

Introducing English Studies
Introduction: Screencast Transcript

Slide 1 [Title slide]

Hello. I am Tonya Krouse, co-author of the textbook *Introducing English Studies*, and in this screencast, I will talk about “How to Make the Case for English Studies.” As most students of English know, people often question the value of our discipline or wonder about whether it is a good thing to study. In this short presentation, we aim to give you the tools to explain English Studies to the people you encounter.

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Topics in this presentation include one, common misperceptions about English Studies, two, the crisis in the humanities, three, skills to develop through English Studies, four, making the most of your English Studies training, five, pairing English Studies with other disciplines, and six, how to answer the classic question, what are you going to do with that?

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Perhaps the most common misperception the general public has about English Studies is that it is a “useless major” or that it does not prepare students for remunerative work. Nothing could be further from the truth. The idea that English majors can’t find work after graduation is wrong. In fact, according to a 2018 report from Burning Glass Technologies, English majors have less risk of underemployment – or working at a job that does not require a college degree – than majors in Business, biology, or health professions. This data matters because research shows that people who start off underemployed tend to stay that way, and it means that they earn less over the course of their working lives than do their peers who were able to use their degrees.

Another common misperception about English Studies is that those who study it will earn much less money than those who pursue training in other fields. This is also inaccurate. While it is true that English majors may have lower starting salaries for their first jobs out of college than those in, say, computer science, career earning potential is very good. According to a survey by Glassdoor.com, English is in the top 25 of highest paying college majors, coming in ahead of journalism, psychology, social work, biology, and more. People are also often surprised to learn English Studies teaches students marketable skills that are relevant to problem-solving, life, and work in the twenty-first century. While English majors may write poetry and analyze fiction, they also learn those soft skills that employers say lead to successful employment and career advancement. According to Google’s analysis of employees in their Project Oxygen and Project Aristotle, the most important predictors of employee success were communicating and listening well, being a good critical thinker and problem-solver, and being able to make connections across complex ideas – all skills that training in English Studies Teaches.

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Many of the misperceptions that the public holds about English Studies connect to what people call “the crisis in the humanities.” According to the Stanford Humanities Center, “the humanities can be described as the study of how people process and document the human experience.” Disciplines that are typically associated with the humanities include English Studies, history, and philosophy, among others. Since at least the 1980s, commentators have talked about a crisis in the humanities connected to alienation of the public from the work of humanities disciplines and increased emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math fields as essential to competing in a global marketplace. Not only have critics challenged the usefulness of humanities study but also they have suggested that humanities study excludes people with conservative values or political beliefs.

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The best answer to public misperceptions about English Studies and the best way to combat perceptions about the crisis in the humanities is to communicate in concrete ways about the skills of an English Studies education. Students of English learn, one,

- Rhetorically sensitive written and oral communication
- Proficiency in practical applications of technology, including familiarity with word processing and spreadsheet software and effective document design using that software
- Research and analytical skills that facilitate informed and sophisticated problem solving
- Creativity and intellectual risk-taking for meeting the challenges and complexity of life in the twenty-first century
- Appreciation of language, literature, and diverse perspectives about the human experience

This list clearly has relevance in twenty-first-century civic and professional life.

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But being aware of and able to talk about skills isn’t enough to convince some audiences. Students of English can best prepare themselves to answer critics by making the most of their English Studies training. How can you do that? First, Step out of your comfort zone. Take classes with a range of professors and in a range of fields in the discipline. This flexibility will serve you as you meet complex working environments after graduation.

Second, get practical experience through internships, co-ops, or research opportunities that allow you to practice what you are learning in coursework. Experiences like these offer evidence that you have learned those skills that you talk about.

Third, students succeed who get involved with leadership opportunities that allow you to hone your written and oral communication skills. These might be opportunities in the workplace, on campus, or in community organizations, and they allow you to translate what you’re learning in the classroom to the real world.

Finally, to make the most of training in English Studies, you should package your major with additional training in a complementary minor that creates a pathway toward your future goals and sets you apart from other students of English.

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Choosing a complement of courses outside the English major can differentiate you from the pack, whether you are applying for graduate school or applying for jobs. Taking just a course or two, a minor, or an additional major, can help give your training focus and prepare you for the future.

- Identify something that interests you outside of English Studies.
- Think about what you would like to do after graduation.
- Articulate a “Plan B.”

Life throws us many curve balls, and considering how English pairs with science or medical fields, business and marketing, technology, another language, or another humanities field can give you more options.

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In the end, people in your life might ask you how you will use your training in English Studies and they may imply that you have chosen a worthless degree. When they do that, you might feel defensive. However, instead of getting defensive, get positive! Invite those people to learn about English Studies.

- Address the misconceptions about the discipline, and explain the facts.
- Talk about the skills you’re learning in English Studies and how they translate to success.
- Get specific about your goals and dreams, and talk about how you are combining your English Studies training with training in other disciplines to forge a pathway to a bright future.