

How ASU's English department went from 'cavalry' to world-class program

Department of English celebrates 125th anniversary with special events, including a history exhibit

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
September 23, 2025

Today's word of the day is quasiquicentennial.

If you're thinking, quas-what? — you're probably not alone. According to Merriam Webster's dictionary, the word's first known use was in 1962, much more recently than the period the word refers to.

But English majors may recognize the word, which means 125th anniversary and happens to be what the Department of English is commemorating this year.

In honor of its quasiquicentennial, the department is celebrating in a big way. [Special events](#) will run through October, including an exhibit detailing the history of the department that will be on display on the first floor of the Hayden Library from Oct. 13 to Dec. 19.

So let's turn back the clock.

From humble beginnings to famous poets

English and humanities studies have been part of Arizona State University since 1886, when it opened its doors to 33 students in a four-classroom building.

But the Department of English was first mentioned in the 1900 course catalog for the Normal School of Arizona (as it was called then) with these words:

The general aim in the construction in English is to secure accuracy and facility in the expression of thought. ... In order to become a good reader, three things are necessary: A mental preparation,

a knowledge of the mechanism of the printed page and an elocutionary training that will enable the reader to express the thoughts of the author when they have once been grasped.

Stirring? Maybe not. But the department was immediately popular with students. More than 100 signed up for classes, and they became known as the “cavalry” because they rode their horses to campus.

According to a typewritten history of the department written in 1977, English courses had become so popular by 1930 that the university was forced to hold classes on Saturdays to meet the demand.

The department has long had an innovative and experimental trend. Drama courses were offered as early as 1929. World literature was also part of the early curriculum.

“The world has changed,” said Jeffrey Cohen, dean of humanities in The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, “but when I look back on the history of what characterizes the department, there’s been an ethic of care for students that I think is continuous over 125 years.

“They were trying to give students opportunities that they wouldn’t have had at many other places,” he said.

Manushag “Nush” Powell, current chair of the Department of English, said that when the Normal School was founded, the library consisted of a single dictionary. Soon after, the department created a “lending library” of more than 4,000 books that were available to students for pennies.

“And all of the money that was spent circulated into buying new books and expanding the library,” Powell said. “This went on for decades, and they were able to grow the lending library to thousands of volumes. People don’t often think of the English department as having an entrepreneurial spirit, but it clearly did.”

University archivist Shannon Walker and her staff discovered several other fun facts when they were constructing the exhibit:

In 1958, renowned poet Robert Frost visited ASU.

What’s now the University Club on campus was formerly known as the English Building.

In 1968, 40 English faculty held a silent protest against the Vietnam War.

And, in the 1980s and 1990s, the department ran a “grammar hotline” staffed by a retired professor.

“It was a challenging job,” Walker said. “That’s why catalogs and yearbooks are so great. They encapsulate a lot of information and they’re already scanned. But we had to go back 125 years. It was a monumental task to try to pull together that history.”

Continuing the legacy

The Department of English has naturally expanded since its early days.

With degrees on the Tempe campus and online, it currently offers six distinct areas of study: creative writing; English education; film and media studies; linguistics, applied linguistics and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages); literature; and writing, rhetorics and literacies.

It also administers the university's first-year writing programs and houses cross-disciplinary degrees in narrative studies and in culture, technology and environment.

"One of the things I love about the Department of English is it's actually an interdisciplinary school," Cohen said. "I believe our English department here at ASU is actually a model for the future of English departments throughout the United States."

Edward "Bud" Cole can attest to that approach. It may not seem like a natural fit, but Cole said the bachelor's degree he received in English in 2000 has helped him greatly in his current role as president of the Asia Pacific Division of Fender Musical Instruments Corporation in Japan. Previously, Cole served in leadership roles for Ralph Lauren, QVC Japan, Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy Group and Pernod Ricard.

"The English teachers that I had taught me how to learn, how to be analytical, how to write well, speak well and present well," Cole said. "They taught me amazing skills on how to debate ideas, all the elements that I have found that you need in the professional space. If you can't influence people to buy into your ideas versus all the other options that they have out there, then pretty much you're stuck."

One of the key moments in the evolution of the department occurred in 2003 when the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust established the [Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing](#) with a \$10 million grant to support literary programs and community engagement, a legacy of the trust's philanthropic goals for arts and culture in Arizona. The center, located in the Piper Writers House, offers writing classes, workshops, public readings and conferences.

"It was such a game changer," said Professor Emeritus Cynthia Hogue, who was a student in the English department in the 1970s and returned in 2003 as the first Maxine and Jonathan Marshall Chair in Modern and Contemporary Poetry. "We started doing Renaissance and Shakespearean studies, and the department was on the move. It was extremely exciting because we were able to recruit some of the best students in the country."

Today, the Department of English educates, trains and supports more than 2,500 students and includes experts in everything from English to health humanities, young adult literature to Shakespeare, classical rhetoric to video game studies.

Its faculty list includes Pulitzer Prize winners, MacArthur Fellows, National Book Award finalists, Guggenheim Fellows and members of the British Academy and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Learn more

[Community Conversations: A Look Inside Virginia G. Piper Writers House](#)

Join Grady Gammage Jr., community leader; Alberto Ríos, director of the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing; Evan Senat, associate operations coordinator; and Shannon Walker, university archivist, for a conversation offering an inside look at the history and ongoing impact of this beloved ASU landmark.

“What’s that saying? Game recognizes game,” said Ayanna Thompson, a Regents Professor of English and the executive director of the [Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies](#). “I was excited when I joined the faculty in 2004, but it’s like we have a lineup of heavy hitters now. We’re pretty much firing on all cylinders. The sky’s the limit.”

Imagine what the “cavalry” would think of the department now.

“We’ve been evolving rapidly for the last 125 years, and we’re going to keep doing that,” Powell said. “I think we are going to emerge 10 years from now as even more of a national presence. We are enormously productive, we have enormously gifted teachers, and I think that’s going to keep becoming more and more apparent.

“So I’m really excited to see what happens.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



The Old Main building in 1901 on ASU's Tempe campus, which was called the Normal School then. It was the first home of the Department of English, and students became known as the “cavalry” because they rode their horses to campus. ASU archives

Gallery



A 1901 Normal School of Arizona class portrait taken in front of Old Main on the Tempe campus.



The Normal School Library inside of Old Main in 1907.



In 1950, the Department of English moved from its lodgings in Old Main to the Science Building next door, which is now called the University Club (shown above in the 1950s).



In 1958, Robert Frost visited the Department of English, meeting with classes and delivering a lecture. Harry Wood, a faculty member in the art department, displayed his portrait of Frost during a luncheon.



Poet Rita Dove was on the creative writing faculty at ASU from 1981 to 1989. Dove won the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 and served as the poet laureate of the U.S. from 1993–1995; she received an honorary degree from ASU during the spring 1995 commencement.



Faculty gather in the main office of the former Language and Literature Building in the 1990s, where the Department of English was once housed.



The exterior of the Language and Literature building in 2014. The building was renovated and renamed Durham Hall in 2021.



The Department of English moved from the Language and Literature building after 50 years of residing there to the newly remodeled Ross-Blakley Hall across campus in 2017. The new digs included an open study area, shown above.



Ross-Blakley Hall, the current home of the Department of English at ASU, on ASU's Tempe campus.