

Ten Life-Changing Skills that You Will Acquire as an English Major

1. Learn to read. Written texts are marvels of subtlety that contain far more than “information.” They can reveal—and conceal—meaning in ways you might never suspect until you learn the skill we call “close reading.”
2. Learn to write—coherently, persuasively, grammatically, and lyrically. Writing is a universally valuable skill that surprisingly few people possess, so it is in great demand.
3. Learn to speak. Develop confidence in expressing arguments orally, thinking on your feet, and defending your views tactfully and skillfully against opposing positions. Future lawyers, take note.
4. Learn how language works—its astonishing power and beauty, its dangers, its limits. Become an intentional master of the medium we use every day without thinking about it.
5. Develop empathy and insight into the minds of people different from yourself. There is no better way to do this than by studying fiction, drama, poetry, and other literary works. This is one reason that medical schools often seek humanities majors.
6. Obtain a sense of the remarkable diversity, and the equally remarkable continuities, that mark human life and thought across vast gulfs of time, space, and culture. The knowledge of human nature you will acquire from literature is at least as deep as, and intriguingly different from, what you will learn in Psychology. If that is your interest, consider English as a second major or minor.
7. Acquire an independent mind. Learn to see through manipulative uses of language, such as advertising and political propaganda, to avoid becoming their victim. Should you be so inclined, you will also have the skill to produce these forms of language.
8. Learn how the English language has shaped, and been shaped by, the historical experiences of colonialism and postcolonial independence. Find out how the English of Ireland, India, Jamaica, or Kenya differs from “standard English,” and discover the transformative effects of global English in business and technology.
9. Learn the differences that translation makes, whether linguistic or cultural. If you are proficient in another language, consider becoming a translator yourself—a skill that is in constant and increasing demand.
10. Acquire a source of joy and pleasure that will sustain you as long as you live, and pass it along to your children—because there is more to life than working and earning money.