

Stony Brook English Department Commencement Speech

Thank you, Professor for that kind introduction. Thank you to the department for inviting me to speak, it's a huge honor and I hope I can do the majors justice. When I told my brother that I was an English major and that I was planning on studying graphic novels for my senior thesis, he started laughing hysterically. And proceeded to say, so you're going to school, to learn to read and to look at comic books. What a waste. And at the time, he had a valid point, mainly because he didn't know what we do or why we do it. There's a lot of mystery surrounding what we do in the English major. I hope I can abolish that today by explaining our work and rationale more thoroughly. If I can't, I'll be glad I changed my thesis to postcolonial studies so I won't be the butt of jokes at my family's Christmas parties.

My first English professor convinced me to switch my major. He never rallied for the cause directly, but he was nonetheless extraordinarily persuasive. Up until his class—Analysis and Argumentation—I was a fresh-faced Biology Pre-med, envisioning a future of saving the third world from the infant mortality crisis, singlehandedly. I sat in Chemistry, Calculus, Biology, and went nearly comatose with boredom as the professors hunched into the classroom, barely made eye contact, and muttered the notes under their breaths. My second semester freshman year, some of my biffles—best friends—convinced me to take an English class with them. I had always had a secret love of literature, but I thought science was practical, or would land me a job. The first day of class, I shuffled into the room, claimed a spot in the corner, took out my little notebooks, and waited. The professor came into class then, almost sauntering up to the front of the room and requested that we change the rows of seats into a circle, so he could see each of our faces. Then, my first English professor spoke. I don't wish to embarrass him today, but the way this professor speaks is well-respected and widely admired among the English undergraduates. Anyone who has ever taken a class with him, knows all-too-well the way he emphasizes each word, as if each word is capable of changing the world or moving mountains by itself. He says words as they are meant to be said, respecting their power and allowing them to sing. I swear to you, that this is not some sycophantic hyperbole. The way he speaks is filled with passion and reverence for language. On the first day of class, he wrote on the board the poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams. You know, it's the one with four stanzas, each shaped like a wheelbarrow:

So much depends

Upon

A red wheel
Barrow
Glazed with rain
Water
Besides the white
Chickens

And for the rest of my life, I will never forget the way Professor Phillips said, "*Chickens*. What do the *chickens* mean?" I realized then, four years ago that there's nothing intriguing about the way a chemist says "neurotransmitter." But the way a scholar says "onomatopoeia" or "dystopia" or "chickens" creates belief where there was none before. So thank you Professor Phillips, because if it weren't for your chickens, I probably would have been down the road at the Biology graduation today.

As I came to learn over the last four years, this passion is unique to the study of language and literature. It follows us into every reading nook and classroom on campus. English majors by nature are learners. We have to be because we are the keepers of two thousand years of knowledge. On every page of text, from the *Bible* to *Beowulf* to *The Bell Jar* to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, is a testament to the people who were here before us. We can analyze what sort of society they belonged to by their assumptions. We can grasp in what frame of mind an author constructed a text by the way he framed each sentence. And, we know the multiple meanings of each and every word that dances or leaps or tragically falls on the page. (Quite possibly because we all have access to the Oxford English Dictionary, but still.) Like artists, we create beauty and provide social commentary. Like scientists, we have a method to our analysis. We are the renaissance men and women of academia because we connect science to art in a way that respects both and appreciates their coexistence.

Students don't choose this major. It chooses them because it seeks out people with a love of learning and too many interests to fit in one category like "Business" or "Anthropology." We should be proud to have earned such a broad education, preparing us to think critically about our environment and to affect change. The last four years prepared me to appreciate the world, to cultivate passion, and to work to my potential. Surely, we take courses in so many disciplines that we are well-equipped to face life with open hands and vast understanding. Every alum I've met

from our program, has gone out into the world to carve their own path in entirely different ways that feed their personal passion.

Still though, I am terrified of the future. It is scary, and vast, and each of us is at a blind crossroads. A number of paths stretch out before us, and the end of each is indistinct. Regardless of what is going on in the outside world, there will always be comfort in a Henry James novel, a Whitman poem, a Shakespearean play, a Sedaris essay, or even that trashy *Twilight* stuff. We feel each word deeply and we know it speaks to us privately. I believe that each person here has a quiet fire burning in their heart, a passion that should never be extinguished by expectation. If nothing else, we, the English majors of the world, see the beauty of words. The way they come to life in wet ink; the way they fall from quivering lips; the way they join to form sentences, pages, love notes, revolutions, paradigm shifts. There is power and passion in words: we only need to release it, like when Professor Phillips released his “chickens” on me. I challenge all of us here today to reach inside of ourselves and find the passion that ignited our education. Find meaning in the mundane or discover something revolutionary. Each day, love learning and broaden your repertoire of the world’s words.

In my education classes, I learned that the formative years of life are between the ages of 0 to 5. I disagree—yes, all of the educational psychologists were wrong!—I believe that the formative years are the ones you spend in college, in the halls of higher learning. That’s when you discover who you really are and take a journey to find yourself and what makes you tick. I would like to thank my family and friends for coming on this journey with me. But it would have been impossible without the help and support of this department. Specifically, Professor Santa Ana who showed me what I didn’t know I didn’t know, Professors Lindblom and Dunn who taught me how to innovate, Ms. Hanley who keeps our community together and holds our hands in crisis, Professor Wimmer who helped me find my voice, and Professor Videbaek who mentored me throughout my education. I encourage the graduating class to take this moment to applaud those who have supported you through your journey and the professors who made a difference in your life. (Applause.)

Always remember: Live with passion! Thank you.