During his sabbatical, Dr. Bryan visited Battle Abbey, site of the 1066 Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest that transformed Old English and introduced the Anglo-Norman tradition. Dr. Bryan covers these key developments in his History of the English Language course.

Literature Professor Explores How Authorship Has Evolved from Medieval Times to the Age of AI

In Spring 2025, Dr. Eric Bryan, professor of English, stepped out of the classroom and into the British Library for a sabbatical devoted to exploring how medieval writers understood authorship. His research focuses on how early communication technologies—such as handwritten manuscripts and the printing press—shaped perceptions of authorship, and what those historical shifts can teach us as writing evolves in a digital world.

Understanding Sabbaticals in Academia

The word sabbatical comes from sabbath, meaning a period of rest or pause. Outside academia, sabbaticals are sometimes seen as long vacations, but Bryan is quick to clarify that misconception. “It’s not a vacation. It’s a time to focus on research and hopefully do some writing and publishing during that time period. You step away from teaching and committee work so you can rest a bit and dedicate yourself to big projects.”

Applying for Sabbatical Opportunities at Missouri S&T

Faculty members at Missouri S&T are eligible for a sabbatical once every seven years. A sabbatical can be a semester-long leave at full pay or a year-long at half pay. Once eligible, professors submit a proposal that explains how the project contributes to the university’s mission. The selection process is competitive. Bryan explained that, for him, the process “was about sharing what I’m curious about and convincing people that it’s worthwhile.”

Exploring the Evolution of Authorship

His proposal centered on authorship and "how medieval writers thought of what it meant to be an author and how that compares to today's understanding of authorship." Furthermore, he sought to examine how authorship has been redefined through major shifts in communication over the ages. These major shifts include oral storytelling, handwritten manuscripts, the printing press, the rise of digital communications, and now the rise of artificial intelligence.

To study these ideas, Bryan needed access to manuscripts that offered insights into the perspectives of medieval authors. The British Library's unparalleled collection of medieval works provided that opportunity, leading him to request time in London, as part of his proposal.

A ransomware cyberattack on the British Library in 2023 made his proposal stand out even more. The British Library refused to pay the ransom and many scanned manuscripts were unavailable while the library was rebuilding its database. As a result, these manuscripts could only be studied in person. "I joked that it was the easiest grant [proposal] I ever wrote [for a sabbatical application]," Bryan said. "The only way to access those resources was to physically go there."

Researching Medieval Manuscripts in London

Bryan spent about three weeks in London. He has three children at home, which makes it difficult to be gone for long periods of time. During that time, he had the experience of working with centuries-old manuscripts made of vellum.

"Vellum is an old word for skin, usually cow, calf, or sometimes sheep," he explained. "It feels different from paper. If you look closely and run your fingers across it, you can detect the hair follicles where the fur once was on the animal." He added, "There were all these small portraits of authors. They call them illuminations. They are like illustrations in modern terms. Several showed the author sitting at a desk and writing. They are truly works of art. Incredible to see. Really wonderful stuff."

Exploring British History Firsthand

When he wasn't in the British Library, peering over manuscripts or pondering the concept of authorship, Bryan explored sites that tie to his areas of interest and the classes he teaches. A highlight of the three-week trip was his chance to visit Battle, England. "It's called Battle because it's where the Battle of Hastings took place, and that's something that I teach in my classes," he explained. While on the Battle Abbey grounds, he recorded documentary-style footage that he plans to edit into a 10- to 15-minute video for his students. "It's probably a little dorky," he laughed, "but it was special. My students will watch the video in class as we talk about the battle."

While in London, Dr. Bryan took a break from his research in the British Library to visit the "Making of Harry Potter" experience at the Warner Bros. Studio Tour. He snapped this selfie in front of Ollivanders Wand Shop. He has aspirations of being a wizard one day.

Insights on Authorship in the Age of AI

Bryan views authorship as "an essential question for humanity," especially in a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, including large language models and tools like ChatGPT. "We think of authors as people who write books, and obviously that's true. But we're authors when we write an email, when we send a text, and when we post something on Facebook. To change that [through AI], in an increasingly textualized world, has a deep and lasting impact on who we are as human beings."

He noted that conversations about AI tend to focus on the final product. "When we think about artificial intelligence and generative artificial intelligence, we think about what the product is. Does it look like something that a human would write? And that's a fair question in terms of productivity, but I think the question that we really need to be asking is how it affects the author more than how it affects the reader."

"Part of being an author is establishing a relationship with the reader, and we've gradually lost that through the course of technological advances. If we think of authorship in terms of relationship rather than production, we can retain much of our humanity as we go into this age of artificial intelligence." His study of medieval manuscripts shows that authorship has always been shaped by technology, and understanding these historical perspectives can help us navigate authorship in the digital age.

The project is still ongoing and doesn't offer any firm conclusions yet, but Bryan sees this as a historic moment. "Two hundred, five hundred, a thousand years from now, people are going to look back and say, 'that's when it all changed.' If we can preserve the fundamental humanness of who we are during this shift, then that's a good thing."

Sharing Knowledge Back on Campus

Since his return to Missouri S&T, Bryan has begun to weave his sabbatical insights and videos into his teaching for the upcoming year. His classes on Tolkien & Lewis and the History and Structure of the English Language all touch on authorship and its changing role in society.

His sabbatical research is still in various stages of publication, with plans for several articles and, after further study, a book. Readers who are interested in his previous work can learn more at academia.edu. Bryan also encourages students to explore the evolution of authorship further by taking one of his classes.

How the Heartland Inspires Coonrod's Teaching and Research

Dr. Josh Coonrod, assistant teaching professor, engages with students in SP&M S 1185 Principle of Speech.

When Dr. Joshua Coonrod walks into a classroom at Missouri S&T, he has more than a lesson plan. He brings a curiosity about how people communicate, a love of writing that began in his hometown of Rolla, and an interest in research for horror films that stretches from low-budget festivals in Indiana to broader cultural debates about the Midwest itself.

Now in his second year as an assistant teaching professor of English and technical communication, Coonrod teaches a range of courses, including composition, public speaking, and occasionally horror l

literature and film. He sees each course as an opportunity to encourage and show students how to think critically, not just about the subject at hand, but about the broader questions underlying it.

"The main thing I want students to take away is to be contemplative," Coonrod says. "Whether it's a speech, a research paper, or even a horror movie,