English Majors: Success After Graduation
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"Are you going to be a teacher?" Every English major has heard these words before, and thankfully for many of them, "yes" is the answer. For the rest of us, it gets exhausting hearing that question and the follow-up, "well what are you going to do then?" or my particular favorite, "why didn't you pick something practical?" Because there is absolutely nothing practical about being able to communicate effectively. Mariah Faris, Alia Mohammed, and Maria Puentes are three recent SJSU graduates with degrees in English. None of them are teachers, and none of them are living in squalor. Instead, all three graduates are working as tech writers.

Both Mariah and Maria entered the English program with the intention of teaching. English was what they liked, and they didn't know what else to do. Like so many before them, they defaulted to education. Alia, on the other hand, entered without a concentration. However, by the time they all got to their third year they became aware of the Tech Writing Program and switched. For Alia and Maria, taking English 103 sparked their interest in sentence level English. However, Mariah always had an interest in document writing but didn't know that it was an option for her degree.

When asked about the program, all three raved. Almost as if they were getting commission for anyone they referred to it. While they enjoyed the program, the biggest source of their praise was how it prepared them for the jobs they have now. Alia comments that one of the most important things she learned in the program was how to ask questions. Maria emphasized the variety of writings that the instructors assign, "it may seem frustrating, but you leave the program prepared. I rarely have to ask for clarification when I'm told to do a write up." The companies they work for have hired our graduates before. Alia worked at the company that Maria is at now, and she remembered her employers having positive things to say about the

program too. However, despite how effective the program is, like most things it has room for improvement. Coincidentally, all three of them commented that the Visual Rhetoric and Document Design class should be mandatory. It offered skills that they did not get in any other class, but have all used in their jobs. Mariah added that learning a wider variety of programs would be beneficial, specifically MadCap and FrameMaker.

As the program is so thorough, moving from SJSU into the workforce was a fairly painless process. Having graduated in 2015, Alia has had the most experience. She spent a year at Blue Coat who partners with Symantec, as a Technical Publications Intern. Maria is there now in the same position. Most of the work done there is document writing and updating. Maria comments, "we were given an older document, and we had to update it. It was awful. It had like, neon pink and green fonts. I don't know what people were thinking." Maria was able to handle this job with relative ease, due in large part to the Visual Rhetoric and Document Design class.

After Blue Coat, Alia spent some time at a small startup company. The small business feel had some perks, it was very much a "work hard, party hard" kind of place. It was not abnormal for people to have mini-fridges with alcohol at their desks. Somehow, that didn't seem to damage the work/home balance like one might expect. Instead, Alia had more freedom in a job than ever before. Coming into the office was encouraged, but working from home was also perfectly acceptable. Need a week off? Go for it, as long as the projects were done by their due date. In a way, it felt like school. Get X done by Y date. Go to class for participation points, or in this case, go to work for team building and camaraderie. The biggest downside of working for a small startup was the inconsistent pay. Alia was always paid for her work, but not always on schedule. Luckily this delay was due more to the vice president being swamped and forgetting to sign the checks than the company being unable to pay the employees.

Mariah, on the other hand, works for one of Blue Coat's competitors. Her project experience is similar to Alia and Maria, but lately, she has been more focused on web product than anything else. Her current project is a user guide for new users. Engineers have provided her with instructions, and she has to translate "engineer" to English. That may not seem like a massive project, but one of the instructions has 90 steps. That doesn't even count the sub-steps, which become more frequent around step 80. Some of the more involved steps end up having 9 to 12 sub-steps. This one instruction will end up around 200 parts by the time it's complete. That does not even count all the other instructions she has to create. While that sounds mind-numbingly tedious to most sane people, Mariah enjoys it. She has completed one other user guide already and is waiting for the OK from her manager to publish it on the company website.

Working as professional writers has given these three independence they have never had before. Independence they obtained with a Liberal Arts degree. It was not an easy journey. They'll have a lifetime of people asking, "so you work at Starbucks?" when they find out about their English degree. At the close of the interviews, They each offered advice for the current students. Mariah wants us to know that we aren't done learning yet. In fact, we better love to learn, because as tech writers we are going to keep doing it. The more she learns, the more she learns she doesn't know. While Alia's advice may be a little cliche, it still rings true: grab the bull by the horns and don't give up. Maria, perhaps, had the best advice. Do your best on all the projects you do, not for your GPA, but, because they can be used in a portfolio and that portfolio will give you a leg up on the job hunt.