

Thomas Deaton, B.A. English Professional Writing, 2019

By Joseph Shoulders

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“It wasn’t until much later in my program that I was more fully engaged with the English department, but it was never too late to start. I encourage students from their first year to their fourth year to seek out opportunities to present and receive feedback on their work.”



Thomas Deaton graduated from Western Kentucky University in 2019 with a concentration in Professional Writing and a minor in Environmental Studies and Sustainability. Deaton is currently finishing his MA in Public Management at Johns Hopkins University, and in his free time, he is a freelance photographer and designer.

Deaton was drawn to WKU as a 4th generation student, and he decided to attend for the competitive environment of the [Mahurin Honors College](#) (MHC). Because of his interests in rhetoric and policy, Deaton majored in English to study language and common cultural threads. “When I started thinking about how I could apply my own personal interests into the program, it was a perfect fit,” Deaton said. “Professional Writing was an ideal concentration for sharpening my editing skills with the practical aspect of a largely project-based curriculum, particularly toward the end of my program.”

While at WKU, Deaton took advantage of many opportunities. He was a student assistant for MHC external relations and worked in event planning and design. He also served as a [Spirit Master](#) and as the organization’s parliamentarian and public relations chairperson. One of Deaton’s most impactful experiences was taking a Semester at Sea in 2016, from which he developed a 122-page coffee-table book of stories and photographs into his honors capstone project.

His roles in Spirit Masters sparked Deaton’s interest in protocol, and he decided he wanted to intern in a federal agency office. At the time, WKU had a Diplomat in Residence, who helped Deaton decide on an opportunity. In the summer of 2018, Deaton interned with the Major Events and Conferences Staff in the Office of the Chief

of Protocol in the US Department of State. He helped plan and execute credentialing, press arrangements, and ministerial-level events. Deaton connected the experience to his studies and said, “Much like rhetoric, protocol is a valuable skill set that can be applied just as easily to create and convey meaning in a small conference room as it can at the White House. The considerations needed for engaging with cultures other than your own at that level help demonstrate the attention to detail you can apply effectively in almost every aspect of the workplace.”

Deaton credits many experiences in the English Department to his development. He said the “most ideal courses for students interested in public affairs” were courses with Dr. Jeffrey Rice that focused on rhetoric and language. In these classes, students studied techniques and applied them in projects. “After two or three of those courses, one can see how easy it becomes to use rhetoric across almost any piece he or she will write, from an email to a grad school capstone paper,” said Deaton.

Deaton was also influenced by the teachings of Dr. Wes Berry and Dr. Angela Jones. They allowed him to incorporate his personal passions into coursework and showed him possibilities to do so in careers. Additionally, Dr. Berry encouraged Deaton to submit one of his papers to the [Undergraduate Conference on Literature, Language, and Culture](#), which gave Deaton experience presenting his academic work, and Dr. Jones taught him how to correctly use the memo format, which Deaton says was “one of [his] most practical takeaways” from college.

In his last two years at WKU, Deaton decided that he wanted to get a master’s degree to transition him into a role in civil service in a government agency. He chose his program at Johns Hopkins for its flexibility. Deaton recently completed [his capstone thesis](#), a 40-page memo on NASA’s “Artemis” mission, and he will graduate in August 2021.

“This program has allowed me to study policy and politics in a number of disciplines, from the nonprofit world to economics, while still sharpening my writing and analytical skills through my elective courses,” Deaton said. He explained how his undergraduate experiences prepared him for graduate school. He said, “Having a strong understanding of how to write well has been very helpful at effectively communicating my arguments. Additionally, the research required in many of my undergrad literature courses has helped me in finding and analyzing source material.”

