

UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES):

English

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INTRODUCTION

Research on learning in college shows that learning is profoundly shaped by the goals, practices, cultures, and values of the academic disciplines¹, particularly the disciplinary practices in students' majors. Therefore, if we are to understand the kinds of experiences that students find intellectually rigorous (and, thus, engaging), we need to examine challenge in the major. Understanding challenge in the major is important because at every stage of their college experience, students report that they want to be challenged, that they perform better in courses that are challenging, and that they value classes that stretch their thinking and ask them to demonstrate learning more than they value classes that ask little of them.² Although learning about where students experience challenge is important, asking students to describe challenging learning experiences in their majors requires some prior understanding of how those majors operate. The Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) designed the UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES) to accommodate these needs.

METHOD

Qualitative methods are recommended when researchers are seeking to understand the complex learning experiences of students, as well as the meaning they ascribe to those experiences³; therefore, we designed the UW ACES to be primarily an interview study.⁴ Using a "citizen science" model, OEA asked departmental advisers if they would be willing to volunteer to interview seniors in their departments who came in to advising to apply for graduation. Advisers are knowledgeable about their academic programs, understand disciplinary practice in their departments, and are trusted by students in the major, so they have the best chance of gathering good information from seniors about their experiences in the major.

Sixty-six advisers from 32 undergraduate programs volunteered to participate. During the 2012-13 academic year, the volunteer advisers asked students if they would participate in brief (5-10 minute) interviews about challenge in the major. If the students agreed, advisers asked them to respond to four open-ended questions, entering students' responses directly into a Catalyst survey form that OEA researchers had designed for that purpose. The questions were as follows:

¹ Beecher & Trowler, 2001; Bransford et al., 2000; Beyer et al., 2007; Donald, 2002; Pace and Middendorf, 2004; Wineburg, 2001, 1991; Neumann et al., 2002; Shulman, 1988; Biglan, 1973.

² Beyer, et al., 2007.

³ Merriam, 2001.

⁴ One participating department asked students to respond to the open-ended questions in writing.

1. What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major.
2. What made the project/class/activity challenging?
3. What did you do or learn that enabled you to meet those challenges?
4. What do you think you learned by completing this project/class/activity?

In addition, advisers asked students in what course the challenging work took place and how many quarters they had until they graduated.

Researchers in OEA conducted training workshops in interviewing skills with all participating advisers, provided individual departments with survey customization if required, and monitored all resulting interviews, reporting back to advisers about the interviews they had conducted. By the end of the academic year, departmental advisers had interviewed 1,237 students. Students' responses were analyzed using a constant comparison method⁵, an inductive process designed to let themes emerge, rather than imposing assumed categories on students' comments.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

If we interviewed students post-graduation, they would be likely to identify their capstone courses or their advanced senior-level courses as the ones asking for their most challenging work. However, because we wanted to attach the interview to a time when students would normally see their academic advisers, we interviewed students when they came into the advising office to apply for graduation, which often meant that they were two or three quarters away from graduation. Senior-level courses, particularly capstone or capstone-like classes, are those which students often say are their most challenging and satisfying. Although interviewing students as they applied for graduation meant that we might not gather information about late-senior year courses, we felt that it would be interesting to departments to learn the kinds of challenges that lead to and prepare students for those more advanced experiences.

English Department Results

The English Department was one of the UW ACES' 32 participating departments. Mel Wensel, Kimberly Swayze, Nancy Sisko, and Bridget Norquist asked 73 students if they were willing to be interviewed for the study and 61 (84%) of them agreed. The 61 students who were interviewed represented about 21% of the 291 seniors in English who graduated during the 2012-2013 school year.⁶

Students were asked which academic pathway in the major—Language and Literature or Creative Writing—they were completing for their undergraduate degrees. Forty-five⁷ (74%) of the interviewees said they were enrolled in the Language and Literature track and 16 (26%) said they were Creative

⁵ Merriam, 2001.

⁶ The number of undergraduate degree completions is based on the 2012-13 UW Profiles reports published by the UW Office of Planning and Budgeting (<https://uwprofiles.uw.edu/Viz/View/13-SummaryandTrendsDegreeAttributes>)

⁷ One of the interviewees did not specify a pathway. We analyzed that student's responses with those in Language and Literature, because the content of the responses most matched that group's responses.

Writing majors. When there were differences in the responses of students in these two areas of concentration, we note them in this report.

Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge

The majority of the interviewees had a full academic year to complete before graduating. Only one of the interviewees was graduating in the same quarter she interviewed. About 28% of the interviewees had two quarters left; two-thirds (66%) had three quarters to complete; and 5% had four quarters left before graduating. Because so many of the interviewees had their senior year to complete at the time of their interviews, their sense of what was challenging in the major was not likely to include capstone courses or other senior experiences that they may have noted if they were interviewed later in their paths through the major.

Indeed, in identifying the courses that either presented them with their greatest challenges or with the activity that they found the most challenging, most of the interviewees identified 300-level courses. Ten (16%) students listed more than one course as the site of their greatest challenges, and altogether interviewees identified 35 courses in the English major as presenting them with significant challenges. About 14% of those were 200-level courses; 60% were 300-level courses; and 23% were 400-level classes. One student mentioned a 500-level course, and another student mentioned a Simpson Center humanities course. Finally, two students, both of them in the Language and Literature track, said that they had experienced their greatest challenges studying creative writing at the Rome Center. The list below provides the course numbers and the number of students mentioning that course if more than one student identified it. When students identified a faculty member, we included that name. As the list shows, the most frequently-mentioned courses were English 302, English 301 (202), and English 297. The full list of courses mentioned is as follows:

ENGL 205 (Searle)	ENGL 324 (3)	ENGL 440 (4, one mentioning Patel)
ENGL 211	ENGL 326 (2)	ENGL 444
ENGL 244	ENGL 334	ENGL 471
ENGL 284	ENGL 335	ENGL 478
ENGL 297 (5)	ENGL 350	ENGL 484
ENGL 301—currently 202 (5)	ENGL 355 (2)	ENGL 485 (2)
ENGL 302 (14, one mentioning Weinbaum)	ENGL 363 (2, one mentioning Mitchell)	ENGL 491
ENGL 304 (2)	ENGL 368	ENGL 494 (2, one mentioning Harkins)
ENGL 306	ENGL 370	
ENGL 314	ENGL 376 (2)	
ENGL 316 (2)	ENGL 381 (2)	
ENGL 318	ENGL 383 (2)	ENGL 593
ENGL 323	ENGL 384 (2)	

As Table 1 shows, there was little overlap in the courses noted by students in the Language and Literature and those in the Creative Writing pathways. As the table shows, only six courses overlapped as the sites of students' most challenging work: English 301, 324, 326, 376, 381, and 494. Furthermore, English 302, the most frequently-mentioned course, was identified only by students in the Language and Literature pathway, which means that nearly one-third (31%) of the interviewees focusing on

Language and Literature found English 302 the site of their most challenging learning experience in the major by the time they reached their senior year.

Table 1. Courses in which most challenging work took place by academic track

Language and Literature N=45		Creative Writing N=16
ENGL 205	ENGL 334	ENGL 301/202
ENGL 211	ENGL 335	ENGL 306
ENGL 244	ENGL 350	ENGL 324
ENGL 284	ENGL 355 (2)	ENGL 326
ENGL 297 (5)	ENGL 368	ENGL 363
ENGL 301/202 (4)	ENGL 370	ENGL 376
ENGL 302 (14)	ENGL 376	ENGL 381
ENGL 304 (2)	ENGL 381	ENGL 383 (2)
ENGL 314	ENGL 440 (4)	ENGL 384 (2)
ENGL 316 (2)	ENGL 444	ENGL 478
ENGL 318	ENGL 471	ENGL 484
ENGL 323	ENGL 494	ENGL 485 (2)
ENG 324 (2)	ENGL 593	ENGL 491
ENGL 326		ENGL 494

In addition to asking students which courses were the sites for students' most challenging work, advisers asked students to identify the faculty member teaching the course or requiring the activity that they had described as challenging. The interviewees named 38 faculty members from the department. They also noted Belic, from the Slavic Languages and Literature Department, Hoogs and Horton from the Rome Center, and Reynolds from UC Irvine. The following lists the 38 faculty members whom interviewees identified; when more than one student named a faculty member we have put that number in parenthesis:

Abrams	Harkins (2)	Reddy
Bosworth (2)	Holmberg (2)	Russell
Bryant (3)	Holtser	Searle (2)
Burstein	LeMesurier	Shields
Butwin	Liu (4)	Simpson (2)
Cherniavsky	Malone	Sonenberg
Chud-Sokei	Mitchell	Streitberger (3)
Crimmins (2)	Modiano	Taranath (2)
Cummings (2)	Moore	VandenBos
DuBois	Patel	Webster
Feld	Patte	Weinbaum (8)
Foster (4)	son, M. (2)	Welty
Guitierrez (2)	Patterson, T.	Wong

1. Students' Greatest Challenges

Students were asked: "What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major." About 31% of the interviewees gave more than one response to this question.

One very strong theme and several minor themes emerged from students' responses.

A course or courses. About 77% of the interviewees said that a specific course or courses presented them with their greatest challenges in the major. Many of these students also identified some aspect of the course that was particularly challenging—for example, the writing required or the theoretical focus of the course (counted in themes discussed below). The following quotations illustrate this category of response:

- *It was a class with Professor Weinbaum on Marxist Theory. Very different from all other English courses I had taken.*
- *I took English 350 which was African American literature mostly. That was the first time I had looked at the modern era of literature through eyes other than Fitzgerald's or Hemingway's.*
- *Shakespeare after 1603.*
- *English 383, poetry class [was the most challenging experience]. I went in with the wrong attitude; I thought it was going to be easy. It was some of the most difficult writing I've ever taken on. [The class] really opened my mind to use of imagery, metaphors, and just other poetic devices that really opened my mind to a new way of thinking, of conveying what I'm feeling and my thoughts. "Tell all the truth but tell it 'slant'"—Emily Dickinson. I really got that concept in that class. [It was a] neat way to communicate my thoughts through poetry.*
- *English 376 was definitely challenging but very worthwhile. A great class.*
- *I'd have to say it was my English 363 class that did that the most. It was a combination of the content, the way it was taught, and the professor that made it really challenging.*
- *Well, as far as challenging my thinking, if you don't consider grades or other obstacles that challenge me, Professor Holmberg's history of theory course. The subject material was something that was new to me and challenged the way I think and affected the way I read for other courses and the way I wrote for other courses. His style of teaching was really helpful.*
- *I guess the first thing that comes to mind is English 301 with Professor Foster. I think I would say that course as a whole because I was introduced to so much that I hadn't heard at my community college.*
- *English 302 with Professor Mark Patterson [was the most challenging experience I had in the major]. That is the class that motivated me to go into honors. I thought he was a great professor, great discussions. That was the closest level of discussion I had been challenged in before my honors seminars and thesis. It set the bar higher.*

The writing required. About 23% of the students noted that the writing they had to complete, usually for specific courses, was particularly challenging for them. For example:

- *I found that English 297 of the gateway class really solidified my writing style. It was a really challenging class for me, heavy in writing, but taught me valuable tools on how to structure and articulate an essay argument.*
- *A travel writing manuscript for English 381, Advanced Expository Writing.*
- *I would say the most challenging task in my major is writing an essay, because back in high school it used to be so simple. In college, it's completely different because the professor looks at your thesis and how clear it can be. In English 302 and 297 I recognized the challenges were there. I always got my paper back with comments about me not being clear. And I really didn't know what they meant by that.*
- *I took American post-modern horror stories. That whole class blew my mind. At the end I had to do 15-page paper on House of Leaves. I had never had to do that before, and I felt like I had to have deeper arguments, things that stood up better, were more original, not what we had regurgitated in class.*
- *Right now English 381, Advanced Expository Writing, Travel Writing. I'm used to writing formal academic papers. [This is the] first class where I've been able to use my voice. The more personal you are, the more you connect with your audience. I spend so long preparing for the pieces we are about to write because I have to put on this new writing "hat."*
- *English 297/301 would be the beginning of it because of the introduction to critical theory and writing papers about that. Coming from a junior college, all papers were opinion based and not so much theory based. Critical theory, at first was really hard for me because it forced to me to completely rethink the way I approached thinking and writing.*

Understanding theory. Seven (11%) of the interviewees noted that understanding and using literary theory to think about texts was the most challenging aspect of the major for them. Five of these students were speaking about work done in English 302 and two in English 301 (currently 202). For example:

- *I really liked the English 301 class. The theory was the most challenging.*
- *Theoretical texts. English 302, for example. I took a course in Marxist theory. Dealing with that kind of heavy material that kind of shakes certain ideologies that I may hold, and, really, trying to parse it out, explore it, keep an open mind, and relate it to other texts and my own life—I found that to be a significant but rewarding challenge. English 440 (the capstone) dealt with a lot of theory-based texts. Just trying to get a grasp of those texts and explore them as deeply as possible was the most challenging of my time in the English program.*
- *I would say English 302 because the teacher covered Marxism in English and it was a completely new topic for me. Thinking of it in literature, it really was a stretch for me. As soon as I grasped something, we moved on. I worked hard at this class.*

- *English 302 was, without a doubt, the first class that stretched my thinking. Learning all the theories about language and culture certainly changed the way I looked at literature. I was especially challenged by Saussure theories with language. That class has really made me do well in my Honors class this quarter.*

The reading required. About 8% of the interviewees spoke of challenges related to the reading that was assigned in class. As three of them noted:

- *English 302 was the first class that focused on criticism, and I had never had that. I had no idea what new criticism was or post-structuralism or things like that. The readings were a challenge to sift through. I didn't understand most of what they were discussing and how to [relate] it back to the class.*
- *Professor Weinbaum's class, English 318. Texts were challenging and different. Class discussion. One book in particular was really weird but I liked it—Octavia Butler, Wild Seed. It brought up a totally different way of thinking about slavery. I was interested in it, which was cool.*
- *I think it would be my Milton class, English 326. There was quite a lot of reading, with many different viewpoints that we looked at and endless theories, and it really broadened my point of view about all the ideas out there.*

Other. Two students each gave the following responses:

- Learning to think critically in the discipline: *“Just entering the English major stretched my thinking. Before I was a history major and an anthropology major and in those disciplines I think very differently! In English, I had to really shift gears to think like an English scholar.”*
- A project. *“In English 316 with Professor Taranath, a project in place of midterm--found poems.”*
- Study abroad: *“I think my creative writing courses stretched my thinking the most, especially my study abroad course. Any course that made me evaluate the way I think and live inside and outside the classroom and in day to day life was most important. The trip to Rome really stretched my conception of myself as a writer and a student.”*

Finally, individual students gave the following three responses:

- Learning about grammar
- Certain concepts
- A specific professor
- An internship

Differences in Language and Literature and Creative Writing students' responses. As Table 2 shows, there were some differences in the responses to this question from students seeking Language and Literature and Creative Writing degrees in the major. Creative writing interviewees noted courses and the writing required in their courses as challenges more frequently than did Language and Literature interviewees. This latter group identified understanding and using theory as significant challenges more frequently than did students seeking creative writing degrees.

Table 2. Greatest challenges of Language and Literature and Creative Writing interviewees

Greatest challenge	Language and Literature	Creative Writing
Course(s)	54%	88%
The writing	16%	25%
Understanding theory	10%	3%

2. What Made Those Activities/Classes Challenging?

When asked what had made those activities challenging, about 48% of the 61 interviewees identified more than one challenge. Four strong themes and several themes with a moderate or small amount of agreement across interviewees emerged from students' responses to this question.

A new way of thinking. About 30% of the interviewees said that their most challenging experiences in the major were challenging because they introduced students to or required them to use a new way of thinking either about writing or about literature. In the words of six of those students:

- *It was just not something I'd done—very new concepts and ways of thinking about things.*
- *The teacher was so good. I had to read so critically, breaking down text, all syllables, looking at language like a math formula. I had never looked at words as something formulaic but still purposeful. [This focused on] how we communicate but not on emotional/story telling. I worked very hard. It was counterintuitive.*
- *[What was challenging was] how familiar the ideas were to the teacher and the other students, so the other students were more engaged and interested in the theory than I was, because it conflicted with my world view. The level of complexity and familiarity that was required for me to understand the topic [was challenging]. I had to read sentence by sentence through the documents and decode each sentence and situate it within what I understand in the theory and whether or not I agreed with it and how to reconcile it with what I believe and know. Language is a tool for influencing my environment. When I am critically looking at a text and the analysis is different from what I know or believe—it changes my way of thinking.*
- *[In the] class on slavery, we looked at slavery in a way I've never looked at it before through fictional and non-fictional works on slaves or written by slaves. It was just an interesting take on the subject. Previously, I'd learned it from the political and historical perspective instead of the personal take on it. This class was very personal and left out all the politics of it and focused on the people.*
- *The whole concept of separating the word itself from the object and the idea and the meaning behind the word was something I had never thought about before. We don't really think about language in that way every day. To think about language is—wow!—we've determined socially what this object is called. It was really a new way to see meaning. It opened me up to so many points of view.*
- *It was mostly different ways of thinking. With the first example, I'd never applied book reviews to academic writing. I had to learn how to get out of the academic writing box for both these experience....You're taught a very specific way of writing academically,*

then you get to another class and you have to stretch your mind more and realize this is not the only way to write an academic paper. And you can draw from outside sources to write in ways I would not have thought of in academic writing.

New ways of writing. About 26% of the interviewees spoke of learning new ways of writing as the most challenging aspect of their work in the major. These students broke into two distinct groups. One group, representing about half of those speaking about challenges related to writing, identified challenges in revision and the writing process. This group of interviewees included an equal number of interviewees speaking of creative writing work and of writing in language and literature courses. The second group spoke about challenges related to being asked to write in new ways or genres. All in this second group were students in the Language and Literature track in the major. The following examples illustrate both groups included in this category of response:

- *We had a week to write our first draft because the class was very revision heavy. Spit this out, then revise and revise. The whole workshop process was run in a way that I'd never done before. In previous classes the writer doesn't say anything. In Maya's class, there were four stages.*
- *Revision was the most challenging aspect. When writing something, usually I get married to it the first time, and it's difficult to go back in and revise. By having to revise multiple times, I got more comfortable with the process, and I understood that the process is the most important part of writing, and I actually enjoy it now.*
- *[The course] challenged me to make my writing concise and focus on one specific topic. It forced me to look at my grammar and writing as a whole. It helped me to change the style of my writing. [There was] no room for fluff because it was only 4-6 pages, no filler, no BS.*
- *I think a lot of what made Rome challenging was that I am the type of student that needs to perfect my work, and that wasn't what we did in Rome. We turned in a LOT of raw writing; we shared this raw work and discussed it. We had to be comfortable sharing this work. I had never done that before. It really helped my writing a lot.*
- *We read The Body in Pain and used that to look at different audiences when we write. It was very different from anything else I'd done in other classes. So much of it was focused on writing for a particular audience through a particular lens. She would have us write about specific theories from the book in three different formats: academic journal entry, blog/Facebook post, and newspaper article. [We used] three different styles for each complex theory. It felt like it was outside my area of expertise. We had to take time to make sure you weren't writing a summary but something that would be understandable to people outside the discipline.*
- *I've never been comfortable using the word "I" in a paper before. I love it. It's really good for internet writing. Good practice to writing in a more personal style. Challenging to forgo all my English-major academic training and connect with the readers as opposed to teaching them something.*
- *This was very different from other things I had done. Most of my previous courses were in British literature or more classical literature. [We had to take the] crazy, out-there aspects of the novel and write about how they related to our lives. I forgot what I wrote about specifically but it was very out there—ghosts, haunted houses, etc.—very far from*

real life. It made me think in a different way—a new mindset required for analyzing horror. It allowed me to stretch my thinking and be more cognizant of other genres.

Understanding and using theory in thinking about literature. One in four (25%) of the interviewees specifically mentioned the challenges of understanding theory and applying theory to literary texts. This category of response is closely related to the previous category, “a new way of thinking,” but when interviewees specifically mentioned theory, we counted that separately so that we could observe the strength of that response. Both Language and Literature and Creative Writing interviewees mentioned theory. The following six quotations illustrate this category of response:

- *The theory. The language has to be parsed a bit. And then the theories themselves are a stretch to wrap my mind around. It's so new and it's not a concrete idea, it's theoretical. Foucault.*
- *The theoretical background that was given to explore the literature was unlike anything I'd seen before.*
- *Just the fact that I never thought about how theoretical approaches to literature changed your view of it; I never thought about the way that I read before; I just ingested without thinking about it.*
- *The assignments were all quite doable, but it was the theoretical framework, like modernity, that was way beyond anything I had read before and affected all my reading and thinking after.*
- *English 593/499 with Professor Modiano really challenged me, because I am much more of an experiential person when it comes to literature, as opposed to a person that has a more theoretical bent, so reading all of these texts rooted in theory and making sense of all of them, and putting that information in a research paper was really challenging for me.*
- *I'd never really taken theory before. The material was new. It gives me a different lens to look at any text throughout the whole English Department, a methodological approach. The projects in class challenged my thinking. It was more than going through the motions.*

Level of critical and analytical thinking required. More than one out of every five (21%) interviewees spoke of the challenge involved in being required to move to a deeper level of critical or analytical thinking. For example:

- *[What was challenging was] the depth of analysis required for each piece of work.*
- *Intellectually, it was demanding to read the analysis that we were required to unpack but also the amount of analysis was really in depth.*
- *South Asian Literature wasn't something I had previously considered. We had to put ourselves in the shoes of the writer. Truly analyzing the texts. In other classes you read and read into it, but in this class you really questioned what we read. We dug deeper, even beyond initial analysis.*
- *The paper was challenging. It was tough because it had to be so much more comprehensive. I had to dig deeper and really think about it. Other papers felt easier.*

You had to know the general concept and convey ideas well. But this one, I really had to dig deep and flesh out concepts. I knew she would read our papers critically.

- *The questions that he asked were so profound and more critical and argumentative, and I guess that is what separated this class out from the earlier ones I had taken, when I was reading and following along in those classes to being able to develop my own thoughts and confidence in expressing them [in this one].*

Having to work and learn independently. About 10% of the interviewees said that working independently was especially challenging. In the words of two of them:

- *[What was challenging was] that we covered theory that I was not familiar with before and also the style of the class as a seminar, which is heavily dependent on student contribution with not much faculty input. This left the burden of learning on the student not being hand-held by the professor. [It] put the power of learning and discovery with us. [This was especially challenging] with something as hard as theory.*
- *The fact that it was very self-guided [was what made it challenging]. She didn't give us any prompt. She said it had to be so long, and we had to turn in a proposal. But you had to come up with own idea from the text and drawing on material from the class. But you really had to have an original idea. It took me awhile to come up with a thesis. But I'm very proud of that paper.*

Coming up with my own ideas/arguments. Closely related to the previous category of response, about 10% of the students interviewed said that the most challenging aspect of their work in the major was coming up with their own arguments or ideas, primarily for written assignments. As two of these students put it:

- *I would say that when it comes to how to create a thesis I would always have a hard time, especially when it comes to writing an argument. I write theses that describe but don't set up an argument.*
- *I think it was having to develop my own argument which is supposed to be original on a piece of material. How do I add to the dialogue? How do I make a positive contribution?*

The heavy workload. Eight percent of the interviewees spoke of the challenge of a heavy workload, with students mentioning both the amount of reading and the amount of writing required by their courses. For example:

- *The main assignment was [to write] two or three chapters of a novel. And we couldn't just end with those chapters. We had to come up with a plan for the rest of the novel. We also had to critique three of our peers' work per week and also had to read novels written by professional authors. The work load was tremendous. The class atmosphere gave me the ability to push forward. [It was] a great environment of writers. And Professor Bosworth is a terrific mediator and conversationalist.*
- *Besides the insane amount of reading we had to do? It was a lot! Professor Crimmins was great for helping us with the language that is hard, so I got a lot from his class.*

Thinking about my own values, ideas, and identity. About 8% of the interviewees spoke of the challenges involved in confronting their own beliefs and personal identities. As two of them said:

- *In rhetoric class, in both the assignments and exams, we were asked how this rhetorical text was useful and how might I apply it to my own life or the way that I read or the rhetoric I use and why. I had to explain myself in writing. That was really challenging because it got me to think about the practical applications for these rhetorical marks on a piece of paper. Some of the readings by authors with socially conscious ideas helped me think about my own social ideas in the turmoil of our times.*
- *It has to do with it bringing me out of my comfort zone. It made me face new ideas, focus on something that hadn't been my focus before. I came into program enjoying analysis of texts and culture throughout genres and mediums, but really getting that kind of grounding in what people have done in the past, and even in fields not necessarily related to these types of cultural texts—just kind of bridges—was most challenging. It forced me to break patterns of thoughts. Ideas of structures of power opened my eyes.*

Understanding earlier versions of the English language. Four students (7%), all but one of them in the Creative Writing track, spoke of the challenge involved in understanding readings from earlier centuries. These students specifically mentioned understanding the language of Shakespeare, Milton, and Middle English. For example:

- *Reading the Shakespearean poetry, the complex language. Analyzing the language and putting the story together.*
- *[Middle English was] a lot to digest at once. It was like learning a new language. It was a lot of information at once but the teacher did a really good job explaining that.*

Other. Two students each mentioned the following as aspects of their work in the major that made it challenging:

- Not knowing the professor's expectations
- Understanding the reading
- Learning "how much I didn't know."

Finally, individual students mentioned the following as challenges:

- Constraints for writing
- Exams

Differences in Language and Literature and Creative Writing students' responses. Table 3 shows the differences in what students seeking Language and Literature degrees and those seeking Creative Writing degrees found challenging about the activities and courses they had described. As the table shows, a greater percentage of Language and Literature students identified new ways of writing and the level of critical and analytical thinking as challenging aspects of their courses and activities than was the case for Creative Writing students. The latter group noted greater challenges with workload and understanding early versions of English than did the former.

Table 3. What made activities challenging, Language and Learning and Creative Writing interviewees

Challenge	All N=61	Language and Learning N=45	Creative Writing N=16
New way of thinking	30%	31%	25%
New ways of writing	26%	27%	19%
Understanding and using theory	25%	24%	25%
Level of critical/analytical thinking	21%	27%	6%
Heavy workload	8%	4%	19%
Understanding early English	7%	2%	19%

3. What enabled students to meet those challenges?

About 52% of the interviewees identified more than one source of help for meeting the challenges they described. For example, this student speaks of help from the professor and TAs, from peers, and from changes in herself:

It was mostly an internal, mental process, just approaching the material from a different standpoint and trying to think of it in a different way. Instead of falling back on my default way of thinking about something, I had to look at it as having a use I never thought it would have before. I consulted with my teachers in both cases, but it was more like a group thing, the whole class on a journey together. I would get a lot just hearing how other students were reworking their thought processes. That would inspire me to think about it in a different way. My teacher and my TAs played a big role--their styles of teaching. Professor Liu's style of teaching—bringing in unfamiliar material—set the whole thing in motion.

Overall, three very strong themes and several minor themes emerged from interviewees' responses to this question.

Professors and TAs. About 56% of the interviewees said that their professors and TAs—or going to office hours—had helped them meet the challenges they described. Many of the students spoke about professors and TAs helping them by commenting on drafts of papers and guiding the revision of both creative and academic writing. In the words of several of those students:

- *My professor for novel writing was wonderful and encouraging,*
- *It was all the professor. He was phenomenal, engaging, I loved going to class. He made the material relevant. Because it was important to him, it was important to us, and he inspired us to work hard.*
- *In order to overcome that challenge, I would stay after class a lot, and I would try to meet with the professor to talk about my writing. I would write drafts and show them to her. I would revise with her comments. I was so surprised that I got a 3.5 in that class in the end.*
- *The way the professor engaged us in the class really facilitated the ability for us to look at these texts as personal stories. The discussions engaged us in a personal way—as if we got personally involved in the narratives as well.*

- *Meeting with TA. We were able to exchange questions. In addition to asking her questions she also asked me questions that helped with clarification.*
- *I went to his office hours a lot, wrote, rewrote and rewrote again, again.*
- *My one-on-one conferences with Professor Wong were inspirational. And it was a wonderful learning experience. Bouncing ideas back and forth helped me to think about the assignments in ways I wouldn't have come up with on my own. With that experience I was able to take it back to the work and make it better than I could have without it. He's awesome just to be able to talk to and very relaxed and unjudgmental and very able to offer just possibilities and to bring up things that you might not have noticed or thought were relevant. All of these small mental prods helped me to unlock and look at things with a whole new perspective.*
- *Professor Weinbaum pushed that thinking further, with stepping stones in between. [Her] facilitation of discussion really helped my brain get there.*
- *For the creative writing class, it was taught by a grad student. You could go to him any time and ask questions and he would give you really good feedback.*
- *Ironically it would be Professor Simpson's class in English 302, where I struggled even more to understand writing a critical paper. I got so much help on my first critical paper in 302 and was allowed to write so many revisions that I finally grasped how to think and write in a critical way. I have done really well since then.*

My own efforts. About 44% of the students said that their own efforts had helped them meet the challenges they had described. Those efforts varied, with students speaking of thinking on their own, practicing language, reading texts multiple times, doing unrequired research to prepare for class or assignments, completing multiple revisions, and pushing themselves through difficulty. In addition, some of the students spoke about changes in their own commitment or of drawing on internal strengths, which helped them meet the challenges they had described. For example:

- *I worked hard to read better and bring more fruitful topics to discussion. I was reading the works multiple times and applying it to other classes.*
- *I think I just really had to be prepared for class. [I did] a lot of careful reading and additional research on certain topics to make sure that I was comfortable talking about these difficult topics. A lot of research.*
- *Make sure you give yourself enough time to fully read the play in depth! Don't just skim. I read like I am reading because I want to. Then before class, I skim through the play again so that I am prepared for discussion.*
- *I don't feel like I gained new skills from that. I feel like I just pushed myself through them.*
- *In the beginning I wrote down all my thoughts for what I wanted to say. The challenge was to narrow it down to that one page, learning how to pick out the most important details. I read it over and over and took out a little more each time. Then I looked again at the texts and what jumped out for me and what I believed that other readers should focus on.*

- *I learned after I got the first grade back and approached the second paper. Focus on the text and fully read and decipher it. The second paper was comparing literature and Marxist literary texts. I started that paper two weeks before instead of four days before. I learned how to compare a piece of literature and a piece of academic writing. The biggest thing was also to put the time and effort into it. I couldn't procrastinate anymore. I wanted to produce work that my teacher isn't going to call BS on.*
- *I had to do a lot of extra independent work on my own to review the material in my own way. I took what I learned from the discussion and let that help me with my readings and analysis.*
- *I talked with the professor, and a lot of it came down to grit, having to understand that, in spite of it challenging my world views, to expose myself to these conflicting ideas was a part of me learning and growing up.*
- *I accepted my abilities as a writer and [developed] a willingness to be open and surrender to the writing process. A lot of times writing is resistance and working against yourself. [You need to] figure out how to move beyond that.*

Working with peers/class discussion. One third (33%) of the interviewees spoke about help they had received in meeting the challenges they had described from peers and class discussion.

- *The discussion structure of class is great for exploring those unfamiliar ideas. I've learned about the history of these new ideas and the theories that my other classmates put forward. Often there's no right or wrong answers, so it's good to hear those other opinions.*
- *Discussions in class were helpful and enlightening. People shared their own personal writing processes in terms of the prompt. We read a lot of examples.*
- *I had a friend in that class, and we discussed the material back and forth. I talked to the teacher a couple times, which really helped. Class discussions also helped.*
- *In classes, the discussion we had really helped, the conversations, bouncing ideas off my peers.
The discussion in Honors English 494 this quarter are really helpful for helping me understand the dense texts.*
- *I collaborated with a peer who had a religious background and her perspective and took my classmates comments in class*
- *Instead of falling back on my default way of thinking about something, I had to look at it as having a use I never thought it would have before. I consulted with my teachers in both cases, but it was more like a group thing—the whole class on a journey together. I would get a lot just hearing how other students were reworking their thought processes. That would inspire me to think about it in a different way. Professor Liu's style of teaching, bringing in unfamiliar material, set the whole thing in motion.*
- *I had deep discussions about it—I asked questions and [participated in] peer discussions. Discussion in groups helped a lot. People had different opinions, and that helped me formulate my own.*

Class activities. About 10% of the interviewees spoke of different aspects of the class itself—such as lectures, reading, or assignments—as helpful. In the words of three of these students:

- *The course readings were really helpful in terms of putting our mentality similar to the people we were studying, in depth and documented accounts of people in that culture. It made it easier to grasp what they were going through, but also why they made the decisions they did.*
- *His in class lectures helped so much.*
- *We read a number of books. They weren't "typical" English books. I did not dread reading them. She chose four or five books from a list of 30. I liked how she thought about choosing the books.*

The class environment. Ten percent of the interviewees mentioned that the class environment helped them meet the challenges they described. For example:

- *The class atmosphere gave me the ability to push forward. It was a great environment of writers, and Professor Bosworth is a terrific mediator and conversationalist.*
- *...we had great classroom environment. I loved getting feedback from people. Working in groups, we got to concentrate on each other's writing.*
- *Professor Holmberg was always very clear and consistent every day about the material and assignments. He created an atmosphere that made me want to be there. I felt safe there. This was also true in Professor Cummings' 302 class.*

Other. In addition to these themes, two or three students identified the following as providing them with help in meeting the challenges they described:

- Applying ideas from one course to another (3)
- Writing exercises that were designed to help my writing progress (2, a writer's log in one case and responses to questions in another)

Finally, individual students said that the following were helpful as they met the challenges they described:

- Reading aloud in class
- The Oedegaard writing center
- Online grammar help
- Nothing helped

Differences in Language and Literature and Creative Writing students' responses. About 63% of the Creative Writing students noted help coming from multiple sources, compared with 49% of the Language and Literature students. Table 4 shows other differences in the responses to this question of students on the Language and Literature path and those on the Creative Writing path through the English major. As the table indicates, differences were slight, with more Language and Literature majors crediting their own efforts than did the Creative Writing interviewees and more Creative Writing interviewees crediting peers for help than did the Language and Literature students.

Table 4. What helped Language and Learning and Creative Writing interviewees

Source of help	All N=61	Language & Literature N=45	Creative Writing N=16
Faculty/TAs	56%	56%	56%
Own efforts	44%	47%	38%
Peers	33%	31%	38%

4. What did students learn by completing this project/class/activity?

We asked students what they felt they had learned by meeting the challenges they had described, and about 42% of the 61 interviewees mentioned more than one lesson learned. Three strong themes emerged from their responses, along with a number of minor themes.

Broadened my thinking and understanding. Sixteen (26%) of the interviewees—all in the Language and Literature track—said that the challenges they had described taught them to be open to others’ perspectives, to new and unfamiliar kinds of literature or ways of looking at literature, and to other people and cultures. Three of these students specifically mentioned becoming more empathetic as a result of meeting the challenge they had described. Students were sometimes speaking of broadening their ideas about literary genres and theoretical perspectives. However, many spoke of understanding of other people and cultures, which underscores a study recently published in *Science* (Kidd and Castano) on the effects of reading literary fiction. Kidd and Castano’s research showed that reading literary fiction improved students’ abilities to detect and understand others’ emotions, beliefs, and intentions. The following quotations by six of the English majors we interviewed illustrate this category of response:

- *I think the biggest thing I learned was to broaden my thinking. My way doesn't have to be the way it is always done. In my classes and in my job, I need to let go of what is standard and think way outside the box.*
- *A certain degree of openness and acceptance of ideas, which may be conflict with my own ideology, and a way of understanding the world. Being able to respect other people's ideas, other ideologies, and how I can defend my own. And see how my ideas can change others and theirs mine.*
- *I learned a lot about South Asian culture and Indian culture specifically. I learned how to put myself in someone else's shoes. It was something I'd never considered before. I came to a better understanding of South Asian people, their lives, and how they are different from mine.*
- *The primary thing is that it enabled me to see things from a different point of view, more so than I had been able to do before. I seem to have more empathy for the people I deal with, research, and write about.*
- *I took away a greater understanding of different genres as well as an appreciation. Instead of limiting my thinking, it expanded it. As I said, I was more used to the classic "normal" styles. [This experience] allowed me to step outside the box and appreciate different things. It gave me the ability to read horror novels and allowed me to expand my reading tastes and open my mind to new possibilities in literature.*

- *I feel it widened my sense of the world, allowed me to understand better the ideas that I grew up with, while also introducing me to ideas and concepts that are held by other cultures, even by other cultures in the US. It makes me a more well-rounded person, citizen. It allowed me to think differently. I'm far more likely now to do research in related fields, to understand that there might be theories out there that I should be looking at when considering writing any sort of piece. There's a breadth of material that I wouldn't have even considered as being applicable to literary studies.*

Learned something about themselves. About 25% of the English majors we interviewed said that they had learned something about themselves as a result of meeting the challenges they had described. Students reported that they had gained confidence in their writing abilities, that they had learned that they could persevere in the face of difficulty, that they had something to add to the academic conversation, and that they could trust their own intellects, along with other aspects of personal awareness. The following examples illustrate this category of response:

- *So many things, geez! To trust my intuition and trust my intellect. I gained a lot from learning to listen to feedback to people's ideas, to think deeply about where other people are coming from.*
- *I learned that I can write, and that the process isn't about perfection the first time. It's about continuous revision and just staying with something, not giving up on it, especially, I think, with creative writing. I've learned that nothing is ever finished.*
- *Perseverance, researching, being accountable, going over my information, and being prepared.*
- *I didn't know I would be challenged by these classes so I learned about my own skill set and its limitations.*
- *It gave me a lot more confidence in my writing abilities, voice, and confidence as a writer.*
- *That I'm capable of it. That I can overcome those obstacles.*
- *I learned that I was smart enough to add to the dialogue, which I hadn't known--that we all are. That has been huge.*

Ways to improve writing. Eighteen percent of the interviewees also spoke of learning to improve their writing in a number of ways. As the following examples show, students spoke of learning a variety of things about writing, including the importance of revision, how to frame a written argument and manage cohesiveness, how to narrow in on smaller topics, how to focus on the audience, the value of constraint, and the importance of planning and starting early in writing:

- *Learning how to frame an argument. It really solidified the importance of cohesiveness and how to manage that flow.*
- *I learned that the specificity of the topic could be so small, that what I wanted to talk about could be really focused. That was new. And the bigger the topic was, the harder the challenge to write a good argument.*

- *I know now what the appropriate amount of time I need to spend to write a good novel. This was so good. How much time writing takes. This is going to be my career. I have to move work and other classes around to make this happen.*
- *In previous classes I had been given advice by my professors in how to revise and change. This really opened my eyes for what worked and what didn't. Multiple revisions are required. You can't just revise it once.*
- *I guess I recognized that constraint can be freeing. It frees you from the paralysis of opportunity.*

To apply learning from one situation to another. About 15% of the interviewees said that they had learned to apply theory, language, and ideas from one class in the major to another or from their courses to the world outside academia. For example:

- *It helped me in my academic work. Like in Shakespeare, I am applying what I learned in 326 to 323. Also, by having these theories and viewpoints clear in Milton, I can see it in Shakespeare and beyond.*
- *It was a good basis for all my other literature courses, especially in terms of Shakespeare classes, pre-1900 literature classes. It helped in understanding the language. In comparison, it made Shakespeare feel easy. Knowing word origins was really useful.*
- *I learned that literature affects the world and has a large influence on the community depending on how you approach that literature. It definitely shapes viewpoints.*
- *A lot of the theories that we learned—when they show up in other classes—it feels good. It gave me self-confidence in my other classes in my writing and reading.*
- *I don't know that the class really did make a big difference in every facet of my academic career, but applying the course ideas has been vital to my subsequent course. I learned to quicken my pace of learning.*

Importance of talking and listening to peers and instructors. About 12% of the interviewees said that they had learned the importance of collaborating or sharing ideas with peers and faculty. In the words of three of them:

- *I've learned to talk to my peers and colleagues and my teachers.*
- *I learned how to take advantage of the opportunities afforded to me by the UW, in the respect that I learned how to meet with my professor and present him with my problems in a manner that forced me to reassess my own preconceived notions about language and study skills.*
- *In discussion I learned the balance between articulating things of interest to you while respecting and listening to others. Learn to build on each other so you have real conversations.*

Better abstract or critical thinking skills. About 10% of the English majors we interviewed—all in the Language and Literature concentration—said that the challenges they had described had taught them to improve their abstract or critical thinking skills. As three of them noted:

- *I think it definitely encourages you to develop critical thinking more. It makes my brain work harder trying to understand certain things.*
- *More critical thinking, thinking outside of my own mindset. Not just other people but other cultures--*
- *some place other than where you were born. Not just thinking outside of the box, but pushing that further. Playing devil's advocate to your own predispositions.*
- *Critical thinking skills that were acquired from analyzing different texts, synthesizing ideas, organizing ideas, looking in depth into texts.*

Content. Eight percent of the interviewees spoke of learning content. The content they listed varied quite a bit, as the following examples suggest:

- *I learned a lot about post modernism as result of writing the paper!*
- *Learned a lot about South Asian culture and Indian culture specifically. I learned how to put myself in someone else's shoes. It was something I'd never considered before. Came to a better understanding of South Asian people, their lives, and how they are different from mine.*
- *The old English use of iambic pentameter.*

Information useful for a desired career. Five (8%) of the English majors we interviewed spoke of learning information that related to a career they hoped to pursue. For example:

- *I want to be a literary agent so reading literature well is going to be a necessary career skill.*
- *I want to go into law, so the understanding of another's perspective is invaluable for that career.*
- *In the internship I learned about the publishing industry in general, which was fascinating from a writer's perspective. I learned how to submit your work, how to write a query letter. I feel much better prepared as a professional now.*

More about research. Six percent of the interviewees noted some aspect of research that they had learned as a result of the challenges they had described. For example:

- *I learned how to process my own experiences through writing, how to integrate research into a piece of writing that was very personal.*
- *I've learned more about reading and self-motivated research and study.*

Other. Three students said that they had learned the following as a result of meeting the challenges they had described:

- Writing is a way of learning (3)
- How to work/learn independently (3)

Finally, one student each noted that he or she had learned the following:

- Writing poetry is hard
- Life skills

- How to be creative
- How to bring one’s own experiences into writing
- Nothing

Differences in Language and Literature and Creative Writing students’ responses. As Table 5 shows, there were interesting differences in what Language and Literature and Creative Writing interviewees said that they had learned by meeting the challenges they had described. The most striking difference was that although more than a third of the Language and Literature students said that the challenge they had met helped them broaden their thinking or understanding, none of the Creative Writing students gave this response. Another interesting difference was that a greater percentage of Creative Writing interviewees noted that they had learned to apply their learning from one class to another or from class to their lives and that they had learned ways to improve their writing than did Language and Learning interviewees.

Table 5. What students learned from challenges, Language & Literature and Creative Writing interviewees

What learned?	All N=61	Language & Literature N=45	Creative Writing N=16
Broadened thinking/understanding	26%	36%	0%
Learned something about themselves	25%	27%	25%
Ways to improve writing	18%	13%	31%
To apply learning from one situation to another	15%	11%	25%
Importance of talking/listening to peers/instructors	12%	13%	6%
Better abstract/critical thinking skills	10%	13%	0%

SUMMARY

When asked what was their most significant challenge in the major, nearly four out of five (77%) of the English interviewees named a course or courses that had presented them with significant challenges. About a quarter of the interviewees (23%) said that the writing required by a course or courses presented them with their most significant challenge in the major.

When asked why those activities were challenging, the most frequently-given responses were that they required new ways of thinking, new ways of writing, the ability to understand and use theory in thinking about literature, and a deeper level of critical and analytical thinking. This latter challenge regarding critical thinking was noted primarily by students in the Language and Literature track.

More than half the students said that professors and TAs had helped them meet the challenges they had described, often noting repeated help with drafts of both academic and creative writing projects. Students also noted that they had met the challenges they had described because of their own efforts, including thinking on their own, practicing language, reading texts multiple times, doing unrequired research to prepare for class or assignments, completing multiple revisions, and pushing themselves through difficulty. Finally, students noted the help of individual peers and class discussions among peers in clarifying their thinking and offering new perspectives.

In terms of what they learned by meeting the challenge they had described, the most-frequently given response was that students’ thinking and understanding had been broadened. Interviewees who gave

this response spoke of a broader sense of people, cultures, perspectives, and literary forms. This response was given only by Language and Literature majors, many of whose responses echoed a recent study in *Science* (2013) by Kidd and Castano. In addition, students noted that they had learned something about themselves, that they had learned to apply learning from one situation to another, and that they had learned ways to improve their writing.

The responses of students in the two paths through the English major—Language and Literature and Creative Writing—were different, as the two examples in the box that follows this report suggest, but that difference was not always clear. For example, both groups identified writing as challenging in itself and as an aspect of the courses they found challenging. However, a greater percentage of Creative Writing interviewees noted that they had learned to improve writing than did Language and Literature students. In contrast, as noted previously, the Language and Literature students said that their thinking had been broadened by their academic challenges, while none of the Creative Writing students gave that response. In addition, a greater percentage of Creative Writing interviewees credited peers for helping them meet the challenges they had described than did Language and Literature students. This difference in the role of peers may be caused by a difference in pedagogy in the two kinds of courses. For example, many creative writing courses use workshops as part of their class time, where writers comment on each other’s work, and such workshops with peers are not used as frequently in literature courses.

Although these interviews on challenge in the major were not designed to assess whether students were meeting the department’s learning goals (<http://www.washington.edu/oea/pdfs/reports/AssessmentChart201315.pdf>), there was evidence in students’ responses that they were grappling with those goals in the courses and work they described as their most challenging in the major. Interestingly, the phrase “close reading,” noted as a method in those learning goals, did not appear in students’ responses. This might suggest that by the time they are seniors, students have internalized that label.

Finally, students’ responses to the UW ACES interview questions suggest that English majors felt that the challenges they described were rewarding. These responses underscore research on student learning that shows that when an assignment is challenging for students and when faculty and TAs help students meet those challenges, students become more engaged in the course material than they are when tasks are easy.

Two Students’ Responses to All Four Questions

Language and Literature major

Course(s) where greatest challenges occurred: English 297 and English 302

Q1. What was the most challenging work you did? Two things. The first is from my critical practice class with Liu. She emphasized writing that wasn’t just academic; it was journalism, comparative book reviews, etc.—other kinds of writing than I had done in an English course. It was challenging in a fun, inspiring way. I could consider working in other kinds of writing as a living. It’s different kinds of thinking. I never merged my journalistic writing side with my academic writing side before. Second, English 297. We were reading “Man in the Crowd” by Poe. I never read stories like that before. It was very ambiguous, and I wasn’t used to writing about ambiguous works. It was difficult at first, but at the end I liked it and did a good job on my essay. I was used to writing more about books that were a little more straight forward. With this I didn’t really know what was going on. There are always

multiple ways to interpret writing, but generally the stuff I've studied, there's like one way that most people steer toward. With this story, it was completely ambiguous, so your imagination was left to do whatever you wanted.

Q2. Why was it challenging? It was mostly different ways of thinking. With the first example, I'd never applied book reviews to academic writing. I had to learn how to get out of the academic writing box for both these experiences. Michelle would always talk about the 5-paragraph essay, that very formalized way of writing, whereas with the writing in that class, we were encouraged to break out of that and question whether that format was effective across the board. You're taught a very specific way of writing academically, then you get to another class and you have to stretch your mind more and realize this is not the only way to write an academic paper. And you can draw from outside sources to write in ways I would not have thought of in academic writing.

Q3. What helped you meet that challenge? It was mostly an internal, mental process—just approaching the material from a different standpoint and trying to think of it in a different way. Instead of falling back on my default way of thinking about something, I had to look at it as having a use I never thought it would have before. I consulted with my teachers in both cases, but it was more like a group thing—the whole class on a journey together. I would get a lot just hearing how other students were reworking their thought process. That would inspire me to think about it in a different way. My teacher and my TAs played a big role, their styles of teaching. Michelle Liu's style of teaching, bringing in unfamiliar material, set the whole thing in motion.

Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge? I learned two things: I learned how to broaden my mind, specifically in academic terms, but also in general. Also, it taught me not to have really firm expectations, kind of just to enter a class or project and see what comes of it as you go along instead of having expectations and then being put off when they're not what you thought it would be. I had to learn how to go along with the unknown while I learned how to do something.

Creative Writing major

Course(s) where greatest challenges occurred: English 383

Q1. What was the most challenging work you did? Poetry class. I went in with the wrong attitude. I thought it was going to be easy, but it was some of the most difficult writing I've ever taken on. It really opened my mind to use of imagery, metaphors, and just other poetic devices that really opened my mind to a new way of thinking, of conveying what I'm feeling and my thoughts. "Tell all the truth but tell it 'slant'" —Emily Dickinson—I really got that concept in that class. It was a neat way to communicate my thoughts through poetry

Q2. Why was it challenging? The actual process of getting my thoughts on paper, putting it in a way that created this other world but actually really made it surreal but really communicated something. It made sense. It just wasn't thoughtless.

Q3. What helped you meet that challenge? I committed myself to getting immersed in the poetry I was reading. It was hard for me to understand at first, and I was misjudging it, mainly because I was being closed-minded about it. But once I got immersed in the contemporary poetry I was reading, it began to make sense. I no longer felt the way I had before.

Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge? It allowed me to process my own thoughts and to write my own poetry in a really original way—a way that was original and innovative to me. Poetry is a challenging art form and really cool, the way you can just...paint a picture on paper with words. It takes commitment. It goes beyond a simple rhyme scheme. It's hard. If you want to take it seriously and do it right, it's hard. But at the same time it's very enlightening.

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