Studying English at the University of Basel
Welcome to the Department of English

Dear prospective student,

With this brochure, we would like to give you a glimpse into what studying English at Basel looks like. Though we are fortunate to work in one of the city’s oldest (and most beautiful) buildings, the work we do here is anything but traditional. The courses we teach are informed by our current research, which takes place in national and international networks. We also take great care to offer you a supportive environment in which to work towards a BA, MA or PhD degree in English.

Our Department consists of about 20 full-time and part-time instructors and around 500 students. Our teaching and research covers four major areas in linguistics and literary and cultural studies. In linguistics, we focus on the Linguistics of English, which explores the structures and uses of the world’s major lingua franca, and Cognitive Linguistics and Language Acquisition, which study how human beings acquire language and process it in their minds. In literary studies, we explore Anglophone Literatures, both fictional and non-fictional, with reference to cultural history and theory, and in relation to other media such as film and theatre. The focus is on English Literature since the Renaissance and on American and General Literatures. We also have offerings in Academic Communication in English that will help you express yourself academically in speech and writing.

While we are committed to giving you an excellent education, we know that studying at a university encompasses more than reading books, writing papers, and discussing research issues in class. Our Department has a rich social life that is kept going by our excellent amateur theatre group The Gay Beggars, our long-standing English Seminar Choir, and the many events organized by our very active Students’ Committee.

We hope that the following pages whet your appetite and prompt you to join our fold.

Heike Behrens
Ina Habermann
Miriam Locher
Philipp Schweighauser

... we are committed to giving you an excellent education ...
As the lingua franca of business and science, English is today’s most important global language. Apart from their world-wide spread, the English language and its cultures have also shaped various domains in our local everyday lives, including media, advertising, and tourism. These developments are of great significance for Switzerland – a multilingual country that is deeply involved in global economic activities. English languages and cultures thus create novel social and political challenges (early English at school, language policy making, intercultural communication, business English etc.) that must be addressed, understood and tackled by experts in English language, literature and culture. Studies at the Department of English are designed to train and develop this expertise.

BA level students become familiar with the complex field of English language(s), literatures and cultures and are introduced to linguistic and literary theories and methods that enable them to understand English and its literary and cultural manifestations from social, cultural, historical, and cognitive perspectives. We also teach academic language skills in English (writing and presentation).

At the beginning of their studies, BA students attend various introductory courses in Anglophone literatures, in literary theory and criticism, and in linguistic methodology and theory. We also offer...
survey lectures as an introduction to current research in linguistics and in British and American literary history. Later, the studies become more specialized, the courses offered for advanced BA students range from “Bring the Noise: Modern American Literature & Soundscape Studies” to “Time and Space in Language and Cognition.” This teaching is crucially informed by the research we do – which means that you will become part of a vibrant research community.

MA students can choose whether they want to focus on Anglophone literatures or linguistics, or on both. Their knowledge is extended and deepened by a training in academic research practice in more specialized fields of English linguistics and/or literature; students do not only tackle specific research questions and approaches in a given field but also learn to apply and critique them in a sophisticated manner. Students develop their own research projects in conversation with their fellow students and instructors.

MA courses in linguistics focus on cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics, examining the cognitive and social bases of language and communication as well as language acquisition theory and methods. Our second field of linguistic expertise focuses on variation of language usage in given contexts (socio-... understand English and its literary and cultural manifestations from social, cultural, historical and cognitive perspectives ...
linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis).

Literary studies are interdisciplinary, approaching literary texts from a theoretical angle and in their historical, social, and cultural contexts. We consider literary texts as manifestations of broader cultural processes that shape how we make sense of the world. Our thematic foci range from aesthetics and the materiality of communication to middlebrow fiction and the spatial imagination of literature.

Excellent MA graduates can extend their research competence by conducting a PhD research project and writing a doctoral dissertation within the framework of our Doctoral Programmes in Language and Communication or Literary Studies. PhD theses can be written individually or as part of a larger research project; in most cases, they are thematically connected to the area of expertise of the PhD supervisor.

The Department of English also provides the academic basis for future teachers. We offer courses and modules for secondary-school teachers (BA/MA, Studiengang Sekundarstufe I); the MA in English provides the academic ground for working as a Gymnasium teacher.

English is studied in combination with another Bachelor or Master Degree subject. The second field of study can be any other subject either within the Faculty of Humanities (e.g. German Philology or Media Studies), or outside the Humanities, (Geography, Computer Sciences, Law, or Theology).

For more information on studying in general, please see the study FAQs published on the website of the Departement Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaften.
I had always liked the idea of becoming a teacher. I decided to do the teaching certificate after working in various schools in the area and because I realized I was interested in the pedagogical and didactical issues raised in the teacher courses at university. My advice to students is: find out if you want to become a teacher by getting as many teaching opportunities as possible. You should really like most aspects of the job. Most importantly, you should be interested in students and their learning. English is a great subject to teach as students usually like it.

I found it helpful to have alternatives to my teaching job after fifteen years of working in the same field. That means that you have to do extra studies and training after having finished your teacher formation and keep your eyes open for opportunities of job enrichment. I now develop and organize support programmes for schools and principals to help them in the fields of leadership and change management.

I chose English as a main subject (“Leistungskurs”) at the Gymnasium in Berlin and wanted to intensify my knowledge of and interest in English and American literature, language and culture. I came to Basel after a year abroad, because my father used to teach at the university. I liked the small size of the university (compared to Berlin) and the quality of the teaching. I also have fond memories of studying in beautiful facilities in the Old Town and of lots of networking amongst students - also students from other faculties. In my job, I still profit from contacts I made at university twenty years ago.

Generally, if you are interested in studying at university, look into as many subjects as possible. Choose the ones you are really interested in. Interest and passion are more important than job opportunities and credit points.
Andrés Luther, Partner at Hirzel Neef Schmid Counselors

I had an interest in theatre and poetry and thought that literature and language are a useful key to understanding culture and people. And I still do believe that. I came to Basel because it was further away from home than Zurich.

Towards the end of my studies I realized that I wanted to know more about how the business world worked, especially global financial markets. Markets seemed to have a huge impact on life and society, and I expected that working in business would teach me a lot that I could not learn at university.

From the skills learnt at university, I now benefit most from doing thorough research on a wide range of subjects, presenting and defending my ideas, debating my findings and opinions and learning to deal with other people’s points of view.

Writing is the key to communications, even in the age of online media and video. While at university, try to find jobs, even unpaid jobs, that give you experience in non-academic writing and editing. Try to spend most of your time with things that you really are interested in. Study humanities only out of genuine interest and passion for the subject matter. Humanities can be the basis for a career, but they are much more insightful and gratifying if you view them as a way of life.

Be prepared for the fact that you will not really understand most of the texts that you read for your studies. Some of them you will only understand several years after you graduate. In other words, there are a lot of things you just cannot understand the first time, so be patient.

I like to remember the long nights and weekends spent as a “gay beggar” at the cellar theatre and all the barbecues in the courtyard of the Schönes Haus.
Most departments of Basel University are located in the heart of the old city. The Department of English is housed in two adjacent buildings on Nadelberg, two minutes from the Market Square. The older of these, at the back of a cobbled courtyard, is also the oldest surviving private residence in Basel. It was already called “Schönes Haus” (“Beautiful House”) when it was first mentioned in a document in 1294, because of its wealth and decorative splendour. For centuries it continued to be the home of rich citizens, among them Rudolph Wettstein, who represented the Swiss at the Westphalia Peace negotiations in 1648; the coat-of-arms over one of the portals is that of the Karger family, who owned the building in the 17th and 18th centuries. During the Council of Basel (1431-49) church dignitaries were entertained in the great hall on the ground floor, notable for its painted ceiling (the oldest non-ecclesiastical one in Switzerland); it serves as a lecture theatre today. Guests lodged in the building included Duke Philip of Burgundy, Duke Albrecht of Bavaria, and Prince John of Orange.

In the 1960s the buildings were carefully restored, and given to the university in 1968. In one of the rooms, which now serves the Department of English as a library, a Gothic wooden ceiling saved from the ruins of another building was added. The cellar of the “Schönes Haus” was converted into a studio theatre, run by the Department of English – it seats about 100 people.

Today, the building hosts the departmental library and offers space for research, administration, and teaching, while most of the lectures take place in the University’s pleasant and modern Kollegienhaus at Petersplatz.

Today the Department of English has four chairs, one in English Literature since the Renaissance, held by Ina Habermann, one in American and General Literatures held by Philipp Schweighauser, one in English Sociolinguistics and the Sociology of English as a Global Language, held by Miriam Locher, and one in Cognitive Linguistics and Language Acquisition, held by Heike Behrens.

Premises and People

... experience a college atmosphere ...
Research

Research is crucial to academic life. Through it, our staff makes significant contributions to their fields of expertise and positions the department in national and international contexts. Our research interests cover a wide range of aspects of Anglophone literatures, linguistic varieties and cultures. In linguistics, we analyze the structure and use of the English language as well as first and second language acquisition. We also explore the construction of cultural discourses in Anglophone literatures, both in the past and the present. Our staff engage in research projects which involve MA and PhD students. We situate our research in the following fields:

**Linguistics**
- Cognitive Linguistics
- Psycholinguistics (First and Second Language Acquisition)
- English in Social Interaction
- Relational Work and Politeness Research
- Health Discourse

** Literary and Cultural Studies**
- English and Irish Literature and Culture since the Renaissance with a focus on literature and space as well as Shakespearean drama and middlebrow writing in the 20th century
- 18th-20th century American Literature and Culture
- Aesthetics
- Post-colonial literatures and theory
- Literary, cultural, and media theory
Research Projects

**Of Cultural, Poetic, and Medial Alterity**

Edward Sapir, Ruth Fulton Benedict, and Margaret Mead are three of the most influential anthropologists of the 20th century. Out of the three, it is Mead who has become famous for experimenting with media other than the standard ethnographic text, particularly photography and film. What is less well known is that together they wrote over 500 poems, many of which engage with the objects of their anthropological investigations. Funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, this research project explores what difference it makes whether one evokes other cultures in conventional ethnographic prose, in poetic language, or in films and photographs.

**British Discourses of Europe**

This research project analyzes twentieth-century British literary and cultural discourses of Europe. In the present crisis of the EU, we aim for a better understanding of how contemporary notions of Europe have been shaped. Since Britain finds itself, and places itself, on the margins of Europe, it will be instructive to study British projections of Europe over time and in various types of writing, such as travel writing, as well as in such discourses as the ‘projection of Britain’ promoted by the British Council as a cultural institution, or British mythical evocations of ‘the Mediterranean’.

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**Cultural Topographies**
The Centre of Competence Cultural Topographies uses a cultural studies approach to investigate the categories space and place. Primarily intended as an interdisciplinary network for researchers at the University of Basel, it also organizes lecture series and offers students the possibility to obtain a certificate ‘Cultural Topographies’ as a means to highlight a spatial focus in their studies. In British Studies, projects include the analysis of British literary and cultural discourses of Europe as well as constructions of Englishness.

**Language and Health Online**
This linguistic project investigates the e(lectronic)-health interaction in asynchronous, written computer-mediated communication: On the one hand we explore linguistic strategies of persuasion on health websites and peer-to-peer fora dealing with smoking cessation; on the other hand we study the ways in which clients and counsellors create a therapeutic alliance in e-mail counselling. Both sub-projects contribute to our understanding of how health discourse is negotiated on the Web.

**Sensory Language and the Semantics of Taste (SenS, Semantik des Geschmacks)**
This is an interdisciplinary project that involves linguists from the Institute for Applied Linguistics (ZHAW), the Universities of Basel and Zürich, and food scientists from the ETH. There are many linguistic pitfalls in the communication between food experts and the public (consumers). The aim of the project is to analyze lexical use and meaning of German and English taste terms such as crispy and crunchy, for example. The analyses include focus group discussions with non-experts as well as naturally occurring corpus data in order to put together a lexicon which helps to bridge the gap between interlocutors from different fields.

**Past Research Projects**
- Status Updates in Facebook. This project analyses language use in the profile pages and status updates of Facebook users from Switzerland and from Great Britain. The aim of the pro-
ject is to explore how users create identities through language, i.e., what ‘acts of positioning’ they engage in, and how this practice is linked to relational work.

- HyperHamlet: Structured as an open-access hypertext, this collection of 10,000-plus quotations is a dictionary-in-progress which does not tell us where phrases come from but rather where phrases from Shakespeare’s most famous play have gone.

- ProDoc “Sprache als soziale und kulturelle Praxis”. Aiming to contribute to a better understanding of the intersectionality of language, sociality and culture, this project draws on concepts from sociology, anthropology, history and media studies while retaining a theoretical framework in linguistics.

- Life (Beyond) Writing: Illness Narratives: The research project explores the social and cultural meanings of illness narratives and analyses their role and function in the literary, linguistic, and medical field. The dialogue established between the three different disciplines contributes to a more holistic approach to illness besides challenging more traditional concepts of health and illness.

... Where have phrases from Shakespeare’s most famous play gone? ...
Philippe Roesle, PhD student in Renaissance drama at King’s College, London

My interest in early modern theatre developed while working on a student-led production of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. At the same time, I was attending a seminar on Shakespeare’s comedies. The practical and intellectual engagement with literary texts triggered my profound interest in all things early modern, but particularly in the theatrical environment of the renaissance. Soon after, I applied for the Shakespeare MA at King’s College in London.

The University of Basel challenged me to develop questions, while teaching me how and where to find and evaluate answers. I was taught to engage critically with word and language and I am continuously building on this theoretical and critical skill set in the course of my current doctoral work.

The freedom and independence I had with my individual timetables allowed me to develop my own interests and even go beyond my two main subject areas of English and History. The interdisciplinary nature of the faculty furthered my lateral thinking, teaching me to approach questions simultaneously from various angles and with different methods. The freedom of the programmes improved my personal time management from the very beginning of my studies and I am still reaping the fruits of this.

Be open-minded and get involved! The combination of social activities as well as the intellectual environment at the Department of English is unrivalled. In Basel the world can be your oyster – there should be no limits to your curiosity and drive for knowledge. I would advise anybody to make the most of the university’s diversity - develop wide interests and pursue them. The diversity and broad range of the Department is fascinating and I would advise anybody to make the most of that in order to truly become an intellectual all-rounder!
Living abroad for a longer period of time is an invaluable experience in many respects. Not only is it an excellent way to improve your language skills, but, by being confronted with other points of view, other ways of life and other educational and political systems, you will also gain insights into a different culture as well as into your own.

Although not compulsory for BA and MA level students who do not want to become teachers, we strongly recommend that you spend time abroad, either at university or teaching at a school. Apart from the academic exchange programme ERASMUS there is the possibility of working as assistant teacher.

In English-speaking countries, the Department of English currently has student exchanges with the Universities of Manchester, Cardiff, Stirling, Virginia Tech and Central Oklahoma. There are also ERASMUS exchange possibilities with the Universities of Vienna, Orléans, Paris VII, Rennes 2, FU Berlin, LMU Munich, Piemonte Orientale, Pisa, Torino and Warsaw. The university’s Mobility Office can help you organize an exchange with further universities abroad.

As an assistant teacher of your native language, you can go to Great Britain for eight to nine months; or as an Amity Intern Teacher to the US for up to twelve months. This option of going abroad is especially attractive for aspiring school teachers.
I chose to study English because it has always fascinated me; as a teenager I enjoyed reading English literature and reflecting on language. Going to the U.S. as an exchange student turned out to be a momentous decision, allowing me to further develop my language competence and to gain insights into U.S. American culture. After graduating from grammar school I felt that studying English would be the right choice, mainly because I was interested in analyzing and discussing literary and theoretical texts.

Basel appealed to me because it appeared to be an open-minded and culturally diverse city. It was perhaps not a coincidence that some friends and relatives of mine also chose to study at the University of Basel.

Autonomy is an essential aspect of my current position as a teacher. During my studies at university I learnt to work independently, a skill I have substantially benefited from. Further skills that turned out to be useful encompass the ability to study a wide range of literary and theoretical texts from different periods; to write academic papers, i.e. to adequately express and organize thoughts by placing them in a theoretical framework; and to give presentations and interact with others.

I remember that my first semester at university was quite a challenge – academia was indeed a new world compared to grammar school! Of course it is advisable to plan your studies at an early stage and to work diligently and in a goal oriented way. However, at the same time I also enjoyed the freedom to choose lectures and seminars that truly interested me, taking time and leisure to delve into literary and non-literary texts and getting to know various theoretical frameworks. When you are starting your studies you might find it difficult to adjust to the new setting, but as time passes you will learn to master these challenges if you keep an open mind, take pleasure in what you do, and are willing to work hard (which is not necessarily a paradox).
I had always wanted to become a high-school teacher but ended up taking on a job in economics after my studies. I grew very fond of corporate communications and have been working in this area ever since.

The most important skill I learnt at university is to be able to think strategically and in complex ways; in literary studies I learnt to grasp concepts fully and view them from different angles. Linguistics helped me develop an affinity for intercultural communications and the playfulness of language: how to formulate and use the right sentences and words depending on which target audience you want to reach. I acquired academic skills that enable me to do careful research. As a humanities person I feel that I gained a very broad knowledge of all sorts of fields and am thus able to reconsider and reflect on various topics.

It is definitely worth while studying a subject in the humanities because the industry does not only need economists. But before you choose English as your subject, you should make sure that you know what it means to study linguistics or literature, which are about more than becoming fluent in the English language.

I also recommend that students of English choose their second subject wisely; if you are interested in corporate communications, for example, it can be useful to combine English with media studies or economics. All in all, philologists are definitely very well-equipped for a position in corporate communications.

I have very fond memories of studying at Basel. I enjoyed having the time to look at texts closely and to think about small but relevant details. The debates and conversations with fellow students and tutors were very fruitful and I am proud to have studied at the oldest university in Switzerland.

Iris Wahlen Callegher, Head HR Communications Switzerland, Novartis
Career Prospects

The profiles of some of our graduates’ current job positions distributed throughout this brochure are designed to give you an idea of the great variety of fields of work for which studying English at Basel prepares you.

A Bachelor’s degree is not geared to a specific job but offers students the opportunity to acquire academic skills that are highly useful in a wide variety of fields of work. Students are able to perform complex tasks in communication and administration which are also important outside academia. They are confident both in speaking and writing in English, can read and analyze complex texts critically, are skilled in obtaining crucial information and can interpret cultural phenomena methodically.

After successfully completing their Bachelor’s degree, students with an interest in research can continue their studies with a Master’s degree, possibly followed by a PhD and an academic career. Yet English Linguistics and Anglophone Literary and Cultural Studies also offer a much broader variety of career prospects. Becoming a teacher is one of the most popular choices: English teachers are required at all levels of the school system as well as in adult education. Many additional fields of work are open to graduates of English due to the wide range of skills they acquire during their studies: from the professional analysis of texts to research competence and a high level of proficiency in spoken and written communication in English. These allow our students to take on jobs in various areas: the diplomatic corps, marketing, public relations, publishing houses, cultural institutions, any information or documentation services, newspapers, radio and television. Students are advised to think about their career choices and to get work experience while still at university.
I knew English would be one of my subjects early on – and by that I mean primary school. Working in a literary field was my dream. I was lucky: when the Literaturhaus was looking for an assistant, I applied and actually got the job. I like it because my tasks are so diverse. I do everything from project management to event management, public and press relations. I get to know authors and their work; I have to cooperate with foundations, political bodies, publishing houses, literary agents and the university. And I love working in a field where the literary, academic and political worlds meet.

My first year at university was tough: the native speakers showed me what proper English was and academic texts turned out to be nothing like reading the odd novel in English. I had to rewrite my first paper and was extremely ashamed to have failed so terribly. But then I got the hang of it and things got easier and I met people who were equally crazy about British TV series and obscure vocabulary – we became lasting friends.

Reading and working with lots and lots of texts, both literary and critical, and being familiar with literary genres and epochs is crucial to my job. The best preparation for any job in literature is to read, read, read. New, old, whatever interests you. If you don’t get it, try again later, it might not be the right moment for that particular book. Be curious, get into things: the really fascinating stuff is rarely on the surface. Attend readings, get to know people. If you have the opportunity to organise an event, take it. Get to know the field working at a bookstore or a publishing house. Plan ahead: If you are looking for an internship, apply early. There might not be a vacancy now, but maybe there will be next year. Don’t be disappointed if you don’t get the “right job” immediately, try again – the right way may not be straight.

... the best preparation for any job in literature is to read, read, read ...
The Department of English has a very lively social life and several institutions that actively contribute to it.

The student committee’s official duties revolve around university politics. As a student of the Department of English, you are automatically a member of the committee and are allowed to participate; the committee is kept up-to-date on all goings-on at the department and holds general student assemblies once a semester where all students meet and are invited to voice their concerns.

The committee also organizes a number of parties and events. Regular movie nights are one of its most well-known activities and its yearly summer barbeque or its Halloween parties have become very popular. See also fg-englisch.unibas.ch

The Gay Beggars is an independent non-professional theatre company which specializes in the production of plays written in English. Founded by students of the Department of English in 1941, the Gay Beggars have managed to keep up the long-standing tradition of staging at least one play a year. The late Professor Rudolf Stamm instigated their use of the marvellous Cellar Theatre, which opened in 1969. In addition to the annual performances in the Cellar Theatre, there have been many performances in other venues in Switzerland and Europe.
People with an insatiable interest in theatre and a reasonably good command of the English language are very welcome to look in and join the Gay Beggars. Though quite demanding and time-consuming, theatre work with the Gay Beggars offers you a brilliant opportunity to get involved in a rewarding activity and get to know other students. For more information, please visit: www.gaybeggars.ch

The English Seminar Choir was founded in 1989 by Allan Turner, then a lecturer at the University of Basel. Thanks to his profound knowledge of the English choral repertoire, as well as his dedication to this “hobby”, the choir thrived and grew to become an integral part of the University and of Basel cultural life. The choir is open to all singing enthusiasts, students as well as non-students. For more information, please visit: www.esc-basel.ch
English had always seemed kind of cool, it was the language of swing and jazz and rock ‘n’ roll, of some of my favorite authors, some of my favorite musicians/poets and some of my favorite places in the world (granted, I hadn’t really thought about why exactly that was the case then, later postcolonial studies helped me understand, though) and some of my favorite grub, too. Think hamburger without English, or fish and chips for that matter, and beans on toast. So I enlisted. And I never looked back in anger.

Why Basel? It was around the corner and seemed cozy enough. Which it was, thankfully. Now I live in Berlin, which is less cozy, of course, but admittedly great fun and a swell place to be.

I only found out two years after finishing my studies what I wanted to do for a living. I meandered and bummed and cycled around, tried this and that. And one bright sunny day, I thought, hey, why not do what you like most and actually earn a living by doing it? So I applied as an editor. It was rather naïve, to state the obvious, but it was the right track. The initial steps were muddy and uncomfortable but once I was on my way, there was no stopping me.

You don’t need to be an Indian guru to know that if you want a thing real bad, you’ll eventually get it if you are ready to sweat for a while. My advice to students: try to do as many internships as you can. Read, read, read. Never tire to be enthusiastic. Get up, stand up.

Studying was wonderful. We were the luckiest chaps. The Department of English was our secret garden, our fountain of youth, our clubhouse and our home. We were happy. We had, in short, a jolly good time.
Department of English
University of Basel
Nadelberg 6
CH-4051 Basel

Phone: +41 61 267 27 90
Fax: +41 61 267 27 80

sekretariat-englsem@unibas.ch
http://engsem.unibas.ch

Useful links and addresses

University of Basel
Petersplatz 1
CH-4051 Basel
http://unibas.ch

Student Services / Studiensekretariat
+41 61 267 30 33
studsek@unibas.ch

Student Advice Centre /
Studienberatung Basel
Steinengraben 5
CH-4051 Basel
studienberatung@unibas.ch
http://www.studienberatung-basel.ch

Faculty of Humanities /
Philosophisch-Historische Fakultät
Bernoullistrasse 28
CH-4056 Basel
http://philhist.unibas.ch/studium

Fachgruppe Englisch
http://fg-englisch.unibas.ch

The Gay Beggars Drama Group
http://www.gaybeggars.ch