

How Do Lit Majors Become Professors? (FAQs)

What would an ideal Lit major, suffering from an ideal

insomnia, ideally know? An ideal Lit major, after an eternity of sleeplessness, would know at least eight different kinds of things, jotting them constantly in an infinitely messy notebook: works, stories, events, ideas, methods, people, words, and languages.

Works.—The experience of works of literature is the core of literary studies. Our Lit majors acquire a backbone of major works by taking the survey of British Writers, Lit 57 and 58, and American Writers, Lit 60. These courses do a good job of covering the broad course of British and American poetry, with some drama and fiction added. An ideal Lit major would go on to read the entire Norton or Longman's anthology, and then start on the English novel! No single course or anthology, however, can provide the classical background necessary for the study of literature in English or the knowledge of the collateral European traditions. (At CMC, some of this is taught in Civ 10 and some in the Junior Seminar in Literary Criticism.) Here is my personal list of the key works that form the background for British and American literature, with the ones to start with in bold. I have included English language works that are of equal stature with the European

ones listed here, and at the end I have added what I think are the most important landmarks of the novel.

Homer, **Iliad** and **Odyssey**
Hebrew Bible: **Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, Job, Psalms, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Jonah**
Poems of Sappho and Anacreon
Aeschylus, Agamemnon, Prometheus Bound
Sophocles, **Oedipus the King** and **Antigone**
Euripides, The Bacchae, Hippolytus
Plato, Meno, Crito, **Apology, Phaedo, Symposium**, and Republic
Herodotus, Histories, Book 1
Thucydides, Peloponnesian War
Aristotle, **Poetics**, Rhetoric & Ethics
Livy, History of Rome, Book 1
Virgil, Eclogues and Georgics
Virgil, **Aeneid 1-6, 7-12**
Ovid, **Metamorphoses**
Poems of Catullus, Horace, and Juvenal
New Testament: **Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, Corinthians, Revelation**
Aesop, Fables
Augustine, **Confessions**
Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy
Dante, **The Divine Comedy**
Boccaccio, The Decameron
Chaucer, **The Canterbury Tales**
[Anonymous] Everyman
Erasmus, **The Praise of Folly**
Ariosto, Orlando Furioso ("Mad Orlando")
Machiavelli, **The Prince**
Thomas More, **Utopia**
Rabelais, Gargantua and Pantagruel
Tasso, Jerusalem Delivered
Marlowe, Dr. Faustus
Montaigne, Essays (for instance, the Penguin Selected edition)
Shakespeare, **Richard III, Romeo and Juliet, Henry IV I & II, The Merchant of Venice, Julius Caesar, As You Like It, Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra, The Tempest**

Bacon, **Essays**
Cervantes, **Don Quixote**
Milton, **Paradise Lost**
Molière, The Misanthrope
Racine, Phèdre
Bunyan, **Pilgrim's Progress**
Defoe, **Robinson Crusoe**
Montesquieu, Persian Letters
Swift, **Gulliver's Travels**
Voltaire, **Candide**
Diderot, Rameau's Nephew
Brothers Grimm, **Fairy Tales**
Rousseau, **Confessions, Part One**
Goethe, Sorrows of Young Werther
Goethe, **Faust, Part One & Act 5 of Part Two**
Wordsworth, **The Prelude**

The Novel

Madame de Lafayette, The Princess of Clèves
Defoe, Moll Flanders & Robinson Crusoe
Richardson, Pamela
Fielding, Tom Jones
Sterne, Tristram Shandy
Austen, Pride and Prejudice
Mary Shelley, Frankenstein
Emily Bronte, Wuthering Heights
Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre
Dickens, Great Expectations
Flaubert, Madame Bovary
Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment & The Brothers Karamazov
Eliot, Middlemarch
Ibsen, A Doll's House
Wagner, Ring of the Nibelungs (sequence of operas)
Strindberg, A Dream Play
Chekhov, The Seagull & Three Sisters
Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Ulysses
Kafka, The Trial
Proust, In Search of Lost Time (a.k.a. Remembrance of Things Past)
Beckett, Molloy

It is also important for Lit majors to gain some knowledge of the history of art and architecture. The two volumes of Gardner's Art Through the Ages, by Fred S. Kleiner and Christin J. Mamiya, are a standard source. E. H. Gombrich's The Story of Art is elegantly written and full of insight, though much less detailed. His ground-breaking book Art and Illusion makes an excellent introduction to the problems of artistic representation. For the complexities of modern art, start with The Shock of the New by Robert Hughes. Among multi-volume histories of art, the most readable, up-to-date, and well-illustrated is the Oxford History of Art.

Stories.—Do you remember what happened to Iphigenia, what Ariadne is famous for, and who the father of Icarus was? Reading the Bible and authors like Homer, Herodotus, Ovid, and Livy from the above list will make you familiar with a lot of the background stories taken for granted by writers and painters. Nevertheless, it's a good idea, as early as you can, to develop a habit of remembering the stories of mythological characters. Here is where your infinitely messy notebook comes in handy. A perennial source of this kind of information is Bullfinch's Mythology, a nineteenth-century volume of retellings that continues to sell in updated, de-bowdlerized versions. Better, though, to use a reference work to jog your memory about the original narratives. A concise but very literate source, useful to have at

hand when you are reading or strolling through an art gallery, is James Hall's classic Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art (Westview, 1979; see also his interesting companion volume, the Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art, Westview, 1996). And for all kinds of background information on ancient culture, consult the Oxford Classical Dictionary, now in its third edition (1996).

Events.—It is also important for students of literature to get a sense of the general shape of world history. One of the best ways to start is by reading a one-volume survey like J. M. Roberts' New History of the World (Oxford University Press; 4th ed., 2003). (Jared Diamond gives a provocative account of human prehistory, patterns of cultural development, and migration in Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies, Norton, 1999). Other broad surveys that have been favorably reviewed are Roger Osborne, Civilization: A New History of the Western World (Pegasus, 2006) and Robin Lane Fox, The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian (Basic Books, 2006). For those who have not studied American history, a solid account is Hugh Brogan's Penguin History of the United States of America (2001). On the English side, there is Clayton Roberts' History of England, 4th ed., 2 vols. (Prentice Hall, 2001), and also Simon Schama's History of Britain, 2 vols. (Miramax, 2000, 2002). The volumes of the Penguin

Social History of Britain are informative about life in Britain in various periods.

In the twentieth century, educational theory turned away from the teaching of facts and dates toward an emphasis on conceptual sophistication and imaginative thinking. There is no reason, however, why people with imagination cannot know facts and dates as well! Dates, in fact, are a particularly useful acquisition. They provide a skeleton upon which one can hang all kinds of other information. Learning them may seem hard at first, but with practice it becomes easy and, actually, quite an enjoyable kind of game. I write the dates of original publication and author's birth and death in every book I read and make a deliberate attempt to remember them.

So much information goes streaming by us in our media-rich environment that it is difficult to hold onto any of it. Developing a chronological sense is one way of coping. Since most students are really starting from scratch in this endeavor, I have appended to this document a list of a hundred or so important dates. Many more can be found in Bernard Grun's delightful and inexpensive reference work, The Timetables of History: A Horizontal Linkage of People and Events (3rd ed., 1991). Lovers of English Literature may also want to track down a copy of the elegant Annals of English Literature, 1475-1925 (Clarendon, 1936).

Another astonishingly useful aid to memory is the habit of looking at an atlas when you see place-names mentioned in books. Just about any one will do. There are lots of helpful maps to be found on the Internet, and you can often click on a place-name in Wikipedia to see where it is located. The intersecting coordinates of chronology and geography will do wonders for your powers of memory.

Ideas.—Getting a firm grasp of the history Western philosophy is a lifelong task, not to mention coping with other traditions too. If you read the works of general history I've mentioned above, you'll get a broad outline of intellectual history as well. Perhaps the best way to proceed from there is simply to follow your interests in reading original texts. As for relatively brief histories of thought, I'm quite fond of J. H. Randall, The Career of Philosophy (2 vols.). Bertrand Russell's world best-seller, The History of Western Philosophy, is witty, opinionated, and brilliantly written, still very much worth reading. Works on the thought or background of a single period can be very useful, and some have achieved such classic status as to remain points of reference for decades. I am thinking of books like Christopher Dawson, The Making of Europe, Perry Miller, The New England Mind (2 vols.), R. H. Southern, The Making of the Middle Ages, Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, and John Passmore, A Hundred Years of Philosophy (Penguin, 1978). In The Discarded Image, C. S. Lewis,

provides a compact and attractive account of the background of medieval and Renaissance literature and thought. Also wonderfully readable and informative are Basil Willey's twin volumes, The Seventeenth-Century Background and The Eighteenth-Century Background. For the French seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, see the great book with the dull, oddly translated title, Man in Society by Paul Bénichou, and also Paul Hazard, Man in Crisis, and Norman Hampson, The Enlightenment.

A good place to start reading up on any philosophical topic or author, with a lead-in to the bibliography, is the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (10 vols., 1998), available to CMC students on-line as well as in the library. And a broad range of general topics in intellectual history is covered in the Dictionary of the History of Ideas. The first, ed. Philip P. Weiner (Scribners, 1973-74), is now available on-line at <http://etext.virginia.edu/DicHist/dict.html>. It is out of print, but the cheap paperback version can still often be found used. The second edition, the New Dictionary of the History of Ideas, ed. Maryann Cline Horowitz (Scribners, 2004), supplements rather than replaces the first and is a disappointing sequel.

Methods.—The last thirty years have witnessed the rise of “Critical Theory,” an assorted battery of methods that can be applied to the understanding and interpretation of literary texts. Feminism of

various kinds, Marxism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and reader response criticism are just a few of them. Along with this development, it has become a strict dogma of the discipline that methods ought to be judged by the readings they produce. Literary theories don't pay their way by being "right" anymore; rather, they compete to be "interesting." The problem is that no mode of interpretation ever fails to produce a reading; that is what they are designed to do, and the texts cannot say no. Further, the interest of a critical reading obviously depends more upon the talent of the author than on the validity of the methods they employ. It is to be hoped that students and critics will not simply adopt modes of interpretation in order to perform readings but will actually consider the validity of the theoretical assumptions behind each of these methods.

This being said, there are a number of books that attempt to introduce Critical Theory from a sympathetic point of view. The most popular and well-known of them is Terry Eagleton's breezy and readable Literary Theory: An Introduction (Blackwell, 2nd edition, 1996). Typing "introduction" and "literary theory" in the search box on Amazon will bring up a host of rivals to Eagleton's best seller. Other, more focused and more demanding classics of the explaining-theory genre are Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature (1976) and On Deconstruction:

Theory and Criticism After Structuralism (1983); Terence Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics (1977; 2nd ed. 2004); Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (1983; 2nd ed., 2002); and Fredric Jameson, Marxism and Form (1972) and The Prison-House of Language (1975). The philosophical background of French theory is deftly sketched in Vincent Descombes, Modern French Philosophy (1980).

Students should also be familiar with some of the classics of the discipline of literary criticism, books that have inspired many to follow it. Among these, Erich Auerbach's, Mimesis (1953) has long held pride of place. Auerbach was a distinguished German-Jewish philologist who found himself spending WWII in Istanbul. Unable to carry on his highly specialized studies there, he decided to write a general survey of the "Representation of Reality in Western Literature," to quote the subtitle of his book. Each of the chapters begins with a brilliant close reading of a page-long passage from a seminal work of literature, from Homer and the Bible to Virginia Woolf.

Venerable classics of comparable stature include:

M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp (1953)
---, Natural Supernaturalism (1971)
Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961)
---, The Company We Keep (1987)
Cleanth Brooks, The Well-Wrought Urn (1947)
Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (1953)
E. R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (1963)

William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930)
Northrop Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism (1957)
Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (1951)
Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (1957)
Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (1973)
---, Culture and Society (1958)
Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (1929)

Finally, in the last decade, cognitive science and Chomskyan linguistics have had an increasing impact on literary studies. Steven Pinker's two bestsellers, The Language Instinct (1994) and How the Mind Works (1999), provide informative and extremely entertaining introductions to both of these fields. For the application of cognitive approaches to literature, see Patrick Colm Hogan, Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts: A Humanist's Guide (2003)

People.— One of the best ways of pursuing the study of literature is to explore a favorite author in-depth, reading all of his or her work, then going on to secondary literature, biographies, and the background of the period. Single-author courses in the Lit department work on this model, but it can be taken much, much further on your own. To know an important author really well is to take a long step toward becoming an educated person yourself, and it is a good way to escape the superficiality of a busy life.

In addition to full-dressed biographies, there are many good sources of general biographical information about authors, including the introductions to scholarly paperback series like the Penguin or

Oxford Classics. Then there is the new, and extremely controversial, Oxford Diction of National Biography, which has recently replaced the old Dictionary of National Biography. The biographical articles in the 1910 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, widely available in used bookstores and now online, are amusingly written in the Edwardian style and make excellent bedtime reading.

Words.—One of the best ways of pursuing the study of literature is to explore a favorite author in-depth, reading all of his or her work, then going on to secondary literature, biographies, and the background of the period. Single-author courses in the Lit department work on this model, but it can be taken much, much further on your own. To know an important author really well is to take a long step toward becoming an educated person yourself, and it is a good way to escape the superficiality of a busy life. By the time they are in high school, most students have already learned about 60,000 words. They are just getting started. All college students should be learning lots of words all the time, and using a good dictionary is essential, but students of literature need to do more. They need to acquire a historical sense of the English vocabulary, by which I mean a sense of the range of English meanings, of where the words came from and when they arrived. For this they should avail themselves as frequently

as possible of the vast riches of the Oxford English Dictionary, which is in the library and on-line.

Words are also a key to your purchase on the history of thought. Jotting them down and learning their precise definitions as you read will provide you with the key elements of most nonfiction writing. Do you know what makes an idea different from a concept and a concept different from a thought? Getting this kind of thing straight, you will skip ahead of generations of students.

Languages.—Here I can only say that there is no substitute for reading a text in its original language, and it is impossible to count oneself an educated person without a fluent reading knowledge of at least one language beside one's own.

What is a senior thesis? A senior thesis in Literature gives the student who writes it a chance to show off what he or she has learned in three years at CMC, if not by making a new contribution to scholarly knowledge, then at least coming up with a viable argument on a scholarly topic. A typical senior thesis is usually between forty and fifty pages long, though it can go beyond that. It should be written with a general scholarly audience in mind, not just one's advisor, so a detailed knowledge of the texts discussed should not be assumed.

The best theses tend to be about authors one has already studied, pursuing a new direction in greater depth. A good thesis will have an introduction that states the topic to be addressed, the method with which it will be pursued, the point of the argument, and how it departs from existing scholarship. The best way to start is by explaining to your readers, in five pages or so, what has already been said about the topic at hand, then telling what you are going to add to it, how you are going to diverge from what is already known. This does not mean you have to obliterate all previous writings on your subject, but it does mean you should look, at very least, for some aspect of the topic that is not stressed in the books and articles you have read.

The best way to begin the process of writing a senior thesis is a conversation with your advisor in the Spring of the previous year, so that you can develop your ideas during the summer. One of the easiest methods of coming up with a thesis topic is to compare two or three authors' treatments of a single theme or subject. Such comparisons can be instructive, but there are also dangers. It is easy to forget that the point of such comparisons is to learn about the authors, not merely about the details of their works. There is no point in observing that the heroine of a novel by Jane Austen is different from the heroine in a novel by Thackeray unless you can give some insight as to what these differences tell us about the authors who

created them. Then there is the even more important question of why they think differently, and what difference it all makes for our view of them.

A better approach to topic development is to read in the criticism about the author or subject you wish to pursue and make a list of the assumptions or conclusions that all the authors who have written about that topic share. Once you have done that, then consider whether any of these assumptions or conclusions can be rejected or modified. At that point, you are ready to write your introduction.

How does student prose differ from the writing of professionals?

Students at the Claremont Colleges are gifted people. They make striking observations and forceful arguments, and their work is, on the whole, quite enjoyable to read. Speaking of the general run of student prose, though, there are three things that mark it as student prose:

First, of course, student sentences contain a higher frequency of punctuation errors and usage, especially with commas, than even, say, a daily newspaper. (I have tabulated about sixty of the most frequent of on my sheet "Technical Aspects of Writing.") The cause of bad punctuation is lack of skill and the absence of terror. Also on the level of the sentence, students frequently hesitate to be simple and

straightforward, for fear of seeming simplistic. Trying to sound bookish, they use words they're not quite in command of. Their sentences are longer than necessary and tend to be all of the same length. One looks in vain for the nice, quick observation. One misses the short, sharp shock.

Second, in the paragraphs of published prose, there is typically a better subordination of evidence to argument than is found in student writing. With published writers, one usually knows why one is being given each detail of information as the sentences and paragraphs move forward. This does not, of course, preclude a certain teasing of the reader. Interesting or perplexing information can be given before one reveals where it fits into the puzzle. But students often ask one to read information that has no intrinsic interest before telling one why one needs to know it. Start a paragraph with "Hamlet is the prince of Denmark" and your reader will instantly be bored. Start a paragraph with "Hamlet is Shakespeare's longest play" and your reader may be intrigued, at least as to why you mentioned the fact. That is what you want.

Third, in terms of the whole argument, students often fail to pass the So what? test. They put together a series of striking observations about how Edith Wharton portrays the working class or how Shakespeare mixes metaphors or how Chaucer's Pardoner

performs his tricks, but then they don't go on to say enough about what difference it makes. If, as you have shown, Tolstoy views the aristocracy as idle and corrupt, is he happy or unhappy about it? How does it affect the tone of his work? How should it make us feel?

Why do we study the humanities? In my opinion the reasons are three: understanding, freedom, and delight.

Each of us is born into a culture at a particular place and time, and we absorb the habits of thought, feeling, and behavior of those around us. As we grow older, we learn that others think differently, people in other times and places, and people among us. Often they think radically differently. It becomes pressing for us, then, as mature adults, to understand the reasons why we think the way we do, why others think the way they do, and what, after all, we should think.

Such understanding is the goal of all the liberal arts, and each discipline in the Humanities plays a role in helping to achieve it. Philosophy brings us directly to fundamental questions about knowledge, the mind, language, and the broad structure of reality. History tells the story of how people came to think about the world the way they do, how the world got to be the way it is now, and how things were in the past. Each of these has its glories. Art and the study of art stand between. Art attempts to express life in the round, in a

way that is more abstract and speculative than history but more immediate and concrete than philosophy. In studying the arts, we reconnect them to our own world, which they allow us, temporarily, to leave behind.

Understanding, then, is the first goal of the Humanities, but freedom is their ultimate end. Only when we possess our ways of thinking as our own, knowing why we hold to them and what the alternatives might be, do we achieve the small freedom of which human beings are capable. So, too, arises also the delight of these studies, delight in the glimpsing of a certain freedom to contemplate the panoply of human thought, action, and expression from an imaginative, speculative point of view, and delight in the sheer fascination of the spectacle. Stories are one of the most enduring human pleasures. The pleasure they give is an end in itself, but it can be more than that. With determined attentiveness to the world as it really is comes the hope that we can change that world and ourselves for the better.

What does being a professor in the humanities demand?

Professorship, especially at a small liberal arts college, is three jobs tangled into one: teacher, scholar, and, for lack of a better word—and a better world—politician:

Teacher.—Good teachers in the Humanities have intense love of their subjects and want to share it with others. Gregarious in temperament, they like young people, people different from themselves, and want to help them learn to think. They find philosophical nourishment in basic discussions and take interest in the erroneous gropings of new inquirers. They can tolerate the messiness, imprecision, and inefficiency of all things that pertain to beginning. Liking an audience in front of them, they have an inclination to performance, classroom teaching being a kind of drama, not easy for the shy or self-sufficient.

Good teachers transmit a personal version of what is known in their discipline to those who are beginning to acquire it. The best teachers like to think in a wide context, to connect with texts and students in an intimately responsive way, and make use of their personal experience to enliven the classroom. Good teaching requires patience, sensitivity, openness, optimism, generosity.

Beginning teaching can be harrowing, but the relation between teachers and students is generally one of mutual encouragement. Teaching is a more or less natural aptitude. Some people are good at it right away and most become competent with practice. Teachers can be compared, but teaching is not a fundamentally competitive activity. Outside the classroom, the danger of the teacher is to become too

intellectually friendly, too interested in all things, too willing to listen or quick to explain. But it is difficult for those of us who have graduated from college to write about teachers without sentimentalizing them just a little.

Scholar.—Good scholars of the Humanities may or may not love their subjects, but they take a great interest in what other scholars have to say about them. Unlike teachers, they focus on an audience of other people more or less like themselves. They love to be alone with a long stretch of time in front of them, free to become deeply immersed in a problem. When the solution arrives, it may take years to complete a satisfactory exposition, years more to see the work in print. Exhibitionism can be a key element in a scholar's personality, but it is the solitary exhibitionism of the writer, the explainer, and not, generally, the performer. Shyness is a scholarly advantage and self-sufficiency a scholarly necessity. The wide range of interests that gives life to the teacher can mean death to the scholar, whose success lies in being able to go farther, deeper than others in a single direction, where forerunners have left off or failed. The scholarly stance is aggressive, argumentative, skeptical, precise, insistent upon details.

The scholar does not choose topics out of love but out of need, because they are useful in making an argument. Scholars must show that their predecessors have been wrong—ignorant, biased, naïve, or

simply erroneous. Everything scholars do is critical and subject to criticism, and they spend their lives waiting to be evaluated. Publication demands great investment and therefore great risk. The life of the scholar would be intolerable without patience, stubbornness, single-mindedness, competitiveness, and resistance to detraction. Outside the study, the dangers of the scholar are pedantry (holding non-scholars up to irrelevant standards of precision) and sterility (losing interest in things unrelated to one's work). But it is impossible for those of us who have published to write about scholars without satirizing them just a little.

Scholarship requires natural aptitude. Relatively few can learn to do it well. It is also a competitive activity and, like other complex, organized fields of competition—chess, gymnastics, poetry—it takes about ten years to reach a world-class level of practice, most people, of course, failing even then. Because scholarship requires ambition and takes place in solitude, scholars crave recognition. Because other scholars are the only ones who can appreciate their work, they depend upon the recognition of their competitors, a potentially frustrating position.

The scholarly world being rife with fashions, the success of scholars is precarious and temporary. No one so much earns the gratitude of other scholars as the one who changes the rules of the

game, consigning well-established players to obsolescence and giving latecomers an opening. The most successful scholars attend as much to the politics of success as to the quality of their work, self-promotion being a far more direct and reliable way of making progress than “blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.”

Politician.—When non-academic people think of the atmosphere of academia, they think of the classroom, where there is a clear relation of authority between teacher and student. The simplicity and clarity of the pedagogical relation make the classroom largely a place of security and trust. Even those teachers who aim to set aside some of the hierarchical dimensions of pedagogy and “decenter” the classroom are there to set the rules and keep order.

But the classroom situation does not typify the academic milieu, which is an unruly combination of bureaucracy, democracy, entrepreneurship, and personal improvisation. This does not dawn on most young scholars until they have actually obtained a job, when they discover that, after years of preparation in scholarship and teaching, they must now take up roles as part-time administrators and policy makers, and operate in a complex political environment in which they begin with very little power or protection. No profession can be without politics, but politics in the academic world seems to many who inhabit it to be particularly messy and bitter.

Politicking runs counter to the idealistic self-image of the academic character. For the most part, scholars accomplish their jobs individually and are not used to cooperation. They tend to be unprepared for political maneuvering and often lack the necessary skills. The fact that they remain in place for so long gives personal rivalries the chance to ripen, and once the protagonists are tenured, no fear of removal constrains such rivalries. Finally, players in the academic game enjoy a relative equality in power, and the umpires are often more fragile than those they supervise, many deans and presidents coming and going during the career of one tenured member of the faculty. This means there can be few dependable rules and much less order than appears from the outside.

All of this takes account only of the dimension of professional politics; it does not touch the college as a site of struggle about political and social issues that effect the whole community. All in all, the environment of academia is an excellent lesson in the culture of democracy, that extraordinarily valuable but extraordinarily exhausting social contrivance.

Who should become a professor? It should be clear from the answer to the last question that being a professor requires a set of nearly incompatible qualities. To be a good teacher, you have to like

other people and want to help them, to be a good scholar, you have to be able to do without them, and to survive as a politician, you have to be able to tolerate competition and joint responsibility with even the most infuriating of them. The most difficult tension is between the teacher's love of books and the scholar's love of arguments. The capacity for both is not often found in the same person.

I have been speaking, obviously, in terms of ideal types. There is middle ground. Some academic institutions place a greater emphasis on scholarship, others on teaching. Some fields are more individualistic than others. The recent trend toward political advocacy in the Humanities has made them more sociable for some people. Generally speaking, becoming a professor is such a long and difficult process, with such an unusual set of demands and risks, that only those who cannot imagine themselves doing anything else should attempt it.

How does the academic lifestyle compare with the way the rest

of the world lives? The glory of academic life is that it offers unusual freedom. Professors have winter, spring, and summer breaks, and only a few of their hours in every week are spent in scheduled activities. They travel to academic conferences, occasionally in desirable locations. Every few years, those who teach at research-

oriented institutions have the opportunity to take longer leaves, or sabbaticals, to carry on their scholarly work.

The greatest benefit of the scholar's life is being paid to spend time one's writing about and talking about one's favorite subjects. Professors of Literature have the added advantage that the things they study are designed to give pleasure, but this also means they have made the things that give them pleasure into their work, and there is inevitably some loss in that.

The negative side of the academic lifestyle is that, if you manage to obtain a job, the financial rewards do not equal those in the private sector, and one does not begin to earn an income until one has finished the Ph.D., usually in one's late twenties or early thirties. By that time one may have acquired significant debt. The other drawback to the academic lifestyle is that, if there are few times when one is required to be working, there are equally few times when one is not working. The absence of a well-defined work schedule means that many professors work just about constantly, or feel they ought to.

Finally, the academic job-market has been extremely tight for many years and will probably continue to be for the foreseeable future, which makes entering graduate school risky business indeed. The academic market is a national market. It takes good fortune as well as talent to get a single job, and one may have very little choice as to

where that job will be located. Once one has a job, one must hold it down successfully for six years before undergoing tenure review, at which time one's position is either taken away or made permanent. It is difficult, amid such uncertainty, to make long-term personal plans. For all of these reasons, plus the demands of the classroom, experts typically list college teaching as one of the most stressful professions.

What is graduate school in English like? Graduate school in English typically begins with two years of course-work, with a written examination for the masters degree usually at the end of the first year. The third year is for satisfying lingering Ph.D. requirements (most programs, for instance, require reading competence in one or two foreign languages) and preparing for a two- or three-hour oral examination, usually given at the end of the third or beginning of the fourth year. This examination, a perennial rite of passage, has traditionally been a test of one's general knowledge in all fields of English and American Literature, but in recent years, many programs have narrowed the examination field, focusing upon knowledge relevant to the proposed dissertation topic. Candidates who have passed the oral exam—performances vary radically but failure is rare—become “ABD,” which is to say, “all but dissertation” (or “all but

dead"). By this time, if not sooner, one will also be looking for teaching experience, either at one's own institution or elsewhere.

Ideally, the dissertation will be a good first draft of what can eventually become a scholarly book. It must address a subject that is of interest to scholars in its field, take account of the current state of knowledge, make a new contribution to understanding the subject, and defend its contribution in an appropriate way. Choosing a dissertation topic is a crucial professional step. It is the basis for the most important professional tie that one will make in graduate school—with one's advisor—and it defines the way one will present oneself to the academic job market. The prestige of the advisor and marketability of the topic must be carefully considered.

Some advisors provide close supervision, some leave the candidate a great deal of freedom, and some provide no help even when the candidate needs it. Most programs appoint a committee to supervise the dissertation, but the principal advisor's opinion almost always governs. In some programs, the candidate must "defend" the completed dissertation in front of faculty from his or her graduate department; in others it is enough for the committee to sign off on it and the doctorate is granted.

Many programs now schedule their students to finish the Ph.D. in five years, and use their purse strings accordingly, but six is still a

short passage, and seven or eight, even nine, quite common. Prepare to be a different person when you exit this course from when you entered. Take some time off beforehand to consider whether you really must do this. The very best programs provide teaching employment and substantial financial support for their students, but most graduates still emerge from them with significant debt. Those who must borrow to pay for tuition in graduate school face a straightened financial future, especially if they get an academic job. (A recent study of Ph.D.s reported that those who left academia eventually valued their degrees more highly than those who stayed!)

How does one get an academic job? In September of every year, the Modern Language Association publishes an on-line Job List with advertisements for the positions that will be opening at American and some foreign institutions that year. These jobs are identified by level (Assistant Professor is entry level) and tenure-track or non-tenure track. (Generally, non-tenure-track jobs involve a set period of years and don't offer long-term opportunities.) They are also divided into specialties—the institution may be looking for a specialist in Medieval Literature, Early Modern, Renaissance, Victorian, Black Studies, and so on. An interest in a certain method or subject matter like Feminism or

Queer Theory might be specified. Often, minority candidates are especially encouraged to apply.

Advertisements typically request a candidate's letter of application and a CV, which usually includes a one-page abstract of the dissertation. The candidate may also be required to submit a writing sample, usually from the dissertation, and a dossier containing four or more letters of recommendation regarding the candidate's scholarship and teaching. Rarely is a candidate asked for a transcript of his or her grades. The evaluation of graduate school performance falls entirely to the recommenders included in the dossier, which is usually furnished through the Career Services office of one's home institution. If the writing sample and dossier are not required in the job advertisement, they'll be required later, and at some point candidates may also be asked for copies of student evaluations. The next stage of the process is usually an interview at the Modern Language Association convention, which takes place between Christmas and New Year's in a city in the U. S. or Canada, and if the candidate survives that grueling hurdle, the final round is usually a two day on-campus interview, which will include a "job talk" with a question session and sometimes the teaching of a sample class.

One typically applies for 20 to 40 positions, hoping to receive further inquiries from 12 to 15 hiring institutions and, at the next

round, to receive a handful of MLA interviews. It is a great success to be invited by more than one institution for an on-campus interview, and even the best graduate programs rarely place more than a handful of candidates in a year. Candidates should seek their institution's guidance on how to carry out each stage of the process, from the letter of application to the job talk. But, as I have already stressed, the most important decisions the candidate will make involve the choice of an advisor and the dissertation topic. The reception of one's initial application will largely be determined by the quality of the writing and the nature of the topic. At the MLA interview, the ability to present one's work in a lucid and articulate way and to carry on a fluid scholarly conversation will be of primary importance, and during the on-campus interview, one's ability to be collegial also comes into play.

How does one get into graduate school? Acceptance to graduate school is based upon grades, letters of reference, usually from three of one's professors, and one's performance on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and the GRE subject test in English Literature. (It is hard to know how heavily any particular graduate school weights the GRE in any particular year; the best way to study for it is by reading the Norton Anthology of English Literature.) Top graduate schools have hundreds of annual applicants and accept only a few. Some, such as

the University of Chicago, have M.A. programs that serve as a gateway for the Ph.D., but that is a risky path since these programs are expensive and there is no guarantee they will lead to admission for the Ph.D. It is hard to give advice about individual graduate programs, since these are always changing. Students interested in this path should consult closely with their advisors and undertake substantial research. Thomas H. Benton has written superbly about how one should go about the process of getting into graduate school:

<http://chronicle.com/jobs/2003/07/2003071701c.htm>

Notice, in light of my earlier remarks about the perils of academic politics, that “Benton” at the time of writing was an assistant professor at a liberal arts college who preferred to write under a pseudonym. [I now know that his real name is William A. Pannacker.—note added 2010.]

How should I prepare for the post-college job market?

With the exceptions of Accounting and Finance, and contrary to all popular belief, undergraduate majors don’t prepare you for a specific career other than becoming a professor in that subject. Therefore, explorations of the outside world will be a necessary step toward finding and achieving your post-college ambitions. Preparation implies a goal, so it is impossible to prepare unless the goal is known. If you

want to go into publishing or advertising, journalism or law, you are in fine shape as a Lit major, but during summers you should pursue internships in those fields. If you want to go into business, you should take some courses that will give you the skills most jobs in business require—computer skills, spread sheets, etc.—and you should also seek internships that will help you find out what kind of business activity suits you. It's not necessary to be a business or an econ major to do well at the next stage. The powers of analysis and expression you have gained as a Lit major will serve you well in any setting, as long as you have the particular skills that specific positions require. Employers value any kind of work experience. They don't want "princes" and "princesses" who've never held a regular job.

The chief difference between the typical Gov major and the typical Lit major is not that one major is more practical than another; both majors have been designed to provide intellectual nourishment while developing a flexible set of capacities and skills. Rather, the difference is the belief of the Gov student that his or her major leads in a particular direction, a belief that spurs confident exploration and self-definition, whereas some Lit majors can be inclined to put off thinking about the future because they don't see it so clearly. Whatever course you choose, you will likely discover that there were some things you could have done in college that would have been helpful and some

others that you once thought were practical but you now see were a waste of time. And whether you choose business or one of the other professions, it is also likely that at some point you will be pursuing further education.

What are the best guides to writing? For the technical aspects of English style—when to use a semicolon and when not—my own favorite is Edward Johnson’s literate and sensible Handbook of Good English (Washington Square Press, rev. ed, 1991). For the best advice about style—how to craft compelling sentences and paragraphs—I recommend Joseph Williams, Style: Toward Clarity and Grace (Chicago, 1985). In fact, in this genre it is the only truly useful book I know. Strunk and White’s Elements of Style has every piece of good advice ever given, but the readers are left to figure out for themselves which ones to focus on.