

PROFILES OF CAREERS AND COLLEGE MAJORS RELATED TO WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

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CAREER: Writer

A Day in the Life

Writers come in all shapes and sizes -- film critics, novelists, editorial columnists, screenwriters, technical writers, and advertising copywriters. Many spend the beginnings of their careers practicing their skills as they await a big break. While all writers prefer to write on subjects of personal interest, most professionals are assigned topics by an editor. Writers may work at home, in an office, or in a hectic newsroom, but wherever they set up their office, writers generally spend upwards of 40 hours a week hard at work -- even if only a fraction of that time is spent actually tapping the keys of a word processor. Writers begin by asking questions and researching a subject.

The process of "writing" may involve conducting interviews, reading up on a subject at the library, traveling to a far-off location or even surfing the Internet for clues. A writer must be open to the possibility that new information will change the original angle of a piece. As she gathers the necessary information, she gradually develops a working outline from which she is then able to work up a draft. Then it may be time for an editor to review the material and suggest changes. A writer may wait and send a completed draft manuscript to an editor, while others may prefer to send the manuscript in "partials" (sections or chapters) in order to give the editor a chance to see the work in progress from an earlier stage.

The editing process continues until editor and writer judge the material ready for publication. Writers collaborate with the other professionals involved in the media, such as photographers, graphic designers, and advertisers. Screenwriters and playwrights write original pieces or adapt existing books or stories for the stage or screen. Usually they attend readings or rehearsals to make revisions because problems may appear when the piece is performed that they had not anticipated when they wrote it. Copywriters generally work for advertising agencies, researching market trends to determine the best way to sell their clients' products. Technical writers take esoteric subjects and write about them in simpler terms so that readers can easily grasp the ideas and information.

Paying Your Dues

The one point most employers agree on is that good writers combine a natural gift for language with an unwavering devotion to their craft. For a professional career, a Bachelor's degree in journalism, English, or literature is all but essential. But most important of all is practice, practice, practice, regardless of the medium. In high school, potential writers can write for the school newspaper or the yearbook; in college, they should continue writing for school newspapers and apply for internships at publishing houses. Technical writers should be well-versed in their subject areas and perhaps have advanced degrees. Every writer should be a proficient typist with mastery of a

word processor; nowadays many writers, especially journalists, are expected to deliver their copy electronically via e-mail. Writing experience is very important. Writers must be disciplined, focused, good at research, and able to work under deadlines. Writers should collect samples of their work to show to prospective employers. A writer's first job is often as an assistant to a writer or an editor. Beginning writers generally work hard at research and clerical tasks while awaiting recognition and opportunity from their boss.

Associated Careers

Editors review and edit manuscripts and give authors guidance and direction for clarifying and otherwise improving their pieces. (Many editors admit to being failed or aspiring writers; the reverse can also be the case.) Journalists, who are of course themselves writers (see separate entry), tend to work under the direction of an editor who sends them out into the field to dig up stories, follow leads and interview people, and submit their findings in the form of a readable article.

MAJOR: Technical Writing

Basics

This may sound like something you would only do as an English major, but that isn't necessarily the case. Many schools treat Technical Writing as a unique discipline, often more closely linked to a communications or business major rather than English.

Technical Writing students master the craft of writing for specific markets and industries. The business and scientific worlds, in addition to needing scientists and businessmen, also need people who can effectively translate their jargon into layman's terms. How does aggregate demand shape a market based on a Keynesian economic theory? And how can CO₂ chemical emissions deplete the ozone layer? Technical Writers are invaluable because they make the news of the business and scientific communities accessible to the rest of us.

Drawing on some of the classic tenets of English, such as sentence structure and organization, technical writing goes one step further. With many universities offering Technical Writing laboratories complete with state of the art hardware, Technical Writing bridges the gap between literature and business.

If you are interested in Technical Writing, you might also like ...

- Advertising
- Agricultural Journalism
- American Literature
- Business Communications
- Creative Writing
- English
- English Composition
- English Literature

Journalism
Marketing
Mass Communication
Radio and Television

MAJOR: Business Communications

Basics

The successful conduct of business demands effective communication, and you can hone your skills and gain valuable new knowledge with a major in Business Communications. What's the best way to communicate on the Internet? How do you effectively incorporate visual aids into a presentation? Answering these questions and many more will be part of your studies in Business Communications.

Speaking skills are of primary importance to a successful career in business. You'll learn how to interview, make presentations, deliver a ceremonial speech, or explain a policy analysis. You'll get practice in nonverbal communication, like visual aids, to underscore your points. You'll analyze audiences in order to compose an appropriate speech for them. You'll examine numerical data, such as survey results, and translate that data into helpful information. You'll learn how to communicate policy changes to your employees and discover the best ways to use the Internet for the dissemination of information. You'll learn how to communicate in a crisis and how to develop and maintain good public relations

You can apply most of what you learn in your Business Communications major to dealings with your own employees, co-workers, or the public. A major in Business Communications could greatly extend your career success.

If you are interested in Business Communications, you might also like ...

Advertising
Agricultural Journalism
Creative Writing
English
English Composition
English Literature
International Business
Marketing
Mass Communication
Public Administration
Public Policy Analysis
Radio and Television
Technical Writing

MAJOR: English

Basics

English programs focus on literature, language, and writing, and an English major provides the opportunity to encounter a wide array of absorbing works of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction from around the world and throughout history. A few years of analyzing the works of the greatest minds and imaginations that human civilization has produced will almost assuredly sharpen your critical, emotional, creative, and moral faculties. With any luck, a little greatness may rub off on you as well.

An English major accords the unique opportunity to engage with different societies, different eras, and, come to think of it, different societies from different eras. It enables you to share the experiences of others, to feel what was felt by people in earlier eras, distant lands, entirely other patterns of life, and to juxtapose those feelings with your own. The study of literature also beautifully and powerfully conveys the enduring questions about the human condition, and -- occasionally, if you look especially hard -- sheds light on the answers to those questions.

With an English degree, you can certainly become a starving author. Or, you can become an affluent one. Just ask Toni Morrison or Amy Tan. You can also become a legendary football coach -- like Joe Paterno; a Supreme Court justice -- like Clarence Thomas; or a governor -- like Mario Cuomo. These and many other people used a degree in English as a springboard to a successful career.

A working knowledge of literature is an invaluable component of any liberal arts education. It is tremendous preparation for a future in law (or any professional training that requires interpreting written material), journalism, publishing, graduate studies, and just about anything else.

If you are interested in English, you might also like ...

African-American Studies
Art History
Classics
Creative Writing
Film
French
German
Hebrew
Journalism
Latin American Studies
Radio and Television
Slavic Languages and Literatures
Technical Writing
Theology