

THE BEST ACADEMIC PREPARATION FOR AN EDITORIAL CAREER

<http://www.dailywritingtips.com/the-best-academic-preparation-for-an-editorial-career/>

Posted: 07 Jun 2013 07:15 PM PDT

I was painfully amused to find in a recent job listing the perpetuation of the absurd notion that a degree in English — or literature, for God's sake — is the ideal preparation for work as a writer or editor. The listing required candidates to have a degree in English or literature. Now, there can be some merit in having earned an English degree, but English majors do not necessarily master composition, much less the finer points of grammar, syntax, usage, punctuation, style, and the other components of writing, and revision of assigned papers is of little use in acquiring editing skills.

I recall taking an English course in which the instructor spent most of every class period reading aloud — word by word — a manuscript he had written about grammar and asking students to identify the part of speech of every word. At the end of the term, despite this intensive analysis, I was no more knowledgeable about grammar than I had been at the beginning of the course.

And few English majors endure this type of experience. Nevertheless, they do receive some instruction in writing, but it is mostly holistic — how to evaluate an argument's logic and validity and how to organize one's thoughts in writing. But little guidance is offered in the subtler qualities I listed above.

A literature degree is even less useful; its basis is literary criticism, and though students write essays and term papers and theses, the focus is on dissecting the themes of literary works, not on developing coherence and clarity and conciseness. English and literature courses do not teach one how to choose just the right word. They do not assist one in structuring strong, active sentences with specific nouns and vivid verbs. They do not help one build narratives. In short, though some English and literature majors may develop into great writers and/or editors, an English or literature major is of little use to would-be masters of the language.

On a related note, I am puzzled when I see job listings that require a degree in, say, economics or math. I'm lazy about *laissez-faire*, and I wouldn't know a cosine from a stop sign. But I've edited scholarly books and textbooks in both subjects. I've worked on several science books, too, though I have only the gleanings of lifelong learning, rather than a degree in biology or physics or astronomy, to support me.

What academic preparation, then, should students — and employers — value? Well, how about theater arts? That's the degree I earned, and I've been gainfully employed in publishing and journalism since I retired from the stage more than a quarter century ago, soon after collecting that inestimably valuable diploma. (Trust me, though; I've experienced plenty of drama — not to mention farce and tragedy — in editorial working environments.)

But, seriously, folks, what prepared me for my career was, first, a natural facility for writing — a foundation that supported the edifice of practical experience. Even though I had no interest in journalism, I walked into my college's student-newspaper office

after my first day of classes and never looked back. I learned to tell a story — writing is, at its fundamental level, nothing else than storytelling — producing over a hundred articles, reviews, and editorials, and editing hundreds more as I took on steadily increasing responsibility. (And when I did take journalism courses, when students were assigned to write articles, I handed in pieces I had already written for the school paper.)

Based on my experience, if there's any degree employers should value when hiring for a writing or editing job, it's one in journalism, or mass communication. But I didn't earn one, and I know people who did earn one who shouldn't be allowed anywhere near a keyboard.

The most useful predictor of a job candidate's ability is how well he or she writes on an assigned topic or edits a brief manuscript provided as part of the application process. Possession of a certain degree, by comparison — no matter where it was earned — is nearly useless. (And job history isn't much more pertinent — but that's another topic altogether.)