

Futures for English majors:

a message from Professor Kenneth Gross, former director of Undergraduate Studies in English

In the spring of 2012, I sent inquiries to all former UR English majors in the Alumni Office's records, asking them to respond to three broad questions: First, what are you doing now, what is your work and life like? Second, how do you think your work in English at UR stayed with you, what tools has it given or memories provided? Lastly, what are you reading? I got close to two hundred responses, ranging from the class of 1949 to the class of 2011, many with detailed stories and reflections. The letters confirmed what we in the department have long known about the wide array of life and career paths our majors choose. They also made starkly clear certain things that many current and former majors shared—a love of the word, a deep pleasure in human language and a sense of responsibility to it, a confidence in their powers of expression, an appetite for reading and thinking about what they read, and patience in analysis. Those who responded spoke of their increased ability to take in other people's thoughts and to frame conversations, to imagine other people's perspectives and be open to diverse ways of thinking. Their experience in the major made them advocates and teachers as well as writers and communicators. And they made it clear that these are not static skills, but things that stay with them, always growing, always a resource, a source of pride and pleasure, enabling fresh discoveries and encounters. What they learned at UR kept them eager and able to learn new things later. This contributes to work of myriad sorts, and to people's ongoing lives as members of a family and a community.

Those responding to my letter included college and university professors, primary and secondary school teachers (in English, Music, Math, Special Education), writers of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, book and magazine editors, wide-ranging journalists, as well as authors of school textbooks and corporate speeches. There include research librarians at major universities, and successful consultants in communication, education, security, and business. There are those that had made their careers in the fields of psychotherapy, neurology, oncology, dentistry, obstetrics, and medical ethics. Some former majors are still in school, or have gone back for additional degrees. There are executives in the fields of advertising, marketing, artificial intelligence, music, and manufacturing, insurance underwriters, financial managers, risk analysts and systems analysts, engineers and software designers. Former majors include musicians, film-makers, and stay-at-home mothers; there are attorneys who have found their careers with private law firms and within state and federal government; there are literary agents, actors, and members of the clergy. One former major is the former US ambassador to Libya, one directed a center for the protection of abused children, one edits an important poetry journal in Los Angeles, another heads a research laboratory for the creative uses of technology, another started her own company making organic chocolate. As their stories made clear, the paths that people took toward these careers were not always simple. There was time taken for advanced degrees, changes of job, unexpected opportunities and difficult stumbling-blocks, and strange chances for renewal. What was striking was a sense of how much, through all of this, things that were part of their career as English majors stayed with them—specific skills and habits of mind, forms of imagination, appetites and energies, resources for the spirit.

And everyone had kept on reading and rereading books of a wild variety, new and old.

What follows is a selection of the letters I received. I will be varying these and adding responses as time proceeds, and the entire archive of responses will soon be available online:

COMMENTS FROM FORMER UR ENGLISH MAJORS:

I can't say enough about how my English degree has prepared me for life after college. At every job or internship interview I go to, the employers always say how they need someone who can write well. Outside of the fact that being well read helps you understand people and society better, the more technical skills of the English degree—close reading, editing, research, analysis, MLA citation format--has helped me get a job, and perform better at that job. I've worked for nonprofits, taught school, and now as I am transitioning to government work, I realize that the skills my employers value the most—simply the ability to communicate clearly--were all augmented by my time in my English classes. You also are more likely to be able to know the plot of almost every movie that comes out now.

Jamie Frank, '09, student in the MA program in Public Administration, Cornell University

Often, in law school, and in life generally, I have met English majors, who I quickly realized majored in English because they could read and the ability to read is technically the major/only qualification for a bachelor of arts in literature....Considering skills that still resonate: the most obvious answer is that rigorous reading and writing strengthened my mind, and made me a stronger, more analytical, and faster reader and writer. However, there is no single tool, in my professional life more important than the careful attention to narrative. It is a mistake, in my experience, to approach an explanation and consider only what is offered. When you read a story, when you hear testimony, the important questions are not only, *what are you telling me?* And *why are you telling me this?* But crucially *how you're telling me* most often reveals more than anything written or spoken.

Jenni Smith, '04, lawyer, hearing officer and arbitrator for public sector labor disputes, Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Being an English major in my view can be the foundation for many interesting, satisfying careers including that of a psychotherapist. The mysteries, dilemmas and processes of

the human condition and human relationships are much more thoroughly revealed and explored in good novels, plays and stories than in psychology textbooks and classes.

Sylvia Adler, '54, LCSW, psychotherapist in private practice

My time as an English major at U of R greatly contributed to what has been a very rewarding career so far. I didn't decide to become a teacher until late in my undergraduate career, and I'm glad of that, because my English degree gave me a stronger foundation in literature and writing than what I probably would have experienced by pursuing an English Education degree at a different institution. I have traditionally taught underprivileged populations, and have had mostly great success in instilling a love (or at least appreciation for) literature in students who didn't have one before. I have been able to pass on some of the passion for literature that was fostered in me by my professors at the U of R. Because I had a top-notch education that was also enjoyable, I have always striven to create that same kind of environment in my classroom. My professors were seldom dry or detached, and I have found that sometimes all you need to do to inspire others is to share your own excitement for the subject matter. Plus, being an English major at the U of R simply made me a better critical thinker. It taught me to excavate meaning from text, and now I try to do the same for others.

Angela Rice, '03, high school and college English teacher

My path to my current dream job was paved by early penury as I followed my passions, which usually paid more poorly than less-riveting work. This I definitely ascribe to my studies of literature because I absorbed the repeated messages of the price and value of personal transformation that lie at the core of so much storytelling. Whether they are meditative medieval tomes that warn of the importance of eschewing the world's riches and values for your soul's elevation or Flannery O'Connor's nimbly incisive dismissal of Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*: "Holiness costs, and they're not paying anything." I definitely credit (or blame) the literature I absorbed for planting the conviction that following your internal goals/passions/dreams is likely to cost you, but certain to be worth it in the end. So I initially worked for modest pay but maximal development as a medical social worker, manager of a poison center, technician in a cancer-center laboratory and a part-time classical announcer at WXXI-FM. I spent years as an editor at various national magazines and newspapers including *Consumer Reports* and *USA Today*. This was followed by fellowships at the Harvard School of Public Health, the National Center for Bioethics, Stanford University and three years as a Research Fellow in Medical Ethics at Harvard Medical School. Today, my award-winning work has been widely published in popular periodicals and newspapers from *Psychology Today* to *The American Scholar* to the *New York Times* and my books also have picked up national awards including the National Book Critics Circle nonfiction award and PEN award.

Harriet A. Washington, '76, writer, medical ethicist and MA candidate, Columbia University

At UR I learned to be resourceful and to engage fully in whatever resources I'm presented, though at the time it was primarily literature, and now it is competitive analyses, contracts and marketing materials. I learned to question things, to never stop pursuing the answers I seek. I learned that there may be multiple answers to a single question or multiple paths to a single answer. I credit many of my esteemed UR English Professors for opening my mind to these possibilities. I carry this with me today, and still thirst for knowledge, to broaden my contributions to my organization and to my customers.

Karin Cross-Smith, '90, Customer Satisfaction Executive, IBM Lotus Software

The skills we acquire as English majors (analysis, critical thinking, examining theories and ideas from multiple perspectives, asking probing questions, pursuing topics just because they're interesting, being creative) qualify us to have almost any kind of career we want... I've found that when you start thinking about things this way (that is, with more flexibility and adaptability), you start doing the very things business/accounting/more "practical" majors do anyway, but you bring more creativity, passion, wit, voice and insight to the job, so that you're making change, not just repeating what people have done before you. The aesthetic sense you develop as an English major will be invaluable in the work place. It will help you stop following and start leading. If you're driven and curious, you will pick up the nitty gritty skills that these other majors learn along the way.

Leah Kaminsky, '06, freelance marketing copywriter and educational consultant

At Illinois, I also made two adjustments in my career, and in some ways I cannot fully define I think my years at Rochester gave me the sense of intellectual adventure, the flexibility of mind and the confidence to make these changes. In addition to the literary and historical approaches to Shakespeare, I became interested in the theatrical side of the plays, which led me to study and teach the plays with a stress on what performance, stage history, adaptations had to tell us about those wonderfully inexhaustible texts. The second adjustment involved my Jewish identity. Although at Rochester I more or less ignored my religious life, in my late 30s and early 40s, I was drawn to Jewish secular literature and eventually became founder and director of a program in Jewish studies. To avoid becoming entirely schizoid, I focused my research on *The Merchant of Venice* and still find intriguing projects and problems to work on, love to teach the play, and often lecture on it to non-academics audiences.

Michael Shapiro, '59, Shakespeare scholar, Loyola University, Chicago

How has an English major made a difference: As a physician, probably the most important skill I learned as an English major was an appreciation of the human

experience. I apply the analysis of a character's motivation, relationships, conflict resolution, and issues of social class and race on a daily basis at work and in my personal life. I think the process of reading something like *Beowulf*, identifying themes, and explaining the story in modern language helped me develop as a communicator, such as telling the salient parts of a story or translating medical jargon to laymen's terms by using analogy and imagery.

Yvonne Sada, '01, M.D., Oncologist, currently working on a Master's in Public Health

My English degree has served me well. The ability to gather, process, organize, and communicate large amounts of information has proved invaluable. In business, these skills have translated into survival through creative innovation... In my personal life, my English training has made me a well-read, respected, informed voice, called upon for varied leadership roles. As an avid reader, it has allowed me to “go deep” into novels, non-fiction, theater, and numerous news sources. And as a parent, it has allowed my wife and me to raise intelligent, well-informed children.

Robert Miller, '77, Senior Vice President, National Spinning Co.

Majoring in English has been a huge contributor to both of my career paths. Obviously, studying literature was critical to my writing career. But it has also been vital to my work in business. I may be biased, but I've always thought that English is the best preparation for any career outside of the sciences. Virtually any endeavor – finance, marketing, law, social services, etc.— involves creating and interpreting texts or some kind. You are constantly expressing your thoughts, opinions or discoveries in words, and reading the thoughts, opinions and discoveries of others. Studying English, in addition to instilling a deep and lasting appreciation for the glories of literature, teaches you how to express yourself and how to interpret the expressions of others. You learn how to seek deeper meanings, subtle differences, obscure but important themes – and this is precisely what lawyers, politicians, business executives, Wall Street investors and others do every day. Critical reading sharpens the mind. And great thoughts are useless if they cannot be conveyed in a clear, compelling and credible manner.

Seth Margolis, '76, novelist and independent branding consultant

I think that the courses I took in the English Department continue to help me as a lawyer in several ways. First, the process of comparing and contrasting literature is an excellent foundation for the critical thinking involved in framing legal issues. I believe that an English degree also nurtures creative thinking which is especially helpful in the preparation and execution of jury trials. My course work gave me the opportunity to write about developing literary themes, character, archetypes, narration, voice, plot, and historical significance. Second, I find that in my practice the lawyers that distinguish themselves are most often able to express themselves orally and in writing. An English degree provides excellent opportunities to refine your formal writing skills. I was

fortunate to have had professors that provided valuable insight and made me a better writer.

David B. Frank, criminal lawyer

I was a double major in Health & Society and English, and my career path has involved multiple settings in health care. For the past 15 years, however, I have fulfilled multiple roles conducting and directing health services research efforts. In this work, my English background has been no less than essential, for two major reasons. First, health services research often involves detailed and meticulous synthesis of what *others* are saying about their work, and so a background in critical literature review and interpretation has proved to be indispensable. Second, I tell young health professionals and scientists all the time that great intelligence and breakthrough research are both useless without the ability to convey to a lay audience what these breakthroughs are and why they are important. The greatest scientists of our generation (Einstein, Hawking, etc.) were great in large part because they could explain the impact of their theories and observations to anyone, regardless of background or training. So, in my mind, to succeed in almost any profession, you need to know how to write.

Dan Ollendorf, '86, Chief Review Officer, Institute for Clinical and Economic Review

While I was working in Louisiana, I saw what happened when students didn't have the same access to literature as I did growing up. Sometimes in New Orleans it was because there weren't enough books, but most of the time it was because the schools hadn't given students the tools to understand the sparse literature they had. For me, teaching reading wasn't just about my students getting jobs or getting into college, but more about their being able to effectively communicate their experiences. They needed to learn to advocate for themselves. What UR's English department taught me was why those things matter.

Kristy Doot, '08, Ph.D. student in Curriculum Design

One of the major jobs for a pastor is to take a Scripture passage, analyze it historically, theologically, and literally, and then turn it into a sermon that is relevant to today's world. Our first task in our Biblical courses was to write an exegesis. This was always fraught with fear at first, but when I realized that in many ways I had already done this when I analyzed literature, I was at ease with the process.

Susan Storing Maybeck, '58, pastor and teacher of divinity

After graduation [from Columbia University Law School], I clerked for two federal judges, the first in Federal District Court in New York and the second in the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. During these clerkships I constantly wrote. Memos,

drafts of opinions, jury instructions. I debated and discussed and persuaded and failed to persuade the judges I worked for. The English classes I took at the U of R proved invaluable during these clerkships as well as in law school, and not only because of the analytical and persuasive writing skills I gained. Struggling, for example, with Joyce's *Ulysses* or other works requiring the reader to piece together vast amounts of information and form some coherence out of the stories of unreliable narrators or fragmented plotlines, gave me the patience to piece together the conflicting and incomplete stories underlying every lawsuit, and the ability to derive pleasure from this fragmentation and narrative unreliability.... When my second clerkship ended last fall, I took a position in the litigation department of a law firm in New York. While classes on Modernism, medieval Celtic literature, and Shakespeare's late plays may not seem to have any role to play when I work on lawsuits between two giant banks, the skills discussed above come into play every day. My willingness and ability to speak my mind and argue my point of view with other lawyers were honed in these classes at the U of R. The way you and the other professors encouraged us to question, and to speak and articulate our thoughts without worrying whether what we said was intelligent or profound helped form what I think is one my most important skills. When a law school professor, a judge, or a partner at the law firm asks me what I think, I have something to say. I am not sure I would have the same degree of confidence and curiosity were it not for the English classes I took.

Michael Cabin, '06, litigation lawyer

I have to watch a lot of movies and TV for work (and because I'm an avid consumer of pop culture). Having an English major made *Midnight in Paris* extremely enjoyable to watch for all the literary, some might say nerdy, references. All kidding aside, I think in a society and professional world that is becoming further and further integrated in social media and global communications having an English major is one of the most versatile majors available as an undergrad. I spend a lot of time now analyzing the best way to communicate ideas to my colleagues through emails and notes on cuts of our shows as well as how best to keep our viewers informed and interested in our projects through Facebook, Twitter, etc. It's surprising how many people I've met along the way lack a basic ability to communicate clearly and comprehend written information. All of the films I work on have a thesis that requires heavy research and analytic skills I developed writing countless papers during my English major coursework.

Kara Rozansky, '04, documentary filmmaker

A humanistic education entails empathetic consideration of different points of view — the conflicting testimonies of witnesses as each one speaks from his or her own place in the human condition.

Timothy Wright, '77, high school English teacher, legal secretary

When students ask what they can do with a particular degree, I think it sometimes betrays a more general approach to life, one which is always wanting to “get something out of it” rather than enjoy it for itself, and let it lead where it leads. Joseph Campbell’s dictum to “follow your bliss” was often followed by his commenting that doing so would likely lead to poverty at some point, but the serious soul has no other option. The utilitarian approach which demands everything have a use or a purpose runs, in my mind, counter to what the humanities (and the sciences as well) ought to embody: a curiosity, a search for new ideas, an excitement about possibilities, a willingness to shatter the old beliefs when better ones arise, and an openness to what is. Right now I am reading Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Lacuna*. I am ghost-writing the memoirs of Remi De Roo, our retired bishop who was the youngest bishop to attend all four sessions of Vatican II back in the sixties. He is 88 now and has a lot to say, but English is not his first language.

Diane Tolomeo, '70, English Professor, retired, University of Victoria, B.C.

I live in a world of technology and finance. I love telling people I have a degree in English. They always underestimate me. I manage a derivatives trading platform for a top-tier custodian bank. This probably would have sounded pretty dull to my 20-year old self but I assure you it's anything but. The world is a fabulously complex place and Wall Street will always challenge your assumptions about how it works. Like everything else, movies do not do it justice....Even the most arduous programming languages are rudimentary when compared to the range of a human language. I was out of school for a few years before I fell into technology but I remember being surprised by the visceral pleasure of writing code. Similar to the way your mind feels when you've read something exquisite or written a poem. From there, I worked my way into system design, system architecture, enterprise architecture and project management. Though I compete for jobs against people with advanced engineering, computer science degrees and MBA's, I have always had an edge when it comes to communication. And the deeper I move into my career the more critical it becomes.

Greg Juros, '88, financial manager

I learned from [my UR professors] not only to show enthusiasm for my profession but how to transfer that enthusiasm and caring to those whom I have dealt with in many countries over the years. They demanded perfection in writing and rigorous analysis, skills that have certainly contributed to the diplomatic dispatches I have had to write to State Department and White House decision-makers. Those cables had to be written carefully, ensuring proper research and opinion. They also required the requisite turn of phrase to keep readers interested. So whatever I have achieved, I attribute a great deal to those group of exceptional professors who brought characters to life and showed us the value of rigorous analysis and the joy of literature.

Eugene Cretz, '72, former United States Ambassador to Libya

I could go on and on, but to answer your second question about what has stayed with me from my UR studies, I can say unequivocally that the critical-thinking, writing and study-discipline skills taught to me (pardon the passive voice!) have made all the difference in my career and life. While I don't spend much time analyzing books these days, I constantly rely on and appreciate my education when it comes to presenting lectures, communicating with the incredible variety (culturally, academically, age) of students I have on a weekly basis, writing educational materials and being a (hopefully) thoughtful human being in a politically charged city. The high standards of work demonstrated by my professors and peers at UR have been and will always be a model for how I conduct my own teaching, what I expect from my students and how I attend to my artistic craft and daily life activities. Given the various educational environments I inhabit on a weekly basis, I first-hand understand how high the UR standards are by comparison and I am grateful for that education and experience.

Jonathan Kornfeld, '92, composer, music theory teacher, writer of music textbooks