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1 Initial bearings

By the end of this chapter you will have considered:

- what to think about when selecting a university;
- your experience of English Literature at A level, IB or Access;
- the subject knowledge you have gained to date;
- what abilities are necessary to succeed at university;
- the nature of study at university;
- relations with academic staff;
- working at university.

INTRODUCTION

The fact that you are reading this book probably means one of two things. Either you are a student who has recently begun studying English Literature at university or you are a student thinking about doing so. In either case you are to be congratulated. Welcome to the exciting world of English Literature. There is no other subject that offers its students such a world of possibilities. Up until now you will have studied a handful of literary texts: a few for your GCSEs and slightly more for A Level, International Baccalaureate (IB) or an Access course. The fun really starts at university, though. So far your study of English Literature has been one part of academic studies, combined with courses in History, Music, Modern Foreign Languages, Geography or Religious Studies, perhaps. Maybe some of you will even have studied one or two of the sciences or Mathematics. English Literature has been only a part of your academic focus. From the point you enter university, however, it will form the major focus of your work.

And what a great thing it is to focus on. To spend three years (and possibly more) of your life studying a selection of the greatest works of literature ever produced is both an honour and a pleasure. It is now many years since I began my own English Literature degree, but I can still remember the excitement of following the course. The pleasures and memories of it have lasted with me throughout my life. It had its difficult moments for certain, and there were times when it was very hard work. Many hours of midnight oil (and early morning oil) were burnt in order to meet essay deadlines and to ensure that reading was completed in time for lectures and seminars, but every minute and hour was worth it.

Of course, this book cannot cover every eventuality, but a good place to start is by thinking about what factors you should consider when you are selecting where you will study.

SELECTING A UNIVERSITY

There are several important issues to consider here:

- course content;
- staff expertise;
- course delivery;
- location.

Course content. Every university course in English Literature is different, as it should be. Courses are not dictated as they were at school or college, by a National Curriculum or by exam syllabuses. University departments are much freer to devise their own courses than are schools and FE colleges. University English Literature courses will reflect a range of different influences, including the academic expertise of the teaching staff. You will almost certainly be able to study Shakespeare and the other major figures from the literary canon – Dickens, Austen, Chaucer, Conrad and so on. You will also have the opportunity to study a much wider range of literature, however. Maybe literatures in translation, Old English and Norse literature, specialist author papers, literary theory or genre papers (e.g. Gothic fiction or science fiction). You may

also have the chance to take modules looking at film adaptations of literature, performance, English Language or creative writing. The vast range of possibilities on offer means it is very important to look closely at what particular universities offer. It is important that you choose an institution on the basis of its course rather than exclusively on its name. An institution may be very prestigious, but if it does not offer courses that you find stimulating, your three years as an undergraduate will not be fulfilling.

Staff expertise. It may be that you already have a clear picture of what you wish to study. You may, for example, have a burning desire to study the works of Salman Rushdie, Restoration theatre, literature and religion, or a particular literary genre. If this is the case, it would be well worth your while to look into the research interests and reputations of the academic staff in the departments you are thinking of applying to. Most departmental websites will have staff biographies, including research interests, lists of publications, conference addresses and so on. This will give you some insight into where you will gain the most innovative and authoritative teaching in the areas of your own personal interest. If you are trying to map out an academic pathway for your career – thinking of going on to Masters and even PhD level – this kind of strategic thinking can be very important.

Course delivery. It is not only courses that vary from one place to another. Teaching arrangements, the number of taught hours per week, numbers of assignments, means and variety of assessment type, possibility of undertaking work placement, use of virtual learning environments, the range and type of reading required may all vary from institution to institution. Again it is important to look carefully at these details before you apply for university. You need to think carefully about whether the practical arrangements for the delivery of particular courses you are applying for actually suit what you want and need.

Location. It is not only in the property market that location matters. The choice of university you make is not solely academic. Your choice of university is also a choice of where you will be living. The quality of the course may well be of great significance, but so too is your happiness with where you live. You should think

carefully about the following questions. Is it a campus university? Is it urban? Is it rural? What is the transport like? How near to home is it? Do you want to live that near to (or far from) home? Is accommodation available in halls of residence? If so, for how many years? What other accommodation is available for students? What is the local area like? What leisure and social facilities are there? Is catering good? These questions may seem obvious, but they are also very important. Especially in the rush of clearing, or in the excitement at being offered a place, it is all too easy to overlook practicalities like this and to end up unhappy.

English Literature degrees and the universities that offer them vary widely. That said, however, it is possible to draw some useful generalisations about what the study of English Literature at university entails, and I trust that this book manages to capture the spirit of English Literature at university. It aims to introduce you to how the subject you are going to study (or thinking of studying) is related to, but also different from English Literature at A Level, IB or Access levels. If you are to make an effective transition from your A level, IB or Access course to university, it is important that you understand how the subject and its emphases change between school and university.

This opening chapter, therefore, will introduce you to a set of practical issues about how universities work and what English Literature at university comprises. Throughout the book you will find lots of practical examples and activities to help you understand how you can work most effectively during your degree and to get you thinking about how your studies so far have (and how they have not) prepared you for what you will face.

YOUR EXPERIENCE SO FAR

It is important before you begin your English Literature degree to think where you are in your understanding of what English Literature is and what you want to gain from studying the subject at university. Your experiences of studying English Literature at GCSE and then at A level, IB or Access level will all have made a significant impact on your views about what the subject of English

Literature is and what the study of it entails. Your studies so far will have instilled in you a set of assumptions and values that you may have to challenge when it comes to studying English Literature for your degree. It is important, therefore, to ask some detailed questions of yourself and your assumptions about what English Literature entails. Think about your most recent experience of studying English Literature, and also what you imagine study at university to be like.

ACTIVITY 1

Your experiences so far

Take some space and time to reflect on the questions below. This will be a useful preparation for you as you begin reading this book, and also as you start your English Literature degree. Being able and prepared to challenge your own presuppositions is one of the hallmarks of an effective student, and so it is important to spend time defining what you think English Literature as a subject is, and what your presuppositions about it are.

- (1) Jot down some thoughts about your own experiences of English Literature at school. What was it like? Exciting? Challenging? Incomprehensible? Wide and varied? Narrow in range?
- (2) How did your teachers make you feel about English Literature? That it was an adventure? That it was approachable? That it was distant? That you were free to 'play' with it? That it was to be revered? That it was about broadening your mind? That it was about passing an exam?
- (3) How did your teachers set about teaching you English Literature? Try to remember a range of the pedagogic approaches they adopted.
- (4) How do you think the teaching you receive at university will differ from the ways in which you were taught at school?
- (5) If you had to sum up what English Literature was 'about' before university, how would you do so?
- (6) What do you think English literature is 'about' at university?
- (7) What are you hoping to achieve through your study of English Literature at university?



- (8) What do you think are the characteristics most important to achieving success in the study of English Literature at university?
- (9) Did you study any English Language at A level, either as a separate subject or as part of an English Language and Literature A level? How do you understand the interaction of language and literature in the study of English?

This is the starting point. The answers to these questions will provide you with some key insights into what you are actually expecting of your English Literature degree. How these views and expectations then relate to your study of English Literature at degree level is another matter, and you may well have to change radically some of the assumptions you have brought with you from your previous studies. A clear understanding of these assumptions is very important, as it is difficult to challenge and overcome assumptions you do not even know you hold. Your experience of English Literature so far is the key means you will use to ‘read’ and come to terms with the new experiences you will gain at university. Your understanding of your new environment will be all the more clear if you know exactly where you are coming from.

AUDITING YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Another useful thing for you to do as you start your degree is to audit your knowledge of literature so far. This will help you to build up a picture of where you stand in terms of your literary knowledge. Below is an activity which will help you to structure your audit of subject knowledge. Be as comprehensive as you can, as it is important that you develop at this stage the fullest picture you can of your subject knowledge and its range. Whenever you come to a new text you ‘read’ it against the background of all your previous reading. It is therefore important for you to know where your greatest body of knowledge lies and where you need to be doing some preparatory work to catch up and to prepare the ground for new reading and study.

ACTIVITY 2

Auditing your subject knowledge

(1) List of major authors published before 1914

The following list is drawn from the National Curriculum, and therefore represents a set of authors you are likely to have studied.

Major poets pre-1914

Arnold, E. B. Browning, Blake, Emily Bronte, R. Browning, Burns, Byron, Chaucer, Clare, Coleridge, Donne, Dryden, Gray, Herbert, Herrick, Hopkins, Keats, Marvell, Milton, Pope, Rossetti, Shakespeare (sonnets), P. B. Shelley, Spenser, Tennyson, Vaughan, Wordsworth, Wyatt.

Examples of major playwrights

Congreve, Goldsmith, Marlowe, O'Casey, Pinter, Priestley, Shaffer, Shaw, Sheridan, Wilde.

Major fiction writers published before 1914

Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Bunyan, Collins, Conrad, Defoe, Dickens, Conan Doyle, G. Eliot, Fielding, Gaskell, Hardy, James, Mary Shelley, Stevenson, Swift, Trollope, Wells.

- Identify as fully as possible your familiarity with the works of these authors. Do not worry if you have not read much (or anything) by all of them. The purpose of this is to identify constructive areas for development.
- Are there other pre-1914 authors you are familiar with as well as those listed here? Who are they?

*(2) Examples of major authors after 1914**Examples of major poets after 1914*

Auden, Clarke, Douglas, T. S. Eliot, Fanthorpe, Hardy, Heaney, Hughes, Jennings, Larkin, Owen, Plath, Smith, E. Thomas, R. S. Thomas, Yeats.

Examples of fiction by major writers after 1914

Forster, Golding, Greene, Huxley, Joyce, Lawrence, Mansfield, Orwell, Spark, Trevor, Waugh.



- Again, identify as fully as possible your familiarity with these authors.
- In addition, add the names of any others you are familiar with.

(3) *Contemporary authors and authors from other cultures*

- Which contemporary authors and authors from other cultures are you familiar with? This may include literature in translation.

(4) *Literary theory and literary criticism*

- Which literary theorists and critics are you familiar with?

The lists of authors and their works that you have drawn up are the ruler against which you will measure your English Literature course at university. They capture your experience to date of the subject you have opted to read and will be one of the most important means by which you access the texts, authors and issues you now go on to study. You should now use this audit as the basis for developing your subject knowledge.

On the basis of your responses, draw up a target reading list so that you can think about developing a wider range of knowledge you can draw on in your studies.

RANGE OF COVERAGE

English degrees cover a very wide range of content and vary considerably from one institution to another. For this reason, it is very important to check out the details of the courses you are applying for, looking at their compulsory and optional components to make sure that you like their range and content. It is impossible to make generalisations about a ‘typical’ course. However, modules tend to fall within the following broad categories:

- *author-based courses*, which focus on the works of a single author or a small group of authors (e.g. Shakespeare, Dickens, James, or Coleridge and Wordsworth) – such modules tend,

with the exception of Shakespeare, to be optional modules in the second and the third years;

- *period-based courses*, which provide broad coverage of a literary period (e.g. Romantic Literature, Victorian Literature, Modernism);
- *genre-based courses*, which provide the opportunity for detailed study of a particular genre (e.g. Modern Drama, The Gothic Novel, Lyric Poetry);
- *Creative Writing*;
- *English Language* (e.g. Linguistics, Language Acquisition);
- *related subject areas* (e.g. Film Studies, Performance, American Studies);
- *other modules* related to your study of English (e.g. Literary Theory, Academic Practice) are often part of early degree-level study, and sometimes option modules can be drawn from a wider pool of subject areas (e.g. Modern Foreign Languages, other Humanities and Performing Arts subjects).

Undertaking the audit in Activity 2 will help you to think about what your studies to date have prepared you to do and will also focus your mind on what other experiences of English you wish to gain through your study at university. This will be helpful in your selection of course when you are applying and will also help you in your selection of options.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

You may well have the opportunity, if you wish, to include some study of English Language within your English Literature degree. For some students, who have followed English Language or English Language and Literature at A level, this will be a familiar ground. If, however, you studied English Literature only, it is likely to be new territory.

The possibility of following modules in English Language will of course depend upon your institution. Not all English departments will offer English Language, and you should check this out via the

departmental web pages or prospectus. Where the possibility to undertake such study exists, the particular modules on offer will also vary from one institution to another, but typical areas for study are the following:

- the use and effects of language in literary texts;
- the sounds and structure of the English language;
- language and society;
- the historical development of the English language;
- the acquisition of language;
- language and politics;
- the structures of the English language;
- linguistic theory;
- sociolinguistics.

The purpose of studying language and linguistics is to understand how language works, how it changes over time and how it functions in social situations. Understanding in these areas can provide a stimulating alternative path within your studies of literature, and can also greatly enhance your engagement with the linguistic features of literary and non-literary texts.

MAIN ATTRIBUTES NEEDED TO SUCCEED IN AN ENGLISH LITERATURE DEGREE

Before committing yourself to applying for a degree in English Literature, it is very important to think about the characteristics you will need in order to succeed. There are, of course, no hard and fast answers to this, but here is a list of characteristics identified by English lecturers in higher education:

- communication skills;
- essay-writing skills;
- the ability to formulate, and sustain and develop an argument;
- analytical ability;
- dedication and self-motivation;
- note-taking and note-making abilities;
- independent study skills;

- interest and enthusiasm;
- research skills;
- intellectual curiosity;
- creativity;
- wide subject knowledge;
- knowledge of literary criticism and literary theory;
- wide reading;
- love of and confidence in reading.

It would be worth spending some time thinking about how far this list seems to relate to you, and also what you understand by each of these characteristics. If this sounds like you, and if the areas identified are areas in which you want to continue to develop, then English Literature may well be for you.

ACTIVITY 3

Your characteristics as a student

Think back carefully over your experiences as a learner:

- What have you done in the course of your study of English Literature to date (and at A level in particular) to prepare you in each of these areas?
- What have you done in your study of other subjects?
- How would you like to develop further in these areas?

APPLYING TO UNIVERSITIES

All applications to UK universities are made through UCAS. Much useful information and advice about the application process is available on their website: <http://wwwucas.ac.uk/>. The following sections provide a timeline of key dates in the application process, and guidance on writing Personal Statements and preparing for interviews.

APPLICATIONS TIMELINE

This timeline identifies on a month-by-month basis what should happen. For details about specific dates, please see the UCAS website.

September	Application processing begins.
October	Last date for applications to Oxford and Cambridge.
January	Deadline for applications from UK and EU students to be guaranteed equal academic consideration.
March	Universities and colleges should have sent decisions on all applications received by 15 January.
May	Applicants who have not responded to an offer made by 31 March will be automatically rejected. If universities have not made a decision on applications received by 15 January, these will be rejected by default.
June	Final deadline for receipt of applications for immediate consideration. Those received after this date held for Clearing.
July	If universities have not made a decision on applications received by 12 June, these will be rejected by default. Last date for applicants to refer themselves through Extra. Outstanding decisions on applications received by 30 June and Extra referrals rejected by default. Outstanding replies declined by default where last decision received by 20 July.
August	Publication of SQA results. Start of Scottish Clearing vacancy information service. All outstanding replies declined by default. Publication of GCE results. Start of English, Welsh and Northern Irish Clearing vacancy information service.
September	Last date for receipt of applications.

WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Lots of universities do not interview potential students, so your UCAS statement is extremely important. It is your opportunity to make a real impression on the Admissions Tutor reading your application. Remember that Admissions Tutors will probably be looking at hundreds of applications, as competition for places is heavy (especially on oversubscribed courses), so your Personal Statement needs to set you apart from other applicants.

Here are some of the key issues an Admissions Tutor is likely to be considering:

- are you suited to the course?
- are your qualifications and qualities right?
- are you conscientious and likely to complete the course?
- can you cope with the demands of the course?
- can you manage the workload?
- will you adjust to life and work at university?
- do you communicate effectively?
- have you researched the course well?
- do you demonstrate passion for your subject and desire to learn more about it?

Your Personal Statement does not need to address these issues mechanically, but you must demonstrate through a combination of statements about yourself and examples of what you have done to date, that you have the qualities required for the study of English at university (see pp. 10–11).

Do not try to write your statement straight out. Begin by jotting down notes about yourself and the course you are applying for. Also, look carefully at the web pages and prospectuses of the institutions you are applying for as well as any other information they may have sent you to see if they offer any particular guidance on how to present your Personal Statement. Here are some areas you could consider:

- what you want to study and why;
- particular areas of personal interest;

- good examples from your studies to date;
- your wider reading/writing;
- other subject experience;
- conferences you have attended (e.g. A-level literature lectures);
- personal experiences which led to your decision to apply;
- how a degree in English Literature relates to your future aspirations;
- your personal reliability, initiative and responsibility (e.g. employment, enterprise schemes, community/charity work, committee membership, assistance at school events, Young Enterprise, World Challenge, Duke of Edinburgh, participation in societies and what you have gained from these experiences);
- free time interests – for example sport, musical, study and leisure activities;
- languages which you speak;
- prizes won/positions achieved in your interests.

This should provide you with plenty of raw material for use in your Personal Statement. Remember that your primary objective is to show that you are enthusiastic about English Literature. You need to explain concisely how and why the subject appeals to you and that you have the personal qualities needed to succeed over the three years of your degree. Reading example Personal Statements (both good and bad) may well help you with this. Your school or college may well keep a stock of these.

As a rule of thumb, spend half of your statement talking about English Literature and why you want to study it, and spend the other half writing about yourself, your abilities and how these make you suitable to study the course. Where possible, these two components should be integrated with one another throughout the statement. You should develop a clear structure for your statement. This can be done in many ways, but make sure the structure you develop is clear and logical. Here is an example:

Paragraph 1: introduction to why you want to study English Literature.

Paragraphs 2 and 3: good examples of how you have studied the subject to date and how you would like to extend this.

Paragraph 4: work experience and responsibilities in school.

Paragraph 5: interests and responsibilities outside school.

Paragraph 6: your goals in going to university and closing comment.

Once you have gathered together your notes and thought about how you are going to structure your ideas, it is time to start writing. Remember the following:

- construct your statement carefully – you need to show you organise your ideas capably;
- express your ideas clearly and concisely – you must demonstrate you are a competent writer;
- make sure your writing is technically accurate – sloppy spelling, punctuation and grammar will turn an Applications Tutor off at once;
- this is a Personal Statement, so make sure your personality comes across;
- do not be arrogant and pretentious;
- make your opening and closing sentences tell;
- do not try to deceive – cheating yourself, other applicants and the Admissions Tutor will make nobody happy.

Remember you only have a limited amount of space, and so it is important to make every word count to be positive and interesting. Do not simply write about what you have done, but try to explain why you did it and what you learned from it. For example, ‘I sat on the Sixth Form Committee, which taught me much about teamwork, responsibility and time management.’

Once you have completed the first draft of your statement, it is a good idea to put it aside for several days. This will help you develop some distance from it, so that when you return to it you will do so with a more critical eye. When you re-read it, make sure it reads well and is not confusing – if you are confused reading your own Personal Statement, you can be sure the Admissions Tutor will be too. Also, ask family, friends and teachers to read your statement and to make constructive comment. Consider carefully any advice you are given and develop your statement as you think is appropriate.

Advice on writing your Personal Statement can be found on the following websites. These offer structured guidance in thinking about the purpose and content of the Personal Statement.

<http://www.ucas.com/students/startapplication/apply09/personal-statement/>

<http://www.studential.com/personalstatements/>

<http://www.getintouni.com/>

There are also three books on writing Personal Statements:

- *Personal Statements: How to Write a UCAS Personal Statement* by Paul Telfer;
- *How to Write a Winning UCAS Personal Statement* by Ian Stannard;
- *How to Write a Successful University Personal Statement Application* by Matt Green and Ian Kingsbury.

PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW

It is comparatively rare for universities to interview applicants, but if a university calls you for an interview, you have done well in the first stage of your application. They like what they have seen on your UCAS form and they want to confirm that you are the right person for their course. They are interested in:

- you and your motivation;
- whether you are capable of studying at university level and completing the course successfully;
- your interest in the subject;
- what you will contribute to university life.

The interview is also an opportunity for you to confirm whether you like the university and want to study there. You will probably have the chance to see the campus and your department and may meet with current students. You should take the opportunity to ask any questions you have, to clarify any issues about course

content and to follow up any queries you may have related to the prospectus.

The letter inviting you for interview should let you know what to expect on the day:

- will you have a general and/or subject interview;
- should you bring examples of your work;
- is some kind of written test involved;
- details of tours and meetings and so on.

If this is not all clear, you should ring the department and ask for this information.

In preparing for your interview, make sure you have read the university prospectus, departmental and generic web pages, and any other information the university has sent you thoroughly. This will help you to target your questions carefully and will avoid you asking questions to which a well-researched candidate will already know the answer. Also, make sure you plan out your journey thoroughly and arrive in plenty of time. It is better to arrive early and to spend two hours sitting in a coffee shop than to be panicking and chasing time. Arriving hot and flustered will not enhance your performance at interview, and reaching your appointment late will be viewed very badly by interviewers. If because of transport problems or for any other good reason you are delayed or cannot make your interview appointment, it is essential that you phone the university out of courtesy to let them know and to find out how to proceed. Contact details of the relevant person to contact should be on your offer of interview letter.

Think carefully about how you present yourself. Dress appropriately. Smart or smart casual clothing is most suitable. Make good eye contact with your interviewer, smile and respond appropriately when you are spoken to. Speak clearly and directly, as muttered answers are difficult to hear, and do not be afraid to ask for a little thinking time if you are asked a tricky question. Your interviewer will not mind, and taking a moment to formulate your thoughts so that you can give a coherent response is much better than launching at once into a rambling and inefficient answer. Ask sensible

questions. In other words, make sure you appear confident (but not arrogant), interested and well prepared.

An important step in being well prepared for your interview is to think through likely questions and to shape your responses to them. This will give you confidence. Here are some typical questions you may face:

- *General questions:* Tell me about yourself? How would you describe yourself? Tell us about your current course? What are you best at? What are your main interests?
- *University motivation questions:* Why do you want to study for a degree? What do you think university can offer you? What else, apart from study, interests you about university? Why do you want to study at this university?
- *Subject-related questions:* Why do you want to study English Literature? What do you know about the course? What attracts you to this course? You may also be asked to complete an audit of your reading and to talk in detail about your study of a particular text, an area of literature you have studied (e.g. Gothic Fiction or Victorian Literature), or an unseen passage. Activities 1, 2 and 3 in this chapter will help you gather your thoughts in this area.
- *Topical questions:* interviewers often ask your opinion on current affairs, or subject-related issues in the media in order to see whether you are generally well informed and up to date. To prepare for this kind of question, read a serious national newspaper such as *The Times*, *The Telegraph* or *The Guardian*, pick out current stories that seem linked to your subject and think about how you could respond to a question on these topics.
- *Situational questions* (sometimes hypothetical): Give me an example of a time when... you dealt with a problem, or overcame some obstacles, or worked in a team to achieve an outcome. Or If you were asked to...do something creative about... what would you do?

Being well prepared to answer questions in these areas cannot guarantee success, and the types of question you are asked may vary, but if you spend time carefully thinking about things like this, you

should go into your interview much more confident. And remember, you do not need to produce perfect instant answers. What you need to do is demonstrate that you are well prepared, well informed, well motivated and have the capacity to complete the course of study for which you have applied.

INDEPENDENCE

An important part of your experience at university is developing more independence. This obviously means changes in the ways you work. You will be expected to take much more responsibility for managing your own learning, and you will be expected to overcome difficulties using your own initiative. In course handbooks tutors will provide much useful information for you to look at which will help you answer your own problems. Reading lists will be supplied. Outline content of lectures and seminars will be provided. Specimen assessment materials may be included. There will probably be Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) related to most of the modules you study as well as general departmental and university pages which will contain much of the information you need, and your tutors will expect you to familiarise yourself with these so that you can to a large extent help yourself. These resources will answer many of the logistical and academic questions you may have without having to go direct to the tutor.

You also have your peers on the course. They are another invaluable resource. The chances are that if you are having difficulty with a particular issue they are (or have done so) too.

Do not wait for tutors to check up on you. Most tutors will not, as a matter of course, make contact with the students on their courses. They will expect the initiative for contact to come from you. If you have a difficulty that you cannot sort out by any other means, do not wait for them to notice. The likelihood of this happening in a lecture you attend with a hundred other students is minimal. Equally, the chances for a tutor to follow up with individuals during or after seminars are often limited, and you will have to be the one who takes the initiative.

WORKING AT UNIVERSITY

It is very important to be creative in the ways you approach your work. A lot can be gained, for example, by thinking about how your peers can provide support. Students who make the time to meet regularly for study can do much to help each other in their work. While the opportunities to meet individually with staff are often limited at university, there is ample time available for you to run working groups and support groups of your own. With the exciting new independence studying at university offers, you need to develop proactive ways of meeting your own academic needs. The creation of alternative support structures – perhaps reading groups or informal student-led seminars – can be very helpful, if only to assure you that you are not alone. This is something you should think carefully about and can really help you to develop effective working practices. This will be explored fully in Chapter 3.

As you have already seen, lecturers will expect you to demonstrate a lot of independence. This level of freedom can seem intimidating, but can also be very liberating. Where during your A-level English Literature course did you really have the opportunity to explore a text widely without being forced back to think about Assessment Objectives? When did you have the chance to talk at length to other people in your class for hours over a coffee or a beer about varying interpretations of *Heart of Darkness*? Many aspects of studying English Literature are tied down at A level, which only allows you to study a narrow range of set texts. At university you have the exciting freedom to explore a much wider range of texts, and your independent study provides you with the time and space to pursue a far wider range of materials and ideas. Do not forget, you have come to university to ‘read’ for a degree. So take the chance to read as widely as you can and to make the time to talk to as many people as you can about your reading.

It has probably already begun to become clear that the teaching you receive at university is not and cannot be the main source of input into your studies. If you are taught for 9–12 hours per week – a typical teaching load in the first year of an English Literature degree – a lot of the responsibility obviously lies with you. You will

soon get used to the jibes of students on other courses about how little you apparently have to do as a student of English:

Q: Why don't English students look out of the window in the morning?

A: Because if they did, they'd have nothing to do in the afternoon.

You, of course, will at this point adopt a superior attitude, treating the remark as the observation of a lesser form of pond life, take a long and pensive sip of your cappuccino, G&T or pint of mild, turn away, pick up your copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and immerse yourself once again in the world of Elizabeth Bennett and Mr Darcy. And whatever you do, take great care not to look out of the window.

More seriously, you will realise that your taught timetable accounts for only a comparatively small proportion of the time you should be studying. The time you spend in lectures and seminars represents only a third to a quarter of the time you should realistically be working. A lot of the responsibility for learning at university shifts on to you. Your lecturers will quite rightly consider themselves responsible for preparing and delivering appropriate teaching sessions, but you will bear a much greater level of responsibility for your own work than you probably did before. If you expect lecturers to provide you with all the answers, you will quickly be disillusioned. Lecturers do not see it as their job to provide answers. They will give you information, will present a variety of points of view and will raise many questions, but will not provide stock answers. They will see their lectures as the first word on a subject or text which you are then expected to go away and explore or challenge through your own independent studies.

Lectures and seminars, in other words, are a form of guidance. They indicate useful areas of study and salient ideas that can be brought to bear on a particular text, author or genre, which you as the student then have to pursue for yourself, with your lecturers' guidance. Some ways to prepare for seminars and lectures are covered in Chapters 4 and 5.

CONCLUSION

English Literature and the experience of studying it at A level, IB or Access level is very different from the experience of studying it at university. It is most important as you start your degree that you know two things which this chapter has hopefully helped you address:

- Where you are as you start your course – not geographically, of course, although this may prove to be invaluable knowledge in some ways. What do you already know about English Literature and where do you have gaps in your knowledge? How effectively do your characteristics as a student prepare you for working effectively at university?
- What has your study of the subject to date (at A level, IB or Access level) led you to believe the study of English Literature is about? What are you hoping to achieve through your studies?

As F. R. Leavis famously used to say, literature is where minds meet. In order effectively to meet others' minds it is important first to know your own.

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