

In Their Own Words: On Being an English Major

(Dr. Tommy Anderson's fourth installment in a series of profiles of our English graduates.)

As the department's Director of Undergraduate Advising, I often have students and parents ask me what an English major can do when they graduate; I'm sure they expect a response about law school, graduate research in English, or teaching. And to be sure, many of our best majors over the years are practicing lawyers and teachers. Angela (Taylor) Brewer's experience at Mississippi State tells a different story. After immersing herself in British and American literature for four years, winning the Peyton Williams Award for student writing, and graduating summa cum laude with a BA in English in 2002, Angela integrated her passion for humanities with a new interest in scientific inquiry—specifically geological science. In her current job as a textbook editor for a major publisher, Angela is both a scientist and literary critic on a daily basis. Her experience as a student of English at MSU speaks to the flexibility of our major and to the value of the skills honed while reading and writing about great books.

When I was getting ready to graduate high school and choosing a college major, I wasn't sure what I wanted to be when I grew up. I thought about being a teacher, a lawyer, a judge, a writer, a doctor, and even president of the United States. I knew that no matter what path I chose, starting as an English major would provide me with a strong foundation because it would help me become a better writer, a better reader—a better communicator. But when I started as an English major at Mississippi State University, I didn't expect to love it as much as I did. I have many fond memories of the years I spent in Lee Hall.

As an English major, I also worked at The Reflector for three semesters—first as a copy editor, then as the opinion editor, and then as the managing editor. And then, the course of my education

changed. I signed up for an introductory geology course because I thought it would be easy, and the lab wasn't required with the class. But the joke was on me! I had to work harder in that class than in any other science class I had taken, and I relished every minute of it. The professor had energy and enthusiasm that sucked me in. So, after I finished my English degree, I moved on to the Department of Geosciences to work on my master's degree under the guidance of Dr. Leo Lynch.

Staying at MSU was a no-brainer for me. I loved the university and Starkville (and I still miss it, almost 7 years later). My English professors, especially my undergraduate advisor, Dr. Kelly



Angela Brewer and family

Marsh, were incredibly supportive of me moving from English to geology. Dr. Marsh was always interested in hearing about what I was working on and how I was still using my English degree in a scientific field.

The reading and research skills I developed as an English major were invaluable to me in grad school, and they set me apart from my fellow grad students. Research requires the ability to read critically and evaluate material and sources for relevance and reliability, whether you are researching information for school, for a job, or for a hobby. The same goes for presenting information, whether you are communicating with peers, colleagues, professors, or potential employers.

After I got my B.A. in English and my M.S. in geology, I moved to Columbus, Ohio, where I

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managed a couple of soil testing laboratories for engineering consulting companies. These jobs were not what I expected to do after graduating with English and geology degrees—I thought I would be a technical writer—but they were great learning experiences. At the time, the lab work was different and interesting, and it was similar to the lab work I did for my thesis. But I eventually realized how much I missed reading and writing on a regular basis. So, in 2008, I got a job as an editor for a major textbook publisher.

In my current position, I edit middle school science textbooks. Whenever I tell someone what I do, I add, “It’s more fun than it sounds!” People (including my parents, I think) usually assume that I sit and read textbooks all day, every day. But there is so much more involved than that! When I started, I coordinated Earth science content for a number of chapters, correlated Earth science content to educational standards, managed freelance authors and editors, edited chapters, and selected art and photographs that would accompany the text, among other things. Now, I work on customizing textbooks for specific states and updating content for new editions. I think about the standard job interview question, “Where do you see yourself in 5 years?” and my answer would be, “Right here.” The job is challenging, sometimes demanding, and a lot of fun! It’s the perfect job for me because it allows me to use my English and geology degrees.

Not only did my time as an English major help me develop research skills and an ability to read critically, but I also can write for a variety of audiences. Having the ability to write a resumé and cover letter or professional letters (or emails) has allowed me to present myself as a professional as I searched for a job in an increasingly competitive job market and as a representative of a large, diverse, international company.

Being an English major was an excellent start to my career. My professors taught me to read critically for information, and having so many different professors with different styles made me a more flexible writer. As a student, I went from writing prose and literary analyses to writing technical papers and the occasional newspaper article. And now I edit and sometimes write about Earth science

for sixth- to eighth-graders. The skills I developed as an English major helped me in my educational pursuits and in my current position, where I have to communicate specific information to a specific audience in a limited space.

Communication styles, writing skills, and learning techniques change with technology, and the flexibility I gained from my years as an English major has helped me adapt to these changes as they relate to my job. Especially now that young people are growing up typing more than writing and texting instead of talking, being able to write well and speak well will help take you farther in your education and your career. Starting your education as an English major will give you a strong foundation, no matter what your goal is.