



# The Norton Survey of English Majors

A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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*April 2021 – April 2022*





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## **The Norton Survey of English Majors**

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“ Being an English major taught me to think—to question deeply, to delve far below the surface, to be critical and creative. I use the skills I acquired in my coursework every day.

*Product strategist for an education technology company*

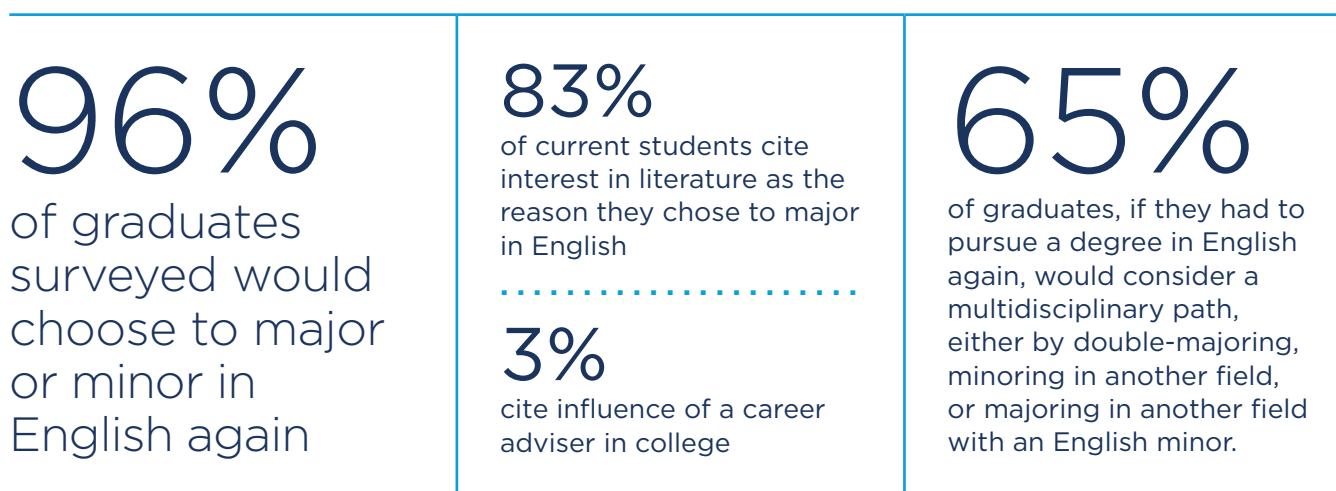
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# INTRODUCTION

The decline of matriculation in the English major has been well documented in recent years, most comprehensively in 2018 by the Association of Departments of English in *A Changing Major: The Report of the 2016–2017 ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major*, an update of which will be available in early 2023. Created with support from the Modern Language Association (MLA), the report offers valuable data from faculty, departments, and administrations. But what do students who study English have to say about their experiences? As the leading publisher of books for undergraduate English courses, the literature group at W. W. Norton wanted to find out.

Between April 2021 and April 2022, Norton's literature group conducted a survey of over 2,000 students currently majoring or minoring in English and degree holders who majored or minored in English to identify answers to three main questions: Why do students choose to study English? How does their coursework connect (or fail to connect) with their professional goals or experiences? What would they suggest for the major in the future?

## Key Findings



The top five favorite courses among current students are creative writing, British literature survey, American literature survey, literary theory, and young adult/children's literature.

Degree holders who reflected most positively on their decision to study English are those who are employed in education (41%) and marketing/communications (21%).

When asked what they most value about their English courses, respondents consistently cited exposure to different cultures and diverse perspectives, cultivation of empathy, development of creativity and writing/communication skills, opportunity for collaboration and discussion with peers, and personal growth.

When asked how the major could be improved, respondents overwhelmingly called for a more inclusive and contemporary canon, better career preparation, and the need to boost the reputation of the major on campus, in the job market, and in the culture at large.

## Methodology

We created a single survey, starting with one conditional branching question that divided survey respondents into three categories with a targeted set of questions for each:

Undergraduates Studying English	<i>"I am a current student majoring/minoring or planning to major/minor in English."</i> Including students graduating in spring 2021
Degree Holders	<i>"I graduated with a bachelor's degree in English before spring 2021."</i> Majored, double-majored, or minored
Graduate Students	<i>"I am a current or recent graduate student in the English department."</i> Master's degree or PhD

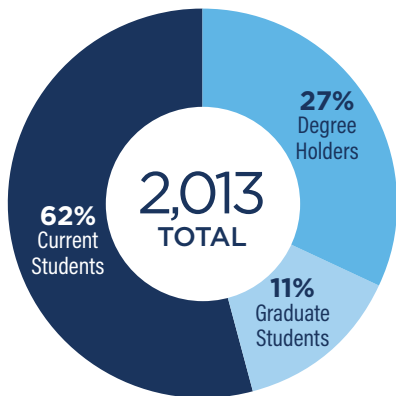
## Distribution

To reach as wide a respondent pool as possible, we distributed the survey in the following ways:

47%	<b>Sigma Tau Delta Partnership</b>	Partnering with Sigma Tau Delta, the international English honor society, whose officers forwarded the survey invitation to 900 active chapters and alumni chapter
24%	<b>Instructors &amp; Department Chairs</b>	Emailing the survey to English instructors and department chairs, inviting them to forward it to their students
19%	<b>Norton Anthology Ebook Page</b>	Posting the survey link on each Norton Anthology ebook page, inviting students directly to complete it
10%	<b>Personal Networks</b>	Sharing the survey link with Norton employees' personal networks

**NOTE:** As an incentive, all participants who responded before June 15, 2021, were entered in a raffle to win a special collection of ten books and some Norton merchandise. Due to student privacy policies, we could not distribute the survey directly to students. In all survey promotions, we made clear that the survey did not require nor had any bearing on the purchase of a Norton product.

## Survey respondents

 <p><b>2,013 TOTAL</b></p> <p>62% Current Students</p> <p>27% Degree Holders</p> <p>11% Graduate Students</p> <p><b>TOTAL SURVEYED</b></p> <p>Replies gathered during the first year of the survey <i>April 6, 2021–April 6, 2022</i></p>	1,250 Current Students	<b>Representing 504 schools</b> 345 respondents (28%) reported currently attending or having previously attended a 2-year college
	544 Degree Holders	<b>Representing 338 schools</b> 116 respondents (21%) attended a 2-year college during their academic career 74% majored in English 21% double-majored in English 5% minored in English
	219 Graduate Students	<b>Representing 124 schools • Enrolled as follows:</b> 61% Master's in English • 133 17% PhD in English • 36 12% Other • 26 8% MFA • 18 1% Master's in composition/rhetoric • 3 1% PhD in composition/rhetoric • 3

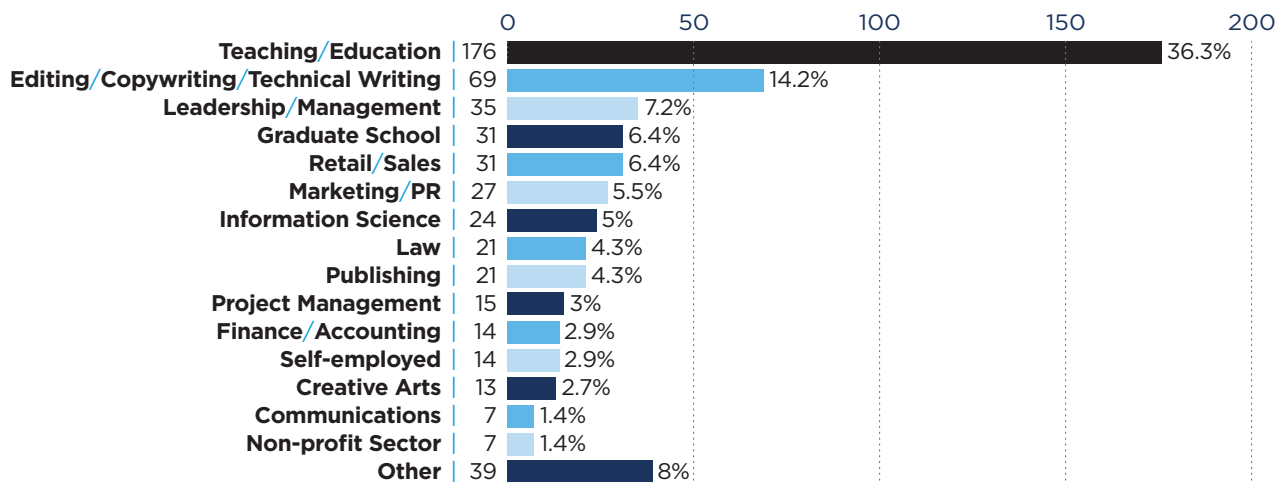
# OVERVIEW

## Why do students major in English?

The vast majority of current English majors and minors surveyed chose to study English because of an existing interest in literature or to pursue a career in fields commonly associated with English majors (most typically education/teaching, but also information science, museums and archives, public history, and training organizations like the Peace Corps). Interest in the major often precedes students' entrance into college: roughly one-third of respondents cited the influence of a high school teacher, parent, or friend. Though this survey does not include information from students who had an interest in literature but decided not to major or minor in English—a potential area for follow-up research—we do note that advice from a career center had very little (almost non-existent) impact on the recruitment of students to study English.

## What do they do with the major after graduation?

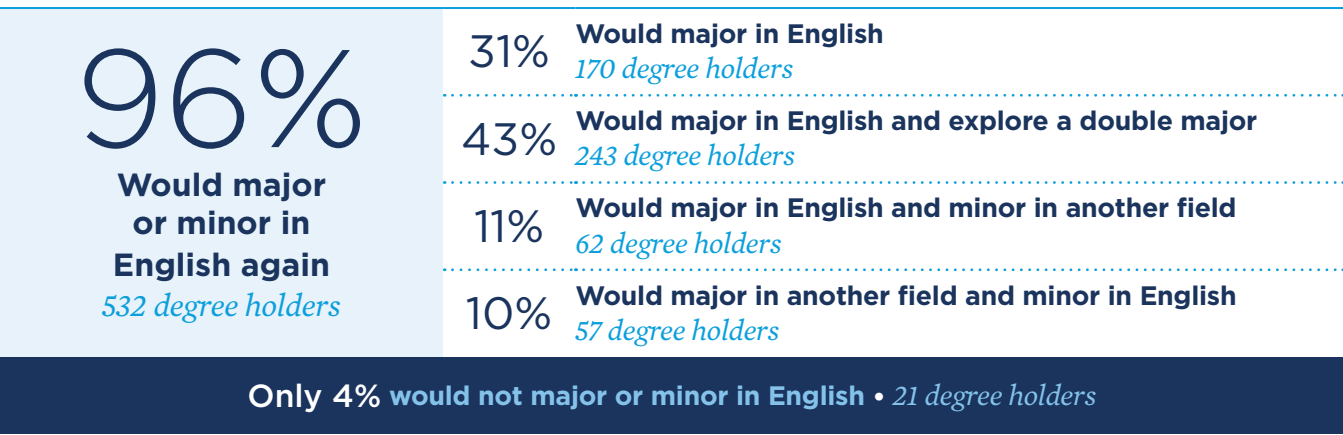
In response to the open-ended question, “Where do you work and what position do you hold?” English bachelor’s degree holders reported being employed in the following areas:



**NOTE:** the distribution methods for this survey may have skewed the pool of respondents toward educators and those in publishing-related jobs. 5.5% of respondents reported being unemployed.

## How do they feel about their choice to major or minor in English?

Post-graduation, of those who opted to major or minor in English, 96% would choose to do so again if given the opportunity, suggesting very high rates of satisfaction with the degree.



## Satisfaction with degree

Satisfaction with the English degree is especially high among graduates in the fields of education and marketing/communications, but some of the most compelling testimonials received are from those now working in law, business, and even fields like cybersecurity:

“Best decision of my life. I am an excellent writer, editor, and critical thinker. I am a lawyer now and English has served me extremely well.”

*BA in English • Loyola University New Orleans*

“Everything I learned during my English courses is vital to my job now. I actually work in finance and help control a small oil and energy company’s finances. Anyone can do math; it’s easily taught. But to be able to read the contracts, understand, analyze, correct, and communicate within the business realm—that is something that is taught only in your English and communication courses. Plus, it’s fun; I always loved my English classes.”

*BA in English • University of Kentucky*

“An English major has been a great asset to my career as a cybersecurity intelligence analyst.”

*BA in English • University of Pittsburgh*

“I like the flexibility my English major provides. I initially planned to be a teacher, and discovered it wasn’t for me. I was able to shift to journalism, and later to marketing.”

*BA in English • Indiana University*

“Every company needs strong writers!”

*BA in English • Santa Clara University*

## What would graduates have done differently?

**65%** of degree holders would have considered a multidisciplinary path either by double-majoring, minoring in another field, or majoring in another field with an English minor

This is evident in the following testimonials:

“I really value my English degree; however, I do feel limited by it and wish I had been encouraged to explore beyond that in high school. It never even occurred to me to major in something else because careers weren’t a focus. I feel like the messaging I heard was to major in something you love and everything else will fall into place, and it has, for the most part, but I wish my horizons would have been broader. I don’t feel I was equipped to make this choice at age 18.”

*BA in English • Mansfield University.*

“I definitely believe a minor in another field, like psychology or computer science, would have both enhanced my overall college experience as well as opened up potential new career opportunities.”

*BA in English • Utica College .*

“If I did it again, I would probably add a business or marketing major to better position myself for brand copywriting positions.”

*BA in English • Loyola Marymount University*

“I absolutely would major in English again. It has been an asset throughout my career [in the insurance industry]. My second major in sociology was equally useful, so I would choose to double-major again to get the benefits of both programs.”

*BA in English • The College of New Jersey .*

By making it easier for students to double-major or minor in other disciplines, English departments might better attract and retain the “almost but not quite” English majors who worry about the professional viability of majoring only in English. (This is already an approach employed by the Compass Advantage program at Ball State University and the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s SuccessWorks.)



## What do undergraduates most value about their English courses?

Responses to this open-ended question, a selection of which appear below, were categorized manually by a process of inductive coding: Norton staff read through the data and allowed patterns and themes to emerge. Some responses were coded to more than one category.

25%	<b>Worldview</b> <i>310 respondents</i> Exposure to different cultures, cultivation of empathy, expanded worldview, diversity of perspectives	<p>“Being an English major has broadened my perspective on so many things. I have a better grasp on the things going on around me now, locally and globally.”  <i>English major • SUNY Plattsburgh</i></p> <p>“[I value] hearing the stories of others.”  <i>English major • American River College</i></p> <p>“I value the broadening of my knowledge to include other groups as well as ideas of how groups were perceived in the past.”  <i>English major • Angelo State University</i></p>
21%	<b>Communication and creativity</b> <i>260 respondents</i> Development of creativity, writing, and communication skills	<p>“The classes all encouraged collaboration and creativity. The professors were all so passionate about their topics as well. I feel like I got a broad range of exposure and learned skills that could be applied to a future career.”  <i>Recent graduate • University of Utah</i></p>
16%	<b>Collaboration</b> <i>206 respondents</i> Peer learning and classroom discussions	<p>“All of my English classes are rooted in collaboration. I think this is integral because we learn so much from one another and realize there is not one right view of a certain topic. Of course, it improves our collaboration skills for the workplace.”  <i>English major • Michigan State University</i></p>
15%	<b>Learning about literature</b> <i>187 respondents</i> The power of literature, passion for literature, and exposure to new kinds of literature	<p>“I value learning about literature and the themes that can be applied to everyday life.”  <i>—English major • University of Nevada, Las Vegas</i></p>
13%	<b>Personal development • 165 respondents</b> General learning skills and real-world applications	
11%	<b>Critical thinking skills • 136 respondents</b>	
9%	<b>Culture of the department</b> <i>110 respondents</i> Welcoming, supportive, flexible, passionate professors	<p>“The professors personally care for their students.”  <i>English major • Andrews University</i></p>
5%	<b>Analysis skills • 59 respondents</b>	
2%	<b>Argument or persuasion skills</b> <i>24 respondents</i>	<p>“[I value] the chance to form your own opinions and being given the skills to properly argue them.”  <i>English major • Arcadia University</i></p>
2%	<b>Professional development • 22 respondents</b>	

## What changes do English majors suggest for the field in the future?

How will students study English in the next decades? Whose voices will be heard? How will students change, and how will courses change along with them?

All three surveyed groups (undergraduate students, degree holders, and graduate students) were asked the same main question above, and we read all 2,011 responses to look for common trends among them. Using inductive coding, we grouped these responses into some common categories. **The top two responses across all three respondent groups were the same and were significantly more common than any other response category: (1) increase the diversity of texts and people in the field and (2) incorporate more career preparation in the major.** What follows is a sample of—and our reflections on— these calls for change.

### 1. Increase the diversity of texts studied in the major and people in the field

31% of undergraduates • 38% of degree holders • 34% of graduate students

“I really hope we can prioritize BIPOC voices in the canon... I worry that the next generation will not be as interested in English because the books they read are outdated/do not connect to their lives.”

*Current student • Michigan State University*

“I hope to see more people from different backgrounds in my discipline.”

*Current student • American River College*

“In both ‘academic’ and creative courses/programs, I think it’s abundantly important to embrace stories and voices that differ from our own.”

*Current student • Ball State University*

“I’d love to see more opportunities for code-meshing and anti-racist instruction.”

*Current student • Metropolitan State University of Denver*

Given the call from so many respondents for greater diversity in the curriculum, it is perhaps surprising that so few respondents named courses on BIPOC authors when asked to name their favorite courses. As Janine Utell pointed out in her review of the survey data for W. W. Norton, “Are these low numbers indicative of departments’ failures to offer such courses in any significant numbers? In other words, would a greater percentage of students note these as favorites if they had been available to take in the first place?”

Interestingly, there were no explicit requests to eliminate course requirements within the major. Rather, many respondents would like to see requirements revised or expanded to reflect a more global perspective and the needs of the job market:

“[I hope to see] fewer requirements surrounding time periods and more requirements surrounding diversity.”

*Current student • Mount Holyoke College*

“I hope to see more course requirements in world literature. I feel students often lack knowledge of literature from African countries especially. Many students cannot even name one African author, let alone one who identifies as female. I would like the major to be more culturally sensitive to teach students about more cultures.”

*Current student • Kutztown University*

“I hope to see, at least in my school, a technical component to the degree. By this, I mean maybe a class or two required in which you learn certain technology (such as graphic design, Excel, Photoshop, videography, etc.) that may complement your English degree or be otherwise useful in a job.”

*Current student • Mississippi State University*

### 2. Incorporate more career preparation in the major

10% of undergraduates • 28% of degree holders • 8% of graduate students

It is interesting but perhaps not surprising that almost a third of degree holders would like to see more career preparation in the curriculum: the recent graduates among them would have entered the pandemic job market.

“I hope they’ll provide a course that goes into all the different career paths that English majors can take since I have no idea what I’m going to do with my future.”

*Current student • Brigham Young University–Idaho*

“I hope to see more career/job-focused specialization courses.”

*Current student • Florida State University*

### 3. Improve reputation of the English major on campus, in the job market, and in the world at large

Another significantly recurring theme in the responses to this question—and elsewhere in the survey—is the desire to improve the reputation of the English major on campus, in the job market, and in the world at large.

“I hope to see that the discipline grows more respected by those outside of it. Less of ‘What are you gonna do with an English major? Teach?’ and more of ‘Wow, how are you going to choose what to do with so many options as an English major?’”

*Current student • University of Florida*

“I want to see fewer students in the business college who love literature but don’t think there’s the potential for a career with it.”

*Current student • Bloomsburg University*

“I hope there will be less stigma around English majors.”

*—Current student, Brigham Young University*

Current students and recent graduates voice a strong desire for better funding and advocacy as well. As one student put it, what’s needed is:

“A nationwide change in how universities value English majors. We have to fight for representation and are hardly ever thought about during the planning of career fairs. It is very frustrating trying to network when you have to go out of your way to seek out opportunities. Our department sticks up for us, but the university as an entity does not.”

*English major • Ohio University*

As another respondent said:

“I would love to see universities appreciate, fund, and celebrate their English departments more.”

*English major • Carnegie Mellon University*

## AT A GLANCE: Changes respondents suggest for the major

Desired Improvement	Current Students	Degree Holders	Graduate Students
More inclusive canon	31%   232	38%   117	34%   44
More career preparation	10%   78	28%   86	8%   11
Better reputation of the English major	7%   51	7%   22	4%   5
Increased variety of courses offered	7%   50	2%   6	3%   4
Expanded offerings in digital humanities, multimedia, and technology	6%   46	10%   30	5%   7
Changes to teaching or grading methodologies	6%   41	1%   4	7%   9
Study of more contemporary works	6%   48	8%   23	6%   8
No changes	5%   37	3%   8	1%   1
More interdisciplinarity	4%   31	5%   16	8%   11
More translated/foreign works	4%   27	4%   11	2%   3
More genre fiction	4%   26	1%   4	3%   4
More creative writing opportunities	4%   28	3%   8	2%   2
More development of writing skills	4%   28	3%   8	3%   4
More classics	2%   10	3%   10	3%   4
More literary theory	1%   7	2%   5	2%   3

# LOOKING FORWARD

We conducted this survey and published this report to provide a national student perspective that will complement the work and research English departments, instructors, and administrators are already doing to pause or reverse trends of declining enrollments. We encourage readers to download and examine the full data set in the context of your own initiatives and research purposes, and to adapt the student survey for local needs. **Visit [seagull.wwnorton.com/NSEM](https://seagull.wwnorton.com/NSEM) for more details.**

## Next steps for W. W. Norton

In addition to presenting the results of this survey in a session at the 2022 convention of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in Anaheim (“Illuminating the College English Curriculum and Professional Pathways for English Majors”), we are planning to host at least one national faculty workshop in 2023 to stimulate conversation and help instructors put ideas into action. We are exploring ways of collaborating with the MLA and other groups on such programming and other initiatives to attract and retain students to the field.

We are piloting monthly informational sessions for English and other Humanities majors and minors who are interested in exploring careers in college publishing. Staffed by members of Norton’s literature editorial and marketing groups, these informal virtual meetings are free and open to all. They are held on the first Friday of every month, starting November 4, 2022.

W. W. Norton will continue to support hundreds of paid internships a year for current students and recent graduates who wish to get a hands-on sense of a career in publishing. Roughly half of these internships are remote.

Based on the popularity of our 2020 poster titled “What Can You Do with an English Major: What Can’t You Do?,” we are creating a new set of materials, highlighting key findings from this report, that instructors can use in their departments and share with the career center in their recruitment efforts.

Because interest in the major often precedes college entry, we are also exploring outreach to high school students through a possible partnership with the National English Honor Society, the goal of which would be to foster positive awareness of the major/minor. ➡

## Contact Us

To stay in touch with us about this and other initiatives, please follow us on Twitter **@nortonanthology**. For questions or comments about this report, please email us at **[literature@wnorton.com](mailto:literature@wnorton.com)**

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