Learning Objectives

A student with a major in English should graduate with an appreciation for the relations between representation and the human soul, for the relations between words and ideas, and for the social utility of a sophisticated understanding of discourse. We address these three learning objectives below.

On one level, stories are fun to tell and hear, to read and write, and Aristotle claims in the Poetics that through this natural process humans learn to become human. But he also says that artistic fictions are more philosophical than history. They tell us more than how or why things are; they tell us what could be or should be, and are infused with moral purpose even when they claim not to be. These representations are non-linear and multi-dimensional, and they call for complex responses. They are invitations to students to live other lives—both in time and place—to test attitudes and understandings that are beyond their own immediate experience, and in a university environment that frees them from the familiar. The resulting flexibility of mind and soul, we hope, will help students find their own paths in a world yet unknown.

Engaging with complex literatures prepares them for understanding complex lives. We expect our students to understand the major experiences in English discourses and representations from earliest beginnings to the current moment; all literatures exist in conversation with earlier literatures. We expect students to get out of their own skins and feel the experiences of others, both by engaging in literatures and by their own efforts to create new literatures. We expect them to understand how periods and cultural intentions and literary genres differ from one another, and why ignoring those differences leads to a solipsistic misunderstanding of the lives of others that we would find intolerable if we ourselves were so misunderstood. We expect students to
concentrate in one or more periods or genres so that they understand in depth just how complex are the relations between a culture and its representations. To that end we teach skills and theories of interpretation, along with the history of our own discipline, to see how interpretive interests shift with time and place.

The second area of learning objectives concerns words and ideas, and the modern English department takes its impetus from that greatest of Renaissance educational treatises, How to Do Things with Words and Ideas (Erasmus, De copia verborum ac rerum). Ideas may finally be more important than words, but words are the pathway to ideas, and they are part of the joy of being human. When words are manipulated in ways unanticipated, they lead to ideas unanticipated. We still have no reliable ways to teach students to generate new ideas, but we have very reliable ways of teaching how to control and shape language—and how to recognize the ways that language has been controlled and shaped. We expect students to learn these ways with language and representation, to hear and practice our different languages in English, in the hope that after they leave us they will have a lifetime of new ideas. Such writing is always creative, and students train in these areas both by exercising their own skills in writing and by studying six–hundred years of the history of creative writing.

The third area of learning objectives is social utility and the relations between English and other disciplines. Justice John Paul Stevens of the U.S. Supreme Court has said that the best undergraduate preparation for a legal career is the study of poetry. The two fields are primarily activities of interpretation, and the minute attention to linguistic detail in poetry has its counterpart in the linguistic detail of legal analysis. The two fields exist because reasonable alternative understandings of discourse exist; both fields adjudicate their differences through arguments that must directly engage their counter–arguments, and those arguments finally must be compelling to parties other than the arguers. Inculcating the habits of mind shared by these two fields takes time, more time than just the forty units of a major, or the three years of law school. Some of our English majors may have careers in law, but most will have lives in very different areas calling for the same skills in discourse, civil argument, and civic engagement. We cannot and should not say what those careers will be; we train students for jobs that have not yet been invented.