# THE ENGLISH MAJOR'S HANDBOOK

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## I. *Introduction*

This Handbook is primarily directed at English majors and at students considering majoring in English. It is also aimed at non-majors who are interested in literature, particularly those who are considering the possibility of doing graduate work in English or a related field (American Studies, Creative Writing, Comparative Literature, Drama).

The purpose of this Handbook is to begin to address two basic questions: first, “What is ‘English,’ Anyway?” and second, the ever popular: “What can I do after I graduate?”

The first portion of this handbook attempts to answer the first question. It contains a few insights into what exactly a major in English is, and how to do your best in English courses. It also describes the department's offerings in creative writing and linguistics.

The second portion offers some basic advice concerning jobs and careers, and how to go about preparing for them.

## II. "What is 'English,' Anyway?"

Imagine a time before there were English departments. Imagine a University in which knowledge was divided up differently from the way that it is now—a University without the divisions

that you're familiar with between the various humanities and social sciences and sciences.

The University is an institution with medieval European origins, and in the medieval curriculum, students began by studying the so-called *trivium* ("three ways," from the Latin *tri*, "three" + *via*, "way"): the arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic.

It is in these three arts that the modern English department has its deepest roots.

Today, when one says one is majoring in "English," one means three distinct things:

1. learning to *write*—and to a lesser extent to *speak*—effectively: that is, to frame cogent arguments in correct and elegant English.

This aspect of what we do in "English" bears the imprint of the classical (Greco-Roman) *rhetorical tradition*.

2. learning to *interpret* literature: that is, frame coherent arguments about what and how literary texts mean.

This aspect of what we do, while also having classical antecedents—*grammar* included interpretation as well as basic rules about sentence construction—owes a lot to medieval and early modern habits of *scriptural exegesis*: that is, from the way that people have studied and interpreted the Bible.

3. learning the *history* of English and American literature. This aspect of what we do largely derives from early nineteenth-century Romantic notions about national literatures as records of, and resources for, the developing "spirit" of a people (what the Germans called *volk-geist*).

In the following pages, I will have some things to say about all three aspects of the English major.

## III. *Writing Well*

What follows is a more or less formal guide to essay-writing. Not all English professors share the exact same sense of what constitutes a good essay; and some professors may have different criteria for shorter, more informal, response papers; still, if you attend to the following advice, you won't end up far afield of anyone's expectations.

*1. When to begin*. One of the truly pernicious myths of undergraduate academic life is that, with enough coffee and adrenaline, you can churn out more or less acceptable papers the night before they're due. In reality, such overnight papers are likely to be a mess. You won't have any real *thesis* (or, consequently, thesis development) because odds are you won't have discovered what it is you mean to say until the last paragraph or two of your paper, at which point the sun's coming up and it's too late to go back to the beginning and begin the painstaking process of revision.

To avoid the hasty mess, *you should always begin a 5-7 pp. paper at least a week before it's due*; you should give yourself two weeks for longer papers. The way you manage to do this is to plot out a writing schedule in your daily planner at the very beginning of your semester. For instance: if you have a paper due for Class A on March 30, you should begin to jot down preliminary notes by March 16. You should have a working outline by March 21; at this point you may want to talk about your ideas with either another student in Class A, a tutor in the Writing Resources Center, or your professor during his/her office hours. You should have a full draft by March 24. At this point, hide a hard copy of your paper in a drawer and forget about it for a few days. Clear your mind a bit. Think about other things. Then, by March 28, return to your draft—at this point, scales will fall from your eyes, and you'll see your paper anew. You'll now have a fresh perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of your essay, with ample time to correct the latter and accentuate the former.

*Clear writing is clear thinking*, and our first thoughts on any subject are rarely clear ones. The *process* of writing about a work of literature is one in which we come, gradually, to understand both the work we're addressing and what there is to say about it.

2. *The Most Important Thing* is to arrive at a "THESIS": that is, a strong *argument*. Let me first give you an example of something that looks like a thesis but is really not a thesis (the "facsimile thesis," or "F.T."):

"There are representations of external nature in both Homer and [the eighteenth-century poet] Thomas Gray."

My answer to this is: "yup, there are." The problem with a facsimile thesis is that it's too obvious—it hardly requires "proof"—and little can follow from it but a mechanical list of external nature sightings:

"Here's a representation of nature...
There's a representation of nature...
Here's another representation of nature...
So we see that both poets represent nature."

I say to this exactly what you'd say if you were reading it: "Yawn." Or: "tell me something I didn't know."

The facsimile thesis lacks *specificity*. It's empty precisely because it can be applied to hundreds of writers. The facsimile thesis quoted above, for example, is easily adapted to the demands of just about any English course: "There are representations of external nature in both William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge," "There are representations of external nature in Thoreau and Emerson," etc.

Here, by contrast, is an example of a good thesis—that is, a thesis that relates *only* to the work or works in question—taken from a paper written by a William & Mary student:

"Progressive eighteenth-century Englishmen saw the natural world in a very different manner than had their Greek forebears. While the ancients viewed nature as a powerful and terrifying force out of their control, the moderns—steeped in an ideology of progress and emergent technology—saw nature as something to be mastered and put to good use. This dichotomy manifests itself in the contrasting views of nature presented in Homer's *Iliad* and Thomas Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College."

This a strong thesis because it's surprising (without being bizarre) and because it needs to be *defended* (i.e., it justifies the act of writing an essay).

Defending this thesis will require a selection of apt quotations from Homer and from Gray, and because neither Homer nor Gray offers an explicit statement about their attitudes towards Nature (that is, neither comes out and says, "I think nature is a terrifying and uncontrollable [or a docile and controllable] force"), any quotations our author chooses will require fairly subtle *interpretation* to yoke them to the purposes of her thesis.

3. What's needed to defend a thesis is good *PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE*.

Having announced a thesis—that is, an argument that is sufficiently surprising to require proof—your essay can immediately begin to prove it.

Every paragraph should be built around *one* central point; that point is usually expressed in the first sentence or two of your paragraph, the "topic sentence."

Here's how our model paper concerning Gray and Homer proceeds to defend its thesis (from the first sentence of the second paragraph): "In the *Iliad* we see nature portrayed as the ultimate destructive force." This is a strong topic sentence.

The rest of this paragraph supports the topic sentence by noting the prevalence, in Homer's similes, of images of destructive nature: fires, storms, and "wolves who tear flesh raw." It quotes liberally from Homer's text.

Our author then argues, in successive paragraphs, that 1.) "The heroes of the *Iliad* try to imitate nature directly in their choice of battle-gear," and 2.) "Although Homer's warriors can attempt to imitate natural forces, they cannot control nature itself; for it is left to the gods to sway nature as they please in Homer's representations of battle."

Note how each paragraph/topic sentence logically follows from the paragraph that came before, and how it serves to advance the central thesis of the

essay. This sense of continuity derives from having a good working outline; and it may be accentuated by making sure you have good *TRANSITIONS* between paragraphs. Our author effectively marks her transitions in the first sentence of each paragraph by retaining elements from the paragraph that precedes it. Thus, a paragraph on images of *natural* ferocity is followed by a paragraph on warriors who adopt the trappings of *nature* ("helmets with horse-hair crests" and the like), which is followed in turn by a paragraph on how both war and nature are under the inexplicable control of the gods.

4. Our exemplary author always *INTERPRETS* quotations, showing how even those passages which aren't ostensibly in line with her thesis can still be seen to advance that thesis. Her interpretative skills can be seen most clearly in the next turn of her argument, as she proceeds to engage Thomas Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College." Gray's poem begins with these lines that address the "College":

Ye distant Spires, ye antique Towers,
That crown the watry Glade,
Where grateful Science still adores
[King] Henry's holy Shade;
And ye that from the stately Brow
Of Windsor's Heights th'Expanse below
Of Grove, of Lawn, of Mead survey... (ll. 1 -7)

Our author, turning now from Homer, writes:

In contrast to Homer's representation of nature as a destructive force, Thomas Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" depicts a tame and subjugated natural world. In the opening stanza of the poem, the speaker surveys "the watry Glade" of the College from a position of elevation or—figuratively speaking—of superiority; indeed, the speaker is *above* the setting of the College in much the same manner that the College itself is poised above "th'Expanse below / Of Grove, of Lawn, of Mead." Indeed, the speaker derives his sense of superiority over nature from the very fact that the College rises, both literally and figuratively, above its grounds. Presumably, mankind's long -standing fear of the disorderly power of nature has been quelled by the progress of "grateful Science," and thus the school, as a bastion of knowledge, symbolizes for the speaker man's triumph over nature.

This paragraph involves "interpretation": it teases out the implications of a text, attending, in the critic Earl Wasserman's phrase, to the "subtler language" of a literary work.

*Effective interpretation is a literature student's crowning achievement* (compare here section V, "Close Reading").

5. OK, so much for our guided tour through a good essay on Homer and Gray. But (you're apt to ask), what about the *NOVEL*? How does one formulate an effective thesis when writing about a novel, or—

to maintain some continuity with our contrastive analysis of Homer and Gray—about the similarities/differences between two novelists?

The rules are the same. Consider Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Here's an unsatisfactory or "facsimile" thesis:

"Jane Eyre is a more active and independent woman than Fanny Price."

The problem with this assertion is that it's too obvious. Jane *is* ostensibly more active and independent than Fanny—what's there left to say? Rather than encourage literary analysis, this type of *faux* thesis simply provides an occasion for plot summary—and *PLOT SUMMARY WON'T DO*.

Here, by contrast, is an intriguing thesis:

"At first glance, Fanny Price seems a far more passive heroine than her nineteenth -century counterpart, Jane Eyre. Upon closer inspection, however, the differences between Fanny and Jane diminish. For at the heart of Fanny's passivity there lies a deep core of aggression, while amidst all the flurry of Jane's self-assertion the close reader may detect an underlying submissiveness. How far in spirit is the Victorian Bronte from the late Georgian Austen? This essay will examine the continuities, as well as the differences in emphasis, between the representations of feminine behavior in *Mansfield Park* and *Jane Eyre*."

Or—another effective paper thesis might derive from comparing/contrasting the role of private theatricals in both *Mansfield Park* (the production of the play *Lover's Vows*) and *Jane Eyre* (the charades performed by Rochester and Blanche Ingram). Do Fanny and Jane possess similar or opposed attitudes towards the lure of play-acting?

Finally, here's a student thesis that concerns one novel only:

"Throughout Leo Tolstoy's novel, *War and Peace*, Pierre Bezuhov struggles to find a "theory of the universe" to answer his existential questions. "What is wrong? What is right?... What is life for and what am I?... What force controls it all?" (389). In the end, Pierre finds faith in God, which brings with it answers to his questions and also a sense of freedom from the external circumstances of his life. But despite Pierre's ultimate success, *War and Peace* is not a prescription for any particular belief system to clarify life's ambiguities. Rather, the novel examines belief itself: the process of acquiring and maintaining belief systems and ideas of truth. Tolstoy suggests, through his novel's diverse characters, that each person's perception of truth is influenced by his or her own personality, experience, and circumstances."

6. *Stylistic Details*. You can avoid the most common problems of grammar and usage by following these

simple tips (some of which I've picked up from my colleague Professor Monica Potkay).

a.) The phrase "the eighteenth-century" is hyphenated only when it is used adjectivally: e.g., one writes "the eighteenth-century novel," but one writes "novels written in the eighteenth century."

b.) Paginate your papers. Papers should be printed in 12 point type, in Times New Roman or a similar font that has serifs, double-spaced with 1" margins. Do not add extra spacing between paragraphs. The goal is to make your essay look like a published work, except for the double spacing. Learn how to get your word processing program to delete extra spacing between paragraphs.

c.) Without going thesaurus crazy, do *avoid the indiscriminate repetition of the same word in a given paragraph*. If you find yourself repeating the same word over and over again, it's typically a sign that your essay, like a scratched phonograph record, has got caught in a single groove—that is, it's not going anywhere. Here's an example of a writer in a rut:

"*Jane Eyre* and [Samuel Richardson's] *Pamela* are both accounts of women's development. As the events and experiences in the two women's lives unfold, their womanly development is illustrated (quite literally) throughout the novels. It is through the changes and developments that occur in their artwork—both within their novels and comparatively—that we are able to observe both

their artistic and womanly development. As we observe each character struggling to reach the ultimate goal of womanhood, their development serves to mark significant changes in the concept of women and womanly development."

Questions: how many times does "development" appear in this paragraph? How many times does "woman"?

As an exercise in writing, try condensing this terribly pleonastic prose into two or three clear, concise sentences.

d.) Avoid "begging the question": that is, assuming as proved the very thing you should be trying to prove. Example: "*Robinson Crusoe* is more *believable* than earlier autobiographies." This assertion will hardly do, because it's your job to tell me precisely what about Crusoe's account of himself is more believable; you also need to address the question of whether or not earlier autobiographers wrote according to a criterion of (empirical) believability.

Some other phrases that generally "beg the question": "more enjoyable than," "more readable than," "more pitiful than," and "relatable."

e.) Avoid *passive constructions*, as they tend to result in vague, murky, and otherwise confusing prose. E.g.: "Both Fanny Price and Jane Eyre are born poor and are sent to live with their wealthy relatives. As a result, upper-class norms *are*

*imposed on them*." Questions: *who* sends them? *who* imposes these "norms" on them? (Not to mention the question: what *are* these "norms"?)

f.) Avoid the indiscriminate use of vague articles ("a," "an") and demonstrative adjectives ("this, that"). Here's a double-whammy of a perplexing sentence: "Defoe...gives the impression that he is writing for *an* audience. *This* audience is absent in neoclassical writers of the period." My question: *what* "audience" are you talking about? Explain your references, being as clear and specific as possible.

A related and still more vexing grammatical-logical problem occurs when you use the demonstrative adjective "this" without a subsequent noun. Consider this sequence: ""Defoe...gives the impression that he is writing for *an* audience. *This* is absent in neoclassical writers of the period." Here "this" has an unclear referent: does it refer back, in the first sentence, to "audience" or "impression" or "giving the impression"? Remember: *always follow the word "this" with a noun*.

g.) Study proper use of *the colon and semicolon*.

Use a *colon* after a main clause when the succeeding clause or clauses explain the first clause. For example:

"Only once, for a moment, did Byron turn against his hero Napoleon: in 1814, when (so he thought)

suicide would have been more seemly than abdication." (Bertrand Russell on Lord Byron)

Use a *semicolon* between two independent clauses when they are not joined by a conjunction: e.g.,

"The great man, to Nietzsche, is godlike; to Byron, the great man is a Titan at war with himself." (Russell again)

Note: a semicolon indicates a closer connection between these two clauses than a period would suggest.

h.) Use the *present tense* for analysis; save the past tense for statements of fact set in the past. The literary work still exists in the present; its author, however, does not. So, "Swift *was* a clergyman; therefore, his tract *takes* a theistic point of view."

Other examples:

Awkward: "Defoe *had novelized* the earlier genre of the spiritual autobiography…"

Good: "Defoe takes the eighteenth -century genre of spiritual autobiography and transforms it into what we have come to recognize as the novel."

i.) Avoid the "nominalized" style. "Nominalization" means that you use lots of abstract nouns instead of using good, strong verbs in your sentences. A general principle of English discourse is that nouns are hard to grasp, verbs less hard. So instead of

writing (in nominalized style) on your paper, “Your style *is nominalized* rather than verbalized,” I’d write: “You *use* too many nouns, and not enough verbs.” You, too, should make verbs work for you.

j.) If you’ve learned in high school “the AP (or sometime IB) style,” you’ll need to unlearn it. The AP (Advanced Placement) style essay strolls through a poem making random and fragmented comments about it: "The poet uses rhyme . . . the poet uses diction . . . . the poet uses alliteration . . . ." Also, in AP style writing the words "however," "moreover," and "continues" are often thrown in without regard to whether they make any sense or not. AP training is good in that it teaches you to recognize literary tropes and figures. AP training is bad when it teaches you to write an AP style essay, which is only *a list of observations and not an argument that advances a thesis*.

k.) How to Quote Literary Texts.

---Give *page references* when you quote prose, *line references* when you quote poetry.

—Offset quotations of more than three typed lines (prose or poetry) and delete quotation marks: see my quotation from Gray’s “Eton Ode,” above.

—For shorter verse quotations in the body of your essay, use a virgule (/) to show line divisions:

According to Alexander Pope, mankind occupies a middle state on the great chain of being: man "hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest / In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast" (*Essay on Man* II, 7 -8).

--- The syntax of your sentence controls the punctuation of the quotation it contains. Even though line 8 of Pope's poem (quoted above) ends in a period, you don't reproduce the period (or any other terminal punctuation) because it makes no sense in your sentence. The citation is part of your sentence--it can't float around in space by itself--and so the period of your sentence should come after and not before the citation.

—Indicate deletions from quoted materials with *ellipsis marks* (three spaced periods).

For Crusoe, the cannibalism of the natives remains a "hellish Degeneracy" (p. 133), and his only consideration is whether punishment ought rather to be administered by God, since "the Crimes they were guilty of towards one another . . . were National" and should be left "to the Justice of God, who is the Governour of Nations, and knows how by National Punishments to make a just Retribution for National Offences" (p. 135).

—Indicate your own additions to a quotation with square brackets ([ ]):

The effect of seeing a footprint on his island is to leave Crusoe “perfectly confus’d and out of [him] self,” just as his earlier attempt to circumnavigate the island had left him “hurry’d out of [his] Knowledge by the Currents” (p. 121).

—Note: “quote” is a verb; “quotation” is a noun. (On a similar note- “refer” is a verb, “reference” a noun.)

7. *Resources and Models*

If you find yourself in need of further writing assistance, consult Joseph Williams’ *Style: Ten Lessons in Grace and Clarity*.

And avail yourself of the *WRITING RESOURCES CENTER* as often as possible (First Floor, Swem Library).

If you’re ever looking for a model of good contemporary non-fiction prose, flip through a few copies of the journals *The New Republic* or *The Economist*, or even the editorial or cultural pages of *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*.

When looking up definitions of words used in older English literature, use the multi-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*, on-line through Swem Library Databases. Dictionary checking will reveal the subtle nuances in words from all periods, and will also prevent awkward misunderstandings of words that have changed over time—for example, “condescension” was once a good thing, and “bowels” once referred to pity or compassion.

## IV. *Older Poetry: Getting the Sense Straight*

English (or other European) poetry written from the Renaissance to Romanticism—roughly, 1500 to 1830—may take some getting used to. The very first challenge in many a poem lies in getting its sense straight: that is, comprehending the poet's grammar (or syntax) and diction (the words he or she uses). The meanings of words may change over time, so even words that you think you know often merit looking up in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (see above). And the verse sentence is often much more complicated than the syntax of our everyday English.

Syntactically, everyday English tends to be structured in *subject + verb*, or *subject + verb + object* sequences:

Sally eats.

Sally (subject) feeds (verb) the dog (object).

Or we could re-write this sentence using *pronouns*: She feeds it.

In more complicated everyday sentences, we tend to pile up clauses sequentially. For example, here's a sentence built upon subject + verb + prepositional phrase + prepositional phrase:

I went to the store to buy dog-food.

Note that in this sentence, we arrive three times at potential syntactic closure: “I went”; “I went to the store”; and “I went to the store to buy dog-food” are all grammatically complete sentences.

But what if we deliberately suspend syntactic closure so that every word of this sentence becomes grammatically necessary? Then we’d get:

To buy dog-food, to the store I went.

This sounds artificial in English, as well as awkward, but it’s grammatical. It’s also (in its humble way) dramatic, as it suspends closure or completion until the very last word, the sentence’s necessary main verb: “I *went*.” We’re moving in this sentence towards poetic language.

Behold the opening verse sentence of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which suspends for dramatic effect any type of grammatical closure till line 6:

Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
*Sing Heavenly Muse*….

It’s only with the appearance of the main verb, “sing,” and the subject, “Muse,” that Milton’s sentence *could* end. (As it happens, it continues on for another ten and a half lines.) When confronted with this type of syntactic complexity, it’s

important that you be able to offer an *explicative paraphrase* of what you're reading—that is, a rendering of Milton's syntax into plain English. An explicative paraphrase of the first six lines of *Paradise Lost* would start with something like this:

You should tell the story, Muse, of man's first disobedience… etc.

An *explicative paraphrase* shows that you understand what the poet is saying. If you can't provide one, it's a good sign that at a literal level you really aren't yet understanding the poem you're reading.

Here's an example of a different kind of syntactic and lexical (word-choice) complexity—this one involving pronouns and their antecedents—taken from John Donne's lyric "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning":

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things that elemented it.

While some anthologies explain "sublunary" (the Norton Anthology, 9th edition, notes: "beneath the moon, therefore earthly, sensual, and subject to change"), the passage raises more questions than any editor could or should address. First, ask yourself: what's the *antecedent* of "it" in the stanza's third line and in its fourth line? (An *antecedent* is the noun that the pronoun—here,

"it"—stands for.) Read carefully, and you'll see that the antecedents are, respectively, "absence" (line 3) and "love" (line 4). Then ask: what's the antecedent of "whose" in line 2? The answer here is less clear: it could be "lovers" (who, as persons, are recalled by a "whose") or it could be their "love," personified. Finally, we come across some lexical questions: what does "sense" mean in the second line, and what does "elemented" mean in the fourth line? A quick search of the OED online (via Swem Library) reveals that "element," as a verb, meant (the meaning is now obsolete) "to compound of elements," so we could paraphrase the last lines here: "for most lovers, absence removes that which constitutes love—that is, physical presence." These lovers, or their personified love, is essentially "sense," that is, grounded in the physical senses (seeing, hearing, touching)—according to OED definition number 3, "The senses viewed as forming a single faculty in contradistinction to intellect, will, etc.," or number 4a, "the faculties of corporeal sensation considered as channels for gratifying the desire for pleasure and the lusts of the flesh."

Reading Donne or Milton may at first glance seem a daunting task. But time and practice will make it not only easier, but ever more pleasurable. Indeed, we may say that one of the differences between earlier poetry and (most) prose is that *prose pleases most upon first reading, while poetry pleases more upon re-reading*.

## V. *Interpretation: Close Reading*

Close reading is the art of understanding the literal sense of words on the page (see section iv), but also appreciating what it is about an author's words that may defy your initial understanding. It is coming to love (& not simply work through) the difficulties and challenges that literary language throws at us.

For an example of close reading, let's take a look at a few more lines from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Here is Milton's first description of Eve:

She as a veil down to the slender waist
Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dishevell'd, but in wanton ringlets wav'd
As the Vine curls her tendrils, which impli'd
Subjection, but require'd with gentle sway,
And by her yielded, by him best receiv'd,
Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
And sweet reluctant amorous delay. (Bk. 4, lines 304-311)

Close reading of these lines reveals nuances and subtleties that may not be immediately apparent. Why, for example, are Eve's "golden tresses" described as veil-like? Might this detail suggest that she lacks clear vision or foresight? And to what degree is this blindness balanced by Adam's superior insight? The poet describes Eve's hair—and, by extension, her being—in terms of "the

Vine," dependent on objects that are more rooted and sturdy; metaphorically, the poet thus suggests Eve's dependence on Adam. However, isn't a good deal of independence suggested by the phrase "coy submission"? The word "coy" here—both for us and, as a perusal of the *Oxford English Dictionary* will show you, for readers of Milton's time—has an ambiguous ring to it: it can refer to a shy reserve that's either genuine or affected. Given the possibility of a calculated reserve, can a person really be "coy" and "submissive" at the same time? A similar question is raised by the phrase "modest pride," an oxymoron that may make us wonder about the precise relation in Eve's character between a mode of self-effacement and subtle means of mastering others. Of course, these are all questions that Milton intends us to ponder as he further unfolds the story "Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit / Of that Forbidden Tree" (Bk. 1, 1-2).

Let's say you come across Milton's description of Eve in class. If nobody in the class can "close read" the passage—that is, if nobody can simultaneously paraphrase it into plain English, and remark on those elements of Milton's verse that resist paraphrase—then an hour of class discussion devoted to talk about Good and Evil or Milton's Attitude Towards Women or the Sexual Politics of the Interregnum is, in a fundamental way, empty. Close reading is the indispensable basis of all higher forms of literary analysis.

If you'd like to see more close reading in action, let me recommend to you a number of my favorite critical books:

Thomas R. Edwards, *Imagination and Power: A Study of Poetry on Public Themes*;

Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*;

Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*—my favorite short work on how meter contributes to meaning;

Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry*;

& anything by Helen Vendler (*The Odes of John Keats*; *Invisible Listeners*; *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*; *The Ocean, the Bird and the Scholar*, etc.).

Or ask a professor what readings he or she would recommend in a literary period that interests you.

**VI. *World Wide Web Resources***

You all know how to do a Google search, but you may not be aware of more specialized research tools. I've already mentioned the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but if you study Swem Library's Homepage (http://swem.wm.edu), you'll find

databases containing all of British and American Poetry to 1900, professional journals, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, dictionaries of quotations and dictionaries of foreign languages. Visit the site often to see what is available.

Swem Library databases have dozens of very useful resources, from “A” (African-American Poetry, 1760-1900) and “E” (“Eighteenth-Century Collections Online”) to “J” (JSTOR, the Scholarly Journal Archive) and “L” (Literature Resource Center).

**VII.** ***English and American Literary History***

Every English major should have some sense of the distinguishing characteristics of each period of English and American literary history. (Knowledge of this history is also demanded by the GRE subject exam in English still required by most graduate programs in literary study.)

Some broad or general knowledge of the particular period in which an author writes is requisite for interpreting that author’s work; conversely, any interpretation of a particular work will influence one's general sense of the period in which it was written.

In studying literary history we observe both continuities and transformations in each of the

various literary genres – epic, tragedy, comedy, satire, lyric, biography, the essay, romance, and a relative newcomer, the novel.

Prospective majors might include in their course of literary study either English 203 (British Literature I) or English 204 (British Literature II). Previously required for the major, these courses are very useful for getting broad period overviews; for most students, English 203, focusing on earlier and thus less familiar literatures (as this Handbook does), will be the most useful of the two.

Here, in outline, are the major periods and the major authors of English and of American Literary History, through the early twentieth century. Datings for each period are conventional.

1. ENGLISH LITERARY HISTORY

The Middle Ages (to 1485):
The Beowulf poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, The Gawain-Poet, Sir Thomas Malory.

The Renaissance (1485-1660):
Often broken down between "The Sixteenth Century"(1485-1603) and "The Seventeenth Century" (1603-1660).

"The Sixteenth Century":
Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder, Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, William

Shakespeare.

"The Seventeenth Century":
John Donne, Ben Jonson, Andrew Marvell, John Milton.

The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century (1660-1798):
John Dryden, Daniel Defoe, Aphra Behn, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, Samuel Johnson, Laurence Sterne, William Blake.

The Romantic Period (1798-1832):
William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, John Keats, Jane Austen, Sir Walter Scott.

The Victorian Age (1832-1901):
Thomas Carlyle, Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde.

Modernism (1901-1945):
William Butler Yeats, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot.

2. AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY

Colonial (1620-1776):
Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, Cotton Mather,

Mary Rowlandson, Jonathan Edwards.

Early National Period (1776-1830):
Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, Philip Freneau, Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper.

American Renaissance (1830-1865):
Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson.

Realism (1865-1920):
Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Charles Chestnutt, Edith Wharton, Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Robert Frost, W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Laurence Dunbar

Modernism (1913-45):
Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, H.D., Willa Cather, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, William Faulkner.

Of course, literature doesn't stop in 1945. Many new "classics" have entered the canon in the past seventy years, and you will doubtlessly become acquainted with some of them during your four years here. Your appreciation of contemporary

literature will be greatly enhanced, however, by a broad knowledge of earlier literary tradition.

**VIII: *World Literature***

While the English Department focuses on British and American literatures, it's important to remember two things: first, that "literatures in English" is a broad and rapidly expanding field that includes important English-language works by writers across Asia, Africa, Australia, the Pacific Islands, and the West Indies (see, for example, Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, J. M. Coetzee, Jamaica Kincaid); and second, that, globally-and historically-speaking, most great literature has been written in languages other than English. Scholars and teachers of literature are still, for the most part, trained in national literary traditions, but you should always remember, as a counterpart to this classificatory system, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's observation from 1827 (written in German): "National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature (German, *weltliteratur*) is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach." Goethe had in mind Chinese novels, Arabic poetry, ancient Mesopotamian and Sanskrit epics—the whole range of literary experiences from across history and around the world.

A problem with world literature, however, is this: are you really getting or understanding the

literatures of other languages if you're reading them in translation? The question is a sticky one, but for the sake of this Handbook, let me offer the following opinion: as a rule, prose (and thus the novel) translates better than poetry does. "Poetry," as Robert Frost defined it, "is what gets lost in translation" (though in context he included under poetry the poetic aspects of prose). Still, there are certain works of world poetry that are so important that they must be read even in translation: the Hebrew Psalms and Wisdom Books; Dante's *Divina Comedia*; Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Flowers of Evil).

In their original languages or in translation, here's a short and very partial list of world authors that you should investigate: Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Sappho, Catullus, Ovid (in English, try Arthur Golding's Renaissance translation), Virgil, Li Bai (also known as Li Po), Rumi, Chretien de Troy, Dante, Petrarch, Rabelais, Montaigne, Cervantes, Racine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Goethe, Schiller, Balzac, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Zola, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Ibsen, Chekhov, Kafka, Proust, Musil, Mann, Camus, Borges, Marquez, Szymborska, Kundera, Pamuk, Murakami.

A good place to begin might be *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, 3 vols.

For critical milestones of World (Western) literary study, see Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis*, and E. R.

Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Also see Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*.

There are a few English courses that address aspects of world literature, including ENG 311 (Epic and Romance), ENG 344 (The World Novel after 1832), and ENG 358 and 359 (Modern Drama before and after 1940). Modern Languages also offers literature in translation courses: check the offerings in Italian, German, Russian, Chinese and Japanese. Finally, you can study ancient Greek and Roman authors in translation in Classical Civilization courses.

With regard to foreign language acquisition, American and English students are at a disadvantage relative to, say, a student from Romania or the Czech Republic: whereas the Central European student *must* learn other languages (including English) in order to operate in the world marketplace, as well as in the world of ideas, the native English speaker, knowing the current imperial language of the world, may feel no need whatsoever to learn another language; worse, those English speakers who live in or around New York, Washington, LA, or London, may feel that they can see "the world" outside their windows.

But foreign language acquisition, even in the USA, is an important part of culturally-competent global citizenship. And it's a still more important part of literary study, as one comes more fully to

understand one's own language precisely by learning different languages.

For the student of English or British literature, the most important foreign languages have, historically, been these:

Ancient Greek

Latin

French

Italian

German

And vitally important these languages remain. In coming years, Hindi and Mandarin will, I expect, play an increasing role in how world literature is understood.

I encourage you, then, to learn more languages; you won't regret it.

## IX. *English Language and Linguistics*

In addition to offering courses in writing and literature, the English department regularly offers courses in English language and in linguistics.

Linguists are interested in the structural properties of languages, and in how they are similar or dissimilar. Linguists also study how languages change through time, how language is associated

with social and cultural patterns, and how language is processed, produced, and learned.

Most linguistics courses in the department have ENGL 220, Study of Language, as a prerequisite. This course provides an introduction to phonetics, phonology, syntax, morphology, sociolinguistics, and other subfields of linguistics.

English majors may be especially drawn to ENGL 303, History of the English Language; ENGL 304, Syntax; ENGL 400, Meaning & Understanding; and courses that deal with variation in English based on gender, ethnicity, or identity.

## X. *Creative Writing Program*

(The following section is by Professor Nancy Schoenberger)

1. What, you might ask, does the English department offer students who desire to write *creative* works? All writing, to varying degrees, is of course "creative" in that each writer is generating a text that (we hope) does not already exist in the world. Most good writing—whether analytical, argumentative, or discursive–displays insight and imagination and fresh language appropriate to its subject. But for those students who want to try their hand at writing imaginative prose, fiction**,** or poetry, the department offers a

number of courses in creative writing -- poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and screenwriting -- at beginning, intermediate**,** and advanced levels**,** all numbered with a CRWR prefix. We also offer a Master Class every two years with a visiting writer and a "Special Topics" courses in poetry and prose, such as writing children's literature, *ekphrastic* poetry, verse drama, and long-form fiction.

Instructor's consent is required for all creative writing courses—this allows the instructor to let you know what you're getting into, and to put together a class of serious writers who are roughly at the same level of achievement. Creative writing courses are organized as workshops in which group critiques and discussions of student work form the basis of each class.

2. The *Creative Writing Minor* is open to students who have taken at least two creative writing classes; 20 credit hours are required to complete the minor. Three credit hours can be fulfilled by an English Department literature course, and, at the discretion of the Director of Creative Writing, credit can be given towards the minor for courses in Theater and/or language courses that include a poetry translation component.

*English majors who choose to do a Creative Writing minor can count only two creative writing courses toward the major.*

3. *The Writer-in-Residence and Artist-in-Residence Programs*. Every two years we host a visiting writer for one semester as the Scott and Vivian Donaldson Writer-in-Residence, and every three years we host the Class of 1939 Artist-in-Residence. Each writer offers one Master Class, typically in poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction, though in 2016, Writer-in-Residence Nicole Georges led a workshop in writing graphic memoirs. Past visiting writers include poets Quincy Troupe, Joshua Poteet, and Henri Cole; fiction writers include Tom De Haven, David L. Robbins, and Rosalind Brackenbury. In 2017, novelist and nonfiction writer Eddy L. Harris (*Mississippi Solo, South of Haunted Dreams*) will be our next Artist- in-Residence, and the following year, poet Shonda Buchanan (*Who's Afraid of Black Indians?*) will be our Writer-in-Residence.

3. *The Hayes Writers Series*. The Creative Writing Program hosts a monthly writers series, bringing a diverse mix of new and established poets and writers to campus throughout the year to give readings and occasionally conduct workshops. Past programs have featured such well-known writers as Allen Ginsberg, Mark Strand, Seamus Heaney, Rita Dove, Tim O'Brien, Ann Beatty, George

Saunders, John Wideman, Richard Price, Ntozake Shange, and Yusef Komunyakaa. These monthly readings give students a chance to meet established writers and find out how one can live as a writer in the world.

Which leads us to the next question: what can you do after taking these courses if what you want is that most precarious and rewarding of occupations, a writing career?

4. *The MFA.* A number of universities offer two-year advanced degrees in creative writing, known as the Master of Fine Arts (or MFA). Armed with the recommendation letters of your creative writing instructors – and, we hope, a publication or two in a literary magazine or journal – you can apply to a range of programs, including low-residency MFA programs, which can be pursued while working full time**.** Most MFA programs consist of intensive workshops in poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction, supplemented by required graduate level literature courses. Students interested in writing screenplays have the option of applying to graduate film studies programs**.** The AWP Official Guide to Writing Programs is available online at *http://www.awpwriter.org* and your creative writing instructors can advise you.

Now, what on earth can you do with an MFA?

There are university teaching positions available for candidates with MFAs and strong publication records, but they are scarce and difficult to procure. Writers with MFAs often do what MAs and Ph.Ds do (there aren't many university jobs for them, either): they teach in secondary schools, they go into publishing or become literary agents; they write for magazines and newsletters, for corporations and non-profit organizations; they go into arts management and/or grant writing positions. In short, they find jobs where writing skills and a knowledge of the contemporary literary milieu are valued.

## XI. *Honors in English*

(The following section is by Professor Brett Wilson)

Honors in English gives outstanding students the opportunity to undertake an intensive year-long project in the study and/or practice of literature under the close direction of a faculty advisor. Students who complete the thesis receive 3 credits in ENGL 495 (Honors, Fall) and 3 in ENGL 496 (Honors, Spring).

Admission is competitive. Students apply to begin the honors thesis process in December of their junior year. They must have a 3.0 minimum GPA to be considered, but most admitted students have

GPAs well above that threshold. No particular course or sequence of courses is required. Creative writers must have completed multiple upper-level courses in creative writing. Between 10 and 20 students are admitted each year.

Admitted students then select a faculty thesis advisor and write a 5-7 page honors thesis proposal during their junior spring, due in April to the English Department's faculty Honors Committee. The thesis advisor is someone who knows the area, field, or creative genre in which the student plans to specialize (e.g., the Victorian novel; contemporary Latino literature; confessional poetry). Thesis proposals are reviewed by the faculty Honors Committee. Students whose proposals are accepted then proceed to write a 40-70 page original thesis over their senior year, due in April of their senior Spring, and sit for an oral examination by three faculty members other than the thesis advisor, typically in May.

Many Honors theses revise and extend research conducted in an independent study or for a summer research scholarship.

Students pursuing an *Honors Thesis in Literary Criticism* develop their own reading lists and choose their own critical frameworks. A successful honors thesis in criticism demonstrates good knowledge of the chosen field and/or topic, substantial research, and a capacity to construct a clear, well-structured, independent scholarly

argument and comes to a conclusion that builds on relevant criticism without simply reproducing it. The best honors theses in criticism display original thinking, make use of sophisticated or complex concepts and/or methodologies, and make an innovative contribution to criticism in their fields. Recent theses in criticism include a study of rage in Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, and one on pro-slavery responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Students pursuing an *Honors Thesis in Creative Writing* develop their own plots, characters, genres, media, and themes. A successful honors thesis in creative writing is an original, arresting text or set of texts that demonstrates good knowledge of the chosen field and genre. The best honors theses in creative writing make use of sophisticated or complex concepts and/or methodologies, fully create an imagined world using fresh and vivid language, and are innovative additions to writing in their field. Recent theses in creative writing include an intergenerational story about Catholicism and trans people, and a screenplay about a Vietnam veteran's summer job at an amusement park.

## XII. *What Does One Do With A W & M English Major?*

Our English majors have become involved in an

astonishing range of activities. They are obviously able to do just about anything they put their minds to. While the English major provides a non-vocational liberal arts education, majors develop skills—logical analysis, clarity of expression, and sheer doggedness—that our society values and rewards.

Roughly half of our graduates pursue careers in three major areas:

1) teaching;
2) writing, publishing, editing, film, or other media;
3) law.

1. TEACHING

Many of our graduates enter elementary, middle, or high school teaching. Not a few teach at the college level, some at prestigious universities, after obtaining advanced degrees. Brian Henry (‘93), for example, received his Ph.D. at University of Massachusetts and now teaches at the University of Richmond; Andrew Zawacki (‘93) completed a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago and now teaches at the University of Georgia. Jennifer French (‘94), Channette Romero (‘98), and Sean Barry (2002) all received their Ph.D.s from Rutgers; Jennifer teaches at Williams College, Channette at the University of Georgia, and Sean at Longwood College. Of the Class of 1997, Erika Weitzman received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from

NYU, and now teaches at Northwestern University: from 1999, Holly Barbaccia received her Ph.D. from University of Pennsylvania and now teaches at Georgetown University. Max Uphaus (W&M 2007) and Lindsay Gibson (W&M 2009) both got their Ph.Ds at Columbia University; Max is now teaching at Montana State, and Lindsay is starting a job at Saint Joseph's College outside of Portland, Maine.

A number of our graduates teach English abroad for one or more years. They have taught in China, Japan, Hungary, Bosnia, as well as other parts of the globe.

2. WRITING, PUBLISHING, EDITING, FILM, OR OTHER MEDIA

Our graduates have gone on to all sort of journalistic careers, most in the print media, but also in radio and TV (e.g., the Voice of America, and the Christian Broadcasting Network). Graduates over the past 20 years have worked for Simon and Schuster, The University of California Press, The University of Virginia Press, the Boston Phoenix, the New York Times, Scribners, HarperCollins, McGraw-Hill Education, and Harvard Business Review.

Several grads are pursuing careers in the arts. More than a few have made their way to Hollywood, where they are writing and acting. My former student Patton Oswalt ('92) co-starred on the TV

series *The King of Queens*, was the voice of the Rat in *Ratatouille*, and is now one of the coolest and most respected comedians in the US, a star of stand-up and film, and also a best-selling writer.

3. LAW—Finally, many, many grads have gone on to law school and many are currently practicing lawyers—and doing well!

But although roughly half of our graduates have gone into the teaching, writing, and legal fields, about half have worked or are now working in fields not traditionally associated with "English." A great many choose business careers—as CPAs, bankers, management consultants, marketing analysts, and urban planners; some have worked for mega-corporations such as IBM, while others run their own small businesses. Some are librarians, some are involved in religious ministries. A surprising number choose the health & mental health professions. A great many are involved in technological areas, especially computer technologies, and some of these folks worked for major computer companies such as Microsoft.

Our '90s graduate Yancy Strickler has found fame and fortune as CEO and co-founder of Kickstarter! And he remains a wonderful person and loyal alum.

A large number of our former students are also engaged in government work of one kind or another, at local, state, and federal levels. Capitol

Hill is apparently teeming with William & Mary grads. Several senatorial and legislative staffs include former W&M English majors. Our majors are working for various agencies of the government such as the Department of Commerce, the Department of Education, and the CIA. Quite a few serve in the military.

There are even those who have chosen to care for children. Those folks may be working hardest of all.

One of the best ways to keep track of our English alumni is through the "Outcomes Information" webpage of the--

**XIII. *William and Mary Cohen Career Center***

To see what others have done with W&M English majors, so to the Cohen Center's web-page & find the "database of post-graduation," and within it the "long-term outcomes from alumni data" (drop down English major). You'll see quite a list of former English majors and their current jobs.

The Cohen Career Center, located in physical space between the Sadler Center and Zable Stadium, is a god-send for W&M students. The Center offers a wide variety of services for current students and graduates, ranging from interviewing and job search strategies workshops, to career fairs, to how to write resumes (or curriculum vitae) and cover letters.

The Career Center also has a job listing service where you can search through hundreds of listings in a wide variety of fields, such as, “Jobs in Education,” “Jobs in Government,” “Jobs in Arts and Entertainment,” and it also contains listings for summer, part-time and internship opportunities. There are even listings by cities.

The Center’s services also include mock-interviews, eRecruiting, Credential Files and possibly one of the best services is Alumni Mentoring.

**XIV. *The Ferguson-Blair Scholarships in Publishing***

(The following section is by Geoffrey Paul Eaton, '94, recipient of a Ferguson-Blair scholarship, former editorial assistant at the World Bank, Washington, D.C., a J.D. from University of Virginia [‘98], former employee of the US Court of Appeals Federal Court, and currently of the Washington Law Firm Winston & Strawn).

The F-B scholarships are awarded each spring to the two or three seniors who show the most promise for success in a publishing career.

Applications may be obtained from those delightful and highly skilled folks at the Career Center, and they’re pretty simple (the applications, that is): some biographical information, a transcript, and a Why I Want to Work in Publishing-type essay.

Submit all this; you'll be called later for an interview. The interview is (or was, in my experience) very casual. Be sincere, stand up straight, and don't fidget. Let them know you're serious about wanting to work in publishing (or fake it just as hard as you can). It helps a lot to know something about the industry. Do you admire Maxwell Perkins? What did Giroux do? What the hell is Viacom, anyway, and didn't Faber and Faber make pencils, or something? A little background information will mark you as an unusually qualified applicant.

Winners of the scholarship receive money to attend one of the publishing institutes. I believe they make you choose from Columbia, NYU, and Denver. Speak with the Career Center for more information.

## XV. *Some Common Questions about Graduate Study in English*

Let's begin with some Q & A about the basics.

—Q.: What good is an MA in English?
—A.: An MA, which typically requires 1-2 years of study, is often viewed as a professional credential in the fields of publishing, editorial work, and secondary education. It also allows one to teach in community colleges (such as, locally, Thomas

Nelson College). An MA is also a way of 'testing the water' to see if you'd like to pursue further graduate study, that is, a Ph.D.

Finally, if your undergraduate record is less than perfect, a successfully completed MA (and strong letters of recommendation from those who have taught you in MA seminars) will make you more competitive for a top Ph.D. program.

Information about what colleges and universities offer MA degrees may be found in Peterson's Guide, in the reference room at Swem Library.

There are two types of MA programs:

1.) the Master's degree that is offered by an English department that does not have a Ph.D. program;

2.) the MA granted by an English department that does offer a Ph.D.

There are pros and cons to either type of MA program.

If you go to a college that has a terminal MA program, the pros are that the program will be smaller and that your professors will pay considerable attention to you. The cons are that your professors may not be very well known in the academic world, and hence their recommendations may or may not carry much weight if and when you

apply for a Ph.D. elsewhere.

The pros of going to an MA program at a place that also grants the Ph.D—let's use Columbia University for our example—are (a) that your professors will be top-notch scholars/critics; (b) hence, if they come to smile upon you, you can ask them for letters of recommendation; and at that point, c) you'll be a strong candidate for Ph.D. programs elsewhere. However, the cons of going to an MA program at a place like Columbia are that, with so many brilliant Ph.D. candidates around, as a master's student you're apt to be treated like a second-class citizen.

For tons of information on graduate schools, programs, etc., use the Cohen Career Center's website.

The rest of this section primarily addresses those who are considering *pursuing a Ph.D. and teaching at the college level*.

—Q.: What type of commitment is required to obtain a Ph.D. in English?
—A.: Generally speaking, it will require a more or less full time commitment for a period of 5 to 8 years. During this time most of your *income* will come from your graduate institution through fellowships, teaching assistantships, instructorships, library work, odd jobs, etc.

Graduate students lead a distinctly low rent sort of life, but they tend not to mind too much.

*Nota bene*: *while students typically pay for MAs in English, Ph.D. programs will typically pay you*. Funding for Ph.D. students in English can range (c. 2016) from roughly $16,000- $24,000, with tuition waived.

—Q.: How's the college teaching job market for recent Ph.D.s in English?
—A.: Statistics show that it has been very challenging for recent Ph.D.s to find employment in college teaching ever since the 1970s. Recent hiring committees in the William & Mary English department have been able to draw on pools of about 200 applicants for any available position, however narrowly defined.

But keep this in mind: it's still easier for a qualified candidate to get a job in an English department than it is for a qualified actor to get steady work in film or television. Like aspiring actors, aspiring teacher/scholars simply need to pursue their goals with ardor and perseverance and, sometimes, without disregard for alternative career goals.

Well, if you're still with me, you may ask next:

—Q.: What can I do to prepare myself for a good Ph.D. program?
—A.: This question leads to my next section,

## XVI. *Preparation for Graduate School: Undergraduate Courses*

1.) At the level of academic preparation, there are two keys to doing well in graduate school and then, afterwards, through a lifetime as a teacher and scholar: the first is an ability to do "close reading" (see sections IV-V, below); the second is more general intellectual background.

You'll need a basic mastery of the intellectual context within which literature is studied, which means you have to know some history and philosophy as well as a great deal of literature. Beyond this, the areas of literary study you choose as an undergraduate will do a great deal to determine how comfortably you adjust to a program of graduate study. Here's my general rule: the soundest basis for advanced study, even for students who eventually intend to specialize in modern or American literature, is a good deal of work in the earlier periods of English literature. Outside of the English department, it's also useful to take classes in History (especially British and American history) and Philosophy (especially the History of Philosophy).

Also, please remember: the GRE subject test in English, required by most Ph.D. programs, requires you to know the basics of English literary history, and the ability to read and comprehend literature

from different historical periods (see section VII, below).

2.) Language Study

The three most important languages for graduate study in English tend to be French, Latin and German.

As a general rule, you'll need reading knowledge of at least one and perhaps two of these (or other non-English) languages.

As for which of these languages are right for you, here are a few guidelines:

—it's always good to know French;

—it's just about necessary to know Latin if you want to pursue pre-1800 British literature;

—it's awfully helpful to know German if you plan to pursue any post-1789 British literature, because Goethe, Kant, the Schlegels, Hegel, et al. become very important to Romantic and Victorian British culture. Even Jane Eyre learns German.

In addition, Italian is quite useful for students of the Renaissance, and Spanish is increasingly important for Americanists.

And ancient Greek is sublime.

## XVII. *Applying to Graduate School*

Graduate school applications typically consist of:

1. Your undergraduate college transcript.

2. Two or three faculty recommendations.

3. A sample of your own critical writing.

4. A short (2 pp.) narrative statement of why you'd like to go to graduate school.

5. GRE (Graduate Record Exam) scores for both—the General Test (an advanced version of the SAT); and the English Subject Test (approximately 230 questions on the literature of Britain, the U.S., and other English-speaking countries).

Allow me to comment on each of these five components. (I've been ably assisted here by a number of students who have gone through this rigmarole: thanks to Jennifer French ['95]; Michael Blum [MA, '95] and Adam Morris [MA, '95].)

1. Your transcript. Well, let's assume that you'll be applying to graduate school either in your senior year or a year or two after you graduate. In either

event, there's nothing you can do about your GPA at this point, so don't sweat it. When looking at schools you want to apply to, remember that when they list a median undergrad GPA among accepted applicants, fully half of the people they accept fall below that median. If you want very much to go to a specific school, don't not apply just because your GPA might be (way) too low.

2. Faculty recommendations. You'll need letters of recommendation from two or three of your professors. Always save the graded and marked up versions of your essays (especially "A" essays)—thus, when you ask for a letter you can quickly refresh your professor's memory as to who you are and why you deserve a detailed and laudatory recommendation.

3. Writing sample. You'll need an essay, preferably 12 pp. or longer, that demonstrates original thought, an elegant prose style, and some familiarity with secondary materials.

4. A Short Narrative, that typically addresses the question, "Why do you want to go to graduate school?," and sometimes the even better question, "Why do you want to attend OUR graduate school?"

Be honest. Whoever reads these things will read through any smokescreens of bull. They also read hundreds of applications in any given year, and so

will be bored by generalities such as, “I’ve always liked to read,” and “Literature adds meaning to our lives.” Try to indicate your awareness that graduate school is professional training. Without being high-falutin’, state which period/s or author/s you’re most interested in, and why; comment on sorts of approaches to literature you favor.

Also, be responsible. Check the graduate program catalogues for wherever it is you’re applying (they’re all on line), and see what the program’s course selection is like; see also who’s teaching in your field of interest. Seek out any book or books that person has written; skim through it/them. If it seems interesting to you, you might say so (and why it’s so) in your narrative. (Alternatively, if everything you read by the faculty at a given place strikes you as impenetrable, impossible, and/or ridiculous, you might want to reconsider applying there.)

After you’ve drafted your essay, take the essay to someone you trust to read it over for content, grammar, and tone.

5. GRE exams—General Test and English Subject Test. Each of these tests can be taken repeatedly. As with the SAT, opinions differ about if and how much one should study for the GRE; there are, of course, many review guides and prep courses available (Barrons, Kaplan, the Princeton Review, etc.).

## XVIII. *When Should I Apply to Graduate Schools?*

Earliest graduate school applications are due around December for admittance the following August/September. I recommend that students—even the most driven students—take a year off between graduating from William & Mary and applying to Ph.D. programs in English. There are many reasons for this:

1. You have enough to do in your senior year without the added stress and busywork of applying to graduate programs.

2. Your GRE English Subject Tests will doubtless be better if you take them in the June or October after you graduate. If (as is likely) you haven't managed to get a handle on all the periods of literary history during your four years here, the summer and fall after your senior year are great times to catch up on your Norton anthologies, read *Ulysses*, and brush up your Shakespeare.

3. If you wait to apply until after all your coursework is through, you'll have the time to take your best William & Mary paper (be it your Honors Essay if you've written one, or an essay for a 475 seminar or a favorite course), polish it up. Otherwise, you'll end up sending as a writing sample something from your junior year, which

probably won't represent your own best self.

4. After four years of this place, you need to break up your routines. By waiting to apply to graduate programs, you'll get a better sense of your own calling: it will become clearer to you whether you really want to pursue the professorial life, or whether you're really only seeking to avoid the slings and arrows of life outside the olive groves of academe.

5. You're only young once. Go a little crazy before "custom lie upon thee with a weight, / Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!"

Michael Blum (MA '95) writes: "Grad school will be there in a year or two, and you will certainly be more mature, as well as more sure that grad school is truly what you want."

## XIX. *Which Graduate Schools Should I Apply To?*

Here's a list of good Ph.D. programs that you might find helpful. Needless to say, it's not exhaustive. I've listed graduate programs according to region, which is largely an arbitrary principle of organization—though you'll want to give some thought to what part of the country you want to live in for five to ten years.

1. Northeast: Boston University, Brandeis, Brown,

Columbia, Cornell, CUNY, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, University of Maryland, New York University, University of Pennsylvania, Penn State (College Park), University of Pittsburgh, Princeton, Rochester, Rutgers, U Mass (Amherst), State University of New York at Buffalo, SUNY at Stony Brook, University of Toronto, Yale.

2. Southeast: Duke, Emory, Tulane, University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), University of Virginia, Vanderbilt.

3. Midwest: Indiana University, Iowa (Iowa City), Northwestern University, Notre Dame, University of Chicago, University of Illinois (Urbana), University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin (Madison), Washington University (St. Louis).

4. Southwest: Colorado (Boulder), Rice, Texas (Austin).

5. Northwest: University of Washington, University of Oregon.

6. California: Stanford, UC Berkeley, UC Irvine, UC Los Angeles (UCLA), UC San Diego, UC Santa Barbara, University of Southern California.

In general, to get into one of these programs you need to have very good grades in English courses; a good range of courses (e.g., don't just take

American lit. courses); and respectably high scores on your GREs. For most of them, you also need a good writing sample.

As a senior you should consult with the William & Mary professor(s) who specialize in whatever literary periods or fields you can imagine wanting to study further—their advice will be most helpful to you as you consider what programs to apply to. Also note that the "Officers of Instruction" section of your course catalogue tells you where your professors' graduate degrees are from—if you have questions about a particular program, it's sometimes good to direct them to a faculty member who's been through that program (especially those who have been through it in the past ten years).

My correspondent Michael Blum advises: "Decide where you want to apply. If you can, visit campuses and talk to students already in the programs you are thinking about. Then pick four schools you have about a 30% chance of being accepted to, two schools you shouldn't be turned away from (barring leprosy), and one school you'd only get into if you had the foresight to make a pact with Satan."

Seems to me like good advice.

Good luck!