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Studying English

A Guide for Literature Students

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with Jonathan Beecher Field



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A note for students

Why English? You'll have your own reasons: perhaps you've always loved reading, thinking and talking about your favorite books and writers; perhaps you're attracted to the range and infinite variety of the subject; perhaps an English course is a requirement. You'll want to find your study stimulating and satisfying, and you'll want to get good grades. This book can help. Because if you know *why* a subject is the way it is, if you have a sense of the bigger picture, an idea of what's going on more widely, a subject is easier to understand, more enjoyable, and you become better at it. And this "why" is what *Studying English* is about. The book seeks to orient you in English by explaining some basic concepts, showing why they are important and by giving you the background knowledge to explore new ideas. It discusses the often unspoken links between courses you take and their relevance to wider debates about literature. And if you want to know what practical skills you're learning from studying English, that's here too.

Studying English does this by looking "behind the scenes" of the subject. The book will give you a sense of the arguments and developments that took place "backstage", and are still going on, and how these shape your course of study. This, too, will offer you some insight into why English faculty teaching and research interests are the way they are. We hope this backstage view will lead to different kinds of conversations and debates about literature and how it is understood. This might mean coming to appreciate multiple views of the same novel or poem or seeing why you may be required to take a course

on Shakespeare for your English degree while your friend from high school majoring in English at another university does not.

Informed and engaged discussions of literature and ideas continue beyond college, and, of course, with people who did not choose the English major. The ability to discuss and debate words and ideas is not only important and pleasurable in its own right, but it's also crucial to the world of work now and in the future. More, while it is not a requirement for citizenship, this ability is necessary for an informed citizenship. The skills one learns as an English major are crucial for the future of democracy. So, when your engineer friends ask what you can do with a BA in English (and they will), you can not only point out the crucial skills you are learning (and perform them through argument!) but also show that you are playing a vital role for democracy.

Overall, we hope that this book will enrich your growth as a student of literature: helping you to get higher grades and, more significantly perhaps, to develop a deeper understanding and enjoyment of the work that you do in college. Please feel free to let us know how it worked out for you.

JBF & RE

A note for professors

This book was written to be of direct use to your teaching: indeed, *Studying English* had its origins in the experience of teaching. Students, reading literature, criticism and especially reading theory, and sometimes struggling, demanded to know *why* they were reading this or that particular text. I discovered (rather obviously, in retrospect) that when I explained *why* they were studying this text or topic, *why* this cluster of ideas was important, they found their study significantly easier, more enjoyable and they did better.

In exploring the “why”, in trying to look backstage, *Studying English* openly addresses an awkward but well-recognised aspect of the subject. In some ways English seems outside the institution of education: the study of literature is about an array of things that are deeply significant but hard to pin down or test: personal response and experience, passion, interest, exploration, otherness, community, delight. In other ways, of course, as one of the most popular and often required academic subjects, it is very much within that institution. In education in general, there is a tension between the concrete objectives of obtaining certificates, degrees, skills and qualifications, on the one hand, and, on the other, a more intangible but no less real sense of personal and communal betterment. In English, with its complex relationship to the institution of education, this very real tension seems at its most obvious. “Will this be in the test?” can irritate the teacher, while the ambiguities of literary meaning and a lack of clear authoritative answers can irritate the student.

However, this book seeks to go beyond this tension by explaining to students why English is taught and studied the way it is: its focus is on what

some educationalist call *metacognition*. Roughly, this means know you are doing and why: knowing this not only makes you better at doing it, it makes it more rewarding and pleasurable too. Understanding the wider context helps focus the more specific learning which is taking place. Metacognition is crucial for making students informed, independent learners who can make connections and develop interests for themselves in their education.

Of course, this sort of overview of English is both challenging and problematic. There is little general consensus about the aims, approaches, purposes or even material to be studied: English characterised by dissensus, in fact. More, English is a fissiparous and quickly-moving academic field (some of our colleagues in other disciplines find this “faddish”: but it might equally well be seen as “responsive” or even “responsible”). And students often take a range of electives with no central core and only limited links between those courses. But this book aims to take up precisely this challenge, in an introductory and not too programmatic way.

This is why the book spends a little time explaining how the history of the discipline shapes its palimpsestic, confusing and often contradictory present: how and why it became what it is now and what this actually means for students of English (chapters 2 and 3). The book then introduces the idea of an open-ended and fluid “disciplinary consciousness,” describes how this is learned as a process (chapter 4) and then outlines some general critical attitudes (roughly, formalism and historicism, in chapter 5).

Central to the book is the idea of “thinking as a critic.” Just as a mathematician (obviously) doesn’t learn all the (infinite) answers to all the (infinite) mathematical problems but ways of thinking about and solving them, and just as a geographer learns to think about space and locations in certain specific ways, so English teaches students to think “as” critics. This may once have been but is no longer a sort of monolithic, fixed identity: rather it is a mobile, developing sense of a range of questions and ideas about the literary, widely defined, and, again, is characterised by dissensus. Learning to “think as a critic” is a process, which is why the second part of the book introduces longstanding debates and disagreements which have shaped the discipline and how it thinks: over value and the canon (chapter 6), understanding Shakespeare (chapter 7), authorial intention (chapter 8), figural language (chapter 9), narrative (chapter 10) and creative writing (chapter 11). In each case, the book explains why these are important and controversial. Arguments around these topics, often made implicitly, play a central part in English, and it’s important that students know about them and what the stakes are.

The book stresses throughout how contentious English is as a subject, a chapter 12 addresses the often stormy relationship between English, identity and politics. The final chapter focusses directly and explicitly on debates over instrumentality in English and on the skills that English can teach students for the workplace: that is, it robustly answers the Gradgrindian question “What use is a major in English?” while showing why that question is itself contentious.

Studying English is designed to work as a primer or as pre-course reading, so that your students enter your seminars or lectures with the confidence and knowledge which allows them to understand and contextualise what they are studying and why. But it is also designed to be read as shorter pieces which can easily be integrated into your more focussed teaching. It can be applied to a variety of courses as it uses a broad variety of examples from literature and culture, and aims to be accessibly written. The book is short and the topics contentious. Tensions between your views and the text are inevitable but, perhaps, these may set the stage for your own interventions.

The discipline of English, of course, faces some challenges, although the situation is not as bleak as some paint it, perhaps. But at its best, it is a subject that can form responsible, knowledgeable, thoughtful, literate and highly-employable individuals who retain a life-long passion for literature and culture. This book, in introducing the subject to students and explaining why it is the way it is, seeks to play some part in this.

JBF & RE

Studying English

- Who is this book for?
- What is it for?
- How to use this book

Who is this book for?

This book is about *why* and *how* we study English. It aims to explain key ideas about the subject called English and the study of literature in general. If you are studying English literature either as a major or minor at a college or university or in AP classes in English in high school, this book is for you. In fact, whatever literature course you are taking, this book is not only an ideal stepping-stone to higher education but also an introduction to significant new questions and ideas about English and literature of all periods.

English often seems very different from other subjects. It isn't just that reading literature is (usually but not always!) pleasurable. More than that, in English, knowledge is made through the experience of reading and isn't simply passed down from authorities. And that form of knowledge, too, can't be easily explained. Knowing that a story moves you deeply is certainly a form of knowledge but a hard one to write about for a test. Indeed, the result of studying literature can be unpredictable, not least because, when we read,

our own experiences and imaginations – our own lives and communities inevitably bought into the class or seminar. English, like the experience of literature, is bound up very closely with how we live, how we are with others, with ethics. It's a strange subject, then, partially within the systems of education (you have to pass tests) and partially outside (it's about who and how you are). This is part of the reason that students find themselves drawn to it (and, perhaps, that some don't like it). This book aims to explain why this is. Moreover, as I'll show later in the book and centrally in chapter 13, English teaches vital skills and broadens capacities for life and for work.

Even though English is probably the most popular arts and humanities subject, perhaps rather surprisingly there isn't a clear answer to the question, "What is English?" To say that it is the study of literature, analyzing writing or simply reading novels, poems and plays and then thinking and writing about them doesn't really answer the question. What does "learning about literature" or "studying English" actually mean? What ideas does it involve? Why do it one way rather than another? Why do it at all? People usually begin "studying English" without thinking about *what* they are doing in the first place and, perhaps more importantly, *why* they are doing it. The answers to these questions are vital because they shape what you actually do and how you react to the literature you study. And because the study of English is "half in and half out" of the normal processes of education, these questions are all the more complex.

Teachers of English at all levels in education have had long and tortuous debates (and even so-called "culture wars") over these questions – over what the subject is and how to study it – but these debates have rarely been explained to you, the person who is actually studying English, even though they affect your assessments, papers and projects, as well as what and even how you read. Some people think the ideas are too complex for students beginning to study the subject: I disagree. I think lots of questions about English (such as, "Is there a right answer?" or "Why are we doing this?" or "Why is it called English?") crop up right at the start. *Studying English* aims to explain these ideas and show how they influence you.

Why is it important to know about these ideas? John Hattie, an expert in education, undertook a huge "study of studies," covering some 80 million (!) students over many years. He argues that what he called "metacognition" – he means, roughly, "knowing what you are doing" – is crucial to improving a student's work. This makes sense: I believe that if you know *why* you are studying something, the subject becomes easier to understand, and you become better at it. In English, this means what helps you to do your best is

not just knowing the texts but knowing *what* you are doing with them a *why*. Moreover, these ideas are interesting and important in their own right

This book is shaped by four core ideas about English.

One: Reading is active

First and most important is the idea that reading is an *active process*. It can seem passive – you often do it sitting or lying down, after all – but it isn’t a natural process; it doesn’t just happen. Reading is a *dynamic act of interpretation*. And knowledge is made through the experience of reading and can’t simply be “poured into you,” as if it were water and you were a bucket. This means that “reading” and “interpreting” mean almost the same and you’ll see I use the words almost as synonyms in this book.

When you interpret, it means that you find some things important and not others or that you focus on some ideas and questions and exclude others. You bring your ideas, your tendencies and your preferences – *yourself* – to reading a book, hearing a poem, seeing a play, watching TV or a film or looking at social media on a screen: your interpretation is shaped by a number of *presuppositions*. These are the taken-for-granted ideas and preferences you carry with you, and you always read through them, like glasses that you can’t take off. On a surface level, your interpretation is affected by the *context* in which you read and by the *expectations* you have of the text. For example, if you read a novel about the Civil Rights Movement for a history project, you’ll think about it differently than how you would if you read it for entertainment. At a deeper level, your view is shaped by your presuppositions about yourself, other people and the world, presuppositions you may take so much for granted that you might not even realize you have them. At this level, everyone has different presuppositions because – simply – everyone is different, to a greater or lesser degree, and have been shaped by different experiences. People from different backgrounds, sexes, sexualities, religions, classes and so on will be struck by different things in any text. And everything you have read and experienced previously affects how you interpret everything you read now. This idea can be summed up by saying that everyone is “located” in the world. Some people argue that your interpretations will always be constrained by these presuppositions; others think that you can escape them. Whichever is the case, you can think about and analyze them.

All this means that *no interpretation is neutral or objective* but has to be argued for and explained. And it means that *how* we read is as important as

what we read because our presuppositions to a great degree shape the meanings we take from literature. Part of the aim of this book is to explore the impact of this rather obvious but often forgotten idea that texts are interpreted. This book also aims to make us think about our presuppositions and how they shape how we read.

It is because of the importance of interpretation that I have used the word “text” regularly throughout this book. Apart from being shorter to write than “novel, poem or play,” it emphasizes that reading is an act of interpretation – texts are things that are interpreted. The word “text” also makes it clear that it’s not only literature that is interpreted; so are people’s actions, television, music and posts on social media, for example. News is interpreted both when it is watched, heard or read and when it is put together by journalists.

Two: English is a discipline

Second, and stemming from this first idea, is that, although English can seem as if it is just reading books, it is a subject or, more formally, a *discipline*. All educational disciplines and perhaps all forms of knowledge grew from very basic human activities. Chemistry grew from cooking and making clothes (dyes and so on). Geometry means “measuring the earth,” vital for early farming societies. Creative writing and criticism both come from listening to stories and poems or watching dramas – interpreting texts – and then responding by asking questions and talking about them, as well as writing about them in different ways. Moreover, every discipline is made up of the questions it asks of the material it has chosen as its subject: originally, practical questions (“What to mix together to make red dye?”); then, slowly, more abstract questions (“How does the process of dyeing actually work? How do the different substances involved react to one another and change?”). Similarly, acts of interpretation lead pretty quickly to quite complicated questions, ideas and debates (including debating what might count as literature and what might count as an interpretation). These sorts of ideas have come, through complicated histories, to form the discipline and shape what we do in English today. I look at those histories in chapters 2 and 3 because, even though these ideas are often “below the surface” and rarely discussed with students, they still shape how English is taught and learned. It can be a bit of shock to think of reading and talking about books, and so about ourselves and others, in terms of being a discipline. But English is a discipline that has spent a long time thinking about precisely this: it is a discipline that thinks about its own nature as a discipline, precisely because

“Designed to help the student ‘think like a critic,’ Eaglestone and Field’s new book *Studying English* will also help them enjoy the process. Student their professors – should celebrate the arrival of a book that will make their lives easier, more efficient, and more productive.”

Geoffrey Harpham, *Professor of English, Tulane University, USA*

Clearly focused on the needs of students, Robert Eaglestone and Jonathan Beecher Field have revised the best-selling *Doing English* specifically for English literature courses in America.

Studying English presents the ideas and debates that shape literary studies in America today. This overview of the discipline explains not only *what* students need to know, but *how* and *why* English came to be the way it is. This uniquely comprehensive guide to the subject gives students the background they need to understand and enjoy their studies more fully.

The book covers arguments about criticism and theory, value, the canon, Shakespeare, authorial intention, figural language, narrative, writing, identity, politics and the skills that you can learn from English for the world of work.

In a clear and engaging way, Robert Eaglestone and Jonathan Beecher Field:

- orient you, by exploring what it is to study English in America now
- equip you, by explaining the key ideas and trends in English in context
- enable you to begin higher level study.

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