1. **English Literature: Wider Reading Ideas**

If you’re thinking of applying for an English Literature degree, one of the key things you’ll be talking about in your personal statement is the books you’ve read. While it’s good to discuss the books you’ve studied in class, it’s even more important to show that you’re enthusiastic and keen to take initiative by reading around the subject.

First and foremost you should try to follow your interests. If there’s a particular author whose work you admire, try and find out whether they’ve written anything else – for example, if you enjoyed Thomas Hardy’s Tess of the D’Urbervilles, you could read Far from the Madding Crowd or a selection of Hardy’s poetry. If you’re more interested in the themes the author tackles, look for books which have similar subject matter – if, for example, you liked Virginia Woolf’s presentation of women and mental illness in Mrs Dalloway, you could go on to read Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wallpaper. Obviously, you don’t have to just stick to the sorts of books you’d cover in class, but it’s always good to read a few, as the ‘classics’ had a huge influence on later writers.

Another thing to take into account when reading for an English degree is the breadth of literature you’re covering. Tutors will be impressed if you’re ambitious so it’s good to show that you’ve read a mixture of poetry, prose and drama. They also like it if you can demonstrate that you’ve read books from the nineteenth century and earlier, as this proves that you’re really willing to stretch yourself. Here are some good places to start:

***1.Beowulf* (c. 700-1000) – Anonymous**

This epic poem was originally written in Old English (a language which you may have the option to study as part of your university course) but Seamus Heaney has written an up-to-date translation. Full of feasts, gory battles, warriors and monsters, it’s one of the original inspirations for the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

**2. *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387-1400) – Geoffrey Chaucer**

*The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories in verse told by a fictional group of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury Cathedral – you can dip in and out of as many or as few as you like. Chaucer was the original master of the unreliable narrator: T*he Canterbury Tales* is as much about the pilgrims’ personalities as it is about the stories they tell. From the risqué ‘Miller’s Tale’ to the pious ‘Tale of Melibee’, there is something for everyone here.

**3. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (c. 1595-6) – William Shakespeare**

Shakespeare is a must-read for any English student! A *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a more unusual choice than *Hamlet or Macbeth*, and more to the point it’s one of his shortest and most accessible works.

. If you enjoy it, you can compare your initial impressions of the text to one of the many adaptations on stage or screen

**4. *Emma* (1815) – Jane Austen**

Though *Emma* is less famous than *Pride and Prejudice*, many critics believe it’s Jane Austen’s best work. You might be familiar with the plot from the Gwyneth Paltrow movie adaptation or the 1995 film *Clueless*: it’s about the ‘handsome, clever, and rich’ Emma Woodhouse who decides to play matchmaker for her friends, though she’s convinced she’ll never get married herself.

**5. *Mary Barton* (1848) – Elizabeth Gaskell**

It’s not as well-known as Mrs Gaskell’s other great work, *North and South*, but *Mary Barton* is still a brilliant, exciting (and relatively short) Victorian novel.

It’s a book with a huge social conscience, which confronts the reader with the challenges faced by the working classes of nineteenth-century industrial Manchester. There are deaths, disappearances, sea journeys and false accusations, as well as a romantic central love story.

**6. *A Doll’s House* (1879) – Henrik Ibsen**

Henrik Ibsen was a Norwegian playwright whose works caused a stir across Europe. Though not all English courses require you to study literature in translation, it can be good to show that you have an appreciation of it nevertheless.

*A Doll’s House* tells the story of Nora Helmer, a housewife who feels trapped in her marriage to the manipulative Torvald. If you enjoy it, you can go on to read Ibsen’s disturbing follow-up, *Ghosts*.

**7. *Selected Poems* (c. 1917-8) – Wilfred Owen**

Wilfred Owen is considered by many critics to be the greatest poet of the First World War and his work still resonates today. Since 2018 is the last centenary year of ‘the war to end all wars’, what better time to give it a go? If you’re not sure where to begin, some of his best-regarded poems include ‘Disabled’, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ and ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’.

**8. *The Bell Jar* (1963) – Sylvia Plath**

Though published over fifty years ago, this semi-autobiographical novel is still incredibly relevant today thanks to its frank depictions of mental illness and life as a woman in a restrictive society. Simply but effectively written, it tells the story of a young woman, Esther Greenwood, who suffers a breakdown while on an internship in New York and is forced to work out what she really wants from life.

**9.*The World’s Wife* (1999) – Carol Ann Duffy**

Sometimes sad, sometimes funny, and always highly readable, this poetry collection plays with our preconceptions of famous women from literature. Highlights include ‘Little Red-Cap’, ‘Anne Hathaway’, ‘Mrs Darwin’ and ‘Pygmalion’s Bride’.

**10. *The Kite Runner* (2003) – Khaled Hosseini**

*The Kite Runner* is an example of postcolonial literature; it’s a novel which deals with the devastating legacy left by empire. It tells a gut-wrenchingly powerful story from the perspective of an Afghan boy, Amir, who flees the country during the Soviet military intervention but must eventually return to seek redemption.

1. **Classic American Fiction: Wider Reading Ideas**

Reading some American fiction will help you with A Level Literature Paper 2: ***American Literature 1880-1940.*** You will need to have a really good grasp of the key themes and ideas explored in many American texts - the more you read, the more confident you will be when you come to the course.

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne: ***The Scarlet Letter (1850)***​
2. Herman Melville*:****Moby Dick (1851)***​
3. Harriet Beecher Stowe*:****Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852)***
4. Louisa May Alcott  ***Little Women (1868)***​
5. Henry James: ***The Portrait of a Lady (1881)***​/***The Turn of the Screw*** (1898)
6. Stephen Crane ***The Red Badge of Courage (1895)***​
7. Kate Chopin ***The Awakening (1899)***​
8. Charlotte Perkins Gilman ***The Yellow Wallpaper(1892)***​
9. Theodore Dreiser: **Sister Carrie (1900)**​
10. Jack London*:****The Call of the Wild (1903)***​
11. Upton Sinclair: ***The Jungle (1906)***​
12. Edith Wharton:***The Age of Innocence (1920)/ House of Mirth (1905)/Ethan Frome  (1911)***​
13. Willa Cather: ***My Ántonia (1918)***​
14. Ernest Hemingway: ***A Farewell to Arms (1929)/ The Sun Also Rises(1926)***​
15. F Scott Fitzgerald**: *Tender is the Night (1934)***​
16. Margaret Mitchell ***Gone with the Wind (1936)***​
17. Zora Neale Hurston**: *Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937)***​
18. John Steinbeck:***The Grapes of Wrath (1939)***​
19. Carson McCullers ***The Heart is a Lonely Hunter (1940)***​
20. **Reading About Fiction: Wider reading Ideas**

As well as reading fiction, you might want to start reading some books about fiction and literary theory and criticism.

***Beginning Theory*** Peter Barry (MUP, 1995)

***Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*** Jonathan Culler (OUP, 2011)

***How to Read and Why*** Harold Bloom (Simon and Schuster,

2001)

***The Art of Fiction*** David Lodge (Secker and Warburg, 1992)

***A Glossary of Literary Terms*** M H Abrams (Cengage, 2014)