

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO NOW?

Trying to decide whether to study English in the U.S. or in the UK? Know the facts.

By Chris Spendlove

Some prospective English majors may think to themselves in a moment of pre-collegiate stress: is it better to enroll in an American university for my (hopefully not totally useless) English degree, or should I journey back to the motherland and study English at a living, breathing English university? Some may argue that to totally appreciate the beauty of the English language, it is necessary to make such a pilgrimage and hack out soppy poetry in the very house in which Shakespeare was born—for the cosmic vibes to fully sink in, of course—or to visit High

Herot and, if one is lucky, do battle with a medieval monster to fully gain appreciation for the epic that is Beowulf. Others posit that



Don't be scared about picking a school. Read on, young grasshopper, read on!

studying at American universities provides the same quality of education without having to hassle with tea-time, driving on the wrong side of the road, and that whole not-being-able-to-see-the-majority-of-your-friends thing. So which are better, British or American universities? As

many perceptive, would-be English majors may have guessed already, the answer depends on what kind of English degree you're looking for. If you are all gung-ho about becoming a dusty professor who has read just about every book that has ever been printed, or if you're really into learning the deep-rooted history of the language we all have a love-hate relationship with, British universities may be the



Either way you go, you'll be hitting the books.

ture, but also into the arenas of writing, editing, and becoming a marketable writer, American universities may be the place for you. Now, this is not to nay-say the quality of British

universities or suggest that you won't be writing; you will write plenty. But there is a pedagogical difference in the way each country tends to work its English majors. British universities channel the energies of the major

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choice for you—they, for the most part, provide a focused, academia-heavy English degree that will have you burning through reading lists and criticizing works of literature until your frontal lobe turns blue. But if you are looking for a degree that will not only move you through litera-

into specific fields, genres, and subjects to engender a love of literature and the study of the language; American schools produce globally marketable and communications-compatible majors who write technically as well as critically and creatively. Why this dichotomy? The an-

swer lies in the era when the two nations effectively swapped positions on the world stage: post World War II.

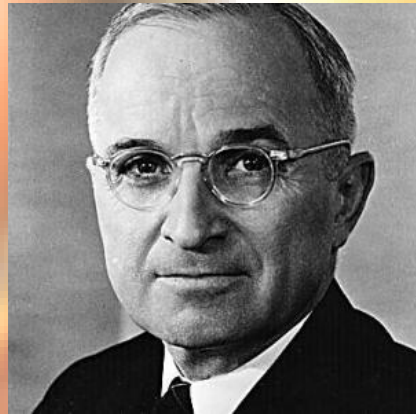
America vaulted to new heights after

World War II: the economic overhaul of the war had jettisoned the Great Depression into the history books, soldiers now had money and families to spend it on, and the military mass-production of

the war bloomed into consumerist mass-production. Key components of President Truman's "Fair Deal" legislation kept defense spending at war-time levels, while injecting funds into the private industries of America to boost the standard of living.

These government funds, along with

the reparations paid by Germany, allowed for great economic freedom not only for American citizens, but the government as well. People were going to universities to get a higher education, and the govern-



President Truman's "Fair Deal" led to significant improvements in higher education

ment was pumping money in to these institutions. The result: well-equipped and well-funded universities that were on the cutting edge¹. These schools then had the freedom and capacity to produce graduates who were

marketable, both at home and abroad, and to flesh out the programs that had perhaps been meagerly equipped before. This tradition of excellence has continued through the twenty-first century.

In Britain, however, the story wasn't so happy. Many of Britain's

colonies, starting with India in 1947, gained their independence, cutting much of the empire's wealth, all of which was desperately needed for reconstructing the nation that had been ripped apart by war. Aerial bombing had taken its toll on the infrastructure, and the many fatherless and widowed were desperately impoverished. All available government funds had to be channeled into repairing the damages of the Second Great War. In an effort to do something to fix the tanking economy, Parliament entered into the Washington Loan Agreement of 1945 with the United States. Tragically, the agreement included a convertibility clause that allowed companies to demand payments in the more highly prized American dollar, which were then spent in American markets, doing very little for the ever-sinking

British economy². Parliament therefore, unlike the prosperous American government, could not spend funds on higher education. The programs that had been in place, such as studies of the origins and criticism of English, remained, while new programs such as the ones implemented in American schools, had to wait their turn for the meager government money available.

You're probably shouting, "Enough with the history lesson already!" but understanding the economic situations in both countries during the postwar era explains the differing approaches of the English programs seen today at top universities in both England and the United States.

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more globally marketable English program than do universities in Great Britain. Yale president Richard C. Levin has this to say about the programs at Yale: "In the diversity of its students, its global outlook, and its outstanding research, it is also a university of compelling change"³.

Again, while British universities certainly apply global outlook and diversity in their curricula, the English programs of American universities outstrip their British counterparts as far as using the English degree as a platform for learning all styles of writing and for gearing their majors toward a globally marketable future. Classes in crafting fiction and nonfiction writing, playwriting, as well as studies in Hollywood film all pepper the American English major's menu, in addition to the standard Shakespeare and lit classes one associates with an English degree⁴. This type of pragmatic,

job-focused study is what truly sets the American English degree apart from the British equivalent.

Now, let's set the record straight: British English

degrees are not inherently inferior to American English degrees—they are simply different. Whereas in American English studies a student will, in addition to his speed-reading of *Hamlet*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *Crime and Punishment*, write working draft of a faux journal article for his technical writing class, the British English major will devote all of her time to the study of the novels and/or poems she has been assigned for her "Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic: Insular Latin Language and Literature" class⁵. So instead of taking a shotgun approach, the British English student focuses her energy on a specific ave-

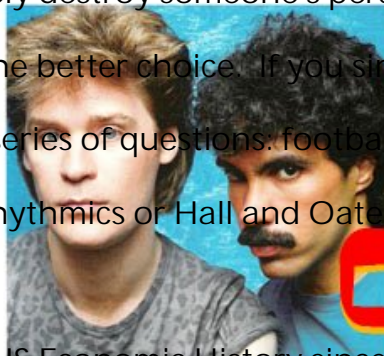
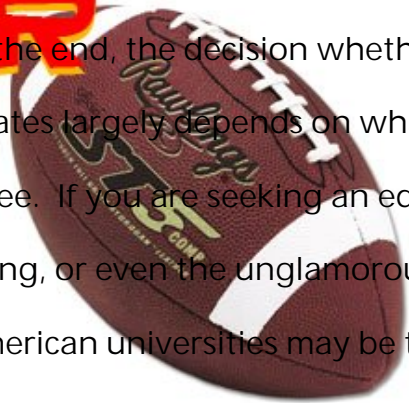
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nue of the English language, becoming, in the end, a prolific scholar in that very specialized area.



In the end, the decision whether to study abroad or to stay in the States largely depends on what you want to do with your English degree. If you are seeking an editorial job, something in the field of professional writing, or even the unglamorous and patchy-bearded life of the starving writer, American universities may be the place for you; if, however, you dream of the day when you can, at a fancy dress party in an Islington flat, smugly listen to and then completely destroy someone's perception of *Jane Eyre*, a British university may just be the better choice. If you simply can't decide, you may ask yourself the following series of questions: football or *football*? Stars and stripes or Union Jack? Eurhythmics or Hall and Oates? Crumpets or apple pie?



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