

Jobs for English majors

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English majors are often assumed today to have fewer job prospects than students who have majored in more “practical” fields, like Business, Education, or Engineering. But if you look around, you will find a great many former English majors in a wide variety of careers – not only in the “usual suspect” careers as professors and writers, but in all types of nonprofits, various entertainment industries, in public relations and sales, managerial positions, and as many different fields as you can think of.

The difficulty in entering the job force with an English major may not so much be that it does not equip you for a career, but that the wide variety of possible career applications can seem dauntingly or paralyzingly diffuse. Here, for instance, is a list drawn from Rutgers University of career options for English majors:

Administrative Assistant	Legislative Assistant
Advertising Account Executive	Librarian
Campaign Manager	Literacy Coach
Claims Examiner	Lobbyist
Community Relations Specialist	Marketing/Sales Manager
Copywriter	Media Analyst
Corporate Trainer	Media Buyer
Critic	Museum Curator
Editor	Nonprofit Administrator
Fact Checker	Public Relations Specialist
Fundraiser	Researcher
Historical Society Specialist	Sales Representative
Journalist	Special Events Coordinator
Law (in many different variations)	

How does one get such jobs? Well, it may not be as easy as it is for, say, a Physical Education or a Nursing major, who apply for jobs in a narrower, specific range. English majors have to be flexible, try things out, and/or throw themselves into what presents itself – post-college internships, graduate/law school, or trial jobs seemingly unrelated to usually assumed English major careers – in order to see what fits.

The good news is that English majors possess a great many talents that those in more professionally orientated majors do not have in such abundance. Not too long ago, I attended a reunion of English majors at my alma mater, State University of New York at Buffalo, and because we were all former graduate and undergraduate English majors meeting in an academic setting there were as part of the program some conference-style panels. I saw a couple: one where former English majors from two or three decades ago discussed what they had done in their careers; another where graduating English majors talked about their prospects, with many of the older English majors in the audience, asking questions and commenting. Buffalo is in New York State, but it does not have a strong economy; it is an old Rust Belt city where jobs can often be scarce. Nonetheless, as the conversations went on, a number of advantages to **majoring in English as a strong career choice** began to emerge:

- communication skills, writing and speaking (the latter of which may need to be cultivated), cut across all fields, and are very much in demand among employers;
- English majors study the “whole human being” in all our vicissitudes, complexities, and “humanity,” rather than just one specialized area;
- English majors are used to being able to look at things in new ways, to imagining solutions from out of uncomfortable situations, and are at home with having their preconceptions challenged;
- English majors are adept at crafting arguments, and doing so in new ways, because problems rarely have one single answer;
- in the corporate world, one is always trying to persuade someone to one’s own point of view, and the rhetorical skills developed by majoring in English are excellent preparation for this environment;
- an English major pairs very well with marketing and legal internships;
- technologies change, but the ways people think, feel, and believe don’t; unlike many other majors, English majors don’t spend a lot of their coursework being trained in technical skills that may well be outmoded by the time the candidate reaches the job market;
- although we live in a society that sometimes seems like it is abandoning the printed word – or maybe because of this – there remains no better

way to speak in the world authoritatively than to write a book; no major better positions one with the skills to do this than English;

- the study of Literature teaches skills that seem non-quantifiable, and yet are very real and give one advantages in both the world of work and life in general: resilience, empathy, perspectival judgment, and learning how to handle things you haven't experienced yet;
- English is a superb major to prepare for a career in Law; said one English major-turned-lawyer, "I have yet to meet an English major who tried and didn't get into law school."

No one says the post-college transition is easy; frequently, employers may have to be convinced of these advantages. It is important, then, that one become articulate in understanding and speaking about them. Practice and rehearse your lines.

Another stumbling block, however, may not be external so much as internal – students frequently *become* English majors because of a type of critical idealism that may not mix well with the idea of a corporate career, and may dismiss a wide variety of careers as "too corporate."

A couple of things to keep in mind as one negotiates the difficult terrain of figuring out how to earn a paycheck without offending one's own personal and very real sense of "selling out" –

Creative writing is one of the central lures that bring students into majors in English. If you believe enough in your dream and sacrifice for it, you can find a way of making a living as an artist, an author, or some related field that fulfills your desire to be a creative person. Understand, though, that such a career may require a long apprenticeship that four years of undergraduate education may only be the beginning of.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell defines the 10,000 hour rule: the amount of time it takes for someone to become truly brilliantly successful at an art or talent. The Beatles are one example Gladwell cites; another is Bill Gates – folks that put everything else aside while working to perfect their chosen passion and bring it to the level of an unparalleled art. Let's say you spend four hours, half of a working day, at developing this talent. Let's say you take off one day a week from this pursuit, to rest, relax, or for whatever reason. Still, you are practicing, working at perfecting your talent, six days a week, four hours day. You will arrive at the magical 10,000 hour mark...

in *approximately eight years*. This is not said to dissuade you, but to give you a real picture of what the word “sacrifice” means in this context.

But there are many career paths you may discover on the way to the 10,000 hour mark – through the people you meet, the places it will take you, the collaborations you may involve yourself in. It may seem to you that you have worked incredibly long and hard to get to where you are – but from the perspective of the career world, which may stretch from your twenties *into your seventies*, you are still very young, and there is a lot ahead of you.

Those who love you want to see you established and settled, but in the case of an alternative career path, these folks *and their worries* may be among your greatest challenges. The most difficult thing about graduate school (or an apprenticeship in the arts, or building an alternative career against the odds the world places against you) may not be the actual work so much as the pressures of years of questions at family barbecues, whether honestly concerned – “So how many years do you think you’ll want to pursue this before you settle down and start earning a real paycheck?” – or comic-hostile – “So how’s the permanent student business?”

An English major knows this, or should know this, above all: It is your life, and there is more to it than satisfying others’ expectations. You have likely read novels in which characters do that. How do they end up?

With an English major, you have chosen a field that equips you to succeed in a variety of areas. You have the option of training yourself to succeed in whatever challenges entrance into this world has designed – study and take to heart the lists above. Majoring in English also from time to time has held out the legitimate promise of a different way of living. This, too, is possible for you if you want it, and if you believe enough in your dream to work for it and get it. In the pursuit, you may find that what you wanted all along was something different than what you thought you wanted. In any case, happiness is always worth pursuing – and there may even be money in it, or at least ways to live a rewarding life.