

Graduate School in English

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Think about it

Your reasons for going to graduate school in English should go beyond simply that you like to read and write, that you like school, or that you did well in your undergraduate classes. Before you start applying for graduate schools, you should do some self-examination: why do you want to go to grad school? What do you want to get out of it? What kind of graduate program would suit your needs and interests? What kind of work do you see yourself doing after your graduate degree? What kind of job prospects are there in the kind of work you're interested in doing? Should you take some time off between completing your undergraduate degree and beginning your graduate work? Are you sure you want to go to graduate school?

Graduate school has many positive aspects: you will experience intellectual challenge and stimulation, gain teaching experience, and associate with other bright and energetic scholars (both faculty and fellow students). Probably at no other period in your life will you have the opportunity to read and write with such intensity about what interests you while surrounded by others who share your passion for language and literature. You should, however, be aware of the highly competitive nature of getting into and succeeding in graduate school, as well as the competitive nature of the academic job market once you complete your graduate work. Graduate school is expensive, academically challenging, and time-consuming, and your teaching and/or research assistantship duties may require a lot of work (in addition to your own studies) for very little pay.

Generally, the further you go in graduate school, the narrower will be your job opportunities--at least in terms of getting a job in your academic field. A master's degree can prepare you for many kinds of positions, including things like editing or publishing work, managerial positions (often with some practical business or management training), positions related to education and teaching, and library work (by completing a library degree). Someone with a Master's in Fine Arts degree (M.F.A.) may find work teaching at the college or high school level, perhaps with funding from arts grants, or an M.F.A. might give you preparation for jobs in the media. An M.F.A. is more marketable if you have a strong publication record. Many M.F.A.'s eventually pursue a Ph.D. as well.

If you are considering graduate school in journalism, you may be interested to know that many, if not most, students in journalism graduate schools are people who caught the journalism bug late in their undergraduate career--or long after--and who did not major in journalism. So although masters' degree programs in journalism are more intense and rigorous than undergraduate programs, they tend to teach the same content and skills. Generally, an advanced degree is neither necessary nor helpful in landing first jobs in journalism. But it is also true that many reporters for metropolitan newspapers and national magazines have advanced degrees, whether in journalism or another discipline. While most editors base hiring decisions on candidates' portfolios rather than their diplomas, an advanced degree, especially from a prestigious graduate program

such as those at Columbia, Northwestern University and the University of Missouri, could be an advantage. Of course, advanced degrees are necessary for anyone who plans to teach journalism at the college level.

About the only kind of work that a Ph.D. prepares you for is college-level teaching, but the job market for Ph.D.s has been very slow recently. Many state institutions have been cutting their budgets drastically, which has meant reductions in the number of faculty teaching at state universities. However, the number of graduating Ph.D.s has not declined at all, meaning that there is and will be real competition for any jobs that are available. In some fields, for example, there are four times as many fresh Ph.D.s graduating each year as there are job opportunities--the employment picture right now is grim.

Having said all that, however, we can add that there is demand in certain areas for students who have graduated from Christian liberal arts colleges: Concordia, for example, does give some preference to people with Lutheran or other Christian college backgrounds. So if you use your graduate training well, take advantage of all the teaching and research opportunities that come your way, and aren't too demanding about where you start teaching, you may improve your chances of finding a job after you receive your doctorate.

If you can establish a network of friends or other supporters you should be ready to grow in a graduate-school environment. It will be challenging, and maybe even painfully so at times, but graduate school might also be the best time of your life!

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Preparing for Graduate School

You should be preparing for graduate school in two ways: preparing for the application process, and preparing yourself to do well once you're there taking classes and learning. The most important piece of advice for both kinds of preparations would be that you should read and write as much as you can.

You can help yourself with all this reading by taking more courses than are required for the department's majors--you can take ten courses from the English department for credit towards graduation, two more than the eight-course requirement for the major, and you should also be reading and writing on your own during summer or in your free time during the school year.

Historical survey courses will most likely help you prepare for the G.R.E., especially the British block courses and the two courses in American literature, since the G.R.E. exam tends to focus on the traditional canon in Western literature. And you should apply for the departmental honors program, since the Honors Seminar will give you practice at the kinds of in-depth analytical projects that you will do --and will have to defend-- in your graduate study.

You should also take the department's courses in Literary Criticism, the Writing of Women, and Native American Literature as these will be important parts of the discussions that take place around you at the university.

Some extra-curricular activities at Concordia may also help prepare you for graduate study. Campus publications and the literary magazines give you important practice in writing and editing. Participating in film societies, literary groups, writing circles, and the English Club shows universities that you intend to be part of an intellectual community. Working in the Reading and Writing Center could help you get a teaching assistantship by demonstrating an established interest in and experience with helping people write.

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Selecting Schools to Which You'll Apply

You should spend time researching the particular strengths and emphases of different schools (i.e. Shakespeare studies, critical theory, nonfiction writing, pedagogy, etc.). Talk to your Concordia professors about their graduate school experience and seek their advice about selecting and applying to graduate programs.

You should apply to three levels of schools: (1) your dream school; (2) three or four middle-range schools; and (3) a backup school where you are sure you will be accepted. Spending two years in a Master's program at your backup school may not sound glamorous, but it will allow you to continue your schooling and should provide a basis for applying to Ph.D. programs later, if you wish to do that.

Obviously, you need to think about the costs of attending graduate schools, so you should definitely apply to schools where you have a chance of getting some kind of financial aid. The best kind of aid would be a teaching assistantship. T.A.'s are paid a small salary, often in addition to having fees for tuition waived, so this is a good deal financially; further, the experience you receive in designing and teaching courses will be invaluable. If you know that you do want to teach, it is this experience that actually makes a teaching assistantship better than a straight scholarship or fellowship--while these are prestigious, they do not give you any kind of practical experience, and the lack of teaching experience may hurt your chances of a job further down the line, no matter what the level.

Another factor in selecting schools to apply to would be your own interests. If you know that Stanford has a phenomenal program in 18th-century American poetry, and you want to spend your career teaching students about Phyllis Wheatley, you should apply to Stanford. You can learn about different schools' reputations in different areas by talking to professors about their own special areas of study. You might also spend some time looking at the library's holdings in your area of interest: check out some of the books, and if two or three of the studies strike you as really intriguing, you might apply to the school where that person is teaching. If you are pursuing graduate work in writing, read the works of writers at schools that interest you. You should be aware, though, that schools' reputations are based on a constantly changing makeup of faculty, so a school that used to have a great reputation in one area may no longer have the same people teaching there who built the reputation. Sometimes schools advertise visiting writers and scholars on their faculty who are not there when you arrive. Check current college catalogues for names of specific professors to double-check this kind of selection method.

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Applying for Admittance

Some of your selection decisions regarding where to apply will take place in the application process. Early in the fall semester of your senior year, you should write to graduate schools requesting materials for application (you can obtain the addresses for these letters from college catalogues in the library or by consulting the schools' websites). In your letter you should ask for detailed information about the kinds of programs offered at each school, the availability of financial aid (especially assistantships), and all the forms and information needed to apply for entrance to that school.

Most schools will ask you to pay an application fee of around \$30 to \$50; they should also give you clear indications of what their deadlines are for applying to different programs. For most schools, the application deadline is in January, although some have deadlines as early as December 15. This means that in October or November you ask professors to write recommendations for you, choose a paper to use as a sample of your writing, and make sure you know how to arrange for transcripts to be sent to different schools.

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The G.R.E.

You should also be preparing to take the Graduate Record Exam, both by signing up to take the exam and also by studying for the test. While not all schools require the exam for admission, with entrance into graduate schools becoming very competitive, many schools are using G.R.E. scores as a way to decrease the number of applications that they have to read. This is a bit ironic, since in theory most graduate schools as well as colleges--including Concordia--do not teach with the same kinds of emphases that the G.R.E. tests; the G.R.E. is much more traditional in its focus on the Western canon than many schools, again including Concordia. It is for this reason that you should prepare for the G.R.E. well in advance by taking historical survey courses and by doing independent reading. Because most schools have application deadlines in January, you should take the G.R.E. no later than October.

In some ways, it is impossible to study for the G.R.E., since it tests such a wide range of knowledge that you simply cannot "cram" the night or even the week before. You might be helped by reading through all of the historical introductions in your survey course anthologies, just to remind yourself of who wrote what in what era; you might also prepare outlines of historical periods, with names of prominent authors and texts of that era. The major benefit of such studying, however, will be to help you remember things you've already studied or read on your own at an earlier time.

You can prepare yourself for the test by looking at the department's book of sample questions. Included in this book is a short, timed section of questions that you can take, getting a sense of what kinds of things you'll be asked to do under what kinds of situations. You can ask the department secretary to lend you this book, which also contains hints on how to take the exam. The Academic Enhancement Center (Ivers 228) also has material that will help you prepare.

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Writing Sample

Besides taking the G.R.E. and arranging for transcripts and recommendation letters, you should prepare a paper or manuscript that you've written, to send to graduate schools as a sample of your work.

For students heading towards an M.F.A., you should send in your most creative, challenging, thoughtful piece(s) of writing; it would be wise to talk over your choice with a creative writing professor who is familiar with your work. In some cases, schools will ask you to send in a portfolio of your writing, so you should be ready to provide a number of different pieces, or varying approaches, for them to consider.

For literature majors, the best kind of writing sample would be a critical, analytical paper that is original in its approach to a specific topic; it should be a paper that uses sources but which is driven by a thesis that is clearly based in your own ideas about a text. If you are thinking of using a paper that you wrote for a particular course, it would be a good idea to ask your professor from that course to read through the paper once again, making suggestions for polishing or revision before you send it to the graduate school; the professor could also then give his or her estimate of how good a choice that paper would be as a writing sample.

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Campus Visits

If you can afford to do so, visiting the campus of a particular university, talking with professors who teach in that graduate program, and also talking with students currently in that program could be very helpful. This will give you a feel for the kinds of things the school is looking for; it will allow you to get ideas of what kinds of study might be possible at the school; it will show you the kind of atmosphere that exists at the place both in terms of scholarly expectations and in how comfortable you would be working, studying, and living there.

Campus visits might be useful at two different times. If you are fortunate enough to be accepted by more than one graduate school, campus visits can help you decide which invitation you would rather accept. But if you have not heard from a particular school, and you are able to visit that campus, an appointment with the department's director of graduate studies might give the department a chance to take a better look at yourself as a graduate candidate than it would have otherwise. Sometimes, in fact, such visits have made the difference between being offered a position and being passed over. If you make such a visit before you're offered a position, you should prepare for the visit as if it were an interview, so you should be ready to talk about the kinds of things you would like to study and your reasons for applying to their school. But also keep in mind that it really isn't an interview, and that people at the school might not be expecting your visit. If you are courteous but also firm in expressing your belief that you would be a good student in their program, you might be pleased with the outcome.

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Graduate School Programs

Here's a list of graduate programs often chosen by English majors and the kinds of jobs to which each might typically lead:

<i>Program</i>	<i>Typical Job</i>
Ph.D. (Literature, American Studies, Women's Studies, Folklore, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• teaching/research at college level
M.A. (Literature)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• editing• high school or junior college teaching
Ph.D. (Rhetoric)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• education work (consulting, research, etc.)• teaching at community college or high school• library work at university level (with an M.L.S.)• teaching/research in composition at college level• managing tutoring programs at college level
M.A. (Rhetoric)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• teaching in corporations, organizations• managing high-school, community, or corporate writing programs• work in tutoring programs at college level• business or technical writing

Ph.D. (Linguistics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching/research at college level • Biblical translation
Ph.D. (Creative Writing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching/writing at college level • writing for publication in journals • editing
M.F.A. (Creative Writing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching/writing at college level • writing for publication in journals • editing
M.A. (Creative Writing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • editing • high school or junior college teaching
M.F.A. (Drama/Acting)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching/drama production at college level • writing for publication in journals
M.F.A. (Journalism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • journalism • editing • writing for publication in journals
M.Ed. (Education)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching education at college level
M.L.S. (Library Science)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • library work

Graduate programs directly related to English skills: Seminary, Law School, Business School.

Graduate programs indirectly related to English skills: Medical School, Dental School, other pre-professional programs.

For additional information concerning the job market and graduate school for [Library and Information Science](#), click here.

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