

English Majors' Handbook

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What is the “English Major?”

Psychologists study psychology, physicists study physics, and philosopher’s philosophy; but what do you call yourself if you pursue the discipline of English? There are many possible answers to that question. One of the oldest is “philologists,” lovers of language; the word can refer to scholars who pursue the history and structure of the language itself or to students of literature who pay particularly close attention to the language of texts. Professors and students of English may also (depending on the English Department in question, and the sort of curriculum it offers) include “literary critics,” “cultural historians,” “linguists,” “poets,” “novelists,” and “literary theorists,” to name a few. But whatever else we students of English call ourselves, we are first and foremost *readers* and *writers*.

The character of English studies has evolved over the centuries. “English” as such was not a part of the university curriculum during the Middle Ages or the Renaissance; the study of language and literature in those periods focused on the writings of Greek and Latin antiquity. Classical grammar and rhetoric provided the grounding of all higher education, and students were taught to appreciate the stylistic and rhetorical skills of the greatest Greek and Roman poets, playwrights, and orators. Only during the eighteenth century did the formal study of vernacular literature first begin to be introduced into English academies. And only in the late nineteenth century did Oxford University establish a School of English Studies. Early English Departments followed the model of classical studies, stressing the study of rhetoric and the practice of a linguistically-oriented philology; then, gradually, other approaches to literature evolved. One of the most influential of these approaches was the “New Criticism” which developed in American colleges and universities during the 1940’s and 50’s; the New Critics rejected the strong emphasis on historical and biographical context which had come to dominate some classrooms in the earlier part of the century. They focused very closely on the text itself as a “verbal icon,” practicing “close reading” and “explication” to reveal how the various parts of a literary artifact worked together as a whole and to explain how verbal devices, especially irony and ambiguity, contributed to the effect of a poem or story. Most literary criticism today is still strongly influenced by the New Criticism, and much of what students do in courses offered by the Whitman English Department involves the detailed analysis and interpretation of literary works.

Of course, literary studies have also seen the introduction of many other approaches to criticism over the last several decades. The tendency toward interdisciplinary study across the academy has brought psychological, historical, anthropological, and philosophical models of analysis to bear on the study of literature; works of English and American literature are studied in relation to other arts and cultural phenomena through cross -disciplinary programs in such fields as American Studies, Renaissance Studies, and Gender Studies. Literary studies also include theoretical arguments about literary processes and the assumptions through which we read. The Whitman English department offers rigorous study of such arguments in its classes on literary theory, as well as in many other courses.

Meanwhile, many English Departments across the United States have also developed courses focusing on writing. While instruction in the basic rhetorical skills needed for good expository writing has always been a part of English studies, courses in creative writing and more advanced courses in expository writing of many different varieties are newer to American higher education. They have become a more well-established part of English Department curricula over the past several decades. In some larger universities, Writing Programs exist independently of English Departments; elsewhere, as at Whitman, writing instruction is included in the English

Department curriculum but has also become an important part of courses across the curriculum.

The English Major at Whitman College focuses on the study of English and American Literature, with a strong emphasis on teaching students to analyze and interpret texts within their historical contexts. As the departmental web page states, “The courses in English provide opportunity for the extensive and intensive study of literature for its aesthetic interest and for its historical and general cultural significance.” A variety of different courses in writing are also an important part of the curriculum, and the particular specializations and expertise of the department’s faculty allow for some offerings in other areas as well, including Literary Theory.

What do English Majors do when they graduate?

The analytic ability and the speaking and writing skills one develops in the study of English are excellent preparation for a wide variety of post-baccalaureate programs and professions. You may wish to go on to study literature or creative writing at the graduate level; you may combine your study of English with a science major or minor to prepare for the MCAT’s; you may go to law school or to business school. Whitman English department graduates include college and university professors, grade school and secondary school teachers, physicians, college administrators, lawyers, editors and publishers, novelists, poets, wine makers, businesspeople, military personnel, journalists, animators, fashion designers, and members of the Foreign Service.

Should I major in English?

As you explore the possibility of an English Major at Whitman, consider the way the major’s curriculum is structured – see the requirements below – and ask yourself how your interests correspond to the design of the major. Take a section of English 200, or try “Introduction to Fiction,” “Introduction to Poetry,” Introduction to Creative Nonfiction,” or “Introduction to Drama” in order to get a sense of the kind of work various literature professors assign at Whitman and in order to expand your abilities as a reader, interpreter, and writer. Explore your creative writing interests in English 150, or hone your analytical and literary interpretive writing skills in other 100-or 200-level English courses. All of these courses are valuable in helping you to understand the nature of the major and in preparing you to take upper-division courses. Beginning in the second semester of your first year at Whitman, you are eligible to take English 290: Approaches to the Study of Literature, which is the “gateway” to the major and will help prepare you for the kind of reading, analysis, writing, and research required in 300-level literature courses.

What courses are required for the English Major?

The English major requires you to take a minimum of **thirty-six credits** selected to include the following:

- One elective chosen from 176-179, 200, 230-233, 246, 247, 250-252, or
- English 290, *Approaches to the Study of Literature*
- At least 3 courses at the 200-to 400-level, including:
 - a. One early British literature course, chosen from English 335, 336, 337, 338, or 350

- b. One course in American literature, chosen from 347, 348, or 349
 - c. One course in underrepresented literatures, chosen from 246, 247, 270, 370, or 376
- English 491, *Seminars in English and American Literature*.
 - Three electives at the 300- or 400-level. (One of the electives may, with the written approval of the English Department, be a literature course in World Literature numbered 300 or higher or a course in literature offered by the department of foreign languages numbered above 306.)
 - Other Important Facts
 - No more than twelve credits earned in off-campus programs, transfer credits, credits from courses offered by other Whitman departments, or cross-listed courses may be used to satisfy major requirements. See page 8 below for details regarding off-campus credit.
 - Courses used to satisfy requirements in other majors or minors cannot also be used to satisfy requirements in the English major or minor.
 - Courses taken P-D-F may not be used to satisfy course and credit requirements for the major.
 - The English Department strongly recommends at least two years of a foreign language, especially for students planning to attend graduate school.

What else is required to complete the English Major?

All graduating seniors must pass one **take-home written comprehensive examination and one oral examination**. For information on these exams, please see the English Department webpage: click on the links to “Preparing for Senior Year,” “Reading Lists for Senior Exams,” and “Important Deadlines for Seniors.”

What must I do to achieve Distinction in Major Study?

In order to achieve Distinction in Major Study, you must

- pass both of your senior assessment examinations—the written and the oral exam—on the initial try
- earn a grade of “Passed with Distinction” on at least one of the two senior assessment examinations; and
- attain by the time of graduation a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.300 and a grade point average of at least 3.500 in the English major.

For guidelines on what constitutes distinguished work on the written and oral examinations, please see the link to “Preparing for Senior Year” on English Department webpage.

What thesis options are available?

A thesis course – English 497 – is available to majors but not required. This course is designed to further independent research projects leading to the preparation of an undergraduate thesis. Students may propose writing a thesis either for credit counting toward the 36-credit major or, for credit above and beyond the 36 credits required for the major, as one component of their effort to achieve Honors in Major Study. Students proposing ideas for theses or honors theses should be aware that the application process is competitive. The faculty cannot direct every thesis and honors thesis that is proposed, so only the strongest and most well-articulated thesis and honors thesis proposals will be approved.

The deadline to propose a thesis topic for approval by the department faculty is the seventh week of the semester preceding the one in which you will research and write the thesis (mid-October if you wish to write a thesis during the Spring; late February or early March if you wish to write a thesis during the Fall); check the English Department's web site for the precise dates of the deadline each year. Before writing and presenting your proposal, you should first contact a faculty member to request that he or she consider acting as your thesis advisor. The faculty recommends that you begin this conversation no later than the end of the second semester of your junior year and that you give your proposed thesis advisor plenty of time to see and comment on your written proposal prior to the deadline for departmental approval. You must have a completed copy of your proposal to the professor with whom you hope to work no later than the fourth week of the semester preceding the one in which you will research and write the thesis; check the English Department's web site for the precise dates of the deadline each year. Your proposal will be considered by the entire English Department faculty and may be accepted, rejected, or returned to you with suggestions for improvement.

The length of a thesis will be determined in consultation with the thesis advisor.

The Critical Thesis

Regardless of whether you are pursuing honors, you should seek to answer the following questions in your proposal to write a **critical thesis**:

1. What primary text(s) do you want to read and discuss in your thesis? What sorts of primary texts (other than the primary texts that are the subject of your analysis) might cast light on your topic? Create a working bibliography of primary sources.
2. Why do you want to read and discuss these texts?
3. What is/are the problem[s] or issue[s] you want to explore?
4. What has been written about your topic? Create a working bibliography of secondary sources.
5. Have you talked to an English Department professor who is qualified to work with you on this project and who has agreed to do so?
6. What have you done and what do you still need to do? (Are there texts you still need to read? Issues you still need to research? If so, what are they?)
7. Do you have a working thesis? What is it? If not, how do you plan to go about developing one?

The Creative Thesis

The opportunity to propose a **creative thesis** project is open to English Majors who show exceptional promise as creative writers and who have fulfilled the following requirements:

- They have (or will have) satisfied all course requirements for the English major by the end of their final semester.
- They have by the end of the junior year taken an intermediate and advanced writing class in the genre in which the thesis will be written.
- They have submitted a proposal and writing sample (written in the proposed genre and preferably an example of the work to be included in the thesis) to the proposed adviser by the end of the junior year (or, at the latest, by the department's thesis proposal deadline) and received approval for that proposal.
- They have received approval from a writing professor to work with him or her in a section of 497 during the semester when the thesis will be completed – typically the second semester of the senior year.

Students proposing ideas for creative theses should be aware that the application process is particularly competitive.

A completed creative thesis will be a substantial collection of work in a particular genre – poems, short stories, essays, a novella or portion of a novel.

In your proposal to write a creative thesis, you should seek to answer the following questions:

1. What body of work do you propose to write?
2. What works and writers do you want to read and discuss during the composition of your thesis? Create a working bibliography.
3. What is/are the problem[s] or issue[s] you want to explore, and how do you imagine form will contribute to your exploration?
4. What has been written about your topic? Have you read works (in the genre you're proposing or in other genres) that deal with similar issues?
5. Have you talked to an English Department professor who is qualified to work with you on this project and who has agreed to do so?
6. What have you written and read so far, and what do you still need to do?

What Must I Do to Achieve Honors in Major Study?

Honors in Major Study are awarded to graduating seniors who show unusual ability in the field of their major studies and who write a thesis worthy of honors. If you are considering the pursuit of honors in major study, you should ask yourself what significant topic or author(s) or text(s) you sincerely wish to explore in depth. You should consult with a member of the department whom you would like to act as the supervising professor and reader of your thesis. If the proposed thesis adviser agrees to direct the thesis, and the thesis proposal is approved by the English Department, you will also be assigned a second reader. You will consult with the second reader as you work on your project. The final grade for your thesis will be determined by your supervisor in consultation with the second reader.

The sooner you consult with a faculty member qualified to direct your thesis project, the better; initial discussions during the second semester of the junior year can lead to profitable summer reading and to a smoother beginning in the busy fall semester of the senior year.

In order to qualify for the pursuit of Honors in English, a candidate must have

- accumulated at least eighty-seven credits;
- completed two semesters of residence in Whitman College;
- attained a cumulative grade-point average of at least 3.100 on all credit earned at Whitman.
- considered carefully the questions listed above under the heading “What thesis options are available?”
- prepared a detailed written proposal describing the honors thesis project and submitted it to the professor you hope to work with no later than the beginning of the fourth week of the semester preceding the one in which you will write the thesis. Note that this deadline is earlier than the deadline for the formal submission of the thesis proposal to the English Department. Check the English Department’s web site for the precise dates of the deadlines each year.

In order to achieve Honors in English, a candidate must

- Begin work on the thesis as soon as your proposal is approved, writing it on a schedule that allows your supervisor sufficient time to read it and to suggest any necessary revisions.
- Establish with your supervisor such things as number of drafts, deadlines, etc.
- Attain by the time of graduation a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.300 and a grade point average of at least 3.500 in the major.
- Meet the English Department’s deadline for submission of the thesis (two weeks prior to the College’s deadline).
- Successfully complete an oral defense of the thesis to be scheduled with your thesis adviser and second reader.
- File the final copy of the thesis in the Library. The deadline designated by the Registrar each semester will be no later than two weeks before final examinations begin.
- Earn a grade of at least A- on the honors thesis or project;

- Pass with Distinction on the comprehensive examination in his or her major study. For English Majors, this means that in order to earn Honors, candidates must
 - Pass both of the senior assessment examinations on the initial try;
 - Earn “Pass with Distinction” on at least one of the two senior assessment examinations.

If you achieve each of these goals, the Chair of the English Department will notify the Registrar, who will officially change your registration from “English 497: Thesis” to “English 498: Honors Thesis.” For more details, please see the English Department webpage: click on the links to “Preparing for Senior Year” and “Important Deadlines for Seniors.”

The non-honors thesis

A thesis becomes eligible for honors if a student fits into the categories mentioned above. Many students write a regular or non-honors thesis. In this case, students complete work on the project in consultation with their advisor, turn in the thesis by the deadlines established by the department (see Important Deadlines for Seniors”), and then receive a grade on the thesis. There is no defense for the non-honors thesis.

How should I distribute my English Department studies over my four years at Whitman?

The order in which you take your English Department courses is quite flexible; however, the English Department faculty does recommend that you take note of these particulars:

- Start early, and if possible, take one or two lower-division courses (such as English 150, 176, 177, 178, 179, and 200) just to learn your way around the department’s approach to literature and writing, and to familiarize yourself with the faculty. These courses will help you to determine whether English is the right major for you.
- Take English 290 as early in your Whitman career as possible.
- No later than the middle of your sophomore spring semester, contact a member of the English Department faculty (probably a professor whose class you’ve taken) to request that he or she be your major advisor. He or she will take over where your pre-major advisor leaves off.
- Think through the curriculum and have a plan in mind each time you go to confer with your advisor. Always take primary responsibility for your own schedule and for the completion of requirements, and if you have any doubt as to whether you have satisfied a particular requirement, ask about it. When deciding when to complete a particular requirement, keep in mind that some courses are not offered every year (see the catalogue for specifics), that professors sometimes go on sabbatical or leave, and that some Special Topics courses may be offered only once during your Whitman career.
- If you will be studying abroad, plan ahead to complete as many requirements beforehand as possible. Realize that, while many courses taken abroad may count as electives in the major or even satisfy particular requirements, the department cannot approve them as doing so until you return and submit course materials demonstrating the nature of the course. Keep syllabi, assignments, and papers in order to submit them to the faculty upon

your return to Whitman. Note in particular that only courses in which you have done at least 18 pages of formal writing will be accepted for credit toward the English Major.

- If you have transfer credits from another institution, you will need not only to have an official transcript sent to the Whitman Registrar, but also to submit course materials to the Whitman English Department so that the nature of your credits can be determined. Some courses may not count toward the major; others will count as electives; and some will count toward particular requirements. Keep in mind that 1 credit in a course offered on a quarter system counts for only 2/3 of a Whitman credit, since we operate on a semester system. Note in particular that only courses in which you have done at least 18 pages of formal writing will be accepted for credit toward the English Major.
- Keep in mind that no more than twelve credits earned in off-campus programs, transfer credits, credits from courses offered by other Whitman departments, or cross-listed courses may be used to satisfy major requirements.
- If you aspire to take upper-division creative writing courses that count as electives in the major (English 320: Advanced Creative Writing--Fiction; English 321: Advanced Creative Writing—Poetry; English 322: Advanced Creative Writing—Nonfiction; or an English 389 [Special Studies in Craft]), plan ahead; these courses require consent of the instructor (Professor Roberts, Professor Elliott, or Professor Schlegel), and some previous course work. It can be particularly difficult, before you are a junior or senior and have a very good registration slot, to secure a spot in some writing courses; so be sure to let the instructor know in advance that you are interested, and put your name on his or her waiting list.
- If you have an idea for an independent study, prepare a proposal involving a specific reading list and writing project, and submit it to a faculty member with expertise in the field you wish to explore. Keep in mind that independent studies must be on subject matter not covered in regularly-offered departmental course offerings. They should be a way of doing exciting work that you couldn't do within the confines of the departmental curriculum, not a stop-gap measure for getting an extra one or two credits toward graduation.
- Take as many of your required courses as possible during your sophomore and junior years in order to leave your senior year open for electives, a thesis (if you choose to write one), and studying for the written and oral comprehensives. Keep in mind that you will also need to take a Seminar (English 491) in your junior or senior year; you may take more than one of these seminars in your junior and senior years if several of the topics appeal to you. Strong majors often take more than the required 36 credits.