

Majoring and Minoring in English at Cornell

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Introduction

Students taking courses in the Department of English engage with English, American, and Anglophone literature of an astounding historical span and global variety, and are trained to respond to what they read in a rich and complex variety of ways—from expository essays and scholarly inquiries to class discussions and creative writing of their own.

The English Department offers a wide range of courses in literature and writing. Literature courses focus on the close reading of texts and the relationship of literary works to other literary works, as well as to historical contexts, modern reinterpretations, and other disciplines. Other courses focus primarily on writing—expository or creative—allowing students to share and critique their work with classmates and instructors, often in the context of studying the work of established writers.

The major's program of study encourages an accumulation of skills as the means to many kinds of futures. Some majors proceed to graduate study in English or other advanced literary or humanist studies; others go on to careers in medicine, law, freelance writing, teaching, publishing, social work, or business. Some English majors concentrate their electives on biology, psychology, or economics, in preparation for law or medicine or other careers for which the English major can supply essential skills in textual analysis, logic, cultural history, and persuasive argumentation. Other English majors choose to be double majors, combining English

for example with Psychology, Biology, or Art History (although double majors must plan carefully to complete their degrees in four years). The major in English at Cornell prepares students for a wide range of intellectual and professional pursuits, and does so by combining innovative and traditional fields and approaches.

Whether considering English as a major, a minor, or simply a field to explore, students are encouraged to consult with the department's Director of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) and Undergraduate Coordinator. Descriptions of English courses offered each term and other important information are available in 250 Goldwin Smith Hall and on the department's website english.arts.cornell.edu/courses/

Admission to the Major

There are no prerequisites for admission to the English major. First-year students, however, may wish to enroll in a section of ENGL 1270, Writing about Literature, the First-Year Writing Seminar (FWS) designed for prospective majors. Like other writing seminars, this course develops skills for critical reading and effective writing. ENGL 1270 is open to all second-term freshmen, and to first-term freshmen with scores of 700 or above on the College Entrance Examination Board Tests in English composition or literature, or 5 on the Advanced Placement Examination in English.

Survey Courses: Most students considering the English major begin with one of the department's survey courses, which are open

to all students. ENGL 2010 and 2020, The English Literary Tradition I and II, provide a survey of British writers. ENGL 2030 and 2040 survey American literature. Several other introductory courses (at the 2000 level) are offered each semester, introducing such topics as modern theory, major writers, and various literary genres.

Introductions to Writing: ENGL 2800 and 2810, Introduction to Creative Writing and ENGL 2880 and 2890, Expository Writing, are open to students who have completed their FWS requirement, and are also suitable preparation for the major. These 2000-level courses, however, do not count towards English major credit. ENGL 2800 or 2810 is a prerequisite for 3000-level creative writing courses, which do count for the major. An expository writing course can, with permission of the Knight Institute, count as a first-year writing seminar.

Requirements for the Major

To graduate with a major in English, a student must complete with a grade of C or better 40 credit hours approved for the English major. All 2000-level ENGL courses (with the exception of 2800-2810 and 2880-2890) count for the major, as do all 3000- and 4000-level courses. Courses used for the English major may also be counted for the Literature and the Arts (LA) distribution requirement in the College of Arts and Sciences. Many of these courses may also be used to meet the College's historical breadth requirements.

Of the 40 credits required to complete the major

- 12 credits (normally 3 courses) must be from

courses in which 50% or more of the material consists of literature originally written in English before 1800 (such courses are indicated in the English course listings);

- 8 credits (2 courses) must be at the 4000 level or above;
- 12 credits (3 courses) must form an intellectually coherent concentration (see below).

The 4000-level and pre-1800 requirements must be satisfied with ENGL courses. ENGL 4930 and 4940, the Honors Essay Tutorial, cannot be used to satisfy either of these requirements. Courses that satisfy the pre-1800 requirement are designated in the department's course descriptions. Many English majors use ENGL 2010 or 2030 to begin meeting the pre-1800 requirement. Since these courses provide an overview of earlier periods of literature they enable students to make more informed choices about additional courses.

The "concentration" requirement may be satisfied with any courses approved for the major. This requirement is an opportunity for a student to reflect on and plan at least in part an individual program of study. Each student defines his or her own concentration, although faculty advisors assist in the process and approve the result. Some possible concentrations concern historical periods of British and American literature; others might address particular genres or approaches. Some of the many possibilities are as follows:

medieval literature; Renaissance literature; eighteenth-century literature; Romanticism; British literature 1890-1900; American literature before Modernism; twentieth-

century British and American literature; American ethnic and regional literature; African-American literature; post-colonial and Anglophone literature; minority, indigenous, and third-world Studies; literary theory; philosophic approaches to literature; historicizing and political approaches to literature; Queer, feminist, gender and sexuality studies; literature, film, and media studies; expository writing; creative writing; cultural studies; poetry; narrative; drama; epic; history of the English language.

Courses in other departments that can satisfy English requirements: Up to 12 credits in courses offered by other departments may be used to satisfy major requirements. Upper-level (3000 or above) courses in literature offered by other academic units may be counted toward the major. To fulfill this requirement, students may use literary courses in other academic units such as German Studies; Romance Studies; Asian Studies; Classics; Medieval Studies; Comparative Literature; Russian; Performing and Media Arts; Africana Studies; the Society for the Humanities; American Studies; Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; Religious Studies; American Indian Studies; Asian American Studies; and Latino/a Studies Program. English majors who are double majors may exercise this option even if all 12 credits are applied to their second major.

Foreign language study: All English majors are urged to take courses in which they read foreign works of literature in the original language, and in addition to 3000- and 4000-level courses in the departments and programs mentioned above, many 2000-level courses in which the materials are read in their original language may also be counted toward the

English major as part of the 12 non-English course credits. Majors should discuss the use of non-ENGL courses for major credit with their faculty advisors or the DUS.

Planning a Program of Study

Few students know from the moment they decide to major in English exactly what they wish to study; breadth of studies is as important as following particular connections. The requirements of the English major are designed to provide a flexible framework for increasing skills in literary analysis, research, and writing; within that framework, the “concentration” and the Honors Program provide two further ways to shape the pursuit of the major. English majors are expected regularly to discuss their overall program of study with their faculty advisors.

Students interested in developing their skills as writers will find a variety of workshop courses in expository and creative writing. As a rule, a student may not enroll in more than one such course per semester, although exceptions are sometimes allowed if one of these is ENGL 2880 or 2890.

Study abroad: English majors often study at foreign institutions, for one term or two during their junior year. The Cornell Abroad office has information on a variety of programs at universities around the world. Many majors go to the United Kingdom or other English-speaking countries, but others choose non-English speaking locations. As long as they meet all College and department requirements, studying abroad can readily fit into the English major. English majors planning on completing the Honors Program

who are spending the entire junior year abroad may need to take the honors seminar, ENGL 4910, as seniors. Students seeking admission to the Honors Program should discuss their plans with the Director of the Honors Program in English before leaving campus.

Credit for literature courses taken abroad can in most cases be applied to the 40-hour minimum for the major, the concentration, and pre-1800 requirements. The DUS, not the faculty advisor, must approve requests to count credits from study abroad for the English major. Students must confer with the DUS in advance of going abroad as well as upon return. The first conference will include a review of catalogue descriptions of courses that the student expects to take while abroad along with alternates; the second will involve an evaluation of transcripts and documentation of successful completion of the work, including papers and exams.

No more than 16 credits per year, or 8 credits per semester, of non-Cornell credit may be applied to the major. This restriction applies to all study abroad even when conducted under Cornell auspices.

The Honors Program

Students who have done superior work in English are encouraged to seek admission to the department’s program leading to the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in English. Following an interview with the director of the Honors Program, qualified students will be admitted provisionally to the program. Plans for this should be made in the sophomore or at the beginning of the junior year. During their junior year, these students

complete at least one Honors Seminar, ENGL 4910 or 4920, and are encouraged to take at least one additional 4000-level ENGL course in the field in which they plan to concentrate. A student seeking honors is expected to select a thesis topic and secure a thesis advisor by the end of their junior year. During their senior year, each candidate for Honors in English enrolls in a year-long tutorial, ENGL 4930 and 4940, with the faculty member chosen as thesis advisor. The year’s work culminates in a thesis that is read by at least two members of the department’s faculty.

More information is in the [Guide to the Honors Program in English at Cornell](#) available on the department website.

Preparation for Graduate Study in English

Students intending to pursue graduate work in English should investigate the requirements of schools offering programs to which they think they might apply. Faculty advisors and the DUS are available for consultation. Majors considering a Ph.D. in English should give special attention to language preparation in planning their undergraduate study; most graduate programs require reading knowledge of at least one foreign language (usually French or German), and sometimes two or more. Some programs require knowledge of Latin. A broad program of undergraduate study in English is advisable since most graduate programs in English require students to demonstrate a wide knowledge of the major authors and periods of British and American literature. Grounding in literary theory and some exposure to the critical tradition is also highly desirable.

The Minors

The English Department also offers three minor concentrations, open to non-majors in all Cornell colleges: “Creative Writing,” “English,” and “Minority, Indigenous, and Third World Studies.” Fulfillment of the requirements for these minors will yield a certification on students’ transcripts. Students may count courses taken at any point in their Cornell careers.

Each minor requires students to pass five 3- or 4- credit courses with a grade of C or higher. No first-year writing seminars will count, and at most 4 credits from transfer, study abroad, or independent study, or courses (where relevant) from another Cornell department, will count.

How to apply: Students may initiate application for their chosen minor at any time up to one month before graduation. As graduation approaches, they must present an English Faculty member with the Declaration of Minor form for approval and then submit the form to the English front desk.

Creative Writing minor: Students must take five courses of at least 3 credits, including the following:

- ENGL 2800 or 2810: Introduction to Creative Writing
- ENGL 3820 or 3830: Intermediate Narrative Writing
- ENGL 3840 or 3850: Intermediate Verse Writing
- ENGL 4801 or 4811: Advanced Narrative Writing or ENGL 4800 or 4810: Advanced Verse Writing

- Any English course in literature or cultural studies, 2000-level or higher, including ENGL 4850 Reading for Writers; or an alternative course approved by the Director of Creative Writing, including Screenwriting.

English minor: Students will choose five courses of at least 3 credits each from literature, creative writing, and critical writing and creative nonfiction courses. These may be at the 2000-, 3000-, or 4000-levels. Those wishing to take four creative writing courses should minor in Creative Writing.

Minority, Indigenous, and Third World Studies (MITWS) minor: Students must take five courses worth 3 credits or more. Students choose four other courses from a list of MITWS offerings. One of these must focus on Indigenous subject matter, defined as American Indian (including all the Americas), Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, Maori and Australian Aboriginal. Students are encouraged to choose their three remaining courses to focus on a variety of ethnicities and national traditions. Where possible, these courses should be offered by the English department.

Related Extracurricular Activities

English majors and minors pursue many kinds of extracurricular activities related to their studies, from writing for newspapers like the *Cornell Daily Sun* to editing or contributing to student-run literary magazines such as *Rainy Day*, *Kitsch*, and *The Cornell Book Review*. The editorial offices of *Epoch*, Cornell’s internationally distributed literary magazine, are located close to the English Department’s

office in Goldwin Smith Hall and provide a congenial meeting place for undergraduate and graduate students with a special interest in contemporary writing. The Cornell Literary Society—a group organized by and for English majors and others—plans readings, films, and other events each semester.

