

In Their Own Words: On Being an English Major

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

During a visit to MSU in 2010, the Dean of Mississippi College School of Law—Jim Rosenblatt—made a special visit to Lee Hall to congratulate the Department of English for the many well-prepared graduates that have gone on to excel in their law school. One of our recent graduates to whom Dean Rosenblatt was referring is Matt Clark.

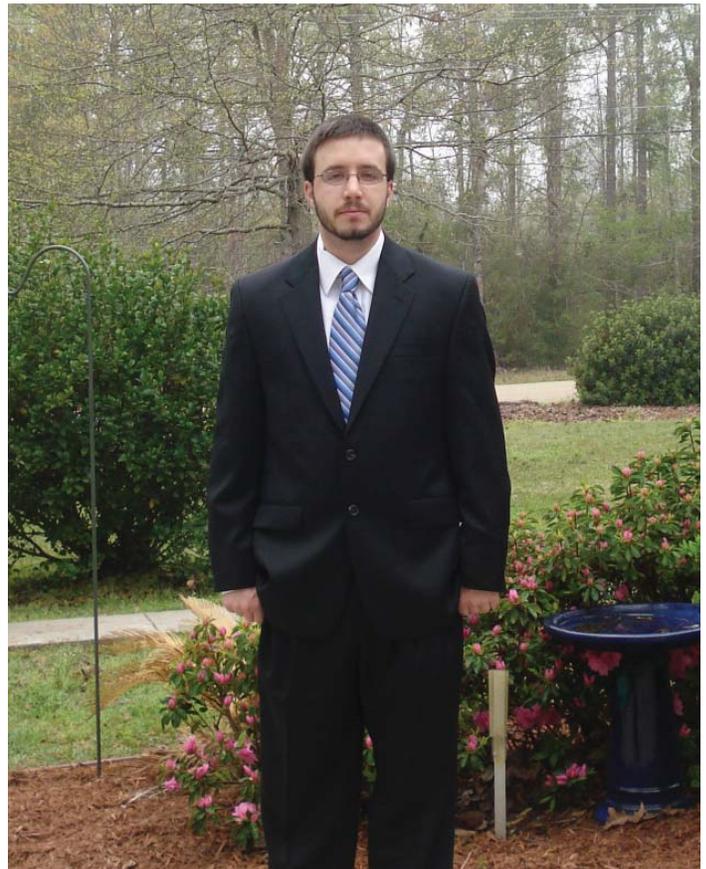
Matt graduated in 2008 with a degree in English with a special focus in creative writing. He is now a second year law student at MC School of Law. As an English major, Matt won awards for both his poetry and literary scholarship. His positive experience in legal studies speaks to the special relationship that exists between our English program and law school.

My time in the MSU English Department went a long way to preparing me for the heavy workload of law school. While many of my law school classmates were at first taken aback by the lengthy reading assignments we are given each day, I was already at home and happy with my nose in a book for a couple of hours in the evening. I've also been surprised by the similarities between the processes of preparing writing assignments for literature and law courses. Whether you are dealing with a novel or a case, the ability to close-read and analyze your source material and to research successfully can serve you very well.

I just finished my appellate advocacy course, which was one of the most challenging and rewarding tasks I've ever completed. For this course each second year law student is given a record of proceedings for an imaginary trial, and has to act as either the party who lost the case and is now appealing the decision or the party who won and is opposing the appeal. The main assignment was to research and write a forty-page brief supporting your side and to argue the substance of your brief in front of a panel of judges. The assignment, which was completed over a

six-week period, certainly tested my time management skills and was an exercise in perseverance. Having the completed brief in my hands feels great. Also, if everything goes according to plan, I'll be externing with a judge in the Mississippi Court of Appeals in the coming summer. I'm sure that will offer all sorts of new challenges and experiences.

When I think back on my time as an English major, one of my fondest memories is of my "Advanced Composition" course during my sophomore year. "Advanced Composition"—renamed "Critical Writing and Research in Literary Studies" in 2010—is



Matt Clark

the required upper-division writing course designed to introduce English majors to the rigors of scholarly research and writing. It was in this course that I feel I matured the most as a writer during my time at State. I had never truly been challenged to close-read a text and draw from it to form a coherent analysis. When I built my Exit Portfolio during my final semester, I was amazed at how obvious the differences were between the papers I had written prior to and after this course.

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My early papers were filled with loose inferences and a lot of shoddy speculation. After “Advanced Composition” I was really able to bite into a text and to draw my analysis deeply but directly from the source material.

I chose to major in English the summer before my first semester at State and I’ve never regretted it. My own experiences and the statements of other people continue to hammer home my belief that the ability to write is an invaluable skill that can take you places. It’s only when you step beyond the fold of the English Department that you realize that there are many intelligent people who don’t know how to write well. While applying to various law schools, I was told time and time again that my English B.A. was one of the most attractive degrees a prospective law student can have, and I feel certain English students applying for postgraduate school and work in other fields would find their degree similarly valuable. I’m still very up-in-the-air about what I’m going to be doing in the next few years. I still really enjoy writing and plan on being somewhere where I can continue to scratch that itch. I’m certain that my English degree—especially when coupled with my J.D.—will continue to provide many opportunities.

In 2010, many of our English majors followed in Matt’s footsteps. English majors were accepted into a variety of law schools including Tulane, University of Missouri, Temple University, University of Tennessee, University of South Carolina, University of Alabama, Ole Miss, Mississippi College School of Law, and the University of Memphis.