

Polishing, grammar, usage

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After 12/10, the Polishing, Grammar, and Usage team should copy-paste the organized draft produced by the [Continuity](#) team into this page and begin the final polishing. This team should not only make sure that the finished essay adheres to rules of Standard English usage but also that the writing is crisp and clear. This team should look at the pages of the SUNY Geneseo writing guide on writing with [care and imagination](#) and on editing for [lucidity, simplicity, and directness](#). The page on [myths about good writing](#) may be helpful, too. Members of other teams should feel welcome to participate in the final polishing work as well. **If you see a way to make the essay better, jump in!**

Analyzing Details and Synthesizing Concepts

In "The Faceoff: Legitimacy of the English Major Questioned", Nick Yager makes the argument that the English major is less valuable than other majors because the major studies "merely the techniques and concepts of literature and to a lesser degree the ideas presented within literature" (Yager 1). Concerning the content that English majors study, however, value can be found in the unique combination of detailed literary analysis and the synthesis of themes presented in literature. An English major's course of study highlights the significance of the human experience as seen through the lens of ordinary people.

To state that the work of an English major entails "the [ability] to comprehend complex ideas from the works that they study and to infer meaning from the information they are given" is a gross oversimplification of the skills developed by English majors throughout their course of study (Yager 1). The English major does not simply identify important themes and ideas in works of literature, but instead deconstructs works of literature to their most detailed form through a methodical investigation that begins with analyzing individual words or phrase structures. An example of this practice can be found when looking at Helen Chasin's poem *The Word Plum*. She writes, "pout and push, luxury of/ self-love and savoring murmur... question/ and reply, lip and tongue/ of pleasure" (Meyer 463). By deliberately breaking up these phrases, Chasin makes the reader pause repeatedly for the next word of what should be a continuous thought. However the poem's structure is synonymous to her desire to savor the word plum, stopping momentarily in awe of its deliciousness. So too does Chasin make her readers pause while reading as their eyes skip to the next line, savoring the words of her poem. The ability to bring meaning to the structure of words in addition to the words themselves is one that English majors gain in their program.

The next step of the investigative process in which English majors engage broadens to themes discussed throughout the work as a whole. Techniques such as symbolism, personification, and parallel language are used to connect ideas within the entire text. English majors, through the repetition required to refine any skill, learn to recognize and employ these techniques to best understand continuity in narrative. In *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, the use of geographical language (i.e. movement or changes in setting) to indicate changes in Scrooge's emotional and mental state allows for a detailed but very important analysis. Dickens writes that Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Past "...pass through the wall, and stood upon an open country road, with fields on either hand. The city had entirely vanished... the darkness had vanished with it" (Dickens 51). Dickens indicates that Scrooge passes through an emotional wall as the Ghost takes him to the countryside, which begins his emotional journey. The methodical and detailed analysis of literature that is part of an English major's course of study is what leads to such complex and valuable observations about Dickens's novel.

Using the aforementioned in-depth analysis of literature, the English major can juxtapose the concepts and patterns of the works they study with the realm of the human experience and the models of life that literature creates. Dickens's use of geographical language throughout *A Christmas Carol* shows how humans experience real life as a journey where we are all constantly moving from place to place, physically as well as emotionally. Dickens reveals a parallel between the way we understand spatial language and the way we understand our own emotional journey. For example, Dickens writes of Scrooge's travel with the Ghost of Christmas Present "much they saw, and far they went, and many homes they visited" (Dickens 120). Through Scrooge's moral transformation, Dickens suggests that in order to become better people we must look beyond ourselves and see the world through the perspectives of others. Dickens does not mean that we should *physically* see the ways of others, like Scrooge physically sees. Instead, he uses geographical language to indicate that we must *emotionally* see and understand the ways of others. Without the methodical process that English majors practice, this valuable observation would have been passed over, and Dickens's use of geographical language would only have been noticed as a whimsical element of the story (such as when Scrooge flies). Even then, this notice would have been fleeting and uninteresting at best without the orderly practice of the English major. The reader would walk away uninformed about the novel's implications of humanity's view of life as a moving element, a journey.

English students study everything from the words on a page to those words' worldwide implications; they do not simply 'comprehend' these complex ideas, as Yager so quaintly puts it, but instead pull together their comprehensive analysis of a work to better understand the world as portrayed through these model systems called literature. When Yager presupposes "the content that an English major studies is merely the techniques and concepts of literature and to a lesser degree the ideas presented within literature," he vastly underestimates the amount of intellectual exertion that this work entails (Yager 1). In fact, his use of the word "merely" in this statement serves to discredit the "techniques and concepts" used by English majors to study literature in a methodical and detailed way.

Literature creates a model of life that engages with any abstract concept or concrete system in the world. English majors study how these models work or affect others and how readers should understand these models of real life using the process of orderly and methodical analysis. English majors form a practice – much like a medical or law practice – through the collective utilization of a constantly redefined vocabulary used to describe the investigation of literary art. English majors systematically investigate the world as seen through the eyes of ordinary people, first by looking at the details of the literary models provided and then by applying those details to the larger world. This unique combination of logical progression and holistic application makes the English major - and the literature it studies - so valuable.

In "The Educated Imagination", an essay by Northrop Frye, literature's important role in the world is discussed. Frye writes "literature's world is a concrete human world of immediate experience" (Frye 27-28). In other words, the world of literature is a world where the reader can intimately interact with an author's words, a world where the reader can explore a whole range of human emotions. Literature peers into the windows of ordinary human beings; it is the lattice through which we are able to see how and why the world operates on all kinds of different people. Through the author's words and characters, we find different interpretations of what it means to be human: how it feels to fall in love or lose a loved one, to meet our goals or come up short, what effects love, hate, joy, sorrow, jealousy, empathy, anger, fear and the myriad of other emotions can have on the fragile mind and body. English majors primarily study literature, but literature is a body of art beyond the tombs of centuries past. Every time we browse a book, every time we peruse a poem, every time we dissect a drama, we subsequently find ourselves gazing into the world of human experience.

English majors study how to analyze and interpret reflections of the human mind as conveyed through works of literature. Words are the instruments in the orchestra of this mode of self-expression, and the creations produced with them often reflect the author's own opinions, emotions, and ideas that he or she wishes to convey to the rest of the world. The English major prepares its students to not only engage with these creations but to understand the authors' implications behind the works as well. Literature therefore serves as the lens that English majors use to gaze into the realm of human experience, and it is through this lens that the English major distinguishes itself from all other areas of study.

A good example of the use of this lens can be found in "The Yellow Wallpaper", written by American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892. Gilman writes of her own experience as a woman in an oppressive and patriarchal society that limits her, mentally and socially. Through Gilman's writing, English majors are able to understand an ordinary woman's experience in 1892 – not simply through her character but also through the techniques she employs and the broad themes that connect her work. Gilman writes of the husband's attitude on his wife's imagination and metaphysical thoughts, "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (Gilman 1). In this one sentence, it is simple to see how Gilman feels oppressed and degraded by the men around her.

Gilman's experience with oppression in real life can also be understood through the narrator's view of the wallpaper throughout the piece. The narrator, when first stuck in the room she must stay in until she gets well, says of the wallpaper "It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide--plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions. The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow..." (Gilman 4). The narrator's view of the wallpaper continuously gets more horrifying until, at the end of the story, the narrator writes "All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!" (Gilman 16). Here Gilman is saying that the oppression of women is completely revolting at first glance and becomes more and more unbearable as time goes on. The character says to her husband at the end of the story, "...said I, 'in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back'" (Gilman 18)! Gilman is indicating that, by expressing herself on paper she has escaped from behind the wallpaper, and the thoughts she's written down can never be put back. Through the character's view of the wallpaper, the learned English major is better able to understand Gilman's experience as an American woman and writer in 1892.

Yager seems to feel that mathematical and scientific majors are more valuable in society today than English majors. However, English majors, with their learned capacity to think both critically and creatively through the content covered as part of their course of study, are able to connect critical methodical analysis with creative abstract synthesis. This pairing of skills is learned through analyzing the details in a piece of literature through the use of literary devices and by studying how narratives interact with the real world and each other. According to Yager, there is a great divide between the sciences and the humanities, the content they study, and the skills they develop. The English major, though, provides a valuable link between the methodical analysis of the sciences and the creative, abstract thinking of the humanities. The truth of the matter is that there needs to be more overlap between the analysis and synthesis studied almost exclusively by the sciences and humanities respectively, because the ability to think both critically and creatively is incredibly important to understanding the complex and interconnected fields that are becoming commonplace in our new working environments. The English major prepares its students for this environment by enabling them to explore the boundaries of their creativity while also reinforcing their ability to absorb and interpret fact-based information. It is a highly valuable limb of the body of academia, and its importance should not be discounted.