthering one's education is encouraged and I was excited to take advantage of CMU's tuition reimbursement benefits.

How did the MAPW program hone particular skills?

I am a much more knowledgeable and confident communicator because of the MAPW program. The program taught me the foundations of strong, effective storytelling through a variety of mediums: professional writing, technical writing, graphic design, web design, social media, and video. With a focus on rhetorical analysis, the program challenged me to think critically about how to connect with my audience. When a new platform comes along in five or ten years, I can apply the skills that I learned in the MAPW program to create effective communication pieces.

What advice can you give to staff members who are considering the MAPW program?

The MAPW staff, faculty, fellow students, and alumni are all very supportive of staff members in the program. Recognize that all of these people are resources to learn more about how you can customize the experience to fit your career goals or balance with your busy life. As a staff member and part-time student, you are sometimes not as immersed in the day-to-day of the program as a full-time student. You have to work harder to reach out and make connections.



Nathan Snizaski ('19)

Technical Writer/Content Writer,
College of Engineering, Engineering
Research Accelerator

Why did you choose the M.A. in Professional Writing (MAPW) program?

I chose the MAPW program to prepare for a career transition. Prior to joining the MAPW program, my coworkers regularly asked for my help crafting email announcements, posters, and other documents. It was rewarding to be known for having a knack for a valuable skill, which piqued my interest in furthering my education. A colleague told me about the MAPW program at CMU and I was sold on the spot. The MAPW program offers a comprehensive curriculum with the breadth and depth that I was seeking to help jump-start my career.

How did the MAPW program hone particular skills?

Elective offerings are highly relevant and applicable in real-world scenarios. Those concepts are reinforced by transferring skills learned in the classroom to my full-time position. When I came into the program, I had a working knowledge of basic office productivity software. Now, I have hands-on experience building portfolio pieces with the Adobe Creative Suite, including Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign, and a few others. It's been fun to update the skills section of my resume each semester.

What advice can you give to staff members who are considering the MAPW program?

You will be taking at least a few classes during the daytime throughout the program, so prepare accordingly. As a professional courtesy, let your instructors know as far in advance as possible if you anticipate any major scheduling conflicts that may interfere with class. The same goes for your CMU job manager. Block out your shared calendar with your class schedule for the semester to avoid being double-booked.

Also, consider taking a class as a non-degree student while you consider – or are currently in the process of – applying. I wish I would have taken a course or two while I was preparing my application materials for submission. It's also a good way to gauge your level of interest in the program.



Meredith Marsh ('22)

Marketing & Communications Manager,
School of Architecture

Why did you choose the M.A. in Professional Writing (MAPW) program?

I chose the MAPW program because I wanted to further develop my writing skills and make myself more marketable for writing jobs. Prior to starting the program, I had finished a degree in English and worked as a legal/technical writer for a law firm, so I knew I loved writing, but the breadth of my writing experience was limited. I wanted to learn more about technical writing and its relationship to user experience, and the program has been extremely beneficial in exploring that.

How did the MAPW program hone particular skills?

The skills I've learned in each class are rooted in realistic professional scenarios. For example, in the Style course, we revised materials extracted from real life, like a gas company's memo to its customers, and wrote a letter explaining our revisions as if we were a freelance writing consultant hired by the gas company. These kinds of projects put me in the shoes of a professional writer and gave me the space to learn how to be a more effective writer.

What advice can you give to staff members who are considering the MAPW program?

Balancing working full time with taking classes is tough, but doable. That being said, there is never going to be a "convenient" time to start the program; work and life will always be busy and demanding, so if you're considering enrolling you may as well dive in. I did, and the strength of the classes has made it all worth it. I genuinely look forward to class and the assignments each week because they have already made such a profound impact on my work and mindset.



Jake Boca ('23)

Technical Writer,
Computing Services

Why did you choose the M.A. in Professional Writing (MAPW) program?

I enrolled in the MAPW program to support a career pivot. I knew I enjoyed writing and information design, and this program was the best suited to help me hone those skills.

Coming from an educational background that left me with limited career options, I was also attracted to the variety of career paths that alumni have taken. The first-semester seminar helps you understand the many types of jobs that you can pursue, and then the rest of the degree is customizable enough to gain experience in the areas that interest you most.

How did the MAPW program hone particular skills?

A lot of people write well enough by imitating work they admire, but that can only get you so far. This program teaches you to use research, theory, and testing to inform your writing decisions and create the best product for your reader. It's been an invaluable skill in my day-to-day work.

What advice can you give to staff members who are considering the MAPW program?

Two things - 1) talk to alumni, current students, and faculty, and 2) take a trial class.

I gained the most information and the best perspective on the program from my conversations with other people. Everyone I spoke with was encouraging, helpful, and eager to share.

And if you can fit it into your schedule, take a trial class or two before you apply. That way, you can practice balancing your workload, better understand the financial implications, and ensure the course content aligns with your career goals.



Sharon McAndrews ('25)

Associate Director,
Advancement Research

Why did you choose the M.A. in Professional Writing (MAPW) program?

I stepped away from working in communications roles when I relocated to Pittsburgh. I chose, instead, to seek information-related jobs after I completed a master of library and information science. The switch in roles has been a rewarding change of pace for me and one that has allowed me to use both my research and writing skills. Still, I have long known that if I ever wanted to return to professional writing roles or communications jobs, I would need to rebuild my credentials and fill in gaps of missing expertise. Lastly, I am a lifelong learner! I couldn't pass on the opportunity to immerse myself within a professional writing program, as my heart really is in the work.

How did the MAPW program hone particular skills?

I am becoming a more confident communicator and critical thinker thanks to enrolling in the program. Coursework is teaching me how to strategically analyze text, reflect with more precision on my word choices, and revise my business communications to both tell a better story and advocate ideas and recommendations more directly on behalf of my customers.

What advice can you give to staff members who are considering the MAPW program?

Appreciate that the program is about non-fiction writing and so much more about how we communicate. Also know that you will be busy and tired and your family budget will be pinched. You'll use a lot of weekends and PTO to make it all happen. But, you *will* find work-life balance and... the program experience is. worth. every. moment. Plus, you will amaze yourself by way of your fortitude, perseverance, and, quite frankly, your love for writing and learning.