

First-Year English at UTAS: Interview with the 2012 Winner of the TATE Prize in Excellence in English Learning

In 2012 TATE began sponsoring a prize for the student who achieves the best result for first-year English at UTAS. The recipient must also have successfully completed at least one pre-tertiary (TCE) English course in Tasmania.

The first winner of the prize is Rebecca Smith. Ellyn Carter, who is currently enrolled in first-year English, conducted this interview. At Rosny College, Rebecca studied English Studies and English Writing. Ellyn was home-schooled for most of her primary and secondary education and completed Years 11 and 12 through Flexible Learning, including English Communications and English Writing.

The first-year English program at UTAS comprises two units: HEA103 English 1A (Semester 1) and HEA104 English 1B (Semester 2). Both units are taught face-to-face on the Sandy Bay and Newnham campuses and through Distance Education.

English 1A begins with the question "How do short stories, poems, plays, novels, and films generate meaning?" and focuses on close reading, critical thinking, and academic writing. Required texts range from canonical poetry, short fiction, and drama (Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas, Emily Dickinson, James Joyce, Tom Stoppard) to highly acclaimed twentieth and twenty-first-century novels (Muriel Spark, Kazuo Ishiguro) to film 'masterpieces' (Alfred Hitchcock) and a popular TV series (Dexter).

English 1B asks, "Why are certain texts regarded as classics within the English literary canon and how do we encounter them today?" Students in this unit build their knowledge of key topics in English studies and work on developing essential skills for writing academic research essays. The unit examines the concept of a literary canon (Shakespeare, Coleridge, Austen), considers the meaning and significance of modernism (Woolf, Faulkner) and postmodernism (DeLillo), and introduces students to the work of political criticism with a particular focus on class and gender.

I am delighted to introduce two outstanding UTAS English students to the readers of EduTATE. Please feel welcome to contact me with any questions about the first-year English program at UTAS.

Dr Lisa Fletcher



Dr Lisa Fletcher is the University Co-ordinator of the UTAS English first-year program (Hobart). Lisa can be contacted at Lisa.Fletcher@utas.edu.au or on 6226 1725.

Ellyn: What drew you to studying English?

Rebecca: English has always been a subject that I did well in, and so that meant I enjoyed it. I also read a lot as a kid, so it's the enjoyment factor really. I think it makes sense to study something you enjoy.

Which English courses did you study in Years 11 and 12?

In Year 11 I took English Studies and in Year 12 I took English Writing. I chose English Studies because it's advertised as leading into university in terms of the content and the way they look at texts. I had a great class and it really helps when you're around people who are really into it.

People who are supportive?

Exactly. And the best part of that course, I think, was the independent study. It's really helpful because it gives you a chance to do your own thing and you don't get to do that so much in high school.

And then, in Year 12, English Writing, getting a chance to do writing helps to understand things. We look at poetry all the way through school, but I only really started to get things like poetic devices and how to use them properly when I had to write it.

What were your expectations coming into University English?

I expected it to be harder and I expected to cover challenging texts, but not how I would, so I wasn't expecting things like close reading or ways of interpreting like Marxism and feminism.

So what were the major differences between university-level English and pre-tertiary English?

I think the biggest difference was how in college you tend to look at a text in one way, often chosen by the teacher, whereas in uni you cover more than one way of looking at a text really quickly. That gives you the chance to narrow down what you thought was really good about it and take that further.

Do you think Year 11 and 12 study prepared you for university?

Yeah, I think it did actually. No matter what, you're always going to have some form of shock because it's a totally different way of studying, with lectures and tutorials, and the sheer amount of study you have to do in your own time. It can be tricky transitioning from high school to college to university, the reading load especially. Once you adjust, though, it's still the same English from school. You're not really looking at new things, you're looking at them in more depth. So yes, content-wise I think it did.

The choice of texts in English Studies in Year 11 was more challenging than in high school. It was one of the first times I studied a book I really didn't like, we covered 1984, and I did not enjoy it. But it was really good to write an essay on it because you could get involved. It was one of the first times I've done that, and it's the sort of thing you do at uni, looking at a much wider range of texts. So English Studies gives you the chance to start developing higher level skills and then uni keeps that going.

What would you like to say about first-year English at UTAS?

First-year English gives you a good grounding. Over the course of the two semesters I noticed that it's set up very well for further study, and not just further study in English. It gives you skills for all sorts of other things. Every subject involves reading things and English helps you really get down to the point of what someone is saying. I would recommend people take it even if they're not necessarily going to continue with it.

You're now a PASS Leader at UTAS, so could you explain a bit about it and your role there?

PASS stands for Peer Assisted Study Sessions, a program run by the university. A PASS leader like me is someone who's got good results in a subject, then comes back in their second or third year to lead sessions for the first year students that cover course content and study skills. PASS is relaxed and fun compared to tutorials, which are still fairly formal, because the focus is on peer learning. So my role is to plan and run sessions, but I don't "teach". It's really about students working off each other.

When you were in your first year, you didn't have PASS. Do you think your experience would have been much different had it been available?

I think it would. PASS was offered for some of my other first year subjects, but I didn't end up going and I wish I had. Seeing it from this angle I can see how helpful it is. PASS helps you to organise your own thinking, because you get to hear other students' ideas. And yeah, the study skills would have helped me to settle into uni, to learn how to study independently, to read in my own time, to read effectively and efficiently, to revise and all that sort of stuff.

Do you see it benefiting the other students you have in your sessions?

I think so. I'm getting some good feedback from them. They're saying "yeah, this activity really helped", and they're enjoying it at the same time.

So rather than just being stuck on your own, trying to figure it out for yourself, you've got other people in the same boat.

Exactly, especially since a lot of people will come to uni, whether they're coming back after taking a break or going straight through, and won't know many people. PASS is timetabled, so you don't have to worry about organising a study group or anything by reaching out to strangers. You can turn up and there'll be people there. It makes learning social.

What are you studying now?

This semester I'm taking two different English classes. I'm taking the second year core unit required to major in English called "Telling Tales: Literature and Narrative". So far we've covered things like point of view and unreliable narrators. My other English class is a third-year level elective, "Writing Tasmania", which is about creating your own piece, rather than taking someone else's and analysing it. Like I was saying with poetry earlier, writing creatively gives you a completely different perspective. You think, these are the same decisions I had to make when I was writing, so that's probably what the author was thinking there.

Where do you see your English studies taking you in years to come?

I'm probably going to do Honours in English, but past that I haven't thought a whole lot. It's always been kind of an idea that I'd love to get into publishing because I love books and I think it would be good to, you know, make more books. I don't think I could make a career out of writing. I don't think that would suit me very well. But we'll see! That's the best thing about an English degree: you can do a lot of things. There are options all over the place.



Above: Second-year English student and 2012 TATE Prize Winner Rebecca Smith with first-year student Ellyn Carter.