

Why Major in English?: A Personal Viewpoint

Reading, for me, was always a way of escaping from the world around me: a way to explore other people's lives, to visit other places and times and cultures. I have loved both the escapism of reading and the puzzle of pondering the complexities of literary texts—trying to understand why characters acted the way they did, why cultures were formulated as they were, how authors created the worlds they imagined.

When I realized it was possible to choose a college major that would allow me to explore these elements in the company of other people equally interested in the same explorations, I enthusiastically pursued the major of English. It took me many years, though, to realize just how wise this choice of mine turned out to be. Following are a few of my realizations about the wisdom of majoring in English.

Interdisciplinarity is built into the very nature of the English major, for understanding the literary texts of and ways of communicating in different cultures and time periods requires one to consider and draw on multiple fields of study: languages, history, art, philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, politics, etc.

And so majoring in English is like majoring in all the Liberal Arts at the same time! It allows the curious person to explore the world not only immediately surrounding them, but to explore all the cultures in all previous time-periods and all the people and cultures anyone can imagine of the past, present, and future. In this regard, one might say the English major is the most economical of all majors, for it gives students the most value for their time by allowing them to expand their understanding of multiple disciplines while studying the discipline of English. Moreover, for lovers of the written and spoken word, what could be more fulfilling than to wallow in and play with the images, implications, and possibilities of all words?

The study of English literature allows the curious person to put on the persona of every type of person who exists or ever has existed, to imagine what life is like for other people. Through the imaginative recreation of multiple lifestyles, ideally, being an English major can build empathy, understanding, and acceptance of oneself and of others.

Moreover, the English major, through the study of literary texts and techniques of effective communication (both oral and written), develops the most prized skills of any career—the ability to interpret complexities, uncover the hidden, gather evidence, and verbalize lucidly and objectively one's convictions.

Majoring in English is not necessarily a job-training major—like majoring in, for example, Education or Nursing or Social Work. When you finish your degree in English, you won't necessarily have a clear-cut sense of which job ads to look at in the classified section of the newspaper. However, the skills a student obtains in the process of earning a degree in English are precisely the kinds of skills that are desirable for virtually any career path in virtually any field.

This difference that the English major has from many other majors actually gives it a distinct advantage over the job-training majors, because it allows the English major enormous flexibility in finding a career after college. This same flexibility means that the English major—no matter how much their ambitions and interests change in the course of their life-time—will always be able to transform their skills into marketable abilities for whatever career path they might choose.