

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

CAREER DEVELOPMENT GUIDE

FOR ENGLISH PHD STUDENTS

Revised for 2024-2025

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BUILDING YOUR PROFESSIONAL LIFE: UI ENGLISH AND BEYOND

The day you accepted your offer of admission to the PhD program in English, you began a new phase of your professional life. Some PhD students arrive in Iowa City with plenty of experience working as researchers, educators, writers, editors, or in related positions. Others are starting the very first stage of their careers. This guide aims to offer useful information for all English PhD students, whether you plan on using your time in the program to build a CV, a résumé, or (ideally) both while devoting years of intensive study to the literature that brought you to graduate school.

This guide will help you understand how to pursue the many career paths that are open to English PhDs. **The faculty wants you to know that we fully support students and graduates who are preparing for and seeking many different types of employment, inside and outside the academy.** We are fortunate that Iowa PhDs and faculty – including your department's career adviser – are all able to draw on the expertise and guidance of the UI [Grad Success Center](#) staff, as well as a network of contacts that spans departments, academic institutions, and other types of organizations and businesses.

All of us working in English, in allied departments, and in the Graduate College aim to help you thrive at every stage of your professional life. We know that your success rests not only on access to information about career pathways, but also on solid mentorship. This guide is not intended to substitute for the advice and other forms of feedback that faculty and other mentors must give you directly. Consider your reading of this document as the first step you will take toward defining a career trajectory that is distinctively yours – one that satisfies as many of your intellectual and personal needs as any professional journey could. Your way may not look like that of your faculty advisers, or your peers here or at other institutions. The department aims to support and celebrate a diverse group of students, projects, and program outcomes.

You are the only person who can seek, request, receive, and use the resources you require. If there is more that the department's faculty and its excellent staff can do to help you define and achieve your career goals during your PhD studies or after graduation, we hope that you will kindly ask us for what you need.

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PHASE ONE:

GATHERING INFORMATION ABOUT CAREER PATHWAYS AND BUILDING MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITIES

During your first years in the PhD program, you will be focused on learning how to perform research and writing at the professional level, and how to teach undergraduate classes. As you develop these capacities, you would be wise to gather as much information as possible about the many different types of academic and non-academic institutions, organizations, and business to which you might bring these skills before and after you graduate. The first steps in the process of planning your professional future are:

- 1) assess the skills you have;
- 2) keep track of those you are gaining in the program; and
- 3) determine those you will need to acquire along the way.

To kickstart this process, the Grad Success Center recommends using the assessment tools offered by Imagine PhD (<https://www.imaginephd.com>). The service is free to you, thanks to UI's subscription. We recommend that you use the assessment not only to help you complete the three steps listed above, but also to prepare you and your faculty mentors for conversations about your professional pathways.

At least one full year before you begin seeking any type of post-graduation employment, make an appointment with the department's career adviser (see above) and the staff of the [Grad Success Center](#). They can and will provide you with personalized guidance, information, and expert support.

COURSEWORK AND TEACHING

If you are interested in pursuing a teaching career in colleges and/or universities, you can and should talk with your own professors about designing, preparing for, and delivering courses. Most faculty members have few opportunities to discuss teaching and will be pleased to do so with you. The coursework stage of the program should develop your reading, research, and writing skills, but it also provides a valuable opportunity to learn more about how professional educators work.

There are several very good books that can supplement your pedagogical experiences. To begin with, we recommend:

Germano, William and Kit Nicholls. *Syllabus: The Remarkable, Unremarkable Document That Changes Everything*. [Princeton UP](#), 2020.

Gooblar, David. *The Missing Course: Everything They Never Taught You about College Teaching*. [Harvard UP](#), 2019.

As soon you start teaching your own courses, begin developing your [teaching portfolio](#), which includes a statement of teaching philosophy (see examples below), syllabuses, your most successful assignments, and summaries of student evaluations.

If you wish to gain a greater understanding of, and expertise in, college-level teaching, we urge you to take advantage of the following:

[Grad Success Center Teaching/CIRTL Consultations](#)

RHET5352: Topics in Teaching & Professional Development

You may also wish to consider the [Graduate Certificate in College Teaching](#) (see below), of which RHET5352 may be a part.

You may be interested in and well-prepared for teaching in other types of educational institutions or settings. If you are considering teaching in high schools, start looking at state certification processes as early as possible, and read the [accounts](#) of PhDs who have gone on to teach in public and private schools. If you wish to seek an Iowa teaching license, consult the [Regents Alternative Pathway to Licensure](#) (RAPIL) site for information.

Please also be aware that less than half a mile from EPB is the [College of Education](#), whose faculty can consult with you.

IDENTIFYING AND MEETING WITH POTENTIAL MENTORS

We strongly recommend that you meet with multiple potential mentors – perhaps including professors in other departments and/or people outside the university – during your first two years in the program.

- Prepare a few questions about your work, their work, and topics of mutual interest. Email them, and then attend their office hours at least twice per academic year to establish solid, long-term mentoring relationships.
- Ask faculty about their own career pathways, and about those of the other students they have mentored.
- Ask them to introduce you to people on- and off-campus who may be able to provide you with other forms of academic and non-academic support and guidance.
- Work to establish long-term relationships with faculty, staff, and community members who will advocate for you.

We also suggest that you thoroughly read this excellent [Graduate Student Mentoring Guide](#) produced by the University of Michigan's Rackham Graduate School. Most of the information it provides is highly relevant to English PhD students.

Other well-regarded resources you may wish to consult that offer guidance on mentoring, as well as maintaining research productivity, personal well-being, and other important aspects of academic life:

Calarco, Jessica McCrory. *A Field Guide to Graduate School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum*. [Princeton UP](#), 2020.

Grafton, Anthony, Garrett Sullivan, Jr., and Gregory Colón Semenza. *How to Build a Life in the Humanities: Meditations on the Academic Work-Life Balance*. [Palgrave Macmillan](#), 2015.

[National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity](#).

ACADEMIC CONFERENCES

Conferences provide a crucial opportunity for you to present your work publicly. This is a vital skill you will use in almost any position you take after earning your degree. However, conferences also offer you important opportunities for building an intellectual community that will support you and your work for many years to come.

- You can and should apply to participate in local, regional, national, and even international conferences before you begin your thesis or dissertation.
 - Please be aware that many organizations offer financial support for graduate students who apply for it. Check conference websites, note the grant application deadline, and then apply!
- Search the [UPenn CFP listserv](#) and the various literary/professional organization websites to determine which conferences are the best venues for your work.
 - Send in abstracts and proposals that respond directly to the CFP (call for papers). Do not exceed the stated word limit.
- If you are giving an academic talk:
 - Write your presentation, shaping your prose for oral delivery. Do not attempt to read from a seminar paper, article, or dissertation chapter. Write reminders like "PAUSE," "LOOK UP," "TAKE A BREATH" into the script or notes.
 - Write a presentation that is two or three minutes shorter than the allotted time limit. Practice it ahead of time at least twice. Time yourself while practicing.
 - If you are using slides or other tech components, save them in at least two different locations and formats.

- Check the location ahead of time, show up at least fifteen minutes early, test any necessary devices, and try to warm up (and also settle down!) by introducing yourself to everyone.
- Make every attempt to personally introduce yourself and your work to other scholars in both formal (panel, seminar, working group, etc.) and informal (e.g., before-and-after session hallway chats) settings. Do not think of other scholars as competitors, but rather as colleagues. If you are kind, generous, and fortunate, they will become your friends.
- Practice good physical self-care.
 - Bring snacks and water in your bag. If you skip this step, you will get dehydrated and hungry, and no one is at their best when their bodies feel poorly.
 - Eat healthy meals before, during, and after the conference.
 - Reserve adequate time for sleep and rest.
- Apply for English department conference travel funding.

GRADUATE CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS AND DUAL-DEGREE PHD+MLIS

As you begin your coursework, learn about the graduate certificates that are available for PhD students at UI. Consider whether one of these certificates could enhance your work here and prepare you for post-graduation employment. Visit the [Graduate College's website](#) to learn more about the current offerings.

After reading the Graduate College and the various departments' websites, contact the program coordinators and instructors to determine whether one or more certificates might beneficially shape your research, teaching, and professional preparation.

The English Department and the School of Library and Information Sciences offer a dual-degree PhD in English with an MA Library and Information Sciences. For more information, consult with the DGS and read [this site](#).

SUPPORT FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK ON CAMPUS

The [Obermann Center for Advanced Studies](#) offers a range of programming open to graduate students, including the [Humanities 3-Minute Thesis](#), an event that enables you to explain your dissertation in the clear, accessible manner you will have to perfect before interviewing for any position. Some of the interdisciplinary [Working Groups](#) welcome PhD students, and in the past the [Humanities Symposium](#) has offered 1-credit courses and related opportunities for graduate students.

[POROI: Project on the Rhetoric of Inquiry](#) is also housed in the OCAS. POROI offers an interdisciplinary graduate course, “Writing for Learned Journals,” that can be very helpful for PhD students seeking to publish articles before searching for academic jobs.

The [Digital Scholarship and Publishing Studio](#) offers 8-week [summer fellowships](#) for graduate students. The Studio also hosts regular, interdisciplinary [DH Salons](#) where students, staff, and faculty can discuss digital projects and methods.

PHASE TWO: SEARCHING FOR OPEN POSITIONS

PREPARE FOR THE SEARCH

Consult with everyone you've met over your years here who might possibly have information on open positions. Do not assume that you and/or your dissertation director will hear about every relevant position in time to apply.

Read a few of these [recommended job search guides](#).

For those seeking jobs outside academia – **and we encourage all PhD students to think about doing so** – these guides can serve as a good resource:

Caterine, Christopher L. *Leaving Academia: A Practical Guide*. [Princeton UP](#), 2020.

Rogers, Katina L. *Putting the Humanities PhD to Work*. [Duke UP](#), 2020.

READ THE JOB LISTS

The year before you intend to apply for jobs, start perusing all job posting sites that may be relevant to your objectives:

- Modern Language Association's official [Job Information List](#) (the JIL). UI subscribes to this list; it is free for you to use.
 - The archive of past job lists is available [here](#).
- [Inside Higher Ed](#)
- [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)
- [H-Net](#)
- LinkedIn
- Indeed.com
- [Academic Jobs Wiki](#) (use with caution – this is a crowd-sourced list and may be inaccurate)

Search these lists at least once every week during your entire job search process. You can set up alerts that will email you when a job advertisement is posted meeting your criteria. Please do also be aware that many kinds of job postings circulate on Twitter.

MEET WITH MENTORS AND DEVELOP AN ONLINE PROFILE

Make **appointments** with all your faculty and non-faculty mentors and the Grad Success Center staff at least **one full semester** in advance of your job search.

Request **letters of recommendation** from at least three of your most consistently supportive mentors well in advance. An informational email and a meeting six to eight months in advance is ideal; ask for letters no fewer than eight weeks ahead of time.

- Whether or not you are searching for a teaching position, make sure you have asked your faculty mentors to **observe your teaching** at least once. Provide them with a copy of your syllabus and lesson plan before they visit your class. They will be able to write a better, more detailed letter if you give them documents to which they can refer during and after the class period. If possible, complete the teaching observations the semester *before* your mentors will write your recommendation letters.

Build out your [graduate student website](#) by sending updated versions of these documents to Graduate Academic Coordinator Tara Atkinson.

Follow the hyperlinks to read the helpful document descriptions provided by Prof. Adam Hooks and others; see also the examples at the end of this document.

- [CV \(curriculum vitae\)](#)
 - This document lists your professional credentials simply and in reverse-chronological order (that means the most recent item tops every section).
 - A CV does not describe your accomplishments or skills like a résumé does. There should be no bullet points or narrative prose of any kind.
 - The formatting must be extremely simple so reviewers can skim it in less than two minutes.
 - Choose a clean typeface, left-justify all text, and place your section headings in boldface.
 - Do not use any graphics, watermarks, boxes, etc.
- list of research interests
- short narrative describing your research and your dissertation
- list of awards or publications with dates
- list of recent courses taught with links, if possible
- professional photo (optional)

If you are searching for academic jobs, prepare the following documents, ideally drawn from the teaching portfolio you have been developing all along.

- [CV](#)

- [cover letter](#)
- [dissertation abstract](#)
- [research statement](#)
- [statement on teaching principles and practices](#)
- writing sample (no more than 25 pages of sparkingly clear prose, probably drawn from your dissertation)

Create an [Interfolio](#) account and upload these documents to the dossier. Provide Interfolio links for every person who will provide you with a letter of reference.

The department encourages you to consider applying positions other than faculty jobs – both inside and outside academic institutions – as well. We suggest that you prepare the following documents, whether or not you initially pursue employment outside colleges and universities:

- [cover letter for positions other than faculty jobs](#)
 - This one-page letter must be customized for every job to which you apply. Write simply, clearly, and in direct response to the job posting.
- [résumé](#)
 - This is not a CV. A résumé does list your credentials, but it also describes your skills and duties – very briefly and very clearly.
 - You may list your work experience in order of relevance to the position for which you are applying.

The hyperlinks above take you to an intermittently helpful site called *The Professor Is In*. Dr. Karen Kelsky, author of a [book](#) of the same title, and her associates offer paid consultations for job-seekers. **Please consult with your dissertation director, the department's career adviser, and/or the DGS before paying anyone to help you do anything job-search related.**

PHASE THREE: APPLYING FOR OPEN POSITIONS

Once you identify job postings for which you think you may be eligible – and we encourage you to think expansively about your eligibility – it is time to customize those application materials. Whether you are applying for academic or non-academic jobs, you must explain in extremely clear and highly readable (even engaging!) prose why your experience and your skills make you an excellent fit for that *particular* position.

This means that you must do some research, and then customize your application materials for each type of position as well as each individual job. Learn about each employer and determine what they need their new employee to do. (Fortunately, you already are a terrific researcher!) It is now your job to convince them that you can and

will be able to do that work well. Research universities differ from small liberal arts colleges, which differ from community colleges, which differ from publishing companies, non-profit organizations, libraries and archives, museums, etc.

Note the posted deadlines. Send in your materials *before* that date.

Advocate for yourself in your application materials. Be honest about the skills and expertise you have at this point, but do not hesitate to assure potential employers that you are willing and able to learn new skills to be able to do the advertised job well.

Send drafts of your application materials to everyone you think may be able to comment intelligently on them, including the department's career adviser. Get as much feedback as possible and give yourself plenty of time to revise your materials based on those comments.

Network (n. and v.). If you have any contacts even loosely associated with potential employers, reach out to them. Do not be ashamed to ask anyone for assistance, guidance, or support.

- If you are pursuing academic positions, continue to present your scholarship at **conferences**. Local and regional conferences can be valuable places to receive feedback on your scholarship, but for networking purposes, national conferences are essential.
- The English Department offers some reimbursements for conference travel. Consult the PhD/MA Handbook ICON site for details.

Gather letters of reference.

- If you are applying for academic jobs, this process should be completed by October 1 at the latest.
- Make sure your referees have copies of all your application materials well in advance.
- Send very polite reminder emails as the deadlines approach.
- Please note that while you will likely make your letters confidential, you may send the DGS and job search adviser your Interfolio file to have the letters vetted.

PHASE FOUR: INTERVIEWING

Check your email and voice mail **at least twice per day** after you apply for jobs. (Make sure to check the **spam and junk** folders, too!) If necessary, create a simple, brief new voice mail outgoing message that includes your full name.

When you receive a request for an interview, reply immediately. In a few pleasant and error-free sentences, express your enthusiasm for the position and ask for clarification regarding possible dates and times for the interview. Include your phone number, even if it's already included in your application materials. If you are interviewing in person, double-check the time and location of the interview. If you are interviewing over phone or video, request the interviewer's phone number ahead of time so that you can call if technical difficulties arise (as they often do!).

Then, contact the DGS, the career adviser, and (if appropriate) your dissertation advisers and schedule a **mock interview** to be held no later than one day before your real interview. **Do not skip this step.**

Write down comments, points, and questions you want to say in each interview.

Generate and practice a three-minute, **very clear, and very accessible** description of your research.

Prepare to discuss concrete examples of how you exercise your skills. If you are interviewing for a teaching job, have brief accounts of several innovative lessons and activities ready to deliver.

During interviews:

- Skype or Zoom
 - Set up your computer in a neutral site with nothing visually busy or otherwise distracting in the background.
 - Arrange your computer's camera and a lighting source so that you are lit from the front.
 - Position yourself so that your head and shoulders take up most of the screen. No chin-first or "up the nose" shots.
 - Test your internet connection, microphone, and video ahead of time.
 - Wear comfortable but professional clothing.
 - Consider writing out key points and phrases on post-it notes, and placing them on the wall surrounding your computer screen so you can glance at them during interviews.

- In-person interviews
 - If you need to travel by plane, do not check in the bags containing interview clothes or computers.
 - Wear comfortable, well-fitting clothing that makes you look and feel good. Bring multiple outfits, including pairs of shoes, with you. Be prepared for challenging weather.

- Bring a pen and small pad of paper so that you can write down questions and notes during the interview.
- Present yourself and your work with enthusiasm and positivity. Make no negative comments about any professor, peer, school, or previous employer.
- Speak to all the people present. If you can, make eye contact with every person interviewing you.
- Vague and contradictory questions are best managed by transforming them into opportunities to say what you want to say. Ask for clarification if you do not fully hear or understand a question.
- Be direct and concise, and don't give extra information unless you know it will help you.

Send a warm thank-you note to each interviewing committee chair after each round of interviews.

If you are interviewing for an academic position, treat non-faculty workers with respect. Thank them for the work they are doing to make your interview a pleasant experience.

If you do not secure a position, meet with your advisors, career adviser, and/or the DGS to generate a strategy for your search in subsequent application cycles. Most job seekers, especially those aiming to get academic jobs, must apply for two or more cycles.

PHASE FIVE: CONSIDERING A JOB OFFER

If you receive a verbal job offer, express your gratitude, and ask when you will receive it in writing. **Do not accept the job before receiving a formal written offer and discussing it with your advisers and mentors.** Read the offer carefully, and then ask your advisers, mentors, and the search committee chair the questions that occur to you.

It may be possible for you to negotiate some of the terms of the offer. For academic jobs, salary is rarely negotiable, but teaching loads and "start-up packages" (usually including computers) can often be discussed to some effect. For jobs outside academe, there can be quite a bit of successful negotiation of terms – or none. All attempted negotiations should be undertaken in close consultation with your advisers and mentors. Ask for everything to be put in writing, and request a clear deadline for your response.

If you do accept a job offer, celebrate – and let your English department advisers, the DGS, and the Academic Coordinator know about it! We want to celebrate you, too, while also gathering **required** information on where and how PhD graduates are working after they leave EPB.

SAMPLE JOB SEARCH MATERIALS

The ordering of these materials is not intended to suggest a ranking of any kind. Workers in all these sectors use many of the skills that you are developing during the graduate program. Whichever paths you pursue, you can and should expect the English Department to support you before and after you complete your degree.

- RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES: FACULTY POSITIONS
- RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES: STAFF POSITIONS
- SMALL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES: FACULTY POSITIONS
- SMALL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES: STAFF POSITIONS
- COMMUNITY COLLEGES
- HIGH SCHOOLS
- NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS
- PUBLISHING AND EDITING
- OTHER BUSINESSES