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# The Road Less Traveled

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# The Road Less Traveled



Photo: Dinkey Lakes Wilderness. Copyright Brandon Caskey

**Brandon Caskey**

Senior Capstone

Practical and Professional Ethics

Creative Project

Dr. Qun Wang

Division of Humanities and Communication

Fall 2016

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I would like to thank all the people who have given me feedback on my work over the last few months, without you I would have struggled far more.

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# Capstone Project Proposal

## Creative Project Option Proposal

1. *Name and Area of Concentration:*

**Brandon Caskey**

Practical and Professional Ethics

2. *Capstone Title:*

The Road Less Traveled

3. *Project Description:*

I intend to write 5 poems and a short story, all of which is aimed at helping young people find their self-identity through natural experience. The short story will be a fiction piece that tells about my younger brother and I bonding in the outdoors while he searches for his identity.

The poems are going to be about influence, solitude, and being yourself.

4. *Alignment with Common Theme:*

*This project relates to Self-identity in that the outdoors provide a place of contemplation and relaxation while also housing opportunities for an increase in self efficacy and self-esteem.*

5. *Expectations:*

1- *Short story.*

5- *High Quality Poems designed to inspire a reader to create their own adventure.*

6. *Specific skills required:*

Creative writing skills

Minor knowledge of the outdoors

Personal investment

7. Next Steps:

1. Start writing the poems and short story
2. Get feedback from students
3. Revise poetry and short story
4. Get feedback from CSUMB Faculty
5. Revise and prepare a final product
6. Write Synthesis Essay
7. Write Reflection Essay
8. Organize all work into a final Portfolio.

8. Timeline:

I plan to work on this project in sections. If I complete each one of the above numbers on a weekly basis, I will have completed my project by the deadline and I will have additional weeks to review the final product.

*I Hate It*

It captures my attention  
it holds me hostage  
It tells me who I am supposed to be  
It shows me how I am supposed to look  
It shows me the negativity that the world holds  
It makes me jealous of others possessions  
It keeps me tied into other people's lives  
It consumes hours of my life  
It dies regularly but can always be revived  
It continues its cycle, steadily crushing my hopes  
It shares so much about me  
I wish it was gone  
I wish I was free  
I wish I could do without it  
I wished for it as a kid  
I saved up money to get it  
Now it owns me  
Now I pay monthly for the negativity it brings  
I wish I could get rid of it  
But it makes me who I am  
Who I want to be  
Or at least that is what it makes me think  
But that isn't the case  
My phone doesn't make my identity  
I do.

*Momma Knows Best*

Mother Nature is always available  
Through her, you can find yourself  
    When you feel left out  
    Like you never fit in  
    You'll know it's the time  
    For adventures to begin  
When you set out on your path  
    And all cell service is lost  
    You find an opportunity  
    To learn about yourself.  
    You lay there quietly,  
    Staring at clouds  
    Your brain can find peace  
    With the absence of crowds  
If you don't know the feeling  
You're definitely missing out,  
    There is no better thrill  
    Than letting it all hang out  
    Some may say nature,  
    Is too dangerous to explore  
Avalanches, bears, and falling trees,  
    Well that's just fine,  
    More nature for me.



*I am*

Recently I was asked, "who are you?" by a close friend.

And all I could get out was, I am me.

I am confident in my endeavors and I love cracking jokes

I work to live, instead of living to work

I spend hours outside, in search of backcountry adventures

I am crafty, and I love woodworking

I care about the environment, but I won't give up my truck

I hike, I mountain bike, and spend a lot of time at school

I learn about HCOM but more so myself

I learned that all my descriptors, are self-assigned

And that my self-identity is flexible, and cannot be defined

White, American, Heterosexual, Male,

All of this makes me who I am, and that is the truth

I just wish it was easier,

To share this message with youth

They struggle so hard, to be who they are not

But they need to learn,

They can choose to be who they want

They choose how they act, and what makes them unique

The only thing worse than being different,

Is being exactly the same.

*The Peaks of Life*

My lungs struggle at 12,000 feet  
With air this thin my body slows down  
My muscles fatigue  
But the climb continues  
I must get to the top  
At this elevation, there are no trees  
There are no deer, no rabbits, only a lone marmot  
The marmot has adapted  
He doesn't struggle to breathe.  
I must become like the marmot.  
This place is rugged,  
And visitation is low  
But this is the place  
Where I can be myself  
I push my body, and fight the pain  
To find the solitude  
That my mind truly needs  
Once at the peak  
I sit, I relax, I reflect  
It is this valuable time for thought  
That separates me from others  
Friends and family think I'm crazy  
And maybe I am  
But I need to get to my place  
While my mind and body still can.

*Death Valley*

With expanses of land

And nothing to see

Death Valley calls out

And speaks to me

The high winds blow away my clouded thoughts

The sweltering heat dries my tears

No Wi-Fi or cell service

Without these, some would die

No water, no crowds, no selfie sticks

Just silence

Peace and quiet

So, I sit and let my brain free

I solve the problems

Constantly affecting me

Who am I?

What do I stand for?

Why do I feel different?

The desert holds the answers

You are you

You stand for what you care about

If you weren't different, you would be the same

And that is worse.

Death Valley, the Sierra Mountains and the Big Sur coast,

Make me who I am.

## The Risks of Adventure

In an attempt to share my connection to nature with my brother I decided to start taking him on random camping trips that are so far off the grid that iPads and cell phones are of no use. These places are special to me because they provide the freedom for the visitor to truly be themselves. There is nobody there to judge you, and it is very rare to come across someone who you know from home. This is where true discovery takes place, but the journey to get there is an uphill battle against the washboard roads, blistering heat, and the constant danger of becoming lost. I think the danger and unpredictability is what draws me in. A part of me likes knowing that I conquered the things that threatened me. But sometimes things don't go as planned.

My brother Brady and I are very close but he is ten years younger than me. He has long blonde hair and two big front teeth that are always being exposed by his frequent smile. Brady is not the most social kid on the block and deals with some self-confidence issues at school. He looks to me as his big brother for advice and I always try to guide him in the proper direction by sharing the lessons I've learned throughout life. Brady really enjoys his time on the computer, he will stay up until 3AM playing first person shooter games and then be tired and moody the following day. I have been trying for years to get him out of the house and become more active. I decided that I needed to share my love for the outdoors with him. I knew it would be good for him to get outside and experience adventure. We embarked on many journeys in and around Joshua Tree, Torrey Pines, and Thomas Mountain; they were all very enjoyable, but there was one trip in particular when the unpredictability of adventure struck hard.

This particular journey ventured deep into the canyons of the Anza Borrego desert. As we drove out on the highway we made the usual stops for food, gas, and water. Our first destination was a set of underground caves made of mud. In the 1930's there was a natural aquifer that kept fresh drinking water underneath the desert floor. Over the years, the nearby town of Borrego Springs consumed the majority of the aquifer and this resulted in a huge underground cavern with a series of tunnels leading to it. This was what we were set to explore. As we arrived at the GPS coordinates that a local ranger gave me; we packed each of our backpacks with:

Water in a Camelback plus one Nalgene bottle each (4 pounds total),

A turkey sandwich, a blueberry yogurt, trail mix, and a Snickers bar each (2.5 pounds),

One Petzl headlamp each (11 ounces),

One XL Kirkland brand Fleece Jacket each (0.9 pounds)

And a Black Diamond climbing helmet each (1.2 pounds).

The tunnel we went down was nicknamed "Cool Cave" because the wind that was blowing out of it was 20 degrees colder than the ambient air temperature out in the desert, this was a very pleasant surprise.

As we hiked deeper and deeper underground we got to the section where the big cavern opens up. This was the magical place that I wanted my brother to see. *Drip, Drip, Drop, Plop* was all you could hear inside. We were about 200 feet below the surface and it was pitch

black in the cavern, all you could see was where your headlamp pointed. "It's friggin spooky in here" brady uttered, knowing I wouldn't let him say the "F- Word".

"Yeah, you're not kiddin" I replied

Brady was so far out of his comfort zone, but every time I looked over at him he had a huge smile on his face so I knew he was doing well. There was still water in the cavern so the eerie dripping noise and the light howl of the wind from the surface never quieted. We found a nice ledge that was comfortable to sit on and we ate lunch. "So what's up with that girl Electra in your class?" I asked.

"Uhh, nothin. I don't really talk to her"

"Why don't you?"

"I guess I just don't have anything to talk to her about."

"Well why don't you talk to her about school, you guys have that yearbook class together, right?"

"yeah, but it's not cool to talk about school"

"you could always talk about music, vacations, or..... Oh! You could tell her about this trip!"

"I mean, I guess I could"

"Trust me brady, girls love Adventure"

"Psh, and how do you know that Brandon?"

“I have had like a million girlfriends and nine hundred thousand of them loved adventure, so there”

“whatever...” brady chuckled to himself

We spent a little over an hour underground chatting and then decided we were ready for some fresh air. As we walked up, Brady shared, “I’m scared to do trips like this without you, I don’t have the right stuff, and I’m not good at reading those maps you have.”

“Outdoor knowledge is earned, and the only way to get it is to venture out of your comfort zone and go on an adventure. Like we are doing right now.” I made sure that he understood that he was still young and the older he got the more comfortable and confident he would become.

After we made it back to the truck we set off for our campsite. I had an old favorite site bookmarked on my GPS and I had Brady drive us there since we were not on public roads. He was so ecstatic to drive, it made me happy inside. Once we arrived at camp, we set up our tent, cooked dinner, and I let Brady light our campfire “Desert Style” which consisted of about 3 gallons of gasoline and a road flare. That night we slept well, not knowing the danger we would face on the following day.

The next morning, we woke up to the desert sun beating down on our dark green tent, it was hot, very hot. We made a nice eggs and bacon breakfast with orange juice, packed up our camp and headed west towards Nate Harrison Grade. Nate Harrison Grade is a dirt road that runs through the Pala Indian Reservation and allows the shooting of firearms in the many offshoots that the road has. Nate Harrison Grade is a place I have been many times and I had

never had any issues shooting or driving on and around the road so I figured it would be a great place to take Brady to show him the proper way to handle the .308 rifle, 12 gauge shotgun, and the 9mm pistol we had on board. I wanted him to understand the safety aspects that are necessary for a well-rounded outdoorsman to know.

We picked a really nice offshoot trail that was about a half mile off of the main dirt road. As we set up our shooting table, set up our targets, and brought out the pistols, shotguns, and rifles, we noticed the wind picking up. We were planning on shooting clay pigeons with the shotguns but I decided that it would be hard for a beginner to shoot clay in the wind. Too much wind might lead to a dangerous situation of Brady turning his body around to chase the clay pigeons, so we stuck to rifles and pistols. We had our safety brief and I showed him how each firearm worked. I started out by having him show me where the safety was on each gun, then moved on to loading, trigger control and firing skills. We shot for about an hour and a half, playing target practice games, and shooting apples off of logs. When we took a break for lunch we took off our hearing protection and began to make sandwiches when I noticed a noise off in the distance. I waited as it grew louder and drew closer. Soon I was able to figure out that it was a bunch of dirt bikes coming up the grade. This was not unusual, since Nate Harrison Grade leads up to the mountains and then down to the desert. I became uneasy when the dirt bikes let off the gas and by the sound of it, turned into our offshoot trail.

Thirty seconds later my brother and I were surrounded by six grimacing Native Americans on dirt bikes. I was immediately suspicious of the because none of them had any riding gear or helmets. They all wore blue or black Dickies shorts and oversized t-shirts with silk screened prints, and I could tell very quickly that they were looking for trouble. I told my



brother very forcefully, "Point your rifle at the ground and keep it pointed there, DO NOT do anything I don't do!"

All of the troublemakers turned off their dirt bikes, so I decided to exchange my turkey sandwich for a 12-gauge shotgun. The whole scene grew silent. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, I broke the silence. "Can I help you guys?" I asked in the manliest voice I could muster up.

I was scared, but I couldn't show weakness in this very tense situation. An overweight rider with a handlebar mustache spoke up and said, "We were just checking on you, to see if you've got anything good."

I immediately realized that this was some kind of an attempt at a robbery, but Brady and I were very well armed, so nobody really knew what the next step was. I replied, "We don't. And I promise you that this will go much smoother if we all just go our separate ways. We are about to head home."

The hair on the back of my neck stood up as these words left my mouth. I never got a reply, but one of the riders kick started his bike and the others followed shortly after. We immediately packed our gear and started the truck, leaving the 12-gauge shotgun behind the driver seat and my pistol in the cup holder just in case there was more trouble down the road.

As I ripped down Nate Harrison Grade towards the city, I noticed we were being followed by our problems. They kept their distance and never got close, but we were being followed. I checked my phone to see if I could call 911 but there was no service. So I pressed down harder on the skinny pedal, maintaining a safe speed but definitely going fast. As we

made it to the pavement I blew two stop signs and immediately merged into traffic. We lost them once we were able to get some good speed on the pavement and I never saw any of them again.

Once we were nice and far from the situation, Brady's barrage of questions came. "What were they doing? Why did they pick us? How come they were following us down?" he asked.

I didn't have the answers to any these questions, but I answered anyways," Things like that are just part of the uncertainty and danger of rural places. Everything is reliant on preparation. We packed for our trip properly and that is why we were good to go."

I made sure that he understood that I was not saying that you need a million guns to go outside because you might get robbed by bandits, but that I really meant that solid preparation, planning, and expecting things to potentially go wrong are what leads to safe trips.

We made it back home to Carlsbad and my mom freaked out when Brady told the story, but she understood that he was in good hands and we both made it home unscathed. That night, Brady came into my room with a little smirk on his face and said, "I really like camping with you, and what you said to those guys today was bad ass."

I just smiled and said, "I can't wait for the next adventure."

It was that trip that made Brady want to become an Outdoorsman.

## Reflective Essay

I chose poetry as the primary medium for my creative project because it is a very new medium to me. Within this past year at CSUMB I have developed some great creative writing skills. I decided that I wanted to challenge myself by working in a medium in which I had very little previous experience. I feel as though I have conquered this goal by providing high quality work. In addition to my poetry I am including a fictional short story about my brother searching for his identity. There are elements of truth throughout my short story but some details have been omitted for personal reasons.

During the writing process, I was constantly searching for feedback on my work. The quality of feedback and constructive criticism was hit and miss, depending on who I asked. Many of my friends just told me what they thought I wanted to hear and simply said that I was doing great and they loved my work. It was Professor Debra Busman that gave me the true feedback I needed. She asked me to describe the places I was writing about to her verbally. When I did this, I began telling her about Death Valley and all the little details that I loved about it. It was this conversation that allowed me to see that the way I wrote and the way I described were different from each other. Once I made this realization I went back and tried to bring the feelings of desolation into my writing.

An additional feature of my poem *The Peaks of Life*, is that I was alluding to the fact that I wanted to be just like the lone marmot. Not only is the marmot so tough that he can survive in the high altitude barren lands, he also lives alone and knows solitude very well. It was this solitude that I was directly focusing on trying to capture. By referencing the lone marmot and

my desire to be like him I was showing that it is ok to be different. The marmot doesn't have to be like the other birds or squirrels, and the fact that he is different makes his life easier because he has adapted to his environment.

I want my readers to realize that they can adapt to their own environment and be themselves. Sometimes having a different skillset makes a person far more valuable, and if that person was just like all of the other people then there would be no need for the person. Being unique is crucial to success, and my intention was to get this across in my poetry. Some readers may not grasp this idea, but the ones that can grasp it will be enlightened.

My life journey has taken me far into the backcountry many times and these mini journeys are what have led to my positive outlook on life, my sense of drive, and my uncanny desire for adventure. In short, my travels have made me who I am. It is extremely difficult to explain how I have grown along my journey because the changes and adaptations don't click and show themselves right away. My skills have slowly surfaced and blended with other skillsets to make me more well rounded. I have high hopes that my creative capstone project has the ability to inspire others to take a journey of their own.

In addition to having my poems displayed on my poster I have chosen to pair them with a high-quality panorama shot that I took while exploring the Dinkey Lakes Wilderness in the Sierra Mountain Range. This photo is especially special to me because it captures the immense views and the pristine lands that are completely accessible with a little planning. During this trip, I hiked to the top of Dog Tooth Peak and spent some time hashing out some issues and stressors from home. It was during this time that I realized I wanted to do poetry for my

medium. I feel that this image accurately represents a single person's search for identity in an outdoor setting. I also feel as though this image is so visually appealing that it has the potential to draw in viewers. Many poster examples I saw made the posters look chaotic and uninviting so I quickly decided that my poster was going to be simple and very inviting. I wanted to make my poster unique, since the whole premise of my project is that you must be who you are and not try to modify yourself to be similar to others. I feel that my poster's simplicity adds to the ideas on the poster and increases their effectiveness.

Originally I wanted to do a quick and easy guide for people who have never been in the backcountry. This guide was supposed to include a packing list, some safety tips, navigational skills, and a step by step guide to meditation in an outdoor setting. After looking at the logistics for this project I quickly realized that I had bit off more than I could chew. The sad part was that I had a burning desire to make this guide but Capstone was not the time or place to develop this. I still plan to create this guide on my free time, but for the Capstone class and festival I found poetry was a better route. Poetry has more emotion and power than a guide, and I feel that the attachment is truly present in poetry. Whereas with a step by step guide, the writing and instruction feel more sterile. I did not want to waste my new found creative writing skills writing a boring, sterile guide to get indoor folks going outside, I just wanted more out of this project.

Selecting an audience for my poetry was a little difficult at first. In the beginning, I was looking to have everyone be my target audience but I quickly realized that this was impractical and if I chose a specific audience I could then tailor my work to relate to them. Once I had my

work written, even those outside of the targeted audience could still access my work, even though it may be a little less effective.

The demographic I chose for my audience is young college students in the 18 to 24 year old range. I feel as though these are the people who struggle hardest with their identity. For a lot of these students, they find themselves in a new land with new people, and they are unsure how to conduct themselves. When a student goes off to college they have a clean slate. They have the ability to show their true colors and find like-minded people. Instead, many students choose to become something they are not, and then they connect with people who are not like them, and they become lost in reference to their identity.

Through my project I am hoping to inspire young adults to be their true selves and let others accept them for who they are. I have struggled with being genuine in the past, after graduating military school I wound up very different than those who attended my hometowns coastal public school. I changed who I was to make myself look similar, but now looking back I realized that I was stronger, smarter, and happier before I started changing myself to match those around me. I now realize that if I had been genuine to myself and showed others my true colors then I would have saved myself the hassle of trying to adapt to something lesser than I already was. My vision is that I can help young adults skip the wasteful steps I took to be “cool” and inspire them to take the steps that will benefit them in the long run.

As a 26 year old student I feel that I have different credibility than a published author. My ability to relate to the struggles of college and me bringing my own struggles with identity to light make me very relatable to a young college student. Since I am older, I have had

additional time to learn life lessons, but the fact that I am still in college makes me relatable. I feel that this type of credibility is key when trying to relate with young adults. If writing is too scholarly or too conceptual then young readers tend to zone out and they can't retain the information well. My poetry is written with simplistic terms and real world examples for this very reason.

The short story that I wrote is another medium that is effective at allowing young people to relate to an idea. My brother Brady is in high school and he is struggling to find his own identity. He wants to be in this popular group but he doesn't really enjoy the things that popular kids like, so he is torn. I tell him that life is not a popularity contest, and he always shrugs me off. I feel this is good advice, because life really isn't a popularity contest, and those popular kids he is so worried about impressing, won't matter in 5- 10 years.

I find solitude and time for reflection in the outdoors so the short story is based on my attempt to take Brady into an outdoor setting to allow him to reflect and refocus on what is important in life. It is important to realize that all of life's wonders can't be understood because of one camping trip, but it is possible to gain new insight and a new outlook on life after a single trip. The idea is to get in the right mindset and allow yourself to find yourself.

The process I took to make my project was strategic. I wrote the majority of my poems in an outdoor setting because I wanted them to feel genuine. This not only allowed me to go on short day trips during the semester "to work on homework" but it also allowed me to have a clear head while writing my short story and poetry. I feel that this makes my writing more real, and finding the details was easier because I could reference my surroundings.

One of my favorite locations to write is down in Big Sur. The actual place is called Partington Cove and when you take the coastal trail down to the shore there is an offshoot trail that brings you to the creek. Right next to the creek is a huge Redwood tree and a large rock that I enjoy sitting on. In this place, there is no cell phone service or Wi-Fi. This is especially important to me because I often get distracted by my phone while working - I even wrote a poem about it. The nice thing about that location is the constant flow of the river and the chirping birds. I feel as though these two aspects are valuable when writing about nature, and these sounds are unavailable in the library. There are many other natural noises that help set the scene of my writing location such as the wind and the rustling leaves, but I feel that running water is therapeutic and allows for premium relaxation.

While my Capstone project focuses primarily on self identity through nature, the concepts applied can be used in a variety of settings. The idea of being yourself is universal, whether you relate with sports, dance, fashion, or business, everyone has a unique style. It is each persons unique style that allows them to be different and outperform others. If everyone had exactly the same identity, then diversity would become a thing of the past and nobody could ever be the best at anything. Everything would just become homogenized and creativity, expression, and success would cease to exist. Granted, this will likely not happen, but it is very important to understand what the dangers are of becoming something you are not and abandoning your own self identity.

At some point the young adults that I am targeting with my work will become older and perhaps they can share their learning with even younger adults. If we can get a cycle like this going, then the search for identity has the ability to become easier for those searching. It is my



hope that my work will be powerful enough to inspire others to not only find their self identities, but also write about their findings. If enough people write about their journeys then there will become a surplus of stories about self identity for a young reader to explore. My Capstone project is just a small piece of this puzzle, but I feel as though is it a very important puzzle piece.

## Synthesis essay

I chose to complete the creative project option because I felt as though the creative project option is the most flexible and would allow me to showcase my own sense of style and creativity. It is important that students are personally invested in the projects they do because it makes the projects more engaging and genuine. For my project, I chose to submit a collection of poems I wrote about finding my own self-identity.

The course theme for our class is Border Crossing, Cultural Negotiations, and the search for Identity. As a person who attended to military school, graduated from public school, and then moved away from my hometown to attend CSUMB, I have learned that my self identity is constantly evolving. The problem is that I have just realized that I have the ability to change my own self identities. As I grew up, I never realized that I could pick who I wanted to be. If I had realized that it was ok not to fit in, then I would have had much higher self confidence. I spent so much time as a child worrying about what others thought about me and attempting to make myself similar to them. I feel that this was counter productive, and my mental health took a toll as a child because of my constant desire to fit in.

Identity and its many layers are very well researched and documented but the research isn't getting in touch with the people struggling with their self-identity. The issue at hand is that people who are struggling with self identity don't realize that is their struggle so they don't actively search out information about the topic. By doing a creative project, I am adding an additional medium for those affected by a loss of identity to access. Poetry has always been a tough thing for me to create but as of recently I have realized how poetry can bring emphasis

and emotion to a specific topic. It is this emotion and emphasis that I am tapping into with my creative project.

I have worked closely with some of my fellow CSUMB students and CSUMB faculty receiving feedback on my work from them. I feel as though this is the best way to find issues in your writing but selecting which peers look over your work is extremely important. I have found that when I had friends look at my work I got nothing but positive reinforcement and statements about how high quality my writing is. This did not help me whatsoever. I quickly realized I needed to turn to people who were not too close to me in order to receive constructive criticism. I turned to the writing center and my creative writing professor to get the real feedback I needed. Luckily, they were able to provide in depth analysis of my work and they asked questions that help me further develop the concepts present in my poetry.

In order for me to write about self identity I first had to research the topic thoroughly. In my research I found that there is a ton of information but each source differs slightly when they define self-identity and show its application. During this research I took a little piece of each source and collaborated them together in my mind. Once I had a solid understanding of what it meant to define my own self-identity, I began writing. This made my poems strong, precise, and relevant to the course theme.

The fact that I learned how to write poetry here at CSUMB is why I chose to use this medium. I wanted to try and use the skills I developed at CSUMB because the entire premise of Capstone is that you showcase the skills you have developed during your career as a student. Poetry has never been easy for me, but over the past two years I have picked up new tools from

my HCOM professors. It is these tools that have allowed me to succeed in providing a high quality Capstone project.

Dr. Stromberg was one of the first professors to expose me to the power of well written poetry and then in a follow up class, Professor Debora Busman taught me how to create meaning and emotion in my writing. Professor Busman's main feedback was the most helpful in the development of my capstone project. She kept telling me to put the reader in the scenes I was creating by using more detail. With each revision, I was able to add more depth and scene setting while still keeping the flow intact. Making this project has been an excellent challenge that I feel I have conquered.