

The Brilliant English Undergrad Student – What Are We looking For?

emagazine went to some of our favourite writers and friends in the universities to ask them this question. We wanted to know more than just 'how does a student get an offer?' – rather what kind of person and student will do brilliantly on their course. Here's what they told us!

To Study English Literature

English Literature is a great discipline to read at university level. It obviously teaches you about literature; less obviously, it trains you in reading and bringing together lots of different material, in uncovering and articulating arguments and in persuading people to believe them. You don't need to have read the whole of English Literature before you come to university, but you do need to like reading, and to have an inquiring mind. You'll be interested in what other people think now, and what they thought in the past, and why they think (or thought) it. You'll have a desire to communicate with other people, both in writing and orally, and will enjoy arguing with others about what a text means. Paradoxically, the ideal student of English is the dissatisfied student, not the satisfied one: you'll be someone who values complexity, and who enjoys looking beneath the surface, to find other, more challenging meanings than might at first be apparent.

Professor Susan Bruce, Chair, University English & School of Humanities, Keele University.

Above all, we are looking for candidates who have an appetite for reading. This means reading beyond the A Level (or equivalent) syllabus. Within reason, it hardly matters what books the candidate has been reading, though variety (prose and poetry; modern and not-modern) is always encouraging. It is even more encouraging if one book has suggested another. You enjoyed studying Jane Eyre at school so you read Villette. Atonement was an interesting set text so you read two more Ian McEwan novels. You did a Keats poem in class so you got an anthology of Romantic poetry out of the library. You get the picture.

At UCL we still interview most promising candidates and this gives us the chance to probe the extent of a candidate's reading. In most cases, however, you will be judged on your UCAS form and will have to reflect your reading in your Personal Statement. You should use this to let the Admissions Tutor know about your literary enthusiasms. If you don't have any, perhaps you should apply for a different subject.

Professor John Mullan, UCL.

We're looking for readers. Not just people who love reading – that's good, but it can be a bit gooey. Our students are people who read and reflect on what they read, ask questions about it, and enjoy it more, not less, when they have discussed and dissected and analysed it. Our undergraduate curriculum ranges from the earliest literature in English to the present day, and across different genres,

so we are looking for people with the appetite to read widely. There's loads you won't have had the chance to explore yet, but try to show us that your tastes and interests are already expanding. Ask teachers, friends or family for recommendations, look at lists of 'great books', read laterally from your set texts, perhaps something else by the same author, or something that influenced them, or something influenced by them.

Sometimes people ask about how they should prepare for an English interview at Oxford. The answer is simple. Do what you already do – reading, and thinking about it. If you don't already do that then think seriously about alternative degrees – you won't really enjoy ours, and enjoying your university degree is really important. If you do – give us a go.

Professor Emma Smith, Hertford College, Oxford.

At Leeds Beckett University we encourage students to think broadly about texts and their contexts, as well as the changing nature of English Literature in the 21st-century world. At open days and applicant days we speak to students about the kind of texts they enjoy, those they find challenging, and what they are looking forward to studying at university level. We welcome students who are interested in reading literary texts, but who are also interested in thinking critically about them, being innovative and interpreting texts for themselves, and being collaborative in discussing texts and working with others to understand them. Literature is all about a global outlook and dialogue, so prospective students would be well placed to focus on communication skills and what they can gain from speaking not only with tutors and lecturers, but with fellow students too.

Dr Katy Shaw, Principal Lecturer in Contemporary Literature, School of Cultural Studies and Humanities, Leeds Beckett University.

If you are studying literature you have to enjoy reading, because that's the main thing you'll be doing. And you have to enjoy communicating – talking, writing, joking, arguing and trying to say what you think about writers and critics. You have to be willing to take intellectual risks, to try new texts, new approaches and to be open-minded about new possibilities. You have to be keen to study independently. English students don't go to labs all day: instead, with support from their tutors, lectures and seminars, they read, explore, research by themselves or in small groups.

Finally, an odd thought: in education, there can sometimes be a tension between, on the one hand, the concrete objectives of obtaining skills and qualifications, and, on the other, a more intangible but still real sense of individual and communal betterment. English is right at this point of tension because it is about deeply significant things – personal response and experience, beauty, passion, interest, otherness, community, delight – which are all really hard to pin down for an exam. Being a literature student involves 'living through' this tension, to find, ideally, ways in which it is productive: where, say, your passion for a writer leads you to do your very best, most interesting work.

Professor Robert Eaglestone, Department of English, Royal Holloway, University of London.

To Study English Language or Linguistics

In the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University, we look for students who are, first and foremost, curious about language in all its manifestations, and open to learning how to study language from many different perspectives and in different ways. We hope that students will come already equipped with some knowledge about linguistic analysis, but we introduce all concepts and terminology from scratch in the first year. Knowing more than one language is useful but not

essential. More importantly, we expect students to be able to express themselves clearly and fluently in both writing and speech, so that, with some academic skills support, they can do well both in written assignments and oral presentations. We also hope that our students will be able and eager to learn independently as well as in class, and be willing to take on new challenges, such as how to use computer-aided methods for the study of language. By and large, we find that our students do possess these qualities, so that they thrive while studying with us.

Professor Elena Semino, Department of Linguistics and English Language, Lancaster University.

At Reading, for our BA English Language, we're looking for students who are passionate about studying the subjects we teach. This means they have looked carefully at the programme specifications and information about our Department and our programmes available through our web presence (university and UCAS web pages, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, etc.), been to visit us on campus, and have chosen Reading because what we do here really fits well with their interests. We focus not only on developing students' abilities to describe the technical, nutsy-boltsy bits of language – grammar and phonetics/phonology – but also on how people are using the English language and how it constantly changes and develops because of that, whether that be in UK language and society, online, as a developing system in children or learners of English, or as a global language in a multilingual context. We want to see students demonstrate a fascination with one or more of those areas in their personal statements, supported by the person writing the school or college's statement. An interest in languages in general is also a good thing. Grammatical and/or spelling errors in personal statements do not go down well; we are looking for well-written, articulate statements, showing a good knowledge of English language usage.

Professor Jane Setter, Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics, University of Reading.

I love Open Days for prospective students, because I always have the pleasure of meeting kindred spirits. How will I know you're a kindred spirit if I meet you at an Open Day? You will be interested in 'language' on a number of levels, from the big picture ('is language what makes us human?') to small details ('why did she use that word, not another?'). You will relish the prospect of getting 'stuck in' to language analysis by starting from the data and seeing where it leads, but you will also appreciate the power of scientific method, formulating and testing hypotheses. You may well have studied (or wanted to study) a combination of arts and (social) science subjects, perhaps with a language in the mix. If you are doing English Language A Level you'll be someone who is open to going both wider, studying new aspects of the structure and use of the language, and deeper, tackling more complex questions and handling data with increasing precision. Since language permeates every aspect of our world, as a student of English Language and Linguistics at university, your subject matter will be all around you all the time.

Dr Sam Hellmuth, Department of Language and Linguistic Science, University of York.

Since a key aim of our programmes is to help students change, the first thing we are looking for in new undergraduates is the potential to develop while working on the programme.

Naturally, we hope students will be fascinated by the linguistic, literary and creative ideas we explore. One aspect of this is the curiosity to ask new questions. If noticing one thing which interests you leads naturally to asking more questions about it, you will be in a good position to develop new and interesting projects.

Another key quality we aim to help students develop during the programme is independence. In English programmes, students take charge of their own learning and development. Reflective work throughout the programme helps students to develop confidence, to think explicitly about skills and knowledge they already have, and to plan to develop them further.

The final quality I've chosen to mention here is creativity. While work on language and literature has to be systematic and well-organised (particularly since it involves moving away from fairly impressionistic everyday assumptions) students need to be creative in all of their work and not only in creative writing and communication. Students constantly surprise us and this is often because they can think about things in new and unexpected ways.

Billy Clark, Associate Professor in English Language and Linguistics, Middlesex University

To Study English with Creative Writing

We are looking for students who are curious about their surroundings in all its richness of detail and colour, its beauty and its ugliness – the city, the country (other countries), buildings, trees, the sky, pubs, clubs, school, college and the streets and parks they inhabit. We want them to pay attention to and write about the people in their lives, past and present. This would include their childhood memories, their families and their friends. We want them to inhabit their experiences more fully so as to find complex and vivid ways to use them in their writing. We hope they will want to write stories and poems that express strong and honest emotions, without resorting to clichés.

Integral to our approach, is the peer-assessment of students' writing in the workshop. We hope students will enjoy and benefit from the process; contribute sensitively and listen carefully to the suggestions offered by members of their group and by lecturers. We would like them to respond to, and be inspired by, the varied examples of literature we hand out for discussion in the workshops. A selection, we hope, that will open their eyes to the importance of structure, control and restraint in good writing.

Ardashir Vakil, Programme Coordinator, Goldsmiths College, University of London.

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