

College offers you many academic freedoms. You can cultivate existing passions and explore new interests—all the while figuring out which major will eventually help you earn a living.

Whatever major you choose, don't pick what's easiest—or what your best friend is studying—because you'll only be cheating yourself out of some great opportunities!

And college is, after all, about opportunities.

The Princeton Review's Top 10 Majors follow. Be warned, however, that these are not necessarily the degrees that garner the most demand in the job market. More importantly, they don't lock you into a set career path. Each major offers unique intellectual challenges and develops skill sets that will be applicable to various careers.

1. Business Administration and Management/Commerce

Think you're a born leader? You'll need stellar people skills—no room for wallflowers here—and talents in problem solving, number crunching, and decision making. And don't forget great communication skills! While studying business, you'll get a thorough grounding in the theories and principles of accounting, finance, marketing, economics, statistics, and human resources functions. You will be a whiz on how to budget, organize, plan, hire, direct, control, and manage various kinds of organizations—from entrepreneurial-type start-ups to multi-million-dollar corporations. This major will also get you thinking about issues such as diversity, ethics, politics, and other dynamics that play a role in every work environment. Make sure those competitive juices are flowing; the business world is all, well, business.

2. Psychology

If you find yourself delving into why certain people react to certain aspects of their environments in a certain way, then studying psychology will help you learn about the biology of our brains. Psychology majors focus on such features of the human mind as learning, cognition, intelligence, motivation, emotion, perception, personality, mental disorders, and the ways in which our individual preferences are inherited from our parents or shaped by our environment. Within the field, psychologists seek to educate, communicate, and resolve many of the problems surrounding human behavior.

3. Nursing

Compassionate individuals with a great mind for the intricate—and sometimes heartbreaking—world of medicine will be well-suited for a nursing career. In the course of evaluating, diagnosing, and treating health problems there is also the chance to work with ever-evolving and ultra-sophisticated technology. Nursing majors take the traditional science and liberal arts courses as a first-year student and begin clinical rotations at hospitals and other health care facilities during the second semester of their sophomore year. Certification exams are required after graduation from an accredited nursing program before you can be officially registered. And the job prospects for nurses are not only plentiful but also varied, available in fields such as geriatrics, neurology, oncology, obstetrics, and pediatrics.

4. Biology/Biological Sciences

From microscopic organisms to cloning procedures, biology encompasses pretty much the whole world. Biology majors can study human, plants, animals, and the environments in which they live, and studies are conducted at the cellular level, the ecosystem level, or anywhere in between. You might find yourself looking to uncover secrets and for ways to solve problems, such as finding a cure for a disease. Biology majors might find themselves in med school or in one of many growing fields such as genetics and biotechnology or working as a veterinarian, optometrist, ecologist, or environmentalist.

5. Education

Patience. Creativity. Dedication. Enthusiasm. Compassion. Education majors tend to have an abundance of all of these traits. In this major, you'll learn the skills necessary to become an effective and inspirational teacher with the ability to influence young children and teenagers when they are most impressionable. Although much of the coursework will be general education material, most states require you to choose a specific grade level you'd like to teach. When you are done with coursework, you'll find yourself in the classroom as a student teacher. This practicum lasts from one semester to a full academic year.

6. English Language and Literature

If you find yourself generally immersed in some book—anything from Shakespeare to Hemingway to Jack Kerouac—you will likely find others just like you in the English department studying the trochaic octameter of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," the stunning word choices of narrative nonfiction author Annie Dillard, or the experimental elements of the writings of Walter Abish. English programs focus on literature, language, and writing, and an English major will encounter a wide array of absorbing works of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction from around the world and throughout history. Analyzing the works of the greatest minds and imaginations that human civilization has produced will surely sharpen your critical, emotional, creative, and moral faculties. The study of literature also helps to shed some light on the answers to the enduring questions of the human condition. This degree is tremendous preparation for a future in law, journalism, publishing, graduate studies, and just about anything else.

7. Economics

Economics is the study of choices—those of individuals, businesses, governments, and societies and how they choose to spend their time and money and otherwise allocate their resources. And you guessed it: Economics involves heavy doses of critical thinking and math. This study of the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services is an indispensable tool for making sense of the intricacies of the modern world. It is also an excellent preparation for a future in business, as well as for graduate studies in law, public policy, and international studies.

8. Communications Studies/Speech Communication and Rhetoric

Communications majors tend to be great storytellers with quick wits and fiery personalities. You'll spend a significant amount of time scrutinizing different kinds of presentations—such as speeches and scripts—and the strategies behind the messages that speakers and writers use to make their points. You'll learn about verbal and nonverbal messages, audience reaction, and the varied effects of different communication environments. It will prepare you for a wealth of careers in business, advertising, human resources, public relations, government, education, media, and social services.

9. Political Science and Government

Because it often deals with current events and sophisticated statistical analysis, political science is timely, fascinating, and perpetually changing. In a nutshell, it's the study of politics of government, and some of the common concentrations are American government, public policy, foreign affairs, political philosophy, and comparative government. Political science majors develop excellent critical thinking and communication skills, and more broadly, an understanding of history and culture. There will be lots of reading, writing, and math. Possible career paths are diverse—from lawyer to politician to journalist.

10. Computer and Information Sciences

Not only will you learn more about computers—hardware and software—but you'll also learn about the applications of such knowledge, such as how technology fits into a business scenario. You'll be exposed to areas such as robotics, natural language recognition programs, artificial intelligence, programming languages, numerical analysis, and gaming technology. Problem solving is a major component of CIS, no matter which segment of the industry you want to pursue.

There are two reasons to choose a major: to prepare for a specific field or job, or to immerse yourself in a subject that fascinates you.

Some students choose a major because it will prepare them for a specific career path. Career-focused majors include engineering, business, education or nursing. If you are committed to a vocation, majoring in it will give you specific, practical skills that will be directly applicable to your post-graduation career.

Other students choose a major simply because they love the subject matter. If you choose this path, you may pursue a career that has little to do with what you studied in college. That doesn't mean you'll graduate without skills, however. For example, most history majors don't become historians, but they do graduate with critical thinking and writing abilities that are highly valued by employers.

Here are some ideas on how to start your search for the right major:

Forget high school. College is a whole new ball game. Subjects you hated as a high school student might turn out to be completely different in a new educational setting. In other words, don't automatically

rule anything out, even if you don't think it's for you. Give everything at least a small chance. You never know.

Make the most of the general education courses you're required to take. Don't just pick whatever's easiest; choose ones that appeal to you, even if they are upper-level courses. You don't yet know what will really compel you. Have your radar on for clues that might be pointing you in new directions.

Talk to your advisors. They know what it takes to tackle certain academic disciplines. Tell them your strengths and your interests. They'll be able to highlight courses that might excite you as well as classes that are popular with other students. A great class on nihilism may be the thing that gets you to declare a philosophy major.

Check the syllabus. What are the assignments? The books? The requirements? Does the material seem compelling to you? If you start nodding off while reading the course catalogue, perhaps it's best to cross that field off your list.

Ask upperclassmen. They are the real experts at your college, and they have faced the daunting task of declaring a major themselves. Older students can tell you the questions they considered and how they went about finding the answers.

Engage professionals in fields you find interesting. Ask them exactly what their jobs entail and how their careers do (or don't) relate to their majors. Learning about the paths others took to get where they are is often valuable and enlightening, and even more often, surprising.

The bottom line is that your major does not determine your life. You should choose a subject that interests you and that has some connection to the post-collegiate life you want to build for yourself. But keep the decision in perspective; you can always change careers or go back to school.

Assignment:

Write a short paper where you explore the area you might like to major in, and why. Be sure to include ideas about careers your major could lead to, like the passages above do, and to discuss your own interests and how they connect with what you think you would like to emphasize in your studies. If you are not settled, then explore several possibilities and talk about the things in your life and experience that are possible pathways to a college major. Allow yourself time (several good sized paragraphs, at least) to record your thinking on the subject. This paper should serve as a chance to put your thoughts into words as you process the possibilities.

GOOD WRITING REMINDER: Good writing is clear and focused and includes detailed explanations of your thoughts along with specific examples to illustrate your meaning. For example—if making money is an important reason that you choose to be a business major, then talk about what kind of job, exactly, you think you might get and why, exactly, it is important for you to make a particular salary. All of your feelings and ideas are valid, but writing well about them involves exploring specifics—please do!