



As a young English major at Mississippi State, I had dreams of graduating and working in the publishing industry to learn the business and eventually publish my first novel. This dream is not unique among English majors, I know, but I believe the roots of this shared vision are telling. Books were my religion growing up, and I found solace and escape in stories that taught me the world was bigger than my rural slice of it, that art was seductive, and that language was powerful.

These stories became my companions. I leaned on them and learned from them and framed my dreams around them. I think many of us English majors fell in love with stories and the art of storytelling when we were young, which shapes our goals of becoming like the novelists and poets we've admired for so long. I found comfort in knowing that my like-minded classmates and professors understood where that yearning stemmed from and that we could share our passion through analytical discussions and uncensored excitement about our favorite texts and poems.

While it's valid (and inspirational) to work toward those name-in-print dreams following graduation, it's simply not the path many of us find ourselves on after all. I eventually landed at the Sun Herald newspaper in Biloxi, and it was a different type of publishing experience than I had envisioned. During my time there, I had to cultivate a certain type of restraint in my writing style as this was my first real-world experience in writing for the general public. I couldn't write the way I did for my English professors or even in standard business writing styles, so if there was ever a time when I needed to articulate my ideas with careful nuance in order to be understood, it was there. Effective communication is certainly more than just crafting well-researched analysis papers. It's also being able to drill down to an idea and

express it clearly, presenting evidence of support along the way. In 2015, I had the opportunity to co-create an interactive application for the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina with the Sun Herald. It had video, photo stories, articles, and personal testimonies, but the design spaces to feature this content were smartphone and tablet screens. Editing down text and interviews featuring first-hand accounts of surviving the historic storm took care and an appreciation for the necessary emotional impact of the survivors' words. In this instance, brevity was paramount, but in distilling these stories, we also had to maintain their integrity. It was a rewarding challenge and one that illustrated the importance of versatility in our study of stories. I found my experience exercising this practice of mindful editing vital, but that growth would not have been possible without the foundational skills I earned through my study as an English major.

It was my time at the paper that led me to seek a new position using writing in a way I hadn't considered before, one that effects change for those victimized by violence. I sought the position of Resource Development Director with the Gulf Coast Center for Nonviolence, a nonprofit organization that serves adults and children affected by domestic violence, sexual assault, and homicide. I'm often asked about my background and how I came into a position like this one, which is responsible for bringing in funding to sustain the agency's programs. It's unusual in my field to have someone on staff who studied literature. It's more common to see social workers, therapists, advocates, and financial professionals. I've met other development directors from diverse backgrounds, but I've never met another one who studied English. But that still seems odd to me because much of my job is detailed grant writing, composing formal requests and communications packages for local government entities, public speaking, and writing for the local media. In my experience, a background in English is crucial to succeeding at these tasks. I'm responsible for ensuring the agency can sustain funding, so careful, persuasive writing clearly detailing the organization's mission, goals, and strategies to use allocated funds under strict guidelines is what sets a grant application apart. If an argument I'm crafting in support of the agency's mission fails to convey the need behind its request, programs are not funded. Lost funding means lost counseling

services, lost legal services, and lost emergency shelter services for those in need.

Thanks to my degree in English, appreciating the ways language can be harnessed to persuade, educate, and inform is my first thought when I start researching a new project that will help expand and preserve these lifesaving social services.

It makes me proud to know that my skills are derived from bringing ideas together and then seeing the results of that effort demonstrated through the direct services provided by my colleagues. I worked with Blue Magnolia Films a couple of years ago to produce a photo story project on the Center to show the importance of these services in our community. I had the honor of writing the agency's story, narrating it, and photographing the programs. I had no idea what direction it would take in the beginning, but the result ended up being a story about the significance of treating each other with dignity and empathy. Whether a viewer had experienced violence did not matter. What mattered in the end was that they could relate to the universal experience of human suffering and that how we tell each other's stories matters. The skills I've learned as an English major help me communicate with readers in a way that activates them, whether that's through an approved funding application or a converted supporter for the cause. Perhaps I'm biased, but I do believe language is an essential tool to induce change in a world that often neglects the importance of our words.

Language is an art. All the readers, writers, and students of literature can agree, I think. We analyze its depth, its beauty, and its ability to unify our experiences. We wield it to show capability and compassion. And we turn to its stories for comfort and inspiration. Without my time in the English Department, I would still love books and language, but I would not have the training, the experience, or the confidence to take risks and teach others why they need an English major on their team. It's about what we can do, not what we're expected to do.