

## Undergraduate Research in English

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### 1. Introduction

English as a university subject covers a very wide range of topics, with variation around the world both in scope and in how programmes are organised. Work in English is often more or less formally divided into sub-disciplines. In the UK (where the authors of this chapter are based), language, literature and creative writing are the three most common subdivisions. In Europe, different divisions are made (in Germany, for example, into linguistics, literature, cultural studies, language pedagogy and language practice) and students on English programmes often look at two or more of these areas. In the United States of America, divisions are stronger, with very little work in universities which combines or connects linguistic and literary perspectives. This chapter focuses on undergraduate research on language, literature and creative writing, without presupposing that this encompasses all that can be covered by English or that these areas should be sharply distinguished. It focuses on higher education in the UK, partly because there is little data on international practice (we mention some below) and anecdotal evidence often relates to particular institutions.

In all areas of English, students can be encouraged to be researchers from the outset of their studies, with tutors ('instructors' or 'professors' in the US) and students working together to develop and carry out research in different forms and of varying depth. While there is a tendency to understand undergraduate student research as only part of

dissertations ('theses' in the US) or extended projects, we conceive it more broadly as referring to systematic, focused investigations which aim to enhance knowledge or understanding. On this view, students engage in research across an entire programme of English study.

We consider here both informal, small-scale research as it occurs in everyday learning within language, literature and creative writing, and the shape of research in its more formal sense. We look at the kinds of extended independent research enquiries involved in the different areas of the discipline, usually undertaken in the final stage of an undergraduate degree, we briefly reflect on commonalities with regards to approaches to research across language, literature and creative writing, and we note a number of avenues through which undergraduate research in English can be published.

## **2. Students as researchers**

Undergraduate research is more feasible in English than in some disciplines due to the nature of how research is conceived and the fact that, in most cases, it requires access only to texts and materials which are becoming increasingly accessible online without requiring access to expensive equipment or software. This is not always the case, however; for example, some branches of language and linguistics rely on computerised data collection and analysis. Engagement in research is important for personal and professional development and we believe that educators should aim to maximise these opportunities and to encourage undergraduate students to take advantage of the small but slowly growing range of opportunities to present and publish their work.

In all areas of English, it is common for students to work alongside teaching staff to explore ideas and to develop their research practice. In the UK, many students will have been involved in formal research investigations of various kinds at secondary school. Undergraduate teaching and learning typically focuses on developing critical literacy,

confidence and independence as researchers. Undergraduate research differs from research undertaken at school in that it involves a more sustained focus on methods, increased attention to contextualisation of research within broader scholarship, and critical reflection on the nature of research of various types.

From the start of undergraduate programmes, students of English typically engage in exploring research questions with their peers and with their tutors. Introductory classes often involve students investigating topics, gathering evidence, communicating findings and reflecting on their own practice. A feature of all areas of English is that students are encouraged to develop and contribute their own critical insights and evidence-based opinions from the start of programmes.

Small-scale informal research enquiries which form part of the first stages of an English language degree might include students' investigation of their own varieties. Students might, for example, compare different ways of forming negative utterances or agreeing with others, e.g. considering when they might use words such as *yeah*, *yes* or *aye* (in varieties where *aye* is a form used to express agreement). In this case, the students' own language use is the data under investigation, and individual students can draw on their own relative expertise in their own varieties and linguistic practices to inform their research. The tutor can facilitate learning about different methods of transcribing and analysing the data, while students and tutors co-design the questions they want to probe. Such activities can also raise questions about the nature of evidence in linguistic investigations, introducing degrees of critical reflection.

First year undergraduate work in literary studies often involves small scale investigations including researching the socio-historical contexts of literary works, biographical research into the lives and views of writers, and peer discussion and comparison of interpretations of texts, whereby both the texts, and the students' and other scholars' readings of texts, constitute a form of data. Literature students are also often

introduced, in their first phase of study, to a range of critical concepts and approaches which most commonly (though by no means exclusively) frame and anchor literary research (such as psychoanalytical criticism, post-humanism, ecocriticism, etc.). Students begin to engage critically with academic scholarship on particular texts and authors, gain a critically reflexive understanding of the dominant forms and lines of enquiry within literary studies, and develop their position and voice amongst this scholarship.

Undergraduate work in creative writing often involves a focus on creative practice as research where the act of writing is understood as a research process. As part of this process, students may undertake small scale research activities into aspects of the craft, such as characterisation or suspense, and into different genres and subgenres, such as the conventions of online travel writing or gothic flash fiction. Students may investigate and learn from theoretical work on these aspects and genres, other writers' practices, and reflection on their own development. Students may also research socio-cultural contexts, topics, people and ways of life, including, for example, particular professions or life experiences. A common mode of learning is the practice of sharing drafts in workshops, which often involves associated critical reflection on individual aims, influences, processes and the resultant product, and receiving and giving peer feedback in the form of, for example, interpretations and critical questions.

Most English degree programmes in the UK and parts of Europe enable students to progress from broader and more informal practices of research (investigating texts and topics and communicating about them) to a more systematic and formal research process. In the later stages of degree programmes, most students have the opportunity to undertake research which involves careful and explicit design and use of a critically considered methodology. Such projects tend to be undertaken as independent work, with advice from supervisors, and tend to be communicated in the form of extended written work such as an individually-written dissertation/thesis or project report.

### **3. Types of research projects in English**

The predominant mode of extended undergraduate formal research within literary studies is the dissertation/thesis. Such research projects in literary studies may focus on a single author or a particular genre but can bring together a range of fields. Topics could include such things as 'public attitudes to queer fanfiction', 'disability in gothic literature', 'use of music in the novels of Angela Carter', 'representations of Saartje Baartman in the work of Zoë Wicomb and Suzan-Lori Parks', 'surveillance in 21<sup>st</sup> century fiction', 'early printing presses and the history of the book', and many more. These projects are often year-long projects, undertaken as a discrete unit of study, in which a student works with a supervisor, researching a narrow topic in significant depth. Preparatory study may involve teaching on research proposal design and how to conduct a literature review, which is often a formally required element of the dissertation. Preparatory teaching and learning may involve a review of research methods, though this is typically focused on more fully in postgraduate study. Method often remains a looser concept at undergraduate level, broadly consisting of close textual analysis informed by critical discussion using a recognised theoretical approach; however, some literary dissertations may involve archival research and/or research methods from other disciplines, such as history, education and publishing. For example, a dissertation on the representation of womxn [sic] characters in the work of a particular author would draw on theoretical and critical ideas about gender in a range of societal and literary contexts, but, depending on the author, text range and research question, may also involve archival research, biographical research into the author, and possibly research into different readings of the texts in question. These readings could include not just published academic analyses (as is conventional) but also online reviews by the general public, and solicited reading group or survey responses.

Language and linguistics programmes tend to include a range of fields, often with distinct methods, forms of data collection and analysis, and dominant kinds of research

questions, e.g. psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics, forensic linguistics, child language acquisition, pragmatics, discourse analysis. Students may study language data (and other semiotic data, such as body language and graphics) as occurring in a range of different contexts, e.g. naturally occurring spoken phatic communication, professional workplace email exchanges, social media marketing, legal testimonies, public health communication, and so on. They may use data which is already available or they may gather their own. Research questions in language and linguistics are not limited to the nuances of the functioning of particular parts of language or probing use of language in particular contexts, but also include areas such as attitudes to use of language and socio-political and economic influences on language policies and language change. In comparison to literature programmes, language and linguistics courses are more likely to include a unit of study dedicated to research methods (e.g. survey design, phonetic transcription, etc.), and extended research projects are more likely to require an explicit methodology and also ethical approval, particularly when gathering data from human participants. Some projects involve complex data and use of more than one method to investigate a particular research question, e.g. carrying out a quantitative study of language use (e.g. analysing corpus data) alongside qualitative study (e.g. thematically coding interview responses).

Creative Writing undergraduate programmes tend to culminate in a major project in which the student presents a significant body of creative writing, e.g. a novella, poetry collection, or non-fiction blog, alongside a critically reflexive commentary which often includes a form of action research (though not always explicitly framed as such). The commentary usually includes reflection on the research and influences underlying the design and crafting of the work, and on decision-making during the drafting, editing and revision process in relation to formative feedback. It may also include required close analysis of extracts from the student's work as well as of extracts of textual precedents which have informed the work.

While many research projects grounded in one area of English draw on others implicitly, some kinds of undergraduate projects do so more explicitly. This type of work is often undertaken by students on joint honours programmes who are attracted by the opportunity to bring together different areas of their learning. For example, research projects in stylistics (or literary linguistics) may focus on using ideas from discourse analysis and pragmatics to explore characterization and dialogue in drama texts, exploring voice in poetry through an analysis of its orientational language, or mapping out and examining mind style and point of view in a novel through a close study of modality. Increasingly, students are also drawn to research that involves demonstrating expertise in working with large datasets, for example undertaking corpus linguistic analyses of speech and dialogue in Dickens' novels, or exploring how readers frame their emotional responses to texts in online reader reviews. Equally, students may bring together areas of their study in critical-creative work which views their own writing as analytical responses to published texts. Such work often involves de-/re-centring a narrative to present it from a different perspective or context, or to re-imagine a poem or short story in a different mode or genre and so draw on the affordances of this new medium in order to repackage the initial text. Pope's (1994) pioneering work on 'textual intervention' is still influential here. As with creative writing tasks, students reflect on their work in a commentary which allows them both to analyse their own language and editing choices and to critically examine those in the original text. We view all of this work as genuinely allowing students to develop and practise research skills across language, literature and creative writing, and to use knowledge from each of these areas in the service of a more integrated piece of work.

Just as there are similarities across the different areas of English in terms of conceptualisation and foci of research, there are corresponding potential areas for development in provision of undergraduate research opportunities. While undergraduate research in English is often a relatively solitary practice, there is scope for more collaborative

projects than the discipline currently appears to pursue. This is demonstrated by some courses which involve group research projects from the beginning. Similarly, traditional extended formal academic written work, in the form of a thesis, report or commentary, remains the dominant mode by which research is communicated. The encouragement of more diverse forms of research outputs, aligned with the development of different skills and with communication with different audiences in mind, would bring advantages in terms of both inclusive teaching and learning and employability gains. There are relatively few platforms by which students can publish their research, although these opportunities are growing.

#### **4. Publishing and presenting student work**

The Boyer Commission (1998: 24) states that “[e]very university graduate should understand that no idea is fully formed until it can be communicated, and [this communication] is part of the thought process that enables one to understand material fully. Dissemination [...] is an essential and integral part of the research process”. Others suggest that publication professionalises students and improves their engagement in learning and their discipline (Hill and Walkington 2016, Walkington 2014) and that publication also enhances skills in communication and critical thinking (Rowlett, Blockus and Larson 2012). English as a discipline is focused on the communication of ideas, and therefore provides an excellent foundation for research publication.

A number of publications have presented a positive view of developing undergraduate research opportunities, including for presentations and publications (e.g. Grobman and Kinkead 2010, Kinkead and Grobman 2011, Chesunt et al 2013). Presenting a tentatively optimistic picture in the introduction to their important collection, Grobman and Kinkead (2010: xiii) suggest that ‘The times they are a-changin’, but at a rather sluggish pace’. They point to evidence of a growth in activity from English undergraduates, including increasing



numbers of abstracts at the Council for Undergraduate Research conference (<https://www.cur.org>).

While a range of journals now provide opportunities for undergraduate students of English to participate in the cultures of research publication, progress here is slow. Students need active encouragement to submit their work and to complete the review and resubmission process. We have faced this difficulty with the journal we co-edit, *Mesh: The Journal for Undergraduate Work Across English Studies* (<https://www.integratingenglish.com/mesh-journal>), an international e-journal publishing student work which brings together two or more areas of English. Students are more likely to reach the publication stage when editors provide more specific guidance on how to respond to comments from reviewers. Other outlets launched recently include an annual conference for linguistics students organised by the Undergraduate Linguistics Association of Great Britain (<https://www.ulab.org.uk/about-ulab>), who also produce the *Journal of the Undergraduate Linguistics Association of Britain* and the quarterly magazine *U-Lingua*, and *Lifespans and Styles: Undergraduate Papers in Sociolinguistics* (<http://journals.ed.ac.uk/lifespansstyles/>), a journal devoted to publishing innovative, empirical studies of sociolinguistics, written by undergraduates and based on original research. There are also more established outlets such as *The Oswald Review* (<https://www.usca.edu/english/opportunities/the-oswald-review>), an international, refereed journal of undergraduate criticism and research in the discipline of English, published annually. Some universities also provide platforms for the publication of work by their own students, such as the University of Nottingham's undergraduate English Studies online journal *Innervate*. There is a fuller list in appendices to Kinkead and Grobman (2011: 229-230).

## 5. Conclusion

English is a diverse and varied discipline. It is quite natural, and we would argue important, for students to be treated as researchers right from the start of their time on undergraduate programmes and many programmes are designed explicitly to welcome students into a community of researchers. As they progress through their studies, students are encouraged and supported to develop independence and confidence in a range of research practices and to share their research ideas with others, including more widely through publication. Increased opportunities for students and others to interact, to develop and share ideas and to engage more explicitly with the nature and practice of research have been welcome additions to English programmes during recent years. We believe that a key focus for future work should be to develop further avenues for presentation and publication of student work and ways of encouraging students to take these opportunities.

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