The English program at Bowdoin has several objectives: to give a rigorous training in clear writing, complex and convincing argumentation, and close reading; to teach how literature has shaped and been shaped by many different historical and cultural experiences; to provide a sense of the long sweep of the history of writing in English from medieval to contemporary times; and to introduce students to a variety of current critical and theoretical approaches to literature, enabling them to challenge or rethink cherished assumptions.

The department as a whole strives to balance classic and emergent literary traditions and to blend literary pleasure with rigorous interpretation. The curriculum includes courses on Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton alongside courses on modern Irish literature, African-American poetry and fiction, and Asian-American literature. Faculty teach literature from a number of perspectives, including those of historical scholarship; contemporary creative writing; psychoanalysis; theories of race, gender, and sexuality; and the legacies of colonialism. While techniques vary, all courses presuppose that interpretation is in itself a creative act.

The department has a significant place in the College’s life, offering many courses in conjunction with interdisciplinary programs (such as gender and women’s studies, Africana studies, gay and lesbian studies, and environmental studies) and sustaining strong ties to film studies and theater. The department conceives of its teaching not in isolation but in the context of its connection to many related disciplines, taking full advantage of the idea of a liberal arts education.

The English and American Literature Curriculum

The major requires a minimum of ten courses, including one first-year seminar or introductory course, either of which serves as a prerequisite to further study in the major. At least three of the ten courses must be chosen from offerings in British and Irish literature before 1800 (only one of which may be a Shakespeare drama course and only one of which may be a Chaucer course). At least one course must be chosen from offerings in literature of the Americas. Each student must also take at least one advanced seminar. When appropriate, students may count this seminar toward a requirement described above.

Remaining courses may be chosen from first-year seminars, creative writing courses, independent study/honors courses, and other mid-level and advanced courses offered by the department. Of two courses outside the department that may be counted toward the major, one may be an upper-level course in film studies. No more than three courses may come from the roster of first-year seminars and other introductory courses, and not more than one creative writing course may be counted toward the major or minor. Courses in expository writing, journalism, and communication are not eligible for major or minor credit.

The department also strongly encourages its majors to study a foreign language. Credit toward the major for advanced literature courses in another language may be arranged.

The minor in English and American literature requires five courses, including one first-year seminar or introductory course, and at least three courses at the 200 level or above.

The English and Theater Curriculum

The interdisciplinary major in English and theater focuses on the dramatic arts, broadly construed, with a significant emphasis on the critical study of drama and literature. In the past, students undertaking self-designed majors have explored the works of a specific playwright or pursued performance studies while researching the literature of a specific culture. This major allows interested students of English and theater to blend introductory and advanced course work in both fields, while maintaining some degree of flexibility in the focus of their work. For more information and departmental requirements, see the College Catalogue.
Independent Research and Honors

Independent study in the department provides qualified students with the opportunity to work closely with a member of the faculty. In this context, students may pursue topics in greater depth and detail than is possible in a course setting, or may focus upon a writer, text, or group of texts not specifically covered in the existing curriculum.

A student who is a candidate for honors must write an honors essay and take an oral examination in the second semester of his or her senior year.

Resources and Facilities

The Department of English is located in the College's first building, Massachusetts Hall, which was built in 1802 and is now a Registered Historic Landmark. Students in the department take full advantage of current technologies, especially the MLA International Bibliography online database, for critical materials on modern language, literature, linguistics, and folklore. Historical resources at Bowdoin include the library's special collections department, which houses among others the original papers of Bowdoin alumnus Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Faculty


Mary Agnes Edsall, assistant professor of English, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. (Columbia), specializes in Chaucer and Middle-English and Medieval literature, language, and culture.


Celeste Goodridge, professor of English, A.B. (George Washington), A.M. (William and Mary), Ph.D. (Rutgers), specializes in modern and contemporary American poetry and American fiction.

Ann L. Kibbie, associate professor of English, B.A. (Boston), Ph.D. (California–Berkeley), specializes in Restoration and eighteenth-century literature.

Aaron W. Kitch, assistant professor of English, B.A. (Yale), M.A. (Colorado–Boulder), Ph.D. (Chicago), specializes in Renaissance literature and Tudor and Stuart drama.

Belinda Kong, assistant professor of Asian studies and English, B.A. (William and Mary), M.A., Ph.D. (Michigan–Ann Arbor), specializes in Asian-American literature.

Margot Livesey, visiting writer-in-residence, B.A. (University of York, England), is the author of novels including Criminals, Eva Moves the Furniture, and Banishing Verona.


Elizabeth Muther, associate professor of English, B.A. (Wellesley), Ph.D. (California–Berkeley), specializes in African-American literature. She is chair of the department.

Mary Reitzburn, professor of English, A.B. (Queens College), M. Litt. (University of Edinburgh), Ph.D. (Wisconsin–Madison), specializes in twelfth-century British literature, British and American modernism, Joyce, and contemporary Scottish and Irish poetry.


William C. Waterson, Edward Little Professor of the English Language and Literature, A.B. (Kenyon), Ph.D. (Brown), specializes in Shakespeare studies, Renaissance pastoral poetry, and contemporary poetry.

After Bowdoin

Rather than being a "preprofessional" program, the English major at Bowdoin represents the very essence of a liberal education, preparing its graduates for a wide range and variety of careers. The department encourages its best majors to undertake graduate work in English, but recommends taking some time to consider this choice, given the difficult academic market in the field. Over the last ten years, majors have chosen graduate programs at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Duke, Cornell, Virginia, Brown, Iowa, Chicago, and California-Berkeley among others.

Many of Bowdoin’s English majors pursue graduate training and professions in fields including medicine, law, public administration, landscape architecture, zoology, history, and education. Others have moved directly into careers in publishing, banking, teaching, business administration, and journalism.

Honors Projects

Recent critical and creative honors projects completed by majors in the department have included:

- Constituents of Chaos: Land and Sea in Moby-Dick
- “Daughter of God and Man”: Reflection, Reality, and Free Will in Paradise Lost
- Reclaiming Onan: Masturbation and Imagination in Whitman’s America
- Wing Anatomy
- Queering Intimacies: The Sexual Narrative in Hanif Kureishi’s Fiction
- “A Proper Subject” – History, the Chorus, and the King’s Interior in Henry V
- Sinister Revelations: the Asylum as a Critique of the Domestic Sphere
- A Year’s Absence
- Performing the Artist: Stephen Dedalus and the Aesthetics of Betrayal
- Wordsworth’s Social Ecology: A Poet’s Vision of Sustainability and Stewardship
- Sentimental Violence: Re-reading the Politics of Sympathy in Uncle Tom’s Cabin and John Brown’s Raid

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