Prospective MA and PhD Students

Some Guidelines and Advice

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Students with bachelor’s degrees in English studies might want to pursue graduate work in English if they have a desire to pursue a career in education, primarily in the fields of literature, rhetoric, culture, theory and writing. Graduate work prepares students in the disciplines of English at a professional level; that is, students learn the tools of critical reading, analysis, inquiry and representation that people who work in English use in their professions. These professions are primarily in higher education, teaching at two- and four-year colleges or universities with masters and/or PhD programs. They also might include teachers in secondary education, librarians, and people who work in the publishing fields.

Graduate work in English focuses on the development of the following academic areas:

- A base knowledge of literature, rhetoric, culture (including film and media) and critical theories
- Competence in interpreting and evaluating primary and theoretical texts
- Skills in researching and assessing scholarly publications on these texts and theories
- Practice in producing disciplinary writing with the goal of publishing or presenting such work
- Training in pedagogical methods and theories

Frequently Asked Questions:

Is graduate school in English a good choice for me?

While each student presents unique qualifications and characteristics, successful applicants are those students who not only have a solid background in the study of literature but also demonstrate an understanding of what graduate work in English entails and enables. In other words, it is not sufficient to say “I love to read.” This is a valued and necessary quality of graduate students, one that grows dearer in our culture every moment, but in the end one can continue to read on one’s own without incurring the sacrifices that graduate school involves.

It is a mistake to think of graduate school in English as a mere continuation of your undergraduate experience. There are great differences (see below) in the purpose and function – not to mention the cost and the work load – of graduate studies. Moreover, graduate school is highly competitive, and career placement (see below) is uncertain.
If you are still reading this document and are still interested in graduate study in English, then you probably also exhibit

- a desire for greater experience with textual analysis,
- a wider scope to your knowledge of literature, rhetoric, culture (including, film and other media) and theory,
- a context into which to place your own curiosity for textual meaning,
- practice in writing on a professional level,
- engagement in a community of scholars,
- and / or a hope to one day teach these things to students of your own.

If so, then you are right to consider graduate studies in English!

**Differences between Undergraduate and Graduate Study in English**

The shape of the discipline(s) in English is changing, and undergraduate study may look very different at different institutions. Some of the things I will suggest for graduate study may have already begun to trickle into undergraduate majors and minors. For the most part, however, the biggest difference in content between undergraduate and graduate study is the involvement of scholarship, what other disciplines call “literature” or secondary sources. At the graduate level, you are expected to learn the texts of literature, rhetoric, culture and theory AND the critical discourse on these texts, the conversations that may have been ongoing for centuries. Graduate students read, assess and try to engage in these critical discussions, learning from, emulating and ultimately forging new threads of analysis in criticism. One of the goals of graduate education is for students to practice these forms of disciplinary writing at a level that allows them to enter into public discussion through publication or presentation at academic conferences.

Undergraduate study in English aims to introduce students to the contents of the field and to develop tools of critical thinking and expression. Graduate study aims to add depth to the former and a purpose to the latter. Graduate study introduces you to the tools of research that scholars use, and depending on your degree program, it prepares you to teach in a wide range of content areas while focusing more closely on a field of scholarly expertise.

**Job Prospects**

**PhD**

The PhD qualifies you for research and teaching at the college level. Surveys done by the Modern Language Association suggests that there is a significant gap between the number of PhDs in English and the number of tenure-track jobs advertised by colleges and universities around the country. This implies that there are a large number of unemployed PhDs in English wandering about the USA. However, other studies by the
MLA suggest that most PhDs in English (over 70%) find full-time employment in education within 3-5 years of earning their PhD. Not all of these jobs are tenure-track, and many are in community colleges or other small four-year colleges with high teaching loads (4 or 5 courses a semester). Jobs for PhDs in English are uncertain, but they are available, and graduate students are well-served knowing this before they put their lives on hold for the degree.

MA

Recent surveys on staffing at institutions of higher education in our country indicate that the majority of lower-level English courses (first-year writing and introductory courses) are taught by holders of the MA degree. As with the case for PhD holders, jobs in teaching at community colleges or other small four-year institutions are available for those with an MA degree. Community colleges in the state of Florida require instructors to have a minimum of 18 credit hours of graduate coursework (prefixes ENL, AML, ENG). Much of this teaching is done on a part-time basis, or in adjunct status, although full-time instructors and some tenure-track jobs are available at this level to holders of the master’s degree. Also, many high school teachers earn a master’s degree to increase their proficiency in their content areas or to achieve higher job classifications.

Resources for more information:

“Advice to Graduate Students: From Application to Career,” Modern Language Association, website: http://www.mla.org/advice_grad


Discussing the various disciplines that take shelter in the departments of English in the United States, this book addresses current concerns about over specialization and fragmentation in the field. For graduate students, this book provides an overview of the profession you are entering, making you aware of the history of departments of English, the constituents and the responsibilities of the various programs. There are individual essays devoted to each of the following subdisciplines of English Studies: Linguistics and Discourse Analysis, Rhetoric and Composition, Creative Writing, Literature and Literary Criticism, Critical Theory and Cultural Studies, English Education.


An up-to-date account of the profession from the student’s perspective, this book helps to orient you as a student, teacher, scholar and additional professional identities. Filled with knowledgeable advice, this guide to graduate school is extremely useful because it is specifically for students in English. There are other guides to graduate school that also provide an overview of the experience and allow you to see yourself as part of a larger educational experience.
Steps to prepare your application:

While in coursework, ask professors who taught you and for whom you exceeded expectations (i.e. earned a grade of A) if they would consider writing a letter of recommendation for you. It is important to have letters from professors who know your academic work well and can speak to your suitability for graduate-level work in English. It is best to have professors who themselves are participating members of the scholarly community or at least tenured or tenure-earning professors who understand the process of academic recommendations and graduate applications. After a professor has agreed to write a letter, you should present that person with all the appropriate documents to help him or her write a detailed and persuasive letter. These documents may include the following:

- any papers you submitted for that professor’s class
- a Curriculum Vita
- academic transcripts (or records of your grades)
- a draft of your personal statement
- a list of schools to which you’re applying

Be sure to include stamped, addressed envelopes for each of the schools to which you are applying. Also make sure the deadline for letters is clearly highlighted, and that you submit these materials to faculty well in advance of the deadline.

You need to take the GRE (Graduate Record Examination). In preparing to take the GRE, remember that every section counts. While the admissions committee is less concerned with your quantitative score (math), it is essential to the university, and so it is required. Also, you will be more competitive for USF fellowships or awards if you have an overall high GRE score. The subject test in English is required for PhD applicants, but there is no required minimum score for this test.

All official transcripts need to be included in your application. Since no decision on your application can be made until your transcripts have been received, applications that do not include transcripts by the established deadline will not be considered.

Writing samples are necessary for all degree programs (this is new for the MA degree). Please submit a paper of no more than fifteen pages on an academic subject (choosing a great paper from a class is a good idea) so that the admissions committee can judge your writing and reasoning ability, your literary knowledge and the sophistication of your ideas. Your writing sample should demonstrate your readiness for advanced literary study at the graduate level.
In your statement of purpose, you should explain your reasons for applying to our graduate program, your qualifications, your individual academic interests and any unusual circumstances that your application presents. This should be a professional statement, and you should envision yourself as a potential member of an academic community. It is not an opportunity to tell your life story or gush about why you like certain authors. For more information on writing successful graduate application statements, see Gerald Graff and Andrew Hoberek, “The Application Guessing Game” in Graff, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004). The following examples come from this text:

Examples of Opening Frames for Statements of Purpose:

**Bad (the “I love literature” approach):** Ever since the age of three I’ve been passionately in love with the sensuous sound of words. So when Mother Goose was read to me in my crib, I somehow knew I was destined for a lifelong love affair with literature.

**Better:** In a college seminar paper, I discussed the prevalence of gendered battle imagery in Hamlet…

**Best:** In a college seminar paper on battle imagery in Hamlet, I discussed the debates inside and outside feminist circles on the question of how specifically gender colors language and how far imagery can be defined as “male,” and “female,”… etc.

**What if my undergraduate degree was not in English?**
While there are some fields that might be an appropriate substitute for an English degree, it is difficult to pursue advanced study in a field in which you have little or no prior training. Degrees in English Education, interdisciplinary humanities, linguistics may be helpful, but the applicant without significant coursework in English would not be accepted. These fields are often suitable preparation for programs in Rhetoric and Composition. While fields such as history, philosophy, religion, psychology, and theatre provide excellent training in critical thinking and share certain methods of scholarly inquiry with English, they are distinctly different fields and can’t really substitute for direct—and directed—experience with the study of literary texts. In a graduate literature seminar you would of course be at a severe disadvantage to those with a solid background not only in the texts, periods, genres, and movements being studied but in the basic methods of literary analysis. While we do occasionally admit students who hold undergraduate degrees in fields other than English, applicants to the program who cannot show evidence of having studied literature at the undergraduate level are at a disadvantage when the admissions committee assesses their readiness for advanced literary study. If you have a degree in a field other than English and you are strongly committed to pursuing a graduate degree in the field, you may be well-advised to take a few undergraduate literature courses before you apply to the graduate program.