

THINKING AHEAD ABOUT A MAJOR

There is no need to choose a major at the outset of your college education; let the decision grow from your academic experiences. Careful planning, however, will allow you to keep more options open. A few general principles may help as you think ahead about choosing a major.

- In most of the humanities and social sciences, you may choose from a number of paths by which to progress from elementary to advanced study. These majors usually require several introductory courses that you may take in either your first or sophomore year and in a variety of sequences.
- In some other fields of study, such as the biological and physical sciences, engineering, and foreign languages and literatures, you need to follow a sequence of courses from your first year to senior year. Introductory courses are prerequisites for intermediate courses, and so on. Students who are thinking about a major in one of these disciplines should lay the groundwork in their first year. It may be difficult to begin a major in these subjects in the sophomore year unless you undertake study during the summer.
- To attain the maximum range and freedom of options for the upper-level years, you should think about probable major areas before arriving at college. If you are considering a major in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics) field, your work during the first year should lay the foundations for it. Normally, this means taking one or more courses in mathematics along with courses in the natural sciences. Students in the biological sciences should plan to complete the general chemistry requirement or begin organic chemistry during their first year and, if appropriate, begin course work in biology. Students in the physical sciences and in engineering should pursue course work in mathematics or physics, or both.
- Many of the courses open to first-year students will build on work begun in secondary school. You will probably want to choose some courses in areas in which you already have an interest and experience, but for the sake of intellectual stimulation and to avoid being unduly limited in your range of future choices, you should also elect some courses in fields that are new to you.
- Relax. Many students are overly anxious about selecting a major as soon as possible, or about picking the “right” major for their future goals. In reality, many students change their minds multiple times before selecting their eventual major. Moreover, as many career advisers will tell you, the selection of a college major—especially in the liberal arts tradition—rarely has a direct correlation to career choice. It is far more important to pursue a field of study that interests you and helps you to develop lifelong skills of analysis, critical thinking, communication, and independent research. These are the skills that employers and graduate schools seek, and evidence of success in a chosen field of study is often more important than the selection of a particular major.

What you ultimately derive from four years of study at Yale depends in large measure on thoughtful reflection and planning. It would be impossible, and surely imprudent, for you to map out at the beginning of your studies a firm schedule of courses for the next eight terms. Yet it is important for you to think ahead and plan as you keep in mind the principles outlined here.