

Testimonials from Recent Graduates, U of Illinois English Department

By Christine Schufreider

As my status as a senior and, therefore, a soon-to-be graduate of the University of Illinois dawned on me less than a year ago, the frantic pursuit of post-graduate plans began. Fortunately, the University of Illinois provides countless resources for undergraduate students to plan and pursue careers. Even more fortunately, I ultimately found my most valuable resource within the English department. During my first three years at the University, I had grappled with the idea of several career possibilities which led me to consider law school, editing, marketing, and PR among many others fields. While I felt I had the confidence, skills and broad range of experiences necessary to eventually excel in many of these, I lacked a concrete direction. The Alumni Mentoring Network provided me with an outlet to discuss my career considerations and, eventually, played a crucial role in my job search success.

Julie Glassman, a graduate of the University of Illinois English department herself, was eager to help me find my way in what seemed like a daunting professional world. Julie and I discussed my concerns and eagerness to discover the intricacies of different industries. She was candid about her experiences in a variety of industries, including but not limited to copywriting and event planning. All of this insight proved invaluable to my decision to pursue a career in marketing and, ultimately, an internship with the Chicago Screenwriters Network as well as a full-time position with a Digital Marketing company. The Alumni Mentoring Network proved integral to my career search and helped to ensure my own success as an alumna of the University of Illinois English department.

By Dan Hass

Not many kids dream of being copywriters. If they did, you'd see a lot more seven-year-olds drinking bourbon and muttering about clients at snack time. I didn't want to be anything but a wizard until the age of eleven (I gave up after my Hogwarts letter didn't come), and a professional writer after that (the next best thing – but not really) which eventually led to my enrollment at the U of I in English and Creative Writing.

If you talk to underclassmen English majors about what their career plans are, you tend to get a mush of “I want to get into publishing-editing-writing-grad school.” I know, because I said it. Non-majors will assume you want to be a teacher, and parents will assume that you enjoy the taste of instant noodles/think living in an apartment with a ceiling is overrated. But that's not important.

It's not important because, even if your career plan is murky, you already have a leg-up on the majority of your peers. You're good at writing, you're good at critical analysis and you're unbeatable when it comes to thinking of problems in terms of people and ideas. What's better is that you *enjoy* those things. You know what you love to do, and you're doing it.

(You're probably also great at procrastinating and have, subsequently, developed the ability to imbibe more caffeine than is thought humanly possible.)

After three years of Melville, Milton, Hawthorne (yuck), and Chaucer, a dozen fiction stories and one calamitous poem about a lonely squirrel, I signed up for the Alumni Mentoring Network. I needed to know what I was qualified for (if anything), and what I was worth. This felt like the way to do it. One month later I attended a panel that hosted alumni from various professions. That's where I met Julie.

Vibrant, ambitious, incendiary – all my attention was focused on her the second she started explaining what she did and how she did it. She held a large black book that contained pieces she'd worked on (some of which had run), and my eyes hardly ever left the pages. Talking to her after the panel, it quickly became apparent that we recognized a similarity in each other. I think her exact words were “Yep. Knew this was for you as soon as you came in. You've got the look.” I felt like I finally got my Hogwarts letter.

We started emailing back-and-forth over the next few months. Julie started me out slow: assigning me a long booklist along with a number of reputable publications stuffed with award-winning ads. We worked together to try and nab me an internship at Leo Burnett, but it quickly became obvious that my passion and experience in the business was still too new (not to mention that I didn't even have a portfolio). I was too green.

I went back to the drawing board and started focusing on what drew me to copywriting, and what skills I could develop. It's a hard industry to break into. That's putting it lightly. Let me rephrase, it'd be easier to get Orson Scott Card into a gay bar. You can follow all the steps – read books, take courses, build a portfolio, go to portfolio school – and still miss out on jobs if you aren't fully invested in the work. In an interview, a good creative director can tell in the first five minutes if you have a genuine passion for copywriting or if you're just in it for the money. Julie helped guide me in so many ways, and it was that, in addition to my own initiative and transparent love for the work, that netted me my first internship at Disruptive Retail Thinking.

So much of my copywriting experience has fed off of what I learned as an English and Creative Writing major. The best part of the program at the U of I is that you're

encouraged to be original and prolific on your own, not to simply read, write and complete assignments. It draws from the idea that we write because we need to, because it's a challenge. From my courses, the Alumni Mentoring Network and my internship, I learned that all copy derives from significant human moments. That all good advertising is just a condensed narrative that, like any story, aims to engage and resonate.

It's because of this that I recommend being an English or Creative Writing major to aspiring copywriters over an advertising program. Certainly, do as much ad work as you can, get involved around campus as much as possible and start freelancing and building your book early (nothing wrong with going to portfolio school), but follow your unique, quirky passions that keep you writing – don't just buy into an ad program and think it will get you a job (especially a job you enjoy).

It's been another summer of sending out resumes, filling out exasperating application forms online (seriously, what demonic designer makes these things?) and cold-calling agencies. And after over twenty-five phone, Skype and in-person interviews, I finally landed a great gig as a junior copywriter at GS Design, a nationally recognized branding, design and digital agency located in Milwaukee, working with clients like Harley-Davidson, Reader's Digest, Showtime, Mercury Marine, Samson and SRAM.

Through it all – from my initial interest, through my internship, through my job search – I've had my mentor. Julie's been right there with me: egging me on, forcing me to look again and again at my book and, if necessary, redo pieces. There's a lot of rejection in this business. It can be jarring if you're not ready for it, so having a mentor watch your progress, someone who can lend the occasional piece of advice or give you a network contact is invaluable.

It's going to be a long haul – and don't ever for a second let yourself believe that it'll be easy – but it's worth it.