

# English Department Graduation Speech

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Hello. My name is John Borwick. I am graduating with a B.A. in English and a B.S. in Computer Science. Today I would like to speak to you to illustrate how useful our English majors are, how they have already helped someone like me in a technical field, and how our English majors have prepared us for the post-college world.

Though I entered NC State with only a declared B.S. in Computer Science, studying English has in many ways proven to be more valuable for me than computer science, and I expect that English will continue to be more valuable. I'd like to outline how an English major has helped me through three major points.

My first point is perhaps the most obvious point for the use of an English major: English has taught me to value and enjoy life.

I'll talk about the more career-oriented reasons for having an English major in a few minutes, but for me this point resounds the most. We have been encouraged to consider the key ideas of hundreds of amazing, thought-provoking writers who all write very well or we wouldn't be reading them. Our degree has demanded that we read the best and most beautiful works of the English language. With English, we have been encouraged to read, ponder, and come to class ready to discuss what we think. It is a rewarding pleasure in itself to feel that it is right and acceptable to sit outside under an oak tree and read poems by Walt Whitman. Without English, I would feel almost guilty for taking time out of my day to read. English has taught me that work can be fun and worthwhile.

An English major has also improved my quality of life by teaching me to apply what I've learned directly to my own life. When I took American Romanticism,

Professor West didn't teach us Emerson and Thoreau as abstract, academic models for prose and rhetoric. Rather, he asked us to reflect on their thoughts and question our daily routines. We talked about how "Walden" can shape our views of the world. We learned the theories, and then applied them to ourselves.

English has improved my quality of life by helping me understand and express nuanced emotions. The books and poems we have read give us a better understanding of how concepts like love, religion, and hope have developed. My idea of love has been refined by John Donne's flea and Hawthorne's mechanical butterfly. Professor Hunt taught me that the word "enthusiasm" didn't even exist in the English language before Spencer. By knowing how elegant, intelligent writers have been able to label and define their feelings, we can better comprehend, embrace, and magnify our future experiences and emotions.

Our ability to understand complex ideas leads me to the second, more practical point demonstrating the value of an English major: we have been prepared to understand and analyze never-before-seen thought, so we can adapt and learn.

Our required course on literary theory demands that we become familiar with interpretive strategies and apply them to texts. After being introduced to a new set of tools, like "narratology" or "deconstructionism," we are asked to think from that new perspective and analyze a piece of literature. That class teaches English majors how to listen, understand, change our perspective to suit the task at hand. With that sort of adaptability, we are ready for a variety of fields.

English courses help us adapt to new interpretive strategies, but also incorporate other disciplines like psychology, sociology, and political science. Our course

on “American Linguistics” could not go far without considering sociology. That same course on literary theory draws on psychoanalysis—from psychology—and Marxism—from political science. English has encouraged us to embrace a multi-disciplinary approach to our work.

The students in our English classes have also helped us understand and analyze thoughts from other disciplines, and teach us new, invigorating approaches. NC State’s diverse student body has afforded us the opportunity to sit alongside engineers, biologists, and architects. Our classmates from other fields of study approach problems from fresh perspectives we would not necessarily consider if only English majors took our English courses. Engineers can produce some spectacular science fiction writing! And biologists can help us understand the implications of an author’s reference to a particular flower or natural compound. Our fellow students have added to our knowledge and helped us become comfortable communicating to people in other fields.

Those students sit in our English classes for a reason. Computer scientists are told that we, as engineers, will only spend ten percent of our time at work doing engineering. The other ninety percent will be spent communicating with others. My third and final point is that we, as English majors, will excel because we have honed the most critical skill in the business world: the art of expressing oneself.

We all know how to write. Literature and writing classes alike have required us to express ourselves on paper. I had to write a three page paper about a single word for Dr. Holley’s course on Chaucer. When we’re asked to deliver a paper that concisely covers a topic, we can deliver a powerful, well-constructed argument

with a rhetorical effect that you can't get just by using a grammar checker.

We can communicate back to those students from other disciplines who take our classes. After we've understood other students' perspectives, we next must hone our skills of explanation to communicate our viewpoint to people without a background in rhetoric, literature, or creative writing. We have been able to contextualize references to Milton in a poetry writing course in such a way that students without that background can still understand us. We have been trained in the classroom to teach, and more impressively to teach to people with little background in the subject material. When we work as business leaders, professors, or poets, we will know how to share what we've learned with others; we will be experts in the most important component of our jobs: communication.

With that, let me express my congratulations and thanks to all of you today. The long nights spent reading, the hours struggling to finish an essay, the weekends spent on group work, and 120 some-odd credit hours have all paid off in a very tangible form today, for all of us. Thank you, professors, for your dedication to us. Thank you, family and friends, for your support and confidence in us. Thank you, fellow graduates, for your perseverance, friendship, and for representing NC State's best. Well done!