What to Do With a B.A. in English?

After the appearance of my October Huffington blog, "Why Study the Arts and the Humanities?," I have often been asked the question, "What can someone do with a B.A. in English?"

Some months ago I was giving a talk to an audience of over 100 at the midtown New York Public Library on my book Endtimes? Crisis and Turmoil at the New York Times. During the post talk question period, someone who wandered in a few minutes before and was standing on the side—and apparently knew I was an English professor—asked somewhat aggressively, "And what do your students do?" Since I knew fifteen or so of my former undergraduate students were in the audience, my response was: “Let's ask them.” And as I went around the room, they responded: “I graduated from Harvard Law school and now work for the city of New York”; “I am at MOMA working on foundation relations after doing an M. A. in Museum Studies at NYU”; “I work at Christie’s as a Junior specialist in European Furniture, porcelain, and decorative arts, after completing a Magister Literarum degree — accredited through the University of Glasgow — from Christie’s Education”; “I am working in hospital administration”; “I work in the financial industry”; “I am preparing to take the law boards in a few months and am working as a paralegal”; “I am an editor in a major publishing house”; “I am a professor of English at a branch of CUNY”; ‘I am in medical school in New York,” and so on.

Other of my former undergraduate majors have become authors and journalists (one won a Pulitzer not so long ago) or have been successful in the theatre and film industry (I was Christopher Reeve’s teacher and advisor). One is the founder of a major hedge fund.
Among those former English majors not in the audience, one writes for Jane’s, which specializes in defense and military technologies; another for Brides; and a third works for an ad agency. Others do technical and business writing or are excelling in various areas of library administration.

English majors choose a major that not only challenges them intellectually but gives them pleasure. They love to read and think that reading matters. Or they hope to be writers and have taken courses in creative writing to test their potential as poets, fiction writers, and dramatists. They may have taken courses in expository writing to polish their skills or to see if the essay and other non-fictional forms were their best genres for a writing career.

English majors believe in education as an end, not merely as a stepping-stone in the path to a career, but they are not necessarily impractical. They are idealists, but unless they have large trust funds or they expect an imminent inheritance or have immediate prospects for marrying into wealth, they need a career.

What an English major brings to career possibilities is the ability to think

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language works and have the written and oral skills to communicate effectively.

**The Obvious Possibilities:**

English majors often go into teaching.

In bygone years, we encouraged our best students to think about a getting Ph.D. and going into college teaching. Many of them did and had splendid careers. I recall being made to understand that I could get a Ph.D. and enter into the mysterious world of academics. It was almost like being tapped for a secret society.

Now unless you really feel a calling akin to what I assume prospective clergy experience and are willing to teach anywhere in the country and perhaps at a small college with limited prestige or a two-year community college, you should think twice about graduate work. You can have a wonderful career teaching at such places, and you will find good students and colleagues everywhere. You may end up at a prestigious place, but job opportunities are more limited than they were when I went to grad school 50 years ago. If you do apply to graduate school in English, it is often better to wait a year after graduation so if you graduate with honors or make Phi Beta Kappa, you have that on your application.

2) Teaching secondary school is another option. Some Ph.D’s now teach at elite preparatory or public high schools, but the more traditional degree is a Masters degree in English and if your choice is elementary school, a Masters in Education. We used to say college teachers teach subject and high school teachers teach students. I like to think we both teach subject to students.
Teaching subject at a top public school or private school can be challenging and exciting.

3) Teach for America—a two year commitment to teach at underserved schools—has become a program that many of our students seek out and find rewarding. Similar programs such as New York’s Urban Teaching Corps also exist. This could lead to a career teaching students who are most in need, but it can also be a prelude to more traditional secondary teaching and/or public or private school administration.

4) Teaching abroad is a possibility; a number of programs exist for placing students in English speaking schools abroad and/or teaching English as second language. The Peace Corps can be another teaching venue.

But a BA in English is often a prelude to law school and even medical and dental school. Doing well on LSATS will make an English major as competitive for law school as any other major; reading deftly, writing precisely, thinking critically, and speaking well are important skills for a law career. Some of our students pursuing medical careers have double majors in

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Other (But Certainly Not All) Possibilities:

English majors are often interested in becoming writers. Often the best way to pursue this is by getting an MFA (Master of Fine Arts). The few years in a MFA program enable you to focus on writing and are also good preparation for a teaching position in a creative writing program, especially if you are getting work published in respectable venues.

Many English majors become journalists. Several of my own Cornell students have done well in this field. Journalism now has expanded beyond print, radio, and TV broadcasting into the electronic media. In the past, a journalism degree was often a recommended path to a journalism career, but it is far from the only path. If you are interested in journalism, you need to get experience by writing for your college newspaper and to get summer internships in the media. Major papers sometimes hire students as part time “stringers” who submit stories that pertain to their campus.

Unfortunately some of the best internships do not pay. Recent litigation on the issue of unpaid interns may mean some of the media companies will pull back on such internships, but perhaps they will offer a lesser number of paid ones. You may have a better chance of employment if you specialize in science writing, music reviews, etc. and have a weekly column or, even better, an editorship on the student newspaper.

Unless you are very well connected, your first journalism position will not be with the New York Times, which tends to use other papers as a kind of farm system, and hire those writers whom they see as promising young stars. Smaller magazines and newspaper may pay less but will offer good
opportunities for advancement.

5) Publishing. Again, summer internships are good because publishing house senior editors get to see your work and observe how well you work with a team. Once upon a time, publishing houses used to hire women as typists and fact checkers even if they had outstanding academic records but now publishers are equal opportunity employers.

6) Needing writers for publicity and for publishing reports to stockholders and clients, businesses hire English majors. So do Ad agencies, which need clever writers. Politicians and some CEOs need speechwriters. English majors are also hired by major investment banking firms because the firms see potential to grow capable young adults who are imaginative, innovative, and have communication and people skills. Again summer internships can open the door to being hired.

**Interviews:**

When you go to interviews, even med school interviews, you will be asked

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other cultures and time periods complemented my life experience” or “No other major would have taught me so much about how people behave in various circumstances and in various cultures. More than any other major I felt I would learn how know other people live, what values motivate them, and why and how people think and feel.”

Among qualities to stress in an interview: you write lucidly; you know how to organize and synthesize complex material; you are an experienced researcher, comfortable with the Internet and libraries; you speak and write well; you have made presentations to audiences and you are a savvy member of the twenty-first century digital universe.

Emphasize that, having taken small classes and seminars, you know how to work within a community: you have exceptional listening skills, work well with peers and supervisors, and learn from others.

Keep in mind that you will be offered a position not for what you are but for what you will become. That is, you will not be hired only for the posted entry-level job but for your potential for growth. You should emphasize that you want be an important asset and will take initiatives within assigned tasks.

Keep a notebook for possible answers to expected questions. Whether it be a job or university interview, always go to interviews informed about the place interviewing you. Foreground what makes you the very person the interviewers want. Always dress appropriately. What might be appropriate for a major finance company might not be best for Teach for America where expensive clothes might have the interviewer wondering how you are going to be able to teach in the South Bronx or on an Indian reservation.

**Conclusion:**
I asked a few of my former students how they use their English major. Kayla Rakowski, Cornell ’08, who is the student working at MOMA, observed: “I use the writing and proofreading skills I honed as an English major every single day, whether I am drafting a grant proposal, editing down content for a donor report, or simply typing emails and business correspondence. Further, the major greatly expanded my knowledge of cultural history, building a context that is a great asset to me as an employee of an art museum.” Devon Goodrich, Cornell ’07, Harvard Law ‘11, Assistant Corporation Counsel in the Environmental Law Division of New York City, responded to my query: “[t]he reading comprehension and writing skills that I developed as an English major gave me an edge over other law students and young lawyers. . . [.t]he ability to closely read a text while also placing the text within its larger context directly translates to law. Practicing law involves reading all aspects of a situation — not only the applicable statutes or regulations, but also the clashing personalities of involved parties, the historical background of a project or property, and the political circumstances surrounding a case — and providing sound advice based on all the facts and angles. . . . Often when reading a legal document, the best readers can read what is not said in

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Playwright and actor Liz Gorman, Cornell ’00 observed: “Majoring in English has definitely contributed to my appreciation of the Arts and of Literature in general. I think it has made me a more thoughtful, insightful person and made it easy and natural for me to analyze a piece of text—be it a play, a piece of fiction, or an article.” According to Liz Wight ’07: “I think the thing the major gave me most was critical thinking, a yearning for discovery and clear means of articulating myself.” Sal Ruggiero, Cornell ’07, who has been an editor and is now Assistant Manager, Domestic Rights for the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, adds: “Reading and writing not just well but for a purpose has proved paramount to my job. . . Plus learning argument and persuasion techniques in essay writing sometimes proves useful in contract negotiation or pitching.” Amanda First, Cornell ’12, assistant editor at *Brides*, notes, “My English major has lent me creative, critical thinking, and analytic writing skills that have my writing clearer, more exciting, and more serviceable to our readers.”

Grace Jean, Cornell, ’2000, US naval reporter writes for *Jane’s* as well as a part-time music reviewer for the *Washington Post*, brings the commentary from former students to an apt conclusion: “All the skills that I developed and honed through my English classes and seminars are put to use daily in my career as a journalist. Close reading, analytical thinking, and clear and concise writing have become the bread and butter of my livelihood. I have the English major to thank for playing an integral role in my professional development.”

What all these comments show is that the English major opens doors through which students walk to a splendid and varied future.

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a new paperback edition). Daniel R. Schwarz is Frederic J. Whiton Professor of English and Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow at Cornell University. He can be reached at drs6@cornell.edu and followed on twitter at www.twitter.com/danRSchwarz and https://www.facebook.com/SchwarzEndtimes

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