



Subject Benchmark Statement

English

December 2019

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How can I use this document?

This is the Subject Benchmark Statement for English. It defines the academic standards that can be expected of a graduate, in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies, and describe the nature of the subject.

The [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (Quality Code) sets out the Expectations and Core practices that all providers of UK higher education are required to meet. Providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland must also meet the Common practices in the Quality Code.

The Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education (QAA) has also published a set of [Advice and Guidance](#), divided into 12 themes, and a number of other resources that support the mandatory part of the Quality Code. Subject Benchmark Statements sit alongside these resources to help providers develop courses and refine curricula but are not part of the regulated requirements for higher education providers in the UK.

This Statement is intended to support you if you are:

- involved in the design, delivery and review of courses of study in English or related subjects
- a prospective student thinking about studying this subject, or a current student of the subject, to find out what may be involved
- an employer, to find out about the knowledge and skills generally expected of a graduate in this subject.

Subject Benchmark Statements provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the course but are not intended to represent a national curriculum in a subject or to prescribe set approaches to teaching, learning or assessment. Instead, they allow for flexibility and innovation in course design within a framework agreed by the subject community.

It may be helpful to refer to the relevant Advice and Guidance when using this Statement.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Subject Benchmark Statement can be found in QAA's [Glossary](#).

About the Statement

This Subject Benchmark Statement refers to bachelor's degrees with honours in English.¹

It has been produced by a group of subject specialists drawn from, and acting on behalf of, the subject community. The process is facilitated by QAA, as is the full consultation with the wider academic community and stakeholder groups each Statement goes through.

In order to ensure the continuing currency of Subject Benchmark Statements, QAA initiates regular reviews of their content, five years after first publication, and every seven years subsequently, or in response to significant changes in the discipline.

Relationship to legislation

Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them, for example by funding bodies. This Statement does not interpret legislation, nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. The responsibility for academic standards remains with the higher education provider who awards the degree.

Higher education providers may need to consider other reference points in addition to this Statement in designing, delivering and reviewing courses. These may include requirements set out by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and industry or employer expectations.

Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Subject Benchmark Statement where appropriate. Individual higher education providers will decide how they use this information.

Summary of changes from the previous Subject Benchmark Statement (2015)

This version of the Statement forms its fourth edition, following initial publication of the Subject Benchmark Statement in 2000 and review and revision in 2007 and 2015.

This latest version of the Statement is the consequence of the revision to the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) which was published in 2018. It has been revised to update references to the Quality Code and other minor changes within the sector. Changes have been made by QAA and confirmed by the Chair of the most recent review group.

There have been no revisions to the subject-specific content of the Statement.

¹ Bachelor's degrees are at level 6 in *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and level 10 in *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland*, as published in [The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies](#)

1 Defining principles

1.1 English is a core academic subject encompassing study of the structure, history and usage of the English language, critical analysis of literature written in English, and the practice of creative writing. Students of English engage with multiple forms of communication, study past and present cultures, and use language and literature to reflect critically and imaginatively on their own learning and thinking. English is relevant to contemporary society as its focus on the production, interpretation and negotiation of meaning develops the capacity to understand the world from a variety of perspectives.

1.2 The subject makes a vital contribution to national cultural life through reading groups, theatre performances, screen adaptations, fiction and poetry readings, literary festivals, heritage events, and other forms of public engagement. English attracts international interest in the UK's cultural heritage and creative industries, stimulating tourism and other economic activity. The status of English as a global language adds significance to the study of both English language and literature written in English, offering opportunities for international exchanges in learning and teaching. The geographical, historical and social varieties of written and spoken English, and the range of world literatures written in or translated into English, enrich the subject and its study.

1.3 English is a broad subject comprising three complementary strands, studied separately or in combination: English literature, English language and creative writing. English literature involves the interpretation and analysis of literary texts and study of the history and theory of literature. English language involves the study of spoken, written and multimodal communication, their historical development, and their distinctive levels of analysis: phonology, grammar and lexis. Creative writing involves the practice of writing, the study of the literary and cultural contexts of writing, and the exploration of the relationships that writing generates between writer, publisher, text and audience.

1.4 The broad aims of an English degree are to:

- inspire enthusiasm for the subject and an appreciation of its past and continuing social, cultural, political and economic importance
- provide an intellectually stimulating experience of learning and studying
- promote the understanding of verbal creativity and aesthetic features of literary and non-literary texts
- help students to recognise and utilise the expressive resources of language
- encourage students to reflect critically upon the acts of reading and writing and on the history of textual production and reception
- foster wide and varied reading through a broad and diverse curriculum
- provide a basis for further study in English or related subjects and for the teaching of English at all levels
- develop a range of subject-specific and generic skills of value in graduate employment, including high-order critical, analytic and research skills, and advanced competence in oral and written communication.

2 The nature and scope of English

2.1 What characterises English as a subject is critical attention to the spoken and written word, to the relationship between thought and expression, and to the variety of social and cultural forms and contexts in which textual production, interpretation and communication occur. English courses take many forms. Some courses offer a balance of English literature, language and creative writing; others concentrate on one or two of these areas. The intellectual range and diversity of approaches in English open it up to the knowledge and practices of other subjects. As a result, English is often studied as part of joint honours or combined degree courses.

2.2 The study of English literature involves close reading and the interpretation and analysis of prose, poetry, drama and other types of imaginative writing in, or translated into, English from across the world. English degrees can also include literature studied in other languages. Students learn to identify the stylistic, formal and rhetorical properties of texts, and explain how these contribute to meaning. They learn how literary language, modes and genres change over time and place. They study the interconnections between texts, the relationship between literature and other forms of expression, and the impact both of works of literature and of modes of literary analysis. They also examine the processes of composition and production, histories of reception, and forms of dissemination, including manuscript, print, digital and performance.

2.3 The study of English language addresses all types and varieties of English, including national, regional, social, historical and contemporary forms. Students investigate the structure, function and use of varieties of English, and the influence of historical, social, geographical, cultural, political, stylistic and other contextual factors. Descriptive, critical and theoretical approaches to language are explored alongside key subdisciplinary areas such as pragmatics, discourse analysis, language history, dialectology, sociolinguistics, phonetics, semantics, and corpus-based, forensic or cognitive approaches. Students undertake qualitative and quantitative analysis of a wide range of texts, from everyday casual spoken communication to highly stylised formal and/or literary written discourse.

2.4 Creative writing helps students understand existing works of literature and explore their own creativity. Students learn to recognise the complex interactive relationship between writer, publisher, text and audience. Creative writing emphasises the importance of the drafting process, the discipline of learning to write to specific briefs, and the benefits of working collaboratively. The greater the emphasis on creative writing in a course, the more the focus is likely to be upon the development of the students' own writing, but the original works produced by students are generally informed by wide and critical reading of existing literature. Creative writing can include poetry, fiction, drama and creative non-fiction but is not restricted by genre, format or style of writing.

2.5 English has contributed significantly to related subjects such as film, drama and area studies. It has also helped to pioneer the development of interdisciplinary modes of study which continue to reshape the contours of English: these include, among others, book history, history of rhetoric, critical and cultural theory, digital humanities, disability studies, medieval studies, postcolonial studies, translation studies, medical and environmental humanities, cognitive poetics, women's studies, and gender and queer studies.

2.6 English plays a significant role in promoting lifelong learning. It has a strong appeal among mature students in mainstream higher education, and is widely taught in summer schools, in continuing education and in widening access courses.

3 Subject knowledge and skills

Subject knowledge

3.1 Graduates who have studied English know about a range of the following:

- literature and/or language from different periods. For single honours literature students this includes knowledge of writing from periods before 1800 and the range of principal literary genres across prose, poetry and drama
- the breadth of literatures in English
- regional and global varieties of the English language
- the history, structure, levels and discourse functions of the English language
- how culture, language, technology and economics affect how, where and by whom texts are produced and received
- the role of readers in shaping texts
- the relationships between different genres and different media
- critical, theoretical, linguistic and stylistic concepts and terminology.

Skills specific to English

3.2 Graduates who have studied English are able to:

- read closely and critically
- analyse texts and discourses, and respond to the affective power of language, using appropriate approaches and terminology
- develop independent and imaginative interpretations of literary, critical, linguistic or creative material
- articulate a critical understanding of complex texts and ideas (and of their historical relations where appropriate)
- write clearly, accurately and effectively
- apply scholarly bibliographic skills appropriate to the subject.

Generic and graduate skills

3.3 Graduates who have studied English are effective researchers, good communicators and active learners. They contribute to society and are highly sought after by employers.

3.4 English graduates are versatile researchers. They are able to:

- discover and synthesize complex information and diverse evidence
- respond creatively and imaginatively to research tasks
- initiate projects of their own
- present information within wider contexts
- test, interpret and analyse information and evidence independently and critically, producing from that analysis cogent arguments and decisive judgements
- plan, organise and report to deadline.

3.5 English graduates possess advanced communication skills. They are able to:

- articulate their own and other people's ideas concisely, accurately and persuasively both orally and in writing
- develop working relationships with others in teams, especially through constructive dialogue (for example, by listening, asking and responding to questions)
- understand the role of narrative and emotion in decision-making
- be sensitive to cultural contexts when working with others.

3.6 English graduates are active, lifelong learners. They are able to:

- adapt to different demands and tasks
- appreciate the benefit of giving and receiving feedback
- evaluate and reflect on their own practices and assumptions
- look beyond the immediate task to the wider context, including the social and commercial effects of their work
- initiate and take responsibility for their own work.

4 Teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching and learning

4.1 Students of English study a variety of primary and secondary texts in printed, digital, and other forms.

4.2 Students' independent study of materials, and their communication of and discussion of ideas, are fundamental to learning and teaching in English.

4.3 Independent research into topics covered by the course means that students of English make extensive use of libraries and digital resources.

4.4 Teaching in English balances direct instruction, facilitated opportunities for active questioning and debate with peers and tutors, peer critique and feedback, and models of relevant skills in action.

4.5 Scheduled activities may include lectures, seminars, workshops, tutorials, and personal supervision as well as structured online activity, and sessions outside the classroom, including performances and field trips. These are underpinned by collaborative and individual independent study.

4.6 To develop and demonstrate the skills identified in Section 3, students of English engage in extensive written analysis.

Assessment activity

4.7 Assessments in English encourage students to pay close attention to texts, to pursue original thought, and to question accepted opinions.

4.8 The value placed by English courses on independence of mind and choice, and the diversity of material and approaches, encourages a variety of assessment forms. These may include:

- essays
- examinations (including unseen, pre-released, and 'take-away' exams)
- independent research projects and dissertations requiring scholarly and empirical research (these may sometimes be completed in collaboration with peers)
- oral and interactive activity (including formal presentations, seminar performance or online discussion, dramatic performance)
- external placement or work-based learning reports
- tasks aimed at developing specific skills (for example, digital literacies, bibliographical exercises, and editing tasks)
- portfolios of creative and critical writing (which may include fiction, drama, and poetry; reflective journals; essay plans; annotated bibliographies; critical reviews; and electronic materials such as websites and blogs).

4.9 Assessment in English rewards:

- breadth and depth of subject knowledge (including relevant contextual knowledge)
- powers of textual analysis and the ability to evaluate literary and linguistic forms
- engagement with and the ability to manage arguments and debates
- independence of mind and originality of approach in interpretative and written practice
- rhetorical strategies in deploying and evaluating evidence
- persuasive expression
- fluent and effective communication of ideas, sophisticated writing ability, and an understanding of writing as a process (including revision and editing).

5 Benchmark standards

Threshold standard

5.1 This is the minimum requirement that should be reached by graduates of a bachelor's degree with honours.

5.2 Graduates who have studied English as a significant component of their degree demonstrate:

- knowledge of the subject as defined by the breadth of the curriculum in Section 3
- awareness of the different ideas and values represented in the subject of English
- understanding of how critical, analytical and creative approaches produce knowledge
- effective communication skills
- powers of textual analysis and critical argument and an awareness of the affective power of language
- critical judgement
- an ability to conduct independent research and organise relevant information to formulate an appropriate written argument or response.

Typical standard

5.3 This is the level of attainment reached by the typical student whose results fall into the main cluster.

5.4 Typical honours graduates who have studied English as a significant component of their degree are able to:

- demonstrate a wide knowledge of the subject as defined in Section 3 and an ability to deploy a conceptual grasp of its central concerns
- interpret and articulate ideas and values as represented in the subject of English
- apply their understanding of critical, analytic and creative approaches to produce knowledge
- exhibit an effective command of written English together with a wide-ranging and accurate vocabulary
- display confident textual analysis and fluent critical argument, attending to language, structure and form and the role of the reader in the process of communication and interpretation
- use independent and self-reflective critical judgement
- conduct independent research through self-formulated questions and tasks and organise relevant information to establish an appropriate written argument or response and achieve scholarly standards of presentation.

Excellent standard

5.5 English graduates who have attained an excellent standard demonstrate to a higher level the capabilities and skills listed in paragraph 5.4, and show evidence of extensive independent reading, originality of thought and expression, and in-depth understanding. Excellent work displays wide-ranging knowledge of the subject and applies it in subtle and effective ways, showing exceptional critical insight, analytic rigour and creativity.

Appendix: Membership of the benchmarking and review groups for the Subject Benchmark Statement for English

Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for English (2019)

The fourth edition, published in 2019, was revised by QAA to align the content with the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education, published in 2018. Proposed revisions were checked and verified by the Chair of the review group of the Subject Benchmark Statement for English from 2015.

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|---|--|
| Professor Martin Halliwell Dr Andy Smith | English Association and University of Leicester QAA |
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Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for English (2015)

Details provided below are as published in the third edition of the Subject Benchmark Statement.

| | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Professor Dinah Birch | University of Liverpool |
| Professor Susan Bruce | University English and Keele University |
| Dr Sue Currell | University of Sussex |
| Dr Fiona Douglas | University of Leeds |
| Professor David Duff | University English and University of Aberdeen |
| Professor Robert Eaglestone | Royal Holloway, University of London |
| Professor Martin Halliwell (Chair) | English Association and University of Leicester |
| Dr Nicole King | Higher Education Academy and University of Reading |
| Professor (Emeritus) Ben Knights | Teesside University |
| Professor Steve May | Bath Spa University |
| Dr Anshuman Mondal | Brunel University London |
| Dr Mark Rawlinson | University of Leicester |
| Professor Jennifer Richards | English Association and Newcastle University |
| Dr Ceri Sullivan | Cardiff University |
| Professor William Spurlin | Brunel University London |
| Dr Alison Waller | Roehampton University |
| Professor Shân Wareing | Buckinghamshire New University |
| QAA officers | |
| Dr Catherine Kerfoot | QAA |
| Ruth Burchell | QAA |
| Specialist reader | |
| Professor John McGavin | University of Southampton |
| Employer representative | |
| Sarah Gibbs | Big Lottery Fund |
| Student reader | |
| India Woof | University of Sheffield |

Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for English (2007)

Details provided below are as published in the second edition of the Subject Benchmark Statement.

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Professor Elisabeth Jay | Oxford Brookes University |
| Professor Ben Knights | The Higher Education Academy English Subject Centre |
| Professor Greg Walker (Chair) | University of Leicester |
| Professor Sue Zlosnik | Manchester Metropolitan University |

Membership of the original benchmarking group for English (2000)

Details provided below are as published in the original Subject Benchmark Statement for English.

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|------------------------------|--|
| Dr L R Anderson | University of Newcastle upon Tyne |
| Professor J Beer | Manchester Metropolitan University |
| Dr M J Coyle | University of Wales, Cardiff |
| Professor K Everest | University of Liverpool |
| Professor K Fullbrook | University of the West of England, Bristol |
| Dr V Gillespie | St Anne's College, Oxford |
| Professor P Hamilton | Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London |
| Professor N H Keeble | University of Stirling |
| Professor P W Martin | Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education |
| Professor P Parrinder | University of Reading |
| Dr S Regan | The Open University |
| Professor R Rylance | Anglia Polytechnic University |
| Professor J A Simons (Chair) | De Montfort University |
| Professor K Wales | University of Leeds |
| Professor R J Webster | Liverpool John Moores University |

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