

Majoring in English

An English major, it goes without saying, loves to read and write, and these skills (reading critically and writing effectively) help prepare the student for a variety of different careers, including research, writing, advertising, public relations, journalism, teaching, and more. English is also a good major if you plan to pursue professional schools, such as law, medicine, business, or library science. In the past, an English major may have focused only on British and American writing, but colleges today provide more diverse and flexible coursework, making English a more complex field than many realize. Areas of specialization still include literature, but also include rhetoric and professional communication, creative writing, linguistics, English education, technical communication, and others.

This chapter starts by looking at some general criteria to consider when choosing a major, so that you can make sure English is a good fit for your skills, abilities, and interests. The chapter then covers what to expect if you do decide on a major in English. What courses will you take? What options will you have in selecting classes? What skills will you learn? Finally, this chapter explores the job outlook for English majors.

Choosing a Major

You know what you like, what you're good at, and what interests you. Although you may need to do some soul-searching and even seek outside advice, keep in mind that you are in the best position to make the decision of which major is best for you. To help you make this decision, consider what issues are important to you, what resources can provide additional information, and what pitfalls to avoid. Let's start by debunking some myths about picking a major.

THE MYTHS OF CHOOSING A MAJOR

Look at the following statements and see how many you agree with:

- ◆ Everyone but you knows exactly what major—and career—they want.
- ◆ Your major determines (and limits) your career choices.
- ◆ You'll just “know” (via a magical sign, omen, or dream) what your major should be.
- ◆ You should consider the advice of everyone when deciding on a major.
- ◆ You are limited to “one” major.

All of the preceding statements aren't true:

- ◆ Most students don't know what they want to major in; they struggle with this decision as much as you do. According to *U.S. News & World Report's* 2005 college guide, between 20 and 50 percent of students are undecided, and about that same percentage will change majors sometime during their college careers. Even when they have declared a major, students may be unsure about their choice.
- ◆ Your major and your career are not the same thing. English, like other liberal arts majors, provides for a broad base of skills and experiences, and you can use this major as the opening into any number of fields. Just take a look at the following list of famous

people, all with a variety of occupations and all with majors in English:

Celebrity	Career
Dave Barry	Columnist for <i>Miami Herald</i> and author of several best-selling books
Chevy Chase	Actor
Mario Cuomo	Former Governor of New York
David Duchovny	Actor
Michael Eisner	Walt Disney CEO
Jodie Foster	Actress
Cathy Guisewite	Cartoonist (<i>Cathy</i>)
Chris Issak	Singer, songwriter
Stephen Kin	Author
Paul Newman	Actor
Joe Paterno	College football coach
Sally Ride	Astronaut
Diane Sawyer	Broadcast journalist
Marty Shottenheimer	Professional football coach
Paul Simon	Songwriter, singer
Steven Spielberg	Filmmaker
Clarence Thomas	U.S. Supreme Court Justice
Barbara Walters	Broadcast journalist

* cited from www.winthrop.edu

- ◆ Although it's okay to solicit the help of others, everyone has an opinion, but only *you* know what's best for you.
- ◆ You aren't limited to one area of study. Often, students have multiple interests, and colleges offer many ways to incorporate your interest into other fields, the most common being minoring in another subject, choosing to get a double-major, or even creating your own specialized major (this is not offered at every school).

- ◆ As for waiting for the magic sign, it's better to take practical steps (covered in the following section). If you find yourself in the wrong major, you can switch majors. Keep in mind that the farther you are along in your college coursework and the type of major you switch to affect how many credits will transfer toward your new major. For information on switching majors, check with your academic advisor. You want to make sure that you're switching for a good reason, that you have now selected a major that *is* a good fit for you, and that you understand how switching affects your current coursework and standings.

Now that you know some of the real truth about picking a major, let's look at some of the resources you can use to help you decide on your major.

HOW TO DECIDE

When considering what major to pursue, consider these guidelines:

1. **Look at your interests.** What do you like to do? What are your hobbies? How do you like to spend your time? What extracurricular activities do or did you participate in? What have you enjoyed most? What have been your favorite subjects in school? What recurring skills have played a role in your success? When you fantasize about your ideal career, what is that job like?
2. **Consider your abilities.** Think about your natural talents. What do others say you are good at? Consider how your abilities align with your interests. If you have great talent in an area but zero interest, choosing a major based on your abilities isn't going to make you happy. Likewise, if you have great interest in a topic, but zero abilities, your choice of a major may limit you.
3. **Reflect on your values.** What do you value? Financial success? Spirituality? Helping others? Entertaining others? If your career and study choices are in conflict with your values, you will have problems. On the other hand, if you choose a major (and then a

career) that are in alignment with what you value, you will improve your chances for happiness.

4. **Think about what it takes to make it in this major and whether you have what it takes.** Do you have the skills? motivation? ability? Does the major require an advanced degree? internships? Think not only about the academic challenges, but also about the financial costs and requirements.
5. **Look at the career opportunities in this field.** This topic is covered in detail Chapter 6, and Chapter 7 also provides some detailed case studies about people who have effectively used their English degrees to pursue rewarding careers. You may also want to check out the research section of your library for publications, such as the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. This resource explains the requirements, salaries, and typical tasks of a number of jobs. You can also find links to this resource online at the Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov).
6. **Honestly assess your reasons for choosing a major.** If you choose a major because it's a good way to meet girls, bad idea. If you choose a major simply because you've heard it's "easy," that's also not a good reason. If you choose a major because you think it has great money potential—wrong answer! If you choose to become an English major because your dad was an English major, are you choosing based on your preference or your dad's? If you are pressured by your family or peers, you'll likely end up unhappy. If you choose a major because a job market is currently hot, that's another wrong reason. What is the right reason(s) then? It's simple: Choose your major based on your interests and abilities.

Steven Rothberg, president of the Minneapolis-based Web site CollegeRecruiter.com (www.collegerecruiter.com), recommends that students not focus on compensation or employment rates when picking a major. Instead, he says, "If students focus on what they're good at, what they like to do, and what's important to them, there's an excellent chance that they will end up in a job upon graduation that will make them happy."

RESOURCES

Although you don't want to allow someone else to make your decisions for you, you do have several resources to narrow or confirm your choice. These additional resources include:

- ◆ Talking to school counselors (at your high school and at prospective colleges).
- ◆ Using Internet resources such as interest and personality testing (covered in Appendix A).
- ◆ Checking your potential college for resources. Some colleges provide aptitude testing to help you decide on a major. Indiana University/Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), for example, publishes a booklet called *Step Ahead to Your Future: a guide to choosing majors & careers* (IUPUI, University College Advising Center and Career Center). This step-by-step guide asks you to focus on yourself and indicate areas of interest. From this self-assessment, you can determine your interest themes, skill preferences, and personality type. Armed with this information, you can then target specific majors (and careers) that match your assessment, and you can explore and determine a realistic picture of the careers and majors you have targeted as areas of interest. You can ask for guides like this at your campus career center.
- ◆ Taking advantage of the workshops and online information offered by some schools.
- ◆ Trying the online personality or character testing some schools offer to provide guidance on choosing a major.
- ◆ Taking advantage of internships or volunteer opportunities in your field.
- ◆ Talking to people who currently work in your field of interest.
- ◆ If you are already in college, taking classes in the potential major. Although you don't want to spend too many credit hours exploring majors, you can choose a few classes. You can also ask to sit in on classes (rather than formally enroll). As another option, you

can review the syllabus and course materials for a class and talk to professors who teach a class you're interested in.

A Closer Look at an English Major

Now that you know generally how to evaluate your choice of a major, let's take a closer look at what you can expect from this major. The following sections answer a host of questions, including the following: What type person is generally suited for this major? What are the requirements for this major? What courses will you be taking? What skills will you develop? What are the benefits of this major? What are the challenges?

A QUICK SURVEY: IS ENGLISH RIGHT FOR YOU?

A few simple questions help you determine whether English is a good major for you:

- ◆ Do you enjoy reading a wide variety of texts (not just one genre, like mysteries or poetry, but a variety)?
- ◆ Do you like thinking, analyzing, and talking about what you've read?
- ◆ Do you enjoy expressing yourself in writing?
- ◆ Do you like arguing effectively to prove a point?

If you answer yes to these questions, your personality is probably suited for an English major. If you answered no, you may want to consider other options or think about your motivation for choosing English as a major.

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS?

In the past, an English major meant the study of the masterpieces of British and American literature. That definition doesn't suit today's college courses and English programs; now an English major encompasses

a much broader spectrum of topics and courses. At the core, most English departments emphasize the following:

- ◆ Analyzing literature, a process that requires critical thinking and logic
- ◆ Exploring your creativity and imagination
- ◆ Understanding different cultures and civilizations from various time periods and places

While the preceding skills are emphasized, what coursework you take—that is, the specific requirements to graduate with a degree in English—will vary depending on your college and also the specific concentration or specialty you pursue (see the upcoming section “Should I Specialize?”). For example, literature-based studies usually focus on classical authors and time periods. Rhetorical studies, on the other hand, concentrate on communication skills in a variety of professional fields. Let’s consider the coursework for a literature-based English major first, and then look at some areas of specialization.

LITERATURE-BASED STUDIES

The most common type of English major is based on literature coursework and usually encompasses several time periods (such as Victorian), places (such as Great Britain), writers (such as Shakespeare), and genres (such as poetry). You usually have a lot of choices in what classes you take. For example, you might expect to take the following classes for a literature-based English degree:

- ◆ **Two courses in writing or composition and, quite possibly, one course in grammar:** You may, depending on the college and on your writing skills, test into an advanced writing or honors class (and possibly get credit for any writing classes that you test out of).
- ◆ **An introductory course in studying literature and another focused on rhetorical analysis:** The first course teaches you the basics of how to read a literature text critically as well as how to

interpret and find meaning, whereas the rhetorical analysis class focuses on the same skills, but considers nonfiction texts.

- ◆ **Several courses in American literature:** You may be required to take one overview or survey course as well as a choice of courses based on a variety of time periods (pre–Revolutionary War 1830 to 1941, 1941 to present, for example), authors (Hawthorne, Frost, Hemingway), schools, movements (Naturalism or Transcendentalism), or genres (poetry, drama, and so on).
- ◆ **Several courses in British literature:** Like American literature, you may take a survey course as well as other courses based on time periods (the Middle Ages, Romanticism), authors (Shakespeare, Chaucer), or genre.
- ◆ **One or more advanced writing courses:** Expect to take at least one other writing course. Examples include business communication, freelance writing for magazines, creative writing (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, screenwriting, playwriting), writing for children or young adults, report and proposal writing, writing for the Web, and technical communications.
- ◆ **One or more courses in women’s or multicultural literature:** Plan to take at least one course that focuses on women writers or writers from another culture. For example, you may take a survey course of women’s literature, African American literature, Jewish literature, Irish literature, or Latino literature.
- ◆ **Several elective English courses:** In addition to taking classes that fall under certain categories, you’ll also be able to select other English courses. In addition to American, British, and multicultural literature, you may be able to take courses in world literature, literature in translation (South Asian literature, the works of Dante, the novels of Dostoyevsky), or courses on a particular genre (drama, folklore, the eighteenth century novel, and so on).

In addition to this coursework, you’ll also need to complete other specified courses. For example, most colleges require you to take related history courses (for example, medieval history or the renaissance), so

that you can interpret the literature you're reading based on cultural and historical events. You may also be required to take two or more courses in humanities and fine arts, as well as at least one year (often two) of a foreign language.

You'll also include courses for a minor or certification. (Chapter 3 covers selecting a minor or pursuing certification in more detail.) Finally, you may also have general degree requirements that include such areas as social sciences (anthropology, sociology) and some basic math and science (but often not much, if any). For exact requirements, check with your particular school.

SHOULD I SPECIALIZE?

English majors at many universities may choose to concentrate in a particular area of specialization, such as literature (covered in the preceding section), creative writing, literary criticism, English language or linguistics, rhetorical studies, English education, technical communication, and others. For example, some universities include film studies or children's literature as an area of concentration within the English department. In other schools, these departments may be their own distinct departments or areas.

If you know what you want to accomplish with your English degree, consider choosing one of these specialty areas. For example, if you want to be a writer, you may want to concentrate on creative writing. You'll take many of the same courses as a literature-based degree, but your coursework will also include several creative writing classes. If you want to focus on business communications or are planning to attend law school, consider focusing on rhetorical studies. In this case, your classes will cover argumentative writing, history of rhetoric, visual rhetoric, as well as technical communication and editing classes. Some colleges also offer a special technical communication concentration or degree that may or may not fall under the English department. For this type of specialty, plan to take classes similar to those offered for rhetorical studies.

As another option, you may plan to teach English. In this case, focus on English education. For example, Penn State University allows for a secondary education option, through which students obtain teaching

certification in communications and English. If you pursue an education-related English degree, in addition to taking basic literature and writing classes, you'll be required to take advanced classes in linguistics; children's literature; and methods of teaching reading, writing, and literature.

On top of these choices, many schools enable you to customize your own concentration, selecting courses based on your own unique interests and goals. Other schools permit students to work on an interdisciplinary major, combining English with another field.

As you can see, an English major is not a one-size-fits-all approach. You have plenty of opportunities to take classes that reflect your interests.

WHAT GENERAL SKILLS WILL I LEARN?

In addition to taking classes and learning specifically about English literature, criticism, and writing, this major also teaches and enhances other life skills, which prepares you for a variety of jobs:

- ◆ Thinking critically
- ◆ Tapping into your creativity
- ◆ Expressing yourself in various types of writing
- ◆ Analyzing experiences from text or from life itself
- ◆ Appreciating the diversity of cultures as expressed through literature
- ◆ Questioning and exploring the human condition

WHAT CHALLENGES WILL I FACE?

One of the challenges for English majors is realizing what English is and is not. Many students associate English with only one aspect of this field—poetry or the classics, for example. But in reality there are a variety of options available, from nonfiction to Web pages, from film to the history of language. And as an English major, you need to appreciate a variety of texts, not just one genre.

Another challenge is choosing a direction among the many different paths. For example, an English major may pursue any number of types

of writing, including creative, nonfiction, business, technical, or medical writing, just to name a few.

Writing effectively may also be a challenge for some. English also doesn't have to equal writing, although that's clearly one of the skills you'll learn. You may also use your English major to communicate through the Web or in presentations or speeches. You can also use your English major to go onto a career in teaching or public relations.

Because English is not a career-specific major, when you graduate, you have to take the initiative to find a job you like. Contrast this to an accountant, for example, who studies solely to become an accountant and isn't left to ponder what type of job might suit that degree.

As an English major, you may not realize that you are qualified for lots of jobs, within and outside of the area of English—but you are! And the most successful English majors look at the opportunities early in their academic careers, and then make sure they attain the right skills and knowledge to succeed. That's the main purpose of this book: to make you aware of the various careers you can pursue with a degree in English.

The Job Outlook

In addition to thinking about classes, of course you want to know what jobs are and will be available for your major. The job possibilities are discussed in more detail in later chapters, but this section gives you a quick overview.

One of the most popular sources for job outlooks is the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov). Although this department doesn't have a category for "English majors," it does cover common careers, such as writers and editors. For these jobs, the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics lists these significant points:

- ◆ Employment in the communication sector is expected to increase by 16.9 percent by 2010. Through 2012, employment of writers and editors is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations.

- ◆ Writers and editors held about 305,000 jobs in 2000. These jobs broke down into these categories: Writers and authors accounted for 126,000 jobs; editors held 122,000 jobs; and the remaining 57,000 were technical writers.
- ◆ Nearly 25 percent of the available jobs for writers and editors were salaried positions with newspapers, magazines, and book publishers. Many—mostly technical writers—worked for computer software firms.
- ◆ Online publications and services are exploding in number and complexity, making a demand for writers and editors, specifically those with Web expertise. Businesses and organizations are more commonly publishing newsletters and maintaining Web sites, adding jobs to create and maintain these publications.
- ◆ Because of the information explosion and rapid change in technical fields, expect many opportunities for technical writers, especially with expertise in law, medicine, economics, and technology. Today there's a great need for writers to create user's guides, instruction manuals, and training materials.

Many opportunities are available to you when you get a degree in English, whether you choose to go on to graduate school or immediately begin looking for a position after completing your four-year degree. This book provides you with information on both of these options, as well as covers how to choose a school (see Chapter 2) and get the most from your time at college (see Chapter 3).

