

Multiple Choice Questions: Career Opportunities versus Career Tracks

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My name is Liana. I was an English major and I am not in a tenure track job.

I know what comes to mind when you think “non-tenure track”: I’m probably an adjunct or a lecturer or a visiting assistant professor. I’m probably living paycheck to paycheck. I’m probably planning my way into a tenure track position. After all, my English department trained me for that. That’s what we go to graduate school for, right? To become professors, researchers, to write and publish in our fields.

Actually, I’m not. I’m a Graduate Writing Specialist at a writing center at a research-intensive, doctoral-granting university. I provide support for graduate student writers as well as faculty and staff who work with graduate student writers to help these students succeed in their writing projects. My job description puts me at an interesting crossroads of outreach, teaching, coaching, and programming: I reach out to faculty, I research academic writing, and I work closely with other departments to organize programs for graduate student writers. I do not consider myself an administrator but “staff” also feels limiting. It’s a rather unique position; I only know of one other school that has a similarly-titled position with a similar set of obligations. I’m what some call an “alternative academic,” someone with a postbaccalaureate degree who works in academia but who is not on the tenure track or not necessarily teaching exclusively. (Bethany Nowviskie [has Storified the tweets](#) from where the term initially originated and has written more extensively on the subject in a post titled [“#alt-ac: Alternative Academic Careers for Humanities Scholars.”](#))

When I tell people about my job, they sometimes ask me what I do and how someone goes about getting a job like mine. I used to think it was just dumb luck (“I happened to be looking in the right place at the right time”) but Sarah Werner’s recent MLA 2013 presentation [“Make Your Own Luck”](#) on how the hard work we put into our academic lives makes more of a difference than luck has made me reevaluate that position. In fact, it was my graduate school experience — particularly the opportunities I took advantage of — that made a difference in my current job.

“I’m the last person who should be teaching writing,” I remember telling my co-instructor the summer I first taught writing. I didn’t trust my ability to teach writing, but I also felt this way because what I *really* wanted to teach was literature. This is not uncommon among English majors; we go to graduate school because we love books and we want to teach those books, write about those books, live in those books. Teaching writing, for many of us, becomes not just a teaching rite of passage, but the toll you have

to pay in order to get to the literature classes you want to teach. I know for a fact that a lot of students feel like teaching writing is something they have to do.

It is ironic, then, that my current job, Graduate Writing Specialist, is almost exclusively writing. I am not ashamed to point out how I used to feel about teaching writing. But I would be remiss to ignore that it was teaching writing which landed me in an alternative academic position; I had the chance to not just teach writing extensively, but I also had the opportunity to work as the Coordinator of the Writing component of a summer program for incoming first-year students. Although I taught writing because it was part of my obligations as a teaching assistant, that afforded me other chances to grow as a professional.

Teaching was not the only opportunity that helped me get one step closer to my current alternative academic position. For example, for the past few years I have been working for an academic blog called [*Sounding Out!*](#), which came out of a class I took as a graduate student. That class introduced me to a new, exciting field of inquiry called Sound Studies, and when the chance came to put together a blog with my professor and some fellow graduate students from the course, I jumped. I knew little about managing a blog or how to put this kind of project together; I didn't have the foresight to see how big the blog would become. More than three years later, I am the Managing Editor and work on the visual layout of the blog, thinking about how the appearance and the online presence of the blog can stay true to the blog's intention and mission statement. I edit guest-bloggers regularly and oftentimes put together the visuals for their posts. The blog gives me a venue to continue thinking critically and share my works in progress with readers. The blog keeps me sharp intellectually and makes me stand out in the academic community because of how we make knowledge and the field accessible to others.

What about my training enabled me to get to where I am today? For me, the close reading skills that are the tool of the trade in literature departments. As a Graduate Writing Specialist, I use my capacity to read closely, deduce information, and draw conclusions with a myriad of texts. I work with students from all sorts of disciplines to help them navigate big projects such as the dissertation, literature reviews, journal articles, etc. I help them figure out what they need to do and how to say it, and I do not take this job lightly because as a Ph.D. I know how important writing is to your success as a graduate student. In terms of the blog, editing forces me to think about what their main ideas are and how images and videos can help get that message across. It is a multimedia platform, and I am certain that my training as an English major helps me every day understand how to negotiate words with images and sound.

Going to graduate school for English is a decision I do not regret. I became an English major because I enjoyed reading and wanted to immerse myself in that world fully, and the thought that I could be a part of that experience with others sounded fascinating. Yes, I decided to do a Ph.D. thinking I would teach. Even though I went to graduate school thinking I would be a tenure track professor, the turns my life has taken are exciting and

worthwhile and I feel great about the position I am in. Although I don't think the English department could have trained me specifically to do either of the things I currently do, the opportunities that I found in the English department made it possible for me to branch out from the tenure track to other career options.

I think English departments should offer opportunities for students to broaden their scope not just in terms of areas of study or literary genres but also in terms of opportunities to explore writing and literature in other contexts. Encourage them to get involved in digital humanities research. Set up a chance to work at the Writing Center. Create internships at academic journals where they can be a part of the editing and peer review process. Even if they continue to read, write, and ask questions in class, they deserve to be shown how far an English degree can go. The future of the English department lies not in career tracks but in career opportunities.