How Reading Poetry Will Help You Get a Six-Figure Job

Britton Gildersleeve

The main problem with teaching poetry to non-English majors is that too often we have to justify our position. . . . This short exercise is one I’ve used with resounding success on skeptical high school and college students.

This exercise will be most effective if you pretend you’re one of your students while you read it. Look at the advertisement (see Figure 1) and see if you can answer the questions asked.

The main problem with teaching poetry to non-English majors is that too often we have to justify our position, as in “What’s so great about poetry that it should take up class time better devoted to writing essays?” This short exercise is one I’ve used with resounding success on skeptical high school and college students. It also worked on my engineer husband.

The accompanying job classified was on Williams Communications’ home page in late March 2000. While the salary is not specified, let your students know it was in excess of $100,000. The same job was listed elsewhere with salary range specified.

I place the copy of the ad on an overhead projector and ask the students to follow with me as I read it aloud—a few of my students would have had a hard time with some of the technical jargon. After I answer any questions about vocabulary, I ask them what the job is asking for.

“What skills,” I ask, “do you need to get an interview for this job?”

They respond “technical skills,” “leadership,” “computer stuff,” and the list continues, covering everything from good problem-solving techniques to “effective communication.”

“And what,” I counter, “do things like computer skills and technical skills have to do with English?” This stumps them. They ponder a bit and then change gears.

“It must be the communication,” they tell me. But I’m shaking my head. “Well, then, how about ‘exceptional written and oral skills?’”

“None of you,” I tell them, “would even get an interview for this job.”

Different classes handle this answer in different ways. Confident classes—usually literature classes—go on to look more closely at the ad. Freshman composition classes tend to look pitifully overwhelmed until I relent.

“Let’s find the most important sentence in this ad,” I suggest. Good students all, they expect the “thesis” to be in the first paragraph. When I tell them it’s not, they’re appalled. This allows a brief—but significant—digression on audience expectations, and form/genre constraints. There are good reasons, I point out, why I ask them to place their explicit theses in their introductions (for the most part; there are also good reasons to break rules).

With prodding and a discussion of “critical reading skills,” students locate the “most important sentence,” actually two:

Must be a strong leader able to manage cross-functional teams toward a common goal of problem resolution and process improvement. Problem resolution efforts will often involve teams with similar goals and priorities and the need to manage them toward a common goal and gain
Six-Figure Job

the support of their disparate management organizations.

What, I ask my students, does this mean? And why do I say it's so important? By this
time, my better critical readers are catching on.

"They want someone who can manage folks who don't get along," Clinton says.

Yes, I tell the class. They want someone who can manage a group of several smaller
groups, working at cross-purposes ("cross-functional"); teams with "dissimilar
goals," whose individual managers sound as if they aren't very supportive at the moment.

How do we know this, I ask the kids. Are we correct in reading the ad this way? What
clues does the actual text give us?

What follows is often the liveliest discussion of the early weeks. Suddenly, students
understand how these apparently esoteric skills apply to the real world. They see why
it's necessary to return to the actual text to prove a point. This is easier when I ask if we
could make a case for the ad asking for physical labor.

"That's nowhere in there," they exclaim in
disgust.

"So," I reply, "the text itself will, to an extent, help you read it? You can't just make up
something?" (A problem with some of my more "creative" readers.)

"No," they agree, "there are limits to reality, even when meaning isn't immediately
obvious."

I point out that few—if any—of their other
classes will ask them to read in this way.
Economics and biology and chemistry and
the much-vaulted "technological" skills
courses will not teach them to read for more
than "facts." You don't have to be able to read
for "clues" to solve for x, nor does Microsoft
require you to dig deeper than a fairly
straightforward owner's manual.

Finally, I ask them if they understand, now,
why I say that poetry is the most important
subject in school. This (usually) brings a
round of loud laughter, and then the
sobering realization that I'm only half
kidding.

In a time when few of our students read
poetry on their own, when schools have less
and less time to devote to what may often
seem like overly intellectual pursuits, many
of my students tell me that they had no
poetry in school at all and have read none
outside of class. Nor do they understand
why, at the college level, freshman composi-
tion is mandated. This, I tell them, should
convince them that only in an English
class—or in a class with someone who
emphasizes critical reading—will they learn
the skills that will help them establish
themselves in the lifestyle to which they
aspire. As for the spiritual enrichment
poetry brings—that's another exercise!

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Oklahoma State University Writing Project. She
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Writers & Projects of the Oklahoma State University
Writing Project.

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Provide technical support and assistance to both Williams internal application
systems users and external customers/partners. Develop familiarity with
business, application, and technical processes and use this understanding to
improve the processing and accuracy of the data and the performance of the
interfaces between internal systems and external customers. Lead efforts to
resolve issues across business, application support, and technical support
groups seeking the best solution to problems that arise in the process, perform-
ance, or accuracy of application systems and the data exchanged between
internal and external systems and customers. Problem resolution efforts will
often include direct interaction with external customers. Must be a strong leader
able to manage cross-functional teams toward a common goal of problem
resolution and process improvement. Problem resolution efforts will often
involve teams with dissimilar goals and priorities and the need to manage them
toward a common goal and gain the support of their disparate management
organizations. Must possess exceptional written and oral skills. A good existing
understanding of business, application, and technical areas is required and/or
the ability to seek out and assimilate information independently and quickly.
Must be able to work with little supervision and manage time effectively.
Knowledge and experience acquired through this position will serve as excellent
preparation for movement into advanced leadership positions within Williams
Communications. Bachelors degree or equivalent experience.

Figure 1. The classified advertisement that prompted Gildersleeve's exercise on poetry for non-English
majors.