The Poets & Writers Guide to MFA Programs

Revised and updated for 2025, this essential guide from the authoritative source provides everything you need to know about applying to graduate creative writing programs, including advice to consider before you apply, the benefits that MFA programs can offer, and tips for the writing life after you graduate.

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Poets&Writers Guide to MFA

Programs

First Things First

Ten Points to Consider Before Applying

Do some financial planning. Funding might not be your top priority, but it should be part of your planning. Make sure you'll have enough money to live on, at least somewhat comfortably, while you're a student. If a program doesn't offer full funding, look into jobs on campus, work-study opportunities, travel and research stipends, and other monetary resources the program might offer. And, not least, understand the long-term costs of student loans—and interest rates.

Size matters. What's more attractive to you: an intimate environment with a small group of peers whose work (and personalities and social proclivities) you'll get to know closely, or a larger cohort and workshop environment where you'll get to know and work with many writers (and perhaps have slightly more anonymity)?

Read books by faculty. Don't pick a program just because you recognize the names of the faculty. Know their work, too. You'll want to find not just a mentor, but someone whose writing style, sensibilities, and aesthetics resonate with your own. So if you haven't already done so, make sure to read the work of the faculty with whom you're interested in studying. Once you've narrowed your top programs, ask an administrator if the teachers you want to work with will be on sabbatical during your residency. And ask around: Is that amazing author a generous teacher? Look online for any proof that the critically acclaimed writer is also a caring professor.

Decide whether you want to teach. Does the program require teaching undergraduate courses, or offer opportunities to teach outside of funding requirements? If so, what will your course load and time commitment be? Don't forget about the time spent outside class reading, grading, and prepping. Do you want your writing to be your primary focus in an MFA program? If so, make sure you have time for it.

Location is important. If you choose to attend a full-residency program, you'll probably be spending the next two or three years in a new place. Would you prefer to live in a big city or a small town? Somewhere warm or cold? Near the coast or in the mountains? Consider the resources most important to your life outside of the classroom—socially, culturally, environmentally, gastronomically, or otherwise.

Review your residency options. Maybe you want to earn an MFA while keeping your job and maintaining your current life and location, taking only a week or two out of your busy schedule to attend workshop. Depending on your

career or family situation, you may want to consider a low-residency program.

Explore the curriculum. Is the program focused on the workshop model? Does it offer courses in craft, theory, or literature? What about genre fiction, or cross-genre study? You may have a traditional or more experimental focus in your work—make sure the program you choose accommodates your interests.

Consider extracurriculars. Do you want to work on the staff of a literary magazine? Are you interested in leading workshops in prisons or community centers? Does the program have a regular reading series? What about student groups, campus organizations, or volunteer opportunities? Think about what will help make your time in the program more dynamic and fulfilling, and make sure those opportunities are offered.

Talk to current and former students. Do some research and ask students as well as alumni about their experiences at the programs you're considering. Ask your friends and followers on social media and try to connect with poets and writers who are in those programs. Ask them about the faculty, the local community, the social scene, the rental market—anything and everything that matters to you.

Visit the campus. If your dream program is nearby, drop in for a visit. If it's across the country, perhaps wait until you've been accepted, then sit in on a workshop before deciding. Take a stroll around campus. Visit the library, gym, or graduate student center to get a feel for the space. Set up meetings with faculty and administrators. If you can, go out to a reading or drinks with current students. Programs often include such opportunities on prospective students' days. So take advantage of them. Ask questions, and don't be shy. This way you'll get to know a lot more about a program and a school, including its community, politics, diversity, and atmosphere, than you ever could from a website.

Decisions, Decisions

Which MFA Program Is Right for You?

By Miciah Bay Gault

YOU'RE a writer, and you've decided to get your MFA. This choice will center writing in your life, give you a unique opportunity to develop your craft, and equip you with a degree for teaching or further education. I love this for you. Congratulations on making the first of many MFA-related choices. But there are scores of programs out there, each offering a distinct education. How do you decide where to apply?

My own MFA came from the three-year fully funded program at Syracuse University. For a long time I couldn't imagine a better MFA experience than the one I had. Since graduating I've directed a full-residency, partially funded MFA program, and I currently teach in the low-residency MFA in Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts. I've come to realize that the MFA decision depends on considerations individual to you. Here are a few topics to think about as you seek out MFA programs that will serve you best.

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Consider Cost

Finances are a limiting factor for many writers, and I'm sensitive to equity issues that accompany pricey tuition bills. Fully funded programs include tuition remission and a stipend, often linked to teaching assignments. In the creative writing program at the University of Virginia, for instance, tuition is covered, and students receive fellowship support and teaching wages totaling up to $36,000 for the first two years and $28,800 for the third year. At Cornell University the current stipend is $47,548. Though many young writers crave a fellowship with no teaching strings attached, the teaching work can be an education in and of itself and a valuable aspect of fully funded programs. To finish your MFA with no debt *and* a résumé of teaching experience is a real gift.

"My feeling is that you don't pay for an MFA," writer Daniel Torday tells his students. "I'm not all that prescriptive a teacher, but I do have definite ideas on this one." Torday is a novelist, a professor of creative writing at Bryn Mawr College, and my former classmate from Syracuse. A fully funded program is "honestly more like a fellowship, support from the Medicis," he says, referring to the wealthy Medici family, patrons who funded artists during the Italian Renaissance.

I agree with my friend, in part. A fully funded program is a great option if you're able to pick up and move, which might mean quitting your job and relocating (or leaving) your family. A lot of young students just graduating from college have this flexibility, but not all MFA students do.

Fully funded programs are also highly selective. Syracuse, for example, receives between four hundred fifty and six hundred fifty applicants for its fiction program each year, competing for six slots. This means that in some years Syracuse accepts only 1 percent of fiction applicants. The Helen Zell Writers' Program at the University of Michigan accepts eighteen writers from among roughly eight hundred applicants. The University of Virginia and Cornell each accept only four fiction writers and four poets yearly.

Because in many fully funded MFA programs, a fixed, small number of students are admitted annually, you'll be competing for those slots with every other applicant in the pool. Most MFA admissions committees—often composed of faculty and program staff—weigh the writing sample more heavily than other parts of the application packet, and the rubric each program uses is individual and variable: Imagine one admissions committee emphasizing innovation

and experimentation, another placing more value on sentence-level writing. Admissions decisions are in no way arbitrary, but they are subjective, and in highly selective programs they're also constrained by incoming class size. Promising writers are turned down simply because there's not room. To apply only to fully funded programs might mean not being accepted to any of the programs on your list—though you can certainly apply year after year.

There's a whole world of MFA programs that offer partial funding; for example, many offer full-tuition scholarships (with or without stipend) to only a few select students, or offer several smaller scholarships to help defray tuition costs. Partially funded MFA programs like the ones at Portland State University in Oregon or Columbia University in New York City often admit larger incoming classes. The MFA program at New York University, for instance, accepts twenty to thirty students in each of three genres.

Admission to low-residency MFA programs often still requires clearing a high bar—your application will need to show that you're a talented, teachable writer who will positively contribute to the MFA community—but because the teaching model in low-residency programs often allows for greater flexibility in deciding incoming class size, you're not competing against every writer in the applicant pool.

Educational Model and Pedagogy

After considering cost, ask how you learn best. MFA programs have various teaching models on the macro level and different curricular expectations and workshop norms on the micro level.

The low-residency model of MFA programs like Vermont College of Fine Arts, where I teach, Warren Wilson College in North Carolina, Bennington College in Vermont, and many others espouse a John Dewey–inspired experiential model of learning in which students send monthly packets of creative and critical work to their faculty advisers and receive detailed feedback throughout the semester. Rather than attending classes, you live like a working writer, meeting deadlines, crafting your own reading lists, and fitting writing into your daily life. The relationship between student and faculty adviser is a true mentorship, and for some writers this one-on-one focus and attention is ideal for processing craft lessons and increasing that butt-in-chair writing time. Low-residency programs usually include intense, seven- to ten-day in-person residencies once or twice a year—"writer camp," our students sometimes call it—and low-residency students often support one another throughout the semester via Zoom meetings or chatty Slack channel conversations online, but some writers might crave the day-to-day classroom community of a full-residency MFA program.

Even within similar educational models, there are differences in curriculum that are worth checking out. Consider whether a two-year or three-year program is best for you. Find out what courses are required. Will you be taking literature seminars in addition to your workshops? If teaching is an expectation of the program, will you take classes on pedagogy? Does the program offer instruction in navigating the world of publishing, or is the emphasis solely on developing your art? How many credits will you be expected to take each semester? Some writers thrive on a busy schedule; some need extensive unscheduled time for dreaming and drafting.

These are all questions you can ask admissions staff, but your best source of information is an alumnus or a current student of the program, who can tell you about their lived experience. Reach out to recent grads at conferences like the one put on by the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) and on social media. In some cases MFA program staff will connect you with current students so you can talk about a program's curriculum, plus that hard-to-define but crucial aspect of your decision-making: program culture.

Culture Check

Program culture is about how people treat one another and the shared values—explicit or implicit—of the program. If I were looking for an MFA program today, I might ask: Is there a concerted commitment to anti-racist principles in workshop, and what does that look like? How do students socialize? Is there a sense of collaboration or competition in the program?

Rita Banerjee, the director of Warren Wilson College's MFA Program for Writers, agrees that "each MFA program has its own personality"; for instance, "some have a reverence for status and hierarchy." Warren Wilson, Banerjee says, fosters a more "egalitarian environment." Try to suss out a program's attitude toward hierarchy. Ask if there's a culture of aesthetic inclusiveness in the program. In other words, if your writing draws on science fiction, fantasy, romance, horror, or other genre traditions, you'll want to avoid programs that eschew genre in favor of a more conservative literary tradition. Some programs maintain a laser focus on craft, while others also offer guidance

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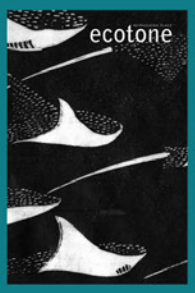

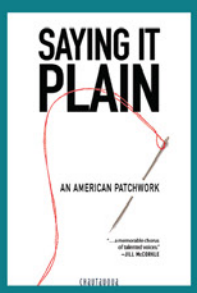

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regarding careers and how to navigate the publishing world postgraduation, and this difference is both curricular and cultural. Which philosophy aligns best with your needs?

Prestige and Faculty Affinity

Certain MFA programs are particularly well respected, and for good reason. Some have been around a long time (the Iowa Writers' Workshop was founded in 1936); some have illustrious faculty; many have simply established a track record of excellence, and their graduates are big voices in the literary conversation. Some of the most prestigious programs also have the most money—which means their applicant pools are huge, and they get their pick of rising literary stars.

But listen: You'll also get a great education at a less prestigious school. Young MFA programs can be full of generous, energetic faculty and fresh pedagogy. And the calculus of prestige is more complex than some would lead you to believe. You don't get a big book deal because you attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop. It's your talent and hard work that gets you the book deal—though the MFA from Iowa might help your agent get editors buzzing about you before your manuscript even hits their desks.

Rather than focusing solely on prestige, think about which faculty members you'd most like to work with. Sometimes the best place to learn from certain beloved writers is on the page, if you want to avoid the disillusionment that can accompany meeting your literary heroes. But a lot of writers are bighearted—and even famous writers might crave the same nerdy craft conversation you do. I'll always be grateful for my time at Syracuse with George Saunders, who is even smarter and more generous in person than he is on the page. But I also learned that a good MFA education is the sum result of insight and instruction from multiple faculty members, not only the ones you already admire. Some of the best teachers aren't (yet) famous. And it's dangerous to worship your teachers too much. The writer Alexander Chee advises his undergraduate students "not to apply if getting in will be the best thing that's ever happened to their writing career. It makes the program, the teachers, and their fellow students there too powerful. They need to feel they belong to themselves, that they can get a difficult critique and not be destroyed by it, because they know their work is powerful on its own, even if it isn't doing all it can yet."

TEACHING in an MFA program is one of the great joys of my life, and I feel proud of my students every day for their commitment, their openness to revelation and insight, and the ways in which they balance so many things—full-time jobs, kids, partners, friends, and health—while still making time for writing. I'm grateful that, with so many choices available, they landed with us. It feels like the best kind of luck. Daniel Torday previously advised his students to "look to the programs that align with the writing life you want to live." With more than 240 MFA programs to choose from, that's easier said than done. On the other hand, how wonderful to have so many options. There's no one type of writer, so there's no one type of MFA program. Start by articulating the writing life you want to live. Then research, apply widely, and, as you wait for acceptances, be open to luck, to the possibilities of happenstance.

MFA Advice

Points to Consider While Applying

By Luis Jaramillo

AS THE former director of a graduate writing program, I've fielded my share of questions about going to school to study the craft of writing. Usually when people ask me if they should apply to an MFA program, I say, "Don't." It's not that I want to be discouraging; my aim in saying this so bluntly is to make it clear that an MFA is not the only way to grow as a writer. Going to graduate school costs time and money. Even if you've been accepted into a fully funded program, you may have to move or give up a stable job to attend. Writing requires you to spend a lot of time alone, taking you away from work and leisure and friends and family. There are alternatives to MFAs that require fewer resources—joining a writers group or writing work space, taking a workshop or master class, hiring a coach—and let's not forget that to be a writer, it's not necessary to hold a graduate degree.

But if someone is asking me about graduate school, they've already decided to put writing at the center of their lives, a decision that I always applaud, and earning an MFA can be a great way to do this. Certainly there are real pluses to being in an MFA program, finding community being at the top of this list. I'm still friends with people from my first MFA workshop, and decades later we continue to show our work to each other, we share publishing opportunities with each other, and we cheer each other on. An MFA program can also speed up the process of learning how to read like a writer, can help you produce significant amounts of new work and become comfortable with incorporating feedback into revisions. MFA programs may offer opportunities to teach and to connect with the publishing and nonprofit literary arts worlds, along with many other program-specific opportunities.

If you choose to apply to an MFA program, clarifying for yourself who you are as a writer and what you want from a particular program will help you craft an application that not only shows the admission committee—usually a rotating group of faculty members—who you are, but will help you take charge of your own education.

Most MFA applications require a statement of purpose, a writing portfolio, letters of recommendation, transcripts, and sometimes GRE test scores. Deadlines for MFA applications are typically in the winter, so you'll want to begin assembling application materials in the fall. The most important parts of the application are the statement of purpose and the writing portfolio.

The statement of purpose is also a writing sample, an important one, that tells the committee how deeply you've thought about your writing and about the program you're applying to. There's no need to get fancy with your tone, style, or structure. You don't have a lot of space, so aim for clarity above all. Use the first person as you describe the things you know to be true about your writing—basic things, like what you're working on. Discuss the content as well as the form of the work, mentioning the themes or subject matters that are meaningful to you, along with any political reasons for writing the work. Briefly discuss your journey to this point in your writing life. I've read the applications of many lawyers, bartenders, dancers, scientists, and college seniors, and it's always interesting to see how their previous pursuits influence their writing. Write about how you see your writing developing over the course of the program, and then finish your essay with a mention of your other professional aspirations, those having

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to do with teaching, publishing, and working in the publishing world, especially as they relate to the program you hope to attend.

For the portfolio, which typically consists of a writing sample of 10 to 30 pages, depending on genre, select the work that best represents the kind of writing you want to continue working on in graduate school. Faculty typically play an important role in reviewing an application, and when they read they consider what it might be like to have the applicant in their classroom. Is the applicant a writer whose work they want to nurture? When I read applications I'm not looking for any particular aesthetic or style; in fact I'm hoping to create a diverse workshop made up of people with different voices, from different professional backgrounds, from places around the U.S. and the world, and with different ethnicities, races, ages, and genders. It's exciting to have everyone writing wildly dissimilar work. We're able to learn more from one another when more experiences and talents are in the room. Faculty read applications with the expectation that people are applying to MFA programs because they want to become better writers, so we're looking for potential as much as we're looking for polished work. That said, have someone proofread your portfolio, and be honest with yourself about the work you're submitting. Is it engaging? One recent application stands out in a bad way—in a twenty-five-page novel excerpt, there wasn't a single scene. Not good!

In letters of recommendation, I want to read that the referrer finds the applicant's work compelling and that the applicant has the ability and desire to work hard and contribute to a community. If you're still in an undergraduate program or a few years out, you could ask your writing teachers to submit letters. But what if you studied something other than writing? What if you're decades past being an undergrad? Then you'll want to find people who can write about the qualities listed above—this reference may be someone who teaches a continuing education class you've attended, or perhaps someone in your writing group.

Test scores and grades can have a bearing on scholarships, but they are rarely a deciding factor for admission. In my experience, academic performance alone tends to not be a great predictor of long-term success. Sometimes people who have consistently received good grades need to unlearn some habits, like perfectionism, or writing with the aim to please. If your program does want you to submit academic credentials, know that GRE scores are reported ten to fifteen days after you take the test, which is offered year-round, so plan accordingly to meet your deadline. Transcripts will also need to be requested from your alma mater and can take weeks to be processed; again, plan accordingly, and be prepared to pay a fee for both the GRE and for transcripts.

It's tempting to think that in the writing life there's a ladder of success, with well-defined rungs that ascend in a logical progression. That's simply not the case. There's no one way to write and no one way to live the life of the writer. The sooner you can take an active part in the creative process of "writing" your life, making choices that reflect your values as a person and a writer, the happier and more productive you'll be. Use the application process to help you start your MFA before you've even been admitted into a program.

How to Write the Personal Essay for MFA Applications

By René Steinke

EDIT your writing sample for the thousandth time, then put it away and remember why you are a writer. Recall that Lorrie Moore line "First, try to be something, anything, else." Write about why that advice hasn't worked for you.

While you're at work, consider why you write. Why are you composing a poem about ants when you should be filling out a spreadsheet? How did you design the fork in the plot of your short story while also memorizing a six-top's drink orders? What will you make of this absurd, ungrammatical memo from your boss when you have time to write your memoir?

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When you told your accountant uncle that you wanted to devote the next two years to writing, and he said, "But no one buys books anymore!" what did you say?

You buy too many books, or you bring huge stacks back from the library. Some of these you don't finish. Others you throw across the room. But occasionally you read sentences you wish you had written. Other times as you read, you want to believe the words were written only for you. Write about this secret life of reading. Name the writers you'd place in your literary family tree. Who would be your mother? Who would be your second cousin?

Consider what you've learned so far about writing and how you learned it. List some of the things you'd still like to learn. List the reasons you want to study with other writers. Reflect on how to write a list in a way that charms or compels.

Ask yourself "Who is going to read this essay anyway?" Does the reader remind you of a famous author who, after you told him maybe too loudly how much you admire his work, stared at you blankly? Does the reader remind you of the person evaluating your insurance claim, looking for holes in the argument? Whoever they are, these are not your readers.

Here is a prompt: How do you feel when you hear someone say: "I've never written anything and don't have time to read, but one day I'm going to write a best-seller."

Consider pretending that writing has never been a struggle for you or that it arrives wholly perfect from the god of writing in the sky. Then tell yourself that if this were true, you wouldn't bother with an MFA. Remember the week you were too exhausted to write more than one sentence. Recall the hours you spent on a brilliant, original essay only to find out later it made no sense. What about that night you were supposed to go to a party but instead sat down at your desk because you felt the flush of a new story? What did your best friend say to you that made you want to keep writing? How did you manage to write that poem, each word maybe exactly right? Whoever is reading this essay knows that having two years to devote to writing is a dream, but why is it *your* dream? Tell your reader all of this in your application essay. Take a nap. Pet your dog. Write the essay again.

A Distinguished Degree

Eight Elements of Unique MFA Programs

By Dana Isokawa

WHEN the first graduate creative writing program was established in 1936—the renowned Iowa Writers' Workshop—the recipe was straightforward: small, focused workshops and literature seminars in poetry and fiction. Nearly ninety years later, more than two hundred forty full- and low-residency MFA programs populate the literary landscape and offer a diverse array of opportunities, genres, and pedagogical approaches. Schools now afford students the chance to try on the many hats of a writer—researcher, editor, teacher, activist, curator—and study in environments increasingly tailored to their aesthetic concerns and interests. The following are unique elements that help a handful of MFA programs stand out in a crowded field.

Social Justice

The low-residency program at Antioch University (antioch.edu/academics/creative-writing-communication/creative-writing-mfa) in Los Angeles focuses on social justice and on developing both the craft and social consciousness of its students. Under the guidance of the core faculty, all students are required to design and complete a field study in their local community, whether it be volunteering once a week to help teach creative writing to pregnant teens and teen parents, teaching writing to inmates at a prison, or managing and writing a publicity campaign in Atlanta for jazz musicians displaced after Hurricane Katrina.

In New York City, the full-residency program at the Pratt Institute (pratt.edu/liberal-arts-and-sciences/writing/writing-mfa) encourages students to probe the cultural and political dimensions of writing. Pratt's curriculum includes seminars that cover topics such as writing and social practice. Furthermore, students conduct a fieldwork residency with a community organization; the program maintains an alliance of local groups willing to work with students. Previous fieldwork sites include a circus and theater troupe, a horticultural therapy program for incarcerated people, and a feminist collective.

Multigenre Degrees

While the majority of programs grant separate degrees in two or three genres, Western Washington University's full-residency program (chss.wwu.edu/english/mfa-creative-writing) in Bellingham requires all students to study at least two genres. Many faculty members specialize in multiple genres and in hybrid forms—their combined publication record runs the gamut from lyrical short fiction to prose poems to collaborative short fiction.

Genre Bending

Not all programs stick to strict genre distinctions, but instead encourage—or even require—students to blur the lines. The full-residency program at Brown University (literaryarts.brown.edu/graduate) in Providence, is one such example, with a digital and cross-disciplinary track in addition to concentrations in poetry and fiction. Digital and cross-disciplinary students integrate writing with music, visual art, or performance art.

With an illustrious past as the brain-child of poets Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University (naropa.edu/academics/schools-centers/jack-kerouac-school-of-disembodied-poetics/) in Boulder, Colorado, continues to push against convention with an open-genre curriculum and its championing of radical, experimental work. With both a low- and full-residency track, the program requires students to take interdisciplinary seminars and classes in poetics, urging students to investigate, as former Naropa faculty member Bhanu Kapil describes it, "the borderland spaces of genre."

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Community Lens

While open to writers of all backgrounds, the low-res program at the Institute of American Indian Arts (iaia.edu/explore-programs/creative-writing-mfa) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is dedicated to advancing Native American arts and cultures. Approximately 75 percent of the faculty members are Native American or First Nations authors, including Brandon Hobson and Tommy Orange. In consultation with faculty mentors, students compile individual reading lists where, in 2015, at least 25 percent of the books must be by Indigenous North American writers.

Situated on the Mexican-American border, the University of Texas in El Paso (utep.edu/liberalarts/creative-writing) has the first fully bilingual MFA in the United States. All courses are in both English and Spanish: Class discussions, workshops, and writing move fluidly between the two languages. While not all students enter the program bilingual, the program reports that most emerge proficient in both languages.

Editorial Training

At many MFA programs, students can sharpen their editorial chops by working on a literary journal—but at the University of Baltimore's full-residency program (ubalt.edu/schools-and-colleges/yale-gordon-college-of-arts-and-sciences/academics/explore-all-programs/mfa-creative-writing-and-publishing-arts), students receive a more extended apprenticeship in the art of publishing. Students not only write a thesis, but they also design and produce the thesis as a finished book. Courses are offered in design and type, book arts, and print and digital publishing.

At the University of North Carolina in Wilmington (uncw.edu/academics/majors-programs/chssa/creative-writing-mfa), students of the full-residency program can intern, study, and work at the university's Publishing Laboratory, founded in 2000. At the so-called Pub Lab, located in its own separate space with built-out publishing equipment, students learn the ropes of publishing a book or literary journal from start to finish. Students learn both the business management and marketing sides of publishing.

SCHOOLS NOW AFFORD STUDENTS THE CHANCE TO TRY ON THE MANY HATS OF A WRITER—RESEARCHER, EDITOR, TEACHER, ACTIVIST, CURATOR.

International Emphasis

Students at the full-res program housed at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas (unlv.edu/degree/mfa-creative-writing) typically spend at least one semester abroad in a non-English-speaking country, either on independent study or enrolled at a university. The program adheres to the belief that great writing goes beyond self-expression, and instead comes from a larger understanding of the world. Students also have the option of completing their MFA while serving in the Peace Corps.

Environmental Focus

The full-res program at Iowa State University (engl.iastate.edu/graduate-students/mfa-program-in-creative-writing-and-environment) in Ames adopts a more environmental perspective on the MFA, sending its students out—sometimes literally—into the field. As part of the program's thesis requirement, all students complete fieldwork with an organization related to the environment. In the past, students have traveled as far as Spain to research medicinal plants and Zimbabwe to collect data about farmworkers. To complete their degree, students also take several environmental courses.

Translation Degrees

A select few programs offer full degrees in translation, including the full-residency program at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville (fulbright.uark.edu/departments/english/graduate/mfa-in-creative-writing) where students emerge with experience in poetry, fiction, or literary translation; Queens College in New York (qc.cuny.edu/ga/lcd-post-bacc-adv-certi-english-language-teaching) also offers an advanced certificate in English language teaching; and the international low-residency program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier (vcfa.edu/programs/mfa-in-writing). The full-residency program at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (utrgv.edu/creative-writing/mfa-creative-writing/index.htm) in Edinburg and Brownsville offers a degree in translation between Spanish and English among other languages.

Online MFA Programs

The Hidden Benefits of the No-Residency Option

By Kali White VanBaale

WHEN the COVID-19 outbreak spread across the United States in spring 2020, forcing colleges and universities to move online for the remainder of the semester, it was business as usual for my students who take fully online creative writing courses at Lindenwood University. As I read social media posts from professors and students alike struggling with online learning formats and questioning how or why anyone would want to attend a no-residency program, I started thinking more deeply about online MFA students in general and what personal reasons informed their decisions to pursue the degree online.

According to the MFA Programs database at pw.org, there are currently more than two hundred forty MFA programs in creative writing in the United States, with more than one hundred eighty full-residency programs, more than fifty low-residency programs, and thirteen online programs at nonprofit accredited institutions. I spent some time chatting with several current MFA students and recent graduates across multiple online programs, along with a few program directors, asking questions and getting to know what factors helped inform students' decisions. Many of the answers I expected, but several surprised me.

TRADITIONALLY, MFA programs took an ivory tower approach," says Gillian Parrish, associate professor at Lindenwood University's MFA program, which offers online and hybrid options based out of Saint Charles, Missouri. "But for a healthy society, writing must not be only for people with more financial means and leisure time. Necessary stories and vital voices go unheard if we are not making spaces for working adults to cultivate their talent as writers."

Perhaps not surprising, students commonly cite flexibility and affordability as primary reasons for choosing an online MFA program. The cost of a two-year full-residency MFA program can vary widely. According to figures compiled by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2017, tuition at that time was anywhere from $27,000 to $125,000—depending on whether the program was housed in a public or private university and if the student qualified for resident or nonresident tuition—on top of the cost of books, other university fees, moving expenses, and cost of living. Two-year low-residency programs charged between $30,000 and $45,000, along with the cost of books, residency room and board, travel expenses, and other program fees. (Of the 158 full-residency programs that were included in the 2019 MFA Index, which was published in these pages in 2018, 65 offered full tuition support for some students, and 93 offered partial tuition support ranging from fellowships to a handful of small scholarships frequently subsidized through teaching assistantships. A few low-residency programs awarded one or two full tuition fellowships a year, but most offered only a handful of modest scholarships.) Average tuition for a no-residency online program, according to data pulled directly from the programs' websites, was roughly $20,000 to $45,000, not including

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books, but of course online programs do not require moving, residency, or travel expenses.

Cost was certainly a factor for former Lindenwood MFA student Angelia Megahan. When she started out in the Lindenwood program, in January 2019, Megahan was forty-seven years old, married, and homeschooling her seventeen-year-old son while also helping care for her college-age daughter, who had a serious health crisis two years earlier. She'd previously earned an English degree at Tougaloo College in Mississippi and later a law degree at the University of Texas School of Law, both in traditional on-campus programs, but when she started researching MFA programs, she concluded a no-residency option would work best for not only herself, but also her entire family. Having settled fifteen years earlier in the Dallas suburb of Grand Prairie, where her husband was working a full-time job in the oil and gas industry, she found relocation out of the question, and even a low-residency program wasn't a viable option. She ultimately chose Lindenwood for the price ($1,485 per class, $495 per credit hour at the time), but also because the online option allowed her to work on her own time and, for the most part, at her own pace. "I have been pleasantly surprised at the seamlessness of the online experience," Megahan says.

All online MFA programs use some form of a learning management system, Canvas or Blackboard among the most popular, that serves as a virtual "campus" of sorts for students to log in to and access their individual classes, course syllabi and rubrics, grades, messages, and student chat groups. Using these learning platforms, which can also support synchronous video conferencing, the instructor designs a self-contained virtual environment. Each of these "classrooms" contains weekly "modules" with important course announcements, reading and writing assignments for the week, and discussion spaces or threads, where students and instructor interact and discuss assigned literature readings or workshop assignments through written responses or posts. Students must meet due dates and minimum discussion post requirements throughout the week, but the asynchronous design allows some degree of flexibility for students to complete those assignments and compose new creative work on their personal schedules.

"MFA PROGRAMS with rigorous online offerings open up possibilities for people whose lives are rooted in their jobs and families," says Parrish. "And these are roots that feed great writing; MFA writers who are working adults draw on deep life experiences for their stories. These students are well-read writers who bring real-world insights to a community of all ages and backgrounds—such a rich learning environment for refining our writing."

Leanna James Blackwell, former director of the Bay Path University MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing program in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, has a similar core philosophy: "Respect for each writer's individual journey." Students at Bay Path range in age from their twenties to their sixties and beyond, from recent graduates to midcareer professionals with families, but whatever their background, students benefit from the flexibility of the program. Their common denominator is a passion for writing and a desire to tell powerful stories drawn from lived experience. "Within the highly interactive online classroom, students learn to give respectful, supportive feedback in a confidential space," Blackwell said in an interview on the Bay Path website. "Although they live in locations across the country, students form deep connections and friendships that last beyond graduation. Bay Path's electives allow students to learn about a wide array of creative nonfiction disciplines beyond literary nonfiction, including writing about travel and food, spirituality, women's stories, nature and the environment, health and wellness, and culture and identity."

Tony Sedgwick, a 2020 graduate of the program, lives on a ranch in Nogales, Arizona, where he has been involved with communities on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border. "My writing mission," he says, "is to amplify the voices of the people who live on borders and whose lives are affected by politicians' rhetoric." Living in this region and within these communities while studying for his MFA was deeply important to him, and the online option allowed him to do both.

Marissa Eller received her MFA through online coursework from Lindenwood in March 2020, and she signed with Westwood Creative Artists literary agency. After completing her undergraduate degree in English at the University of North Carolina in Pembroke, around the time she was diagnosed with a chronic illness she had battled for some time, she moved back to her hometown of Hickory, North Carolina, and wasn't interested in moving away again. "I knew myself well enough to know that being close to home was crucial to my success, so I looked into low-residency and fully online programs," Eller says.

She was twenty-one when she enrolled in Lindenwood in fall 2018, and the online option allowed her to manage her illness while completing her master's coursework. She was also able to continue her part-time job at a local community college as a tutor in the writing center, where she helped run the peer tutoring program, a job that left time to work on assignments and creative writing between helping students.

Even though she was attracted to a format that accommodated her illness and her job, a rigorous and competitive MFA program was still important to her. She was particularly interested in one that offered a variety of challenging literature courses and a creative thesis requirement—and regular writing workshops where her work would be evaluated by an instructor and her peers. "Lindenwood admits students based exclusively on their writing sample and statement of purpose," she says. "That's what I wanted. If I was going to take a chance on myself, I wanted my writing to be the only leg I had to stand on."

As with any decision that involves a financial investment, prospective students should do their homework and thoroughly research each program—the application and degree requirements—and be aware of for-profit and accreditation statuses. Like all college and university programs, the rigor and reputation of online MFA programs can vary. Students should look for robust curricula with a healthy mixture of workshops, literature classes, and courses that require both creative and academic writing.

When Darlene P. Campos enrolled in the online MFA program at the University of Texas in El Paso (UTEP) in 2013, she was twenty-one. As a recent graduate, she was working three part-time jobs to make ends meet. After researching full-residency and a few low-residency programs, she decided that attending an online program would allow her to continue her established work schedule without adjusting her hours and income while also completing her graduate coursework on her own time—between shifts and on breaks. Campos admits it wasn't an easy work-school schedule, but the affordability of the UTEP online program, combined with the ability to stay near her family, made the pursuit of an MFA possible. And during her final year at UTEP, she earned a generous scholarship from her program that fully covered her expenses, allowing her to quit one of her part-time jobs and free up more time to focus on her thesis.

Another factor in her decision to attend UTEP's online program was its diverse community of both faculty and students. Campos completed her BA in English with a creative writing concentration at the University of Houston, where she had "classmates, professors, and coworkers from many different backgrounds," she says. She wanted to attend a grad school program with a similarly diverse demographic.

"Diversity of opinions, perspectives, and voices matter when your voice is an 'other,'" says Angelia Megahan, the former Lindenwood student. After attending a law school where only a handful of her fellow classmates were people of color, and the majority of her law professors were white and male, a diverse community was especially important for her.

In fall 2021, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that degree-granting postsecondary institutions enrolled 9.5 million full-time and 5.9 million part-time undergraduate students. Of the 15.4 million undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2019, some 7.8 million were white, 3.3 million were Hispanic, 1.9 million were Black, 1.1 million were Asian, 700,000 were of two or more races, and 100,000 were Native American/Alaska Native. By removing the geographic limitations of a required residency, significant barriers to access are lifted for many students, and a diverse student body is a natural result—something I've personally witnessed while teaching in a no-residency MFA program.

In addition to diversity in students and faculty, online MFA students were attracted to variety in classes. Lindenwood and the University of New Orleans (UNO) online MFA programs allow students to declare a track—fiction, nonfiction, or poetry—and to take classes in nontraditional genres outside of their declared track as electives that historically aren't offered at many full- and low-residency programs. Lindenwood also offers courses in publishing, genre fiction, and young adult fiction, while UNO encourages students to experiment with numerous styles they have offered in the past in classes like "Drama as a Genre," "The Novel of Sensibility and the Gothic," and "Scriptwriting Workshop." The University of Houston in Victoria online MFA program offers electives such as "Legal Environment of Publishing and Contracts," "Genre Studies," and "Studies in Latino Literature." Boston's Emerson College online MFA in Popular Fiction Writing and Publishing is designed for writers particularly interested in a variety of genres not traditionally considered in the MFA world, like fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, thriller, and young adult fiction. The University

of Arkansas in Monticello has offered electives like "Magazine Editing and Design" and "The Simple Art of Murder," and Southern New Hampshire University offers additional courses on the business and technical sides of professional writing, navigating the publishing ecosystem of both traditional and self-publishing, and teaching writing in a classroom setting.

A number of students reported that they were already teaching in community colleges but desired a terminal MFA degree to possibly move on to teaching at a four-year college or university. The online option allowed them to continue in their teaching position and build valuable experience while also completing coursework. Bay Path additionally offers a teaching track alongside its writing courses. The online program at the University of Arkansas in Monticello offers eligible students the chance to do a graduate assistantship to offset tuition costs and gain higher-education teaching experience. Selected students teach online sections of first-year writing courses.

It is important to note that Megahan, Eller, and Campos acknowledge a big drawback of no-residency programs: Each mentioned that they missed face-to-face interactions with classmates and instructors and the chance to network in-person by attending program-sponsored events. Despite those disadvantages, by and large I found that students who chose an online program wanted to deepen their writing skills while further enriching the full professional and personal life they'd already built where they were currently living. I've worked with students who had newborn babies or older parents to care for, students teaching and living abroad, students working as teachers, librarians, and active-duty military, and even students with farms and livestock to tend, and the online option is what made it possible for them to pursue an MFA. "Part of what thrills me most about mentoring our MFA writers," Lindenwood's Parrish says, "is helping these talented people foster meta-creativity—habits of integrating writing into our busy days. We write in the midst of living."

Starting Out in an MFA Program?

Ten Tips for Getting the Most Out of It

By Susan Jackson Rodgers

I HAVE taught fiction writing for over three decades and served as program director of two graduate programs—the MA program in creative writing and literature at Kansas State University and the MFA program in creative writing at Oregon State University. Students often ask, "Can I *do* this? Do I have what it takes?" While I can't predict anybody's future writing success, I've found that students who thrive in what one of my grad school pals called "MFA School" embrace some common practices and habits.

First, **stay focused on why you are in school**. Presumably you want to write, read, study other writers, grow as an artist and a person, and become a part of the larger community of writers and readers. If you're lucky you'll make some lifelong friends. Write down your own list of MFA School objectives and pin it above your desk as a reminder.

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The second point seems obvious, but it's key. **Do your work.** You will be asked to read things you won't love and to write outside your comfort zone. Do the reading and the optional readings, too. Reread. Annotate. Mark up the margins. *Close reading is your best teacher.* If an assigned reading isn't your thing, try asking yourself, "What can I learn *about writing* from this writer?"

If you have more serious concerns about a reading assignment, talk to your instructor. Classes in MFA School are, or should be, a two-way street, a conversation, a working through the texts together. If you're a survivor of trauma, some readings or authors may cause you particular emotional or psychological distress. Only you and your support team can decide on the role that art will play in your recovery. Again, discuss your concerns with your instructor, and be open to taking on an alternative assignment.

Here it's worth pointing out the importance of researching the faculty before you apply to a program. These are the people who will directly influence your reading and writing for the next two to three years. Choose mentors with aesthetics, sensibilities, and worldviews that will inform this stage of your career—which doesn't necessarily mean they mirror your own. MFA program websites often include not just instructor bios, but also teaching philosophy statements, sample course descriptions and syllabi and curricula vitae (academic-speak for résumés). Read interviews with faculty members online, read their work, and do your best to identify a good match. Ideally your program will include more than one writer you're eager to learn from, as professors often take leave in the form of sabbaticals and fellowships; placing all your eggs in one writer-basket can be risky.

Be a good workshop citizen. Workshop is a whole *thing*, and every instructor has different expectations and philosophies around what makes an effective workshop. But here are some guidelines that generally apply to traditional as well as innovative workshop formats.

Know the workshop paradox: You will learn more from other people's workshops than from your own. This is a good thing. Assiduously and attentively reading the work-in-progress of writers who are at your level teaches you, over time, how to read your own work as if it were someone else's, a crucial skill for revising and editing.

Read the work of your fellow students with care, compassion, and respect. The quickest way to fall out of favor—and waste workshop time—is to read carelessly and critique indiscriminately. Meet the work on its own terms, rather than imposing your vision on it. Read drafts at *least* twice, marking up the manuscript with comments, questions, and suggestions (unless your instructor asks you to proceed otherwise).

Exercise self-awareness. If you're a talker, be mindful of dominating the conversation. If you're naturally reticent, practice speaking up.

Beware of groupthink. There's always one whip-smart workshop member

whose eloquence can persuade everyone else that they hold the key to a piece. An especially trenchant comment can create a pile-on—now that the group has been enlightened, everyone will repeat this brilliant insight, over and over. No matter that your own reading, in the quiet of your own company, may have elicited a very different response. But it's your responsibility, to the writer and the workshop at large, to offer your perspective. If for some reason you can't do it during discussion, speak to the writer after class. If the reason you kept quiet has to do with how the instructor is (or isn't) managing discussion dynamics, consider speaking to them—or to the program director or department head, if there are larger issues.

When your own work is workshopped… There is so much to say on this topic. But the main thing to know is, you're going to find your readers—those who *get* you and your work but still hold you to a high standard—and you need to pay attention to them. Separate your (maybe fragile) writer self from your (maybe more resilient) editor self. Take notes and listen. Don't reject what you don't agree with out of hand, but also don't assume everyone is right and you are wrong. A student once came to my office with a spreadsheet of every single comment he'd received in workshop. He was having difficulty, he said, trying to incorporate *all the things* into his story. Don't ever try to do this! Writing is collaborative, but stories and poems and essays are not written by committee. After your workshop, allow some buffer time—a few days, a week, a month. Then go back to the work and decide what *you* want it to be. Use feedback that is helpful to this end, and gently put the rest aside.

Say yes to as many opportunities as you reasonably can. Attend the readings sponsored by your program. They are put on, in large part, for you, and they are a crucial part of your education, as well as a bonding experience with your cohort and faculty. Read a sample of the author's work ahead of time. If the work resonates and you can afford to buy a book, have it signed and chat with the writer after the reading.

Time and health permitting, engage in extracurriculars. Form a reading group with students in other genres, or grad students in other programs. Find groups on campus who share your interests or believe in your causes. Avail yourself of internship opportunities, especially those that might aid in your post-MFA search for employment.

If, after the first semester, you realize you've taken on too much, adjust your schedule and your responsibilities accordingly. Accept that you won't ever find a true balance.

Aim for a consistent writing practice. Here's the thing: You will not be writing for hours every day, blissfully, serenely, passionately, effortlessly producing pages of lucid and profound prose or poetry or screenplays or plays. No one in your program will be doing this. Or, to paraphrase Anne Lamott, one student in your program may do this, but no one will like that person very much.

My spin class instructor tells us to "find a cycling speed you can maintain—something that's challenging but doable." Find a writing "speed" you can maintain, something challenging but doable. Don't disdain the fifteen- to thirty-minute writing session. That's the writing session you will always have time for, no matter how busy you are. Set aside fifteen minutes at least five days a week. Mark it on your calendar. Some days you'll find an additional hour, or three, or more. It all adds up, and a regular writing practice beats binge-writing to a deadline every time. You're not an undergraduate, pulling all-nighters. That's amateur hour. You're an apprentice writer, training to be a professional writer. There are no workshop deadlines in the real world. So start putting in the time now. Keep track of your writing sessions on a calendar or in a journal. A written record will keep you honest and on a steady course. Make a list of your writing goals every few weeks, and post it next to your list of MFA School objectives.

As others have said, touch the work every day. On days when you're truly swamped, set the timer for five minutes and reread a bit of the draft you're working on, to keep it active in your mind. Ideas, images, phrases, entire lines will arise as you move through your daily routine. Jot these down, and when you arrive at your next writing session, transcribe these bits into your draft. This practice will help to vanquish the blank page.

And while it's important to discover and respect your own rhythms, consider writing first thing in the morning. In a 2008 interview in *Bookslut*, fiction writer Chris Adrian said this about his time at Iowa: "You could tell who had got their writing done early in the morning, because they were in consistently better moods throughout the day." Fifteen minutes in the morning is an amulet you carry in your pocket for the rest of the day. It will help protect you from the demons.

The next tip will happen in the natural course of things, but it's worth pointing out.

Get to know at least one faculty member well. Not just because we are

(we hope) an essential part of your MFA School experience, but postgraduation we will write you letters of recommendation for jobs, agents, fellowships, and/or more grad school.

Pick your battles. Once the initial excitement has worn off and you've settled into your new life, you and your cohort—all writers with considerable critical and analytical skills—might fall into the habit of scrutinizing every perceived flaw in your program, curriculum, faculty, teaching assignment, workshop, special event, and even one another. But if you get too caught up in this scrutiny, you will jeopardize your own creative health, as well as the health of your community. Take occasional stock of where you're placing your attention, to ensure that you're getting what you came for.

Please note: I'm not talking about the big stuff here. Students can, and should, call out the deeply embedded and troubling problems that exist in institutions of higher learning and offer suggestions, if they are so moved. (And faculty and administrators need to listen, as students are crucial allies in the work that we need to do.) I'm referring here to the potentially corrosive nature of the writer's favorite pastime: pick, pick, pick. I'm saying, pick your battles, and protect your artist soul.

Be prepared for the financial reality. Only a small percentage of programs offer "full funding," and even then we're usually talking about a tuition waiver plus a subsistence wage. (Universities count on the cheap labor of graduate students to teach lower-level writing, math, and science classes. Unfortunate but true.) You've received and signed a contract, so you know the situation ahead of time. All the more reason to choose your program carefully.

The upside is, assuming your school has a decent pedagogy program, you'll be equipped with the skills and knowledge to *teach*. You'll be supported so that you can write and read, and talk about writing and reading, for the next two or three years. Maybe it's not the best-paying gig in the world, but…it's

a pretty great gig.

If you feel at any point that the terms of your contract are violated, contact your supervisor, program director, department chair, or, if applicable, union representative, but start with your supervisor. Misunderstandings and other human errors can often be quickly cleared up.

Familiarize yourself with your university's resources. Read around the program and school website, and bookmark important pages for easy reference. Your MFA site should include a student handbook, which outlines policies, procedures, and degree requirements. Locate as well the course catalog, schedule of classes, and the faculty/staff directory for your department. Treat the department office staff with respect and courtesy. Not only do they deserve it, but they'll be a vital source of information for your paychecks, teaching schedules, and more. Graduate teaching or research assistants should check out the human resources site for FAQs on contracts and leave policies. If you're at a large university, the graduate school or graduate program is likely its own entity and provides a range of academic, instructional, career, housing, and personal services, as well as services for international students.

For students of color and LGBTQ students: The world of academia progresses at a glacial pace. There is, without a doubt, a lot of work left to do. Faculty and administrators have the power and responsibility to make a program a safe and respectful place for students of color and LGBTQ folks to grow and thrive as writers. It is our responsibility, not yours, to effect change. If, however, you find yourself in need of support, most if not all universities have offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion, multicultural affairs, and other resources. Look into your school's resources, and before classes start, or better yet before you accept a spot in a program, ask the program director or a faculty member you've been in touch with to connect you with students so you can inquire about the culture and climate

of the department, university, and wider community you're about to join. (There is much more to consider on this subject that is outside the scope of this article.)

Finally, **take care of your mental and physical health.** Getting enough sleep, exercise, and proper nutrition, as well as managing stress, is more important than ever as you face the challenges of graduate school. Note the hours and services of your campus's student clinic and counseling services. If you're on your school's health insurance plan, review the coverage and ask questions. What kind of mental health services are available? Will your insurance cover counseling, therapy, medications? Know what's available before you suffer a crisis or need help managing stress.

SO LET'S recap. Stay focused on your MFA School goals, work hard, strive to be a good workshop citizen, and find a regular writing routine that works for you (but try writing in the morning). Seek out opportunities, inside and outside of your academic department. Get acquainted with the faculty and your university's resources, and ask questions if you're not finding what you need. Know the financial burden you might be taking on, pick your battles, and take care of your physical and mental health.

Time is short, and yet it's inevitable that you'll waste some of it. That's okay. The MFA isn't the end of your education as a writer; it's the springboard for the rest of your writing life. Whether you're entering your top-choice, high-flying program or your last-ditch-effort safety school, there's not much correlation between eventual success and where, or even whether, you get this degree. The truth is, of the more than three thousand people who graduate with an MFA every year, only a small number continue to write. One way to ensure you're among them is to cultivate good habits while you're in school, and know that the work itself is always—in fact, must be—its own reward.

Making the Most of Writing Workshops

By Camille T. Dungy

WHAT can workshop participants do to create an open, equitable, encouraging, and positively challenging workshop experience for themselves? Our time in writing communities is important. The past few years have made that abundantly clear. If we have the opportunity to work together (in person or virtually), we should be conscientious about how to best use that precious time. Here are some of my tips on how to do this:

Have fun! Prepare to enjoy the experience of your workshop. Search for moments of joy, grace, and humor in the conversation. Let these buoy you through the more challenging parts. Ask your fellow writers where *they* find moments of joy, beauty, humor, gratitude, pleasure in your work. Too often we focus on the difficult and painful, on the parts that "could use some work" or that cause frustration. Help yourself and your cohort communicate pleasure as frequently—perhaps even more frequently—as you communicate pain. I watched *The Tragedy of Macbeth* starring Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand. Tragedy is in the title. It's not supposed to be a barrel of laughs. But sometimes I found myself smiling or laughing out loud. Shakespeare is great at that kind of emotional layering, and the film added texture to the play's tonal and sensual variations. What a joy it was—and how instructive—to look for joy even in one of the canon's darkest texts. Find ways to have fun. Notice your own pleasure and the pleasure of others, and you will be well on your way to becoming a stronger, more compassionate writer, critic, and human being.

If your workshop experience will surround you with new faces, don't be nervous about saying hi to people—even the famous writers—and don't be afraid to ask questions. We are all humans. All of us, even the famous writers, have moments of staring at the blank page, not knowing what to do next. The workshop environment is a space to help people who value this craft. If we've chosen to devote our time to such an experience, it's highly likely that we are invested in this fundamental project. Be nice. Initiate conversations. Get books signed by the writers you admire. People are sometimes too afraid to ask a question that feels elemental, and they risk missing the opportunity to hear the guidance they most need. Remember: Every piece we write requires new approaches to those elemental questions. In a workshop environment you have an opportunity to crowdsource solutions that might take you years to discover on your own. If a question pops into your head and you think *that's too simple*, ask it anyway: "What do you mean when you say these line breaks are working well?" "Can you give an example of what you mean by cliché?" "Why am I the only person turning in poems that are centered on the page?" You may be surprised

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at how exciting the seemingly simple questions can be to explore.

Push past the small talk and into the nitty gritty. Workshops are intimate spaces where we come to better understand the ways others think and feel. Not just what they think and feel, but also why they think this way and how you have (or have not yet) constructed your piece to bring them to this place. So if someone says, "I think this line is great. Don't lose it," follow up. Say thank you, then ask why they think this and what is happening inside and around that line that helps them connect. If you want a few specific questions to encourage your readers to move speedily into these deeper lines of inquiry, here are a few I've found helpful:

Can you describe the voice or tone of this piece and how it functions?

What are the ways the form and structure of this piece are aiding the work it attempts, and what do you think that work is?

What are some things this author repeats and why?

How can/does the piece play with shifts between active and passive voice?

What does the title teach you?

Can you picture the colors used in this piece, and how did the use of color influence how you read these pages?

Are there other sensory details you would suggest the author consider in revision?

What is or what can this piece be doing with punctuation?

You can ask questions like these at the beginning of a workshop session to help guide discussion toward concerns you might be having about your writing. They are also great follow-up questions to help you receive more in-depth responses to your writing. There are workshop models in which writers are encouraged to stay silent the whole time. One reason for this mode of workshopping is so that writers can make the space to absorb feedback rather than working up responses in the moment. Another reason is so that writers can experience the sort of responses their readers might have encountering work in a bookstore or submission pile, without authorial mediation and explanation. But remember that this is your workshop. This is your opportunity to understand both your own work and people's responses to it. Even if it means pulling someone aside to ask a follow-up question after the formal discussion has concluded, I stand behind my suggestion that you should make space to seek the kind of information you need.

Be as specific as you can with your questions. Specific questions allow for more grounded responses. As with most things in good writing, the universal is most often accessed through the specific rather than the other way around. If the group talks about punctuation strategies for one piece, you and everyone in the group will have learned things about punctuation that can be applied and reframed in many other circumstances. If you never broach the issue of punctuation, you will have missed the opportunity to learn about how punctuation informs the pacing, legibility, tone, style, and appearance of the piece being critiqued as well as any other piece to which similar questions might apply. If it makes sense to do so, ask specific follow-up questions about things said to other people too: "I love what's been said so far about how this poem's em dashes guide the pace of reading. I wonder if we could discuss the line breaks as well." This can mean that you can have access to answers that more than one person will be able to apply to their own work.

Remember that advice to others may not feel immediately applicable to you but may become useful one day. Always listen deeply and empathetically. Fundamentally, writing well is about communicating well. There are a lot of different ways we can do this, and it never hurts to learn from others' styles. You can even learn something from the person in the workshop who never seems to be answering the same question you asked (or who answers the questions in ways that put you off). Perhaps what they can teach you is what kind of reader you are not interested in accommodating. In some ways the point of the workshop is to teach you how to internalize the insights of other readers so that eventually you can ask yourself a series of questions, intuit a variety of possible responses, and construct the solutions that work best for you. This works best if you have a wide range of feedback. You don't want everyone in your workshop to be a yes-person. You don't want everyone in your workshop to love everything you write. And you don't want to love everything about what everyone else writes. Rather than asking how to please everyone (you can't!) or worrying about universal "relatability," find ways to understand what it means for some readers to be more accommodated by a text than others. Sometimes formulating your answer to why you don't want to accommodate one reader's suggestions is the push you need to help you learn what you do want your work to accomplish.

Learning and growing happens as much from when we are challenged as from when we are praised. It is important to experience both in your workshop and to learn what to digest and what to dismiss and why.

Set out to make at least two connections that might last beyond the workshop. Have you seen *Top Gun: Maverick*? One of the moments of joy I gleaned from that movie was a lifelong connection that becomes fundamental to the success of a key character. This community of writers is surprisingly small, and it is a wonderful thing to connect with people who will challenge you and encourage you during the time you are in workshop and for many years after. It's a lot easier to find these people if you are open to building community from the start.

Drink lots of water. I'm serious. It's important to stay healthy when you want to be part of a healthy environment. In many workshop settings, particularly the endurance feats of conferences or summer retreats but also less formal gatherings with fellow writers, we can be overwhelmed by stimulation and triggers. For some of us this means drinking more caffeine or alcohol as a coping mechanism. For others, we forget to hydrate, or we don't eat the kinds or quantities of foods that truly nourish us (anyone want some potato chips?). Then we end up in workshop with a headache, a foggy brain, a fluttery heart, and a sense of anxiety and discomfort that gets in the way of listening and participating fully. Pause to drink water throughout the day and throughout your workshop. Keep healthy snacks like fruit nearby. Our bodies and our minds are directly connected. Be kind to one and you are often well on the way to being kind to the other.

Above all, in your workshops make it a point to take risks, to be willing to advocate for and nurture yourself, and to truly and carefully listen to yourself and to your fellow writers. Doing these things will continually reward you on the page as well as in your life.

How to Think About Your Time in an MFA Program

By Dan Beachy-Quick

YOU'LL hear it as soon as you leave your first workshop—time counting itself down. Egg timer or hourglass, grandfather clock or moon's lunar click, just as the experience has begun, you'll feel your time is running out. It can create panic as easily as petulance, this sense of precarity, that you've finally arrived where you most belong, only to feel as if it were already gone. Panic can lead you to write as much as you can possibly write, fearing that on the other side of the degree, work's weird wasteland might put a stranglehold on your inner life; petulance can lead you to say to anyone who might listen, in a desperation nearly inexplicable to yourself, "Look, look at what I've made," seeking validation or seeking proof, and wondering why they can't see it.

But you can learn to hear that ticktock of time's relentless passing differently—you might need to learn to do so, to make the most of your time in your MFA. Not a countdown to nothing left, nor a sum of hours spent, but something more like a metronome, a tool not to teach you that time is a commodity, but a truer economy—a rhythm, a meter, a cosmos. You're introduced to a sense of poetic order, a pattern that promises you that you do not live, as you feared, in scarcity. No, you're learning to live in time of another kind—not one in which your worth is proved by how much you do and the assumed successes that follow (publications, awards, etcetera), but something far simpler and more beautiful: You're learning to labor in language in such a way that you've made yourself worthy of the next labor. You write the poem that is no more than the clearing of the ground that makes the next poem possible—or essay, or story, or novel.

To do this you might have to take seriously ideas your younger self scoffed at—art's odd eternity, poem's strange paradise. Then time suddenly is no longer the precious resource of which you must take full advantage, but is instead the open field itself. Then you might find certain moments living on within you forever, newer by the year—talking with friends in a dark pub, taxidermy fox above the bar's mirror, arguing over a line of Emily Dickinson as if nothing in the world mattered more. And nothing did matter more. Nor does it now. You'll know what I mean, when you know what I mean. "And Being, but an Ear"—that's the line. You might look back, a quarter century after your MFA is done, feeling no time has really passed at all, for there is hardly a thing called time that actually exists, not really. You'll realize all you'd meant to learn was how to listen, the ever-present present tense of what *now* is, when *now* is when you're listening. And you're listening now, trying to listen, to words of advice that bewilder more than they guide. How do you make the most of your MFA? You might suspect a poem is a form of listening. You might define a poet as I have come to define it: a creature that opens its mouth to listen. You learn to listen.

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When Workshop Is Hard

How to Deal With Tough Critiques, Miscommunications, and Our Own Insecurities

By Rosalie Knecht

I've spent a lot of time thinking about the egos of writers. We live in a culture suffused with therapeutic language that has shifted its meaning with broad usage, and *ego* is a good example. In its original sense, it was value-neutral, meaning only the thinking, conscious self, the one putting sentences together, anxiously replaying conversations, having coherent qualities and consistent likes and dislikes. The ego is just the self. In classical psychoanalysis, the ego was what mediated between the world and the raw, chaotic id. The ego does your taxes, decides what peanut butter to buy, comes up with something appropriate to say at baby showers, while the id boils and quakes somewhere underneath, obsessing about sex and death.

Writers have a reputation for having egos that are more sensitive and more demanding than the average, and nowhere is this observed more often and with more stress than in the workshop setting. Writing, maybe more than other art forms, requires a horrific putting-forward of the self. Fiction, in particular, has a way of revealing private preoccupations, weaknesses, and wounds that the writer is not necessarily aware of, or at least did not intend to reveal. It does this in much the same way that dreams do—in themes, patterns, shapes, and, at times, symbols that are humiliatingly obvious. When writing, I know what interests me, I know what problems feel knotty enough to spend hundreds of hours with and which ones don't, but I often do not see until years later (years!) why I was hung up on that particular thing at that particular time—and this kind of hindsight is embarrassing, frankly. In our work we are transparent and oblivious at the same time. We are doing a little dance, and our fly is down. This unawareness is the reason we need the workshop, and it's also the reason the workshop can be so excruciating.

When I was in workshops in college, the rule was that the person being workshopped could not speak. I've heard this rule is falling out of favor, and I can see why—it is sometimes miserable. Its function is to keep the workshop from becoming an argument and, more than that, to relieve the workshopped of the pointless labor of defending their piece. Whether you feel relieved or not by the presence of this rule depends on many things, not least the temperament of the group. If you trust them as readers and colleagues, it's a useful check on defensiveness, and in the privacy of your mind you can simply disregard the feedback that feels off and take in what you can use. But if the group dynamic is off, the rule does not work at all. Instead it feels like a bizarre, low-stakes nightmare in which you are forced to listen while people assert that you have done and said things that you have not done or said, or struggle to understand your work on the basis of a typo, or mix up your main characters, or misremember crucial plot points discussed in earlier workshops.

This is the main struggle of the workshop, whether or not you're allowed to talk: You will be misread. What do we do with that? Is it useful information (*I'm not being clear enough, the text is misleading in specific places*)? Is it infuriating (*you're not even paying attention to my work, you're disrespecting me, you're stupid*)? Is it threatening and painful (*I'm not good enough, the experiences that inform my work are incomprehensible to this group, the group is interpreting my work based on*

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stereotypes about me and people like me)? It's important to acknowledge that the worst of these wounds are not a necessary hazard of critique, but rather something we can work to minimize by creating workshop environments with more care and awareness of how power moves through them. Even when this is managed well, misreadings will happen. In our lives, in our relationships, we speak and hope to be understood. The workshop is only a formalized version of this, which is why it can be painful in such a personal and familiar way when it goes badly.

And the misreadings of workshop are not always unintentional. The tricky relationship between writer and protagonist allows space for moments of breathtaking passive aggression. I'll never forget sitting in workshop with a person who had written a story in which a protagonist who superficially resembled him hooked up with a series of hot women and listening while another participant smilingly praised him for creating such a hilariously obtuse asshole of a character. On another occasion, a writer critiqued one of my pieces by repeating a line of dialogue in a singsong, nasal falsetto. It's fine! It's no big deal. He was actually a pretty good writer, and I barely even remember it now. It has been nineteen or twenty years and it's totally fine!!!

But let's say that the personalities in your workshop are harmonious, the vibe is great, the atmosphere is serious, the perspectives are diverse. Let's say you are all taking Diet Coke–and–gossip breaks together, and there's a group chat so you can organize birthday drinks, and you all have basic communication skills and you're recommending books to one another and there are no couples in the group who have recently broken up. It can be hard anyway, because sometimes the problem with feedback is that there's just too much of it. This problem can actually be made worse by having a group that is enthusiastic and engaged, that truly cares about your work. An engaged reader has a stake in the piece, and when invited to imagine how it could be better, they will deliver and will suggest several different

directions the entire thing could take. And then the next person will do the same, and then the person after that, and in the end you will have exponential suggestions for turning your piece into something that resembles it but is not it at all. This can make you feel like you have to lie down in a dark room for a day or two. You may conclude that both writing and reading are just a bad idea, a giant can of worms, best to avoid.

One of the ways I handled this problem in workshop was to *not* take notes. This allowed the advice that was smart and well intentioned but not aligned with the goal of the piece to just fall gently away, through the sieve of my memory. Irrelevant and confusing feedback is hard to remember. What I could remember without notes was the advice that actually solved problems I was already struggling with and, unfortunately, the rude stuff. You will remember the rude stuff verbatim on your deathbed. It's fine, though! Jake, I wish you the best!!!

The second thing I always did was to put the stack of marked-up copies of my piece aside as soon as I got home and not look at them for at least a few days. If you will indulge me in a metaphor: When you bake a cake, you don't eat it hot. Let the thing cool. Your feelings are too inflamed right after a workshop, both the positive and the negative ones, for you to be a good editor. Think about something else. Go to work. Call your mom. Watch *Love Is Blind*. Roast a chicken. It'll wait.

The workshop is a group of people trying to communicate with one another, sometimes succeeding, often failing, and this is true whether you are the person in the hot seat or one of the many others at the table. Our miscommunications feel bad, but they are fixable and temporary, a product of a particular set of relations on a particular day, in a particular place. Take what's useful and leave the rest. Cultivate a poor memory. Loosen your grip. Be generous. And when you're complaining afterward, make sure you don't accidentally text it to the group chat.

Belonging and the MFA

By Jessica Kashiwabara

OVER the past several years there has been a strengthened outcry for change and reflection in this country and within our communities about what diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging really mean. For so long, the words to describe the oppression that many face were not a part of the vernacular, and the conversations about equity that have been so needed were not encouraged or facilitated. Now that the terminology exists, conversation has begun, and more of those in power are paying attention and acknowledging these issues, how do we translate intention into meaningful change? And what might this look like for writing communities?

Literary institutions, including universities with MFA programs, have been tasked with looking deeply at the ways their practices have perpetuated the power dynamics of a country rooted in white supremacy. Issues include all-white faculties, student bodies that are not diverse, teaching from a literary canon that is not inclusive, and financial and physical inaccessibility. In 2021, two important books guided the way to reconsidering some of the harmful practices within the workshop process and mentoring of emerging writers from marginalized communities, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom* (Haymarket Books) by Felicia Rose Chavez and *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping* (Catapult) by Matthew Salesses. Within MFA workshops, the programs that run these workshops, and the institutions that host these programs, there are questions that need to be considered: What does it mean to lead, to nurture, to guide, to be a mentor, to be an ally, to provide support and resources? How do we break the mold of such long traditions of teaching? How do we truly create safe spaces, not only for writing, but for the bodies and lives of writers?

Several MFA programs have been ahead of the curve in striving to better hold such space. One program attuned to the importance of having a faculty that reflects its student body is Randolph College's low-residency MFA program in Lynchburg, Virginia. Rooted in the intention to speak to the current landscape of literature and culture, the program boasts faculty including Kaveh Akbar, Mira Jacob, and Phillip B. Williams, many of whom were emerging writers at the inception of the program in 2018. "In my experience, the heart of a safe space is shaped by the framework established by the leadership, which for us includes a faculty deeply committed to caring for students and challenging and dismantling social and systemic abuses and misuses of power," says founding director Gary Dop.

Jacob, who teaches fiction and nonfiction at Randolph, sees the impact of this caring on both the students and faculty. "Most of us faculty come from teaching at programs where we are one of a few, tasked with representing all, and often implicitly or explicitly treated like a 'diversity hire'—just lucky to be in the room. It's exhausting and soul-deadening," says Jacob. "I remember the day I realized I didn't have to act nicer or dumber than I am to get the support I need to help my students thrive here. It was almost too much to bear." Akbar, who is on the poetry faculty, adds, "As corny as it sounds, it really does feel to me like we're trying to do something different at Randolph. Our graduates stay enthusiastically in touch with us and with each other. They often come back to visit and recommend the program to their peers. I've not experienced

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that anywhere else."

In thinking about the future, Dop emphasizes that safety must be thought of as distinctive to each individual student and ever-ongoing work. "The real task is to keep evolving in how we shape the framework of the students' experience, so we don't make the appearance of diversity and safety a defense against continuing to change to meet the latest needs of marginalized writers," says Dop. "Students five years from now will not be best served by our sense of progress today."

The impact of a strong community and consideration for each individual student is also key to the success for writers at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe. Founded in 1962, the public, tribal land-grant college offers a low-residency MFA program that emphasizes Native American and First Nations writing. Students in the program create a self-directed study plan highlighting their interests, needs, and self-described strengths and weaknesses to share with their mentor in order to build an individualized syllabus. "At IAIA we celebrate Indigenous values and see education as a democratizing force," says Deborah Taffa, director of IAIA's MFA in creative writing program. "We pride ourselves on a program that is supportive and noncompetitive. To affirm each other is to affirm our love of the art. We are here because we value literature and aim to inspire and take back control of our stories."

Several high-profile Native authors, including Jamie Figueroa, Oscar Hokeah, Sasha LaPointe, Terese Marie Mailhot, Tommy Orange, Jake Skeets, and David Heska Wanbli Weiden, have come out of the program with celebrated, award-winning work. "I believe being surrounded by other Native people who understand you is paramount to confidence," says Taffa. "I often say it's so much easier to write at IAIA because the burden of representation doesn't seem so heavy here."

Similarly, a growing number of programs understand that for writers to pursue work on their own terms, MFA programs must hold space for writers to work in languages besides English. Rosa Alcalá is the former chair of the department of one such program, the Creative Writing and Bilingual MFA at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), a public university that sits on the Rio Grande across the Mexico–United States border from Ciudad Juárez. The program creates a culturally and linguistically diverse space in which writers from all over the Spanish-speaking and English-speaking world can come together to write, read, and discuss work. "Because our students and professors bring with them their own literary traditions and histories, there's no dominating concept of what constitutes good writing and no predetermined canon to reinforce," says Alcalá. The program also includes a track in translation, which Alcalá emphasizes "moves between languages, expanding what we can express and to whom, who we are, and what's possible in our writing."

Alessandra Narváez Varela and Aldo Amparán are two writers from the program who published books within a year of one other. Varela's YA novel, *Thirty Talks Weird Love*, was published by Cinco Puntos Press in 2021, and Amparán's poetry collection, *Brother Sleep*, winner of the 2020 Alice James Award, was published in 2022. Both are El Paso–Ciudad Juárez locals who were undergraduates at UTEP and decided to pursue their MFA in creative writing in the place they love and in the community they want to serve. "We have so many success stories like theirs, of writers from the border who find in our program a place to tell their stories—stories that are really necessary and not often heard," says Alcalá.

Other creative writing programs incorporating the Spanish language include the University of Houston's PhD program in Spanish with a concentration in creative writing and University of Iowa's MFA Program in Spanish Creative Writing. The MFA program at Mount St. Mary's University in Los Angeles offers bilingual study in English and Spanish, and at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, a bilingual and binational university, many courses are conducted in Spanish, and the MFA program offers a literary translation concentration in Spanish and English.

Access to a graduate education may depend, of course, not just on the navigation of language barriers, but of political and legal ones, including immigration status. Janine Joseph is one writer who knows these obstacles firsthand. Joseph is an associate professor of creative writing at Virginia Tech, where she was previously the inaugural Dean's Distinguished Visiting Fellow. She is also a co-organizer for Undocupoets, a nonprofit literary organization that advocates for poets who are currently or who were formerly undocumented. When Joseph was seeking an MFA program early in her career, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration policy—an administrative relief that protects eligible immigrants who arrived in the United States when they were children from deportation—did not exist. Neither did the open conversations that have become more common in this country and within the literary community about documentation. "Just the fact that people

are equipped with the vocabulary, if for example someone said I am undocumented or I have DACA, people have at least heard these words by now," says Joseph. "Even if they might not fully understand the terms or all the layers that are involved in immigration and immigration issues, just the fact that it's spoken about feels, at least for me, remarkably different."

Creating a safe space for writers who are undocumented, have DACA, or have temporary protected status (TPS) requires intense consideration, within both the workshop space and in terms of legal and financial support. Undocumented individuals who've written about their experiences can be put in danger if others reveal their status outside of the workshop. Seeking administrative support and resources can cause a chain reaction by which their immigration status is disclosed to additional people, and family members may also be affected. "There might be real, legal repercussions for not just them, but all of their family members, for other people they know, and on and on and on," says Joseph. "It's such a complicated position to be in, especially when immigration law is involved, and your safety or your family's safety is involved. 'Well-intentioned' doesn't work in these cases."

According to BestColleges, an online resource providing information on higher education programs in the United States, "there are no federal laws that bar undocumented students from graduate school. Nevertheless, some states, including Alabama and South Carolina, do not allow undocumented learners to attend public schools." In addition, "some schools require proof of citizenship" while "others allow only DACA students to apply. Still, others are willing to accept all qualified students—regardless of their legal status." With this array of circumstances, it can be overwhelming for a student to navigate admissions without support from the institution that claims to welcome them. Many students, as was the case with Joseph, are sent to international students offices, which are not equipped to answer the questions of an undocumented student. International students who are in the United States have visas specifically indicating that they are here to study, a completely different circumstance than that of undocumented students. "How do I make it through this semester if I'm not even sure I'm going to be allowed to stay in this country? These are real, real issues and pressures that undocumented students face," says Joseph.

Even if a writer gets in the door of an institution, they then face the consideration of funding. "No one will apply to a partially funded program because if you are undocumented or you have DACA or you have TPS, you do not have access to federal funds," says Joseph. "Programs need to fully understand what it means to recruit and retain undocumented students: Does an offer of full funding mean the same thing for a noncitizen in that specific state or institution or program?" In fact, too often there are discrepancies as some states do not allow undocumented students to receive scholarships, and in some cases DACA students who have employment authorization are eligible for teaching assistantships but not for scholarships. In the future Joseph hopes to see institutions providing more support with information on their website specifically for undocumented, DACA, and TPS students that includes funding, mental health resources, and legal support—support that is concrete and shows they are prepared to host these writers. If you are seeking more support, the Undocupoets, currently organized by Joseph, Esther Lin, and cofounder Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, are available to answer questions through their website (undocupoets.org) or by e-mail at undocupoets@gmail.com.

While some MFA programs continue to reckon with and reimagine inclusion within the walls of the institution itself, others have found ways to approach progress by emphasizing the world beyond one's own writing, to consider the communities writers take part in. At Antioch University's low-residency program in Los Angeles, the rights and ethical responsibilities of creative writers are addressed in the pursuit of becoming an engaged literary citizen. The program's unique Field Study requirement offers an opportunity for writers to engage with their local communities through a service project of each individual writer's choosing. "We center conversations about inclusivity, access, injustice, and how to make the world of writing and writers a more equitable place," says Lisa Locascio Nighthawk, program chair. "We've found that this strategy of acknowledgement, engagement, and activism is transformative in the lives of our students."

Nighthawk recognizes that while there have been improvements in MFA programs in terms of representation in faculty and student bodies, "less progress has been made in making programs accessible to students with limited financial resources and from nontraditional educational backgrounds." One way the program is helping to change this is through a commitment to raise scholarship funding, which includes two $10,000 scholarships for UCLA Extension Writers' Program Certificate holders, three to four $10,000 merit and need-based scholarships, along with

other scholarships through the Eloise Klein Healy Scholarship Fund.

While gradual progress is being made in some facets of representation, there is still a severe lack of support for some marginalized communities such as the disabled community. Although most universities have Disability Services on campus, there is rarely direct funding for disabled writers and few disabled-identifying faculty members. There are, however, some programs finding creative ways to offer support, such as Drexel University's low-residency program in Philadelphia. Its first MFA cohort, which graduated in the spring of 2021, donated a total of $1,300 to start the Drexel MFA Gift Fund for Marginalized Writers—then received an anonymous $50,000 donation to supplement the funds they'd raised. The scholarship funds the entire degree program for a writer from a marginalized community, including writers living with chronic illness or disability, as well as writers who have aged out of foster care, who are experiencing homelessness or food instability, or who otherwise have been historically disenfranchised. For more information on support for disabled writers, Disability Visibility Project (disabilityvisibilityproject.com) and its podcast, now ended, are both headed by disabled activist and writer Alice Wong, are excellent resources.

The truth is, there is a lot of research you need to do as a writer to find the best place to flourish in your creative work. Even when you find and are accepted into an MFA program that speaks to who you are, there is likely more work to be done, beyond just the writing itself. Perhaps, though, this is the role of a writer, to strive not only to become better at your craft, but to become the best literary citizen possible, by supporting other writers, by finding ways to push what is possible within an institution: to advocate, to demand more resources, to publish work that will inspire future authors to write work that will in turn inspire more writers. The goal is to keep moving forward, to keep evolving, to keep providing support, so that every writer can say to themselves, *This is possible for me, I belong here.*

Older in the MFA

Drafting a Rich Second Half

By Laura Spence-Ash

OVER ten years ago, when I began a full-time MFA program, the first person I met in my cohort was the writer Laura Villareal. We shared an office as well as a name. We both taught composition, and we had the same teaching mentor, who mistook us for each other at first. This struck us as quietly hilarious as, outwardly at least, we couldn't be more different. Laura is Latinx and queer, from Texas; I am white and straight, from New Jersey. Laura is a poet; I write fiction. Laura is petite; I am not.

Laura was in her early twenties when we started the program. Her dark eyes shone over the top of her large glasses. She wore cute, chic clothes, and when she laughed, which she often did, she hid her mouth with her hand as if not to let too much joy escape. Her poetry, then and now, expresses her deep investigation of the ties that bind the physical and the emotional worlds; myth and story and landscape are intricately intertwined. In our office her students would cluster around her desk, two or three deep, always leaning in.

My students sat farther back. Because the biggest difference between Laura and me is this: I am more than twice her age. I turned fifty-five that first fall in the program; my son is only a year younger than she is.

My age was one of my concerns when I thought about applying to MFA programs later in life. I had written in college, but then life moved in different directions. I got an MBA, I worked in finance and marketing for television, and then, after staying home with my kids when they were young, I worked in higher-education administration. But writing was always that thing in the back of my head, that thing I planned on returning to, someday.

For years I printed out applications to MFA programs that lay half completed on my desk. I always had a million excuses why I shouldn't apply: My work wasn't strong enough, I didn't have anyone to write a letter of recommendation, my time had simply passed. But then, in 2013, I got a huge boost of confidence and support when a short story I wrote was accepted by *One Story*. It was my debut publication.

I spoke with the editors there about applying for an MFA. They weren't convinced that it was something I needed to do. "You're already on your way," one of them said. "I don't think it's necessary." An MFA certainly is not a requirement to becoming a writer, but I felt as though there was so much I didn't know. I wanted a foundation upon which to build my fiction. I wanted to know the rules so that one day, perhaps, I could break them. And although I didn't realize it at the time, I think I needed the community as well.

So in the fall of 2013, I completed a handful of applications, applying mostly to low-residency programs. I knew I would find people closer to my age in such programs, as the population there tends to skew older; low-residency programs are often the perfect solution for adults who are deep into a career or have existing obligations on their time. But they are expensive, and there's little in the way of financial aid. So I applied to a few local full-time programs, even taking the dreaded GRE at the eleventh hour. I took the sealed manila envelopes to

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the post office—yes, this was before applications were fully online—and the young postal clerk ran his finger under the address of one. "Wow," he said, looking up quickly to scan my face. "*You're* applying to an MFA program?"

I should have been more offended, but deep down I shared his disbelief. Then a few months later I received a phone call from Jayne Anne Phillips: Rutgers University–Newark invited me to join its program and very generously offered me a package that included teaching and benefits. The faculty was (and is!) stellar, and the offer impossible to pass up. And yet when I visited, one of the current students told me that she was the oldest in her year, and she was thirty-five. I spent the summer before I matriculated worrying about how I would ever fit in.

My first semester I kept my head down. Everyone was friendly, but they were young, with most in their twenties or early thirties. The next youngest person in my cohort was forty. I told myself I had too much to do to fully engage with any of them: I was enrolled in three classes, I taught a section of freshman composition, and, because my daughter was in her senior year of high school, I had college applications to oversee and swim meets to attend.

After class on Thursdays, pretty much everyone set off for McGovern's, the local cop bar, with its lime-green windowless walls. I saw pictures and I heard stories: They drank, they stayed out late, they talked writing until the bar emptied, long after the law students and the business students had called it a night. I never went, waving goodbye to them all on a dark Newark street and heading to the train station alone. Again and again I reminded myself: I didn't enter an MFA program to make friends; I was in the program to become a better writer.

And that was definitely happening. I was learning so much, both in workshop and in electives. Over the course of my time there, I was in workshops led by Jayne Anne Phillips, Alice Elliott Dark, and John Keene. I took every craft class that was offered, including two on the craft of poetry. In workshop I received helpful critiques from such careful readers, and I was able to incorporate that feedback to make my work better. I think I learned even more, though, from reading the work of others and trying to provide constructive comments for them.

The only downside, really, was that teaching composition took up a huge amount of time. I had never taught before, and I had also never taken composition. I remember a moment, about six weeks into the program, when I realized that I had not written a word of fiction since the semester began. (I had written a few stories over the summer in preparation for workshop.) Most of my time was taken up with class prep and grading essays. It took me a minute to figure out how to balance my workload so that the emphasis was on the writing and not on the teaching.

I think it was partly that balancing act—making sure that writing was at the center—that allowed something else to shift during that first year. I became more comfortable being there. I spent time hanging out in my office, talking with Laura and our other office mates, as well as with the writers in offices down the hall. We became friends. Laura and others urged me to join them at the bar or at readings in Manhattan. I started going out on Thursday nights and the occasional Saturday. How wonderful it was to talk reading and writing and craft. Over time those conversations became just as important to my education as the more formal instruction.

I think I finally understood that I had misread them all. I thought they would see me as a parent, someone prone to disapprove, someone they wouldn't respect. Someone who wouldn't appreciate their work. I worried, too, that they wouldn't like my work. I wasn't writing about being a young person in a fraught world. I was writing about loss and grief and regret, often through characters who lived in a world way before my classmates' time.

It turned out, though, that age fell away when we met through the work. It simply didn't matter. And I learned that they were far more accepting than I was. I feel quite sure that as a grad student in my twenties, if I had encountered someone my parents' age, I would have dismissed them for being old, for being out of touch, for being judgmental. No one did that to me. They treated me like an equal; they graciously accepted me into their fold. I will be forever indebted to them for that.

I went back to school to get my MFA and to become a better writer. Now, over a decade later, I am happily ensconced in the writing community. I write, edit, and teach. I've published stories and essays and a novel. I love promoting the work of others on social media. My community is still expanding as I continue to attend conferences and residencies as well as meet writers at social events

and readings.

When I set out, I didn't understand how important community can be. But now I have all these wonderful friends and colleagues, writers I cheer for as their work goes out into the world, as everyone else discovers their brilliance. Three of my closest friends from my MFA have had great news: Megan Cummins's debut novel, *Atomic Hearts*, was published in by Ballantine in 2025; Anisa Rahim published her first book, *An American Meo: A Tale of Remembering and Forgetting*, with Spuyten Duyvil Press in 2023; and Mel King—who worked on fiction during the MFA—is on the final draft of a memoir. And there are so many others producing wonderful work, writers I am very proud to call my friends.

As they have become editors and administrators and teachers, in addition to being writers, their ability to reach across the aisle—be it one of age or gender or race or class—will make a tremendous difference in our world that is thankfully chock-full of differences.

Laura returned to Texas after the MFA. I was sad when she left the New York City area, but we have stayed in touch—we text regularly and shout out each other's work on social media. Her debut poetry collection, *Girl's Guide to Leaving*, was published by the University of Wisconsin Press in 2022 and won the Writers' League of Texas Book Award for Poetry.

In February 2024 we saw each other at the AWP conference in Kansas City, Missouri. She was on one of the featured panels, interviewing Rigoberto González and Carmen Giménez about literary citizenship. Rigoberto—who taught in our MFA program and was Laura's thesis adviser—talked about how proud he was of her and all her many accomplishments. I sat there in the dark auditorium looking up at them on the well-lit stage, tears in my eyes. I am so proud of Laura as well. And I'm so glad that I decided to get my MFA later in life. How lucky am I that I get to live such a rich second half.

The Thin Envelope

By Yona Harvey

Embracing Your Writing Life After MFA Rejections

IF YOU'VE been rejected from an MFA program, the experience may have left you stumped about how to move forward as a writer—or, worse, questioning your abilities. You wouldn't be the first writer to feel this way. A rejection from an MFA program comes with a particular sting and creates a particular dilemma: Should you brush yourself off and try again, or are these rejections a meaningful judgment of your talents as an artist? The answer is almost certainly the first: If the MFA still calls to you, reapply. Admissions committees change, your work evolves, and no one cloistered group of academics gets to decide if your work matters. It does. But it's also worth remembering that there is more than one way to learn to be a writer. "The main thing is to just keep writing," says Sakinah Hofler, a fiction writer, poet, and playwright in New Jersey who has been where you are now. Other writers agree. Some of their stories of persistence follow—may they remind you that your rejections are not a judgment of your worth or worthiness and that there are many ways to pursue your work.

Hofler loved reading as a child and longed to become a writer, but she didn't know how. When the YA novelist Ann M. Martin (The Baby-Sitters Club series) answered a young Hofler's fan letter explaining that writers were often "starving artists," Hofler balked. "I wanted to eat," she jokes. So she became a chemical engineer, but her dream of becoming a writer persisted. She longed for what an MFA program might offer: time, mentorship, and a consistent writing community. In 2010, all eight programs to which she applied rejected her. She laughs about it now but admits she felt sad back then, especially when three thin envelopes arrived on the same day rather than the thick acceptance packets she'd hoped for. "I knew before even opening them," she says.

Still, Hofler was determined to find the literary community she craved. She gave herself five years to pivot from engineering and used the community she found through the Gotham Writers Workshop as a sounding board for her short story drafts. She reduced her social life with coworkers, writing instead of going out to lunch, and woke at 4:30 AM to write before work.

The second time, she broadened her scope and applied to twenty programs. Her dedication paid off: In 2012, Hofler was accepted to six fully funded programs—three years ahead of her deadline. Several years later she feels grateful for that first round of MFA rejections, not only because she hadn't fully considered the best fit, but also because none of those initial programs were fully funded. She would have drowned in student loan debt.

Like Hofler, Nikesha Elise Williams of Jacksonville, Florida let MFA rejections motivate her. The two-time Emmy Award–winning news producer started drafting her first novel in 2013 and later self-published it, a process she believes offered her a kind of DIY MFA program—writing, revising, editing, and driving long distances for interviews or appearances at book festivals. Williams also credits her journalism career for building her skills: Tight deadlines trained her to write quickly, and experience in television and video have helped her visualize characters as part of her writing process. Interviewing subjects for her news program in Chicago connected her with countless

YONA HARVEY's poetry collections are *You Don't Have to Go to Mars for Love* (Four Way Books, 2020) and *Hemming the Water* (Four Way Books, 2013). Her first book was published more than a decade after earning her MFA from the Ohio State University.

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writers. Essentially she capitalized on the life she already lived to learn to be a writer. And, as with Hofler, her efforts paid off: She signed a deal with Simon & Schuster; her novel *The Seven Daughters of Dupree* will be released in 2026.

"There's more than one way to be a writer, and that's not [discussed] enough in the writing community," says Williams. What's more, there's no one path to success. And if Williams had insisted on getting an MFA to get started, would she ever have begun her book? Would she have completed it as quickly?

Like Williams and Hofler, Rabeetah Hasnain already had an established career—and a master's in education—when she finally decided to apply to MFA programs. "I don't think I [wanted to] publish a *New York Times* best-seller," Hasnain says. "I just wanted to learn." Before applying she had been active in writing groups in New Orleans, where she lived for about ten years. "And then when I exhausted all those options, I decided to pursue my MFA." She applied to nine programs and was accepted to one school, but because it was not fully funded, she did not attend at the time. She is now pursuing an MFA in fiction and creative nonfiction at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Applying to master's programs in education had been a seamless process for Hasnain. But she felt woefully unprepared for the competitiveness of the MFA application process, something she had carefully contemplated for three or four years beforehand. It wasn't until her partner introduced her to the MFA Draft groups on Facebook that she started to understand the intricacies of the MFA application system and saw how common it was to be rejected. Hasnain confesses that MFA Draft also made her behave in cringeworthy ways: "It felt like sorority rush or something," she says. And the more she learned, the more competitive she felt. She began checking the backgrounds of other writers in the group, comparing her work with theirs, and deftly sleuthing to discern acceptances on the group's shared spreadsheet. "It was awful."

"Sometimes I feel inferior to other writers [with MFAs] even though you know people say you don't need an MFA," says Danielle Buckingham. Buckingham currently works as a prose editor for a literary magazine and was encouraged by friends and by the writer Kiese Laymon to pursue the MFA in 2018. She applied to nine programs and, like Hasnain, was accepted to one school, but a lack of funding from the school meant she ultimately could not accept the offer. Living in Mississippi, Buckingham watched as her friends with MFAs got books published and gained access to a certain level of mentorship from professors. "I was very resentful about it for a long time," she admits.

She resolved to be "more intentional" the second time she applied, focusing only on fully funded programs and being realistic about the schools she believed would be the best fit for her writing, which honors rural, Black Mississippians. But the MFA rejections made her wonder if "only one or two people can go through that lane." She's right to ask that question, especially in today's climate in which institutions scramble to diversify or at least appear to be diverse.

Hasnain shares Buckingham's skepticism on that front. She was waitlisted at a school where another woman "who looked and sounded a lot like me, who has a similar background to me, ultimately got in," while Hasnain did not. "In my mind I was like, 'Oh, did you have a quota?' Like, you only have a certain number of brown women from a certain religion or cultural background. I couldn't shake those thoughts, and I still can't," she says. "That's the one thing that kept me hesitant, I think, to apply again."

Navigating rejections like this can amount to respecting your own sensibilities and standards as a writer and artist. Give yourself the time and space to get there, and then make the best decision you can—and remember the flaws in the academic system. "There can be freedom in understanding the cultural context," says Carrie Wittig, a writer and teacher in Pittsburgh, "which is that it is an elite thing to [attend an MFA program] and not getting into it does not mean you're not a good writer. It's a piece of it, but it's not the whole wheel."

Despite excellent mentorship from undergraduate creative writing professors, Wittig was rejected from seven fiction programs she applied to in 2005. She applied again in 2022, this time in nonfiction, but to only one school because she was now married and not looking to relocate. She was again rejected. Today Wittig is considering some low-residency program options, but she is primarily focused on finding a regular rhythm for her own writing. In the years since, Wittig has cultivated a writing community by opening the bookstore Stay Gold Books with her husband in Pittsburgh.

Nonfiction writer and journalist Dara Mathis was an undergraduate creative writing major but applied to only one graduate program in poetry after receiving a random promotional flyer about it from Florida State University. "Oh, it looks like they have money," she recalls thinking, poking fun at her younger, clueless self. Her MFA application was rejected, but a woman on the admissions committee recognized the strength of her material and outstanding academic record and recommended her for the literature program instead.

There Mathis studied Black women of the Black Arts Movement and integrated her love of poetry into everything

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she wrote. Grad school was also where she took her first creative nonfiction class. "That's when the light bulb went on," she says. She discovered ways to introduce lyricism into her essays, and that between space is now where her work most comfortably resides. After finishing the MA, Mathis kept her plate full with parenting, pitching long-form articles regularly, and contributing to outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Atlantic*. She advises MFA applicants struggling with moving forward to "take the time to deal with the emotional fallout from that rejection."

One writer, who asked to speak about her experiences anonymously, applied primarily to MFA programs with concentrations in creative nonfiction and interdisciplinary focuses. As a first-generation college student she felt intimidated by the entire experience, particularly the financial aspects of graduate studies. For example, a graduate equivalent to the Pell Grant—a need-based grant available to undergraduates from low-income backgrounds—doesn't exist. "My [financial] need wasn't met, and so to me that is also a form of rejection." Coming from an abusive family home, this writer did not have a rich family or a wealthy distant relative to tap for school funding. She spent months hoping to negotiate offers or waiting to hear what aid she might receive.

"For me, receiving the rejections from MFA programs and not attempting suicide is an accomplishment," the writer says. She has come a long way from her hometown in the Southern U.S. where "less than 5 percent of individuals go on to pursue undergraduate education." Despite these obstacles, she has found a writing community where she now lives abroad, which is more than a career move; it's a personal achievement.

Community, persistence, and time at the desk—these are the sources of any writer's success. As Sakinah Hofler says, "The MFA does not make a writer. Writing and reading make the writer. Find a community that will motivate you to write and give feedback." That may come from an MFA program—or it may not. You and your art can thrive either way.

Life After the MFA

By Dawn Denham

THERE aren't many writers I know who don't look back on their time in an MFA program as the closest they'll get to heaven on earth. These programs, whether they are full- or low-residency, typically offer good teaching, excellent networking opportunities, and a structured, protected writing culture. Yet the work has only begun by the program's end. What follows is a compendium of experiences and advice about how to sustain a writing life after the MFA, which I've gathered since graduating from the low-residency program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA) in 2006.

Write the day after you leave your program. In early January 2006 I returned to my regular life—my husband, my young son, and my dog as well as my full-time teaching job—and promptly stopped writing. Today I know (because I started writing again six months later) there were many reasons for my inactivity, but first and foremost I was suffering from a simple case of good old-fashioned postgraduation blues.

What I call postgraduation blues another might call writer's block. A student of mine at the University of New Hampshire once sent me this missive: "I have no idea if the poet William Stafford was a Buddhist, but the quote I need to pin to my shirt reads, 'I believe that the so-called "writer's block" is a product of some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance.... One should lower his standards until there is no felt threshold to go over in writing. It's easy to write. You just shouldn't have standards that inhibit you from writing.'"

In one of his lectures at VCFA, Larry Sutin said, "You never know when you'll do your best writing, so write a lot." He wasn't talking about desperation. Writing is always in part a process of exploring the unknown. If we don't know when the good stuff will happen, we have to make sure we show up to work to at least allow for the chance of it. For me, it's actually a statement of hope.

You have to circumvent those feelings of loss when your MFA program ends—those feelings of self-doubt when the work gets hard—by simply writing just as you had been all along, starting the day you graduate and either return to your old life or begin a new one.

Learn to be flexible. Many years ago I attended a weekend workshop with the late poet and prose writer Kate Braverman, who blew me away with her courage, her power, and her convictions. She told the students gathered in the room that if we were serious about becoming writers, we must forsake everything, live in a solitary room, and write endlessly. An older gentleman with a beard and white hair—whom I immediately pictured in a sparsely furnished room with a hot plate, a cat, and a portable typewriter—said, "I am ready to do it." I have no doubt he believed he was. I hope he is still writing.

This all-or-nothing approach to the writing life plagues many MFA students, but the truth is, it's not very practical. I've written in the living room with my toddler at my feet. I've written in coffee shops, airplanes, in the car during soccer practice, and sitting up in bed. I've done some of my best revising in the in-between moments, all those times when I wanted to believe I couldn't write because the setting or situation wasn't right or there wasn't enough open-ended time. I've learned to listen to myself, to know that any time I need to, I can get real writing done.

Someone asked Grace Paley, at a reading she gave in Tucson, Arizona, in the early nineties, "Do you like writing or do you like having written?" At the time, I knew I liked having written. I liked being done. Having something to show for it. But that kind of mind-set—thinking of yourself as a writer, even a specific kind of writer, without focusing on what really

DAWN DENHAM's writing has appeared in *Poets & Writers Magazine*, *Brevity*, and *Zone 3*, among other publications. She received an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts in 2006 and is the coauthor of *Writing Together: How to Transform Your Writing Life in a Writers Group* (Perigee Press, 1997). She has taught at the University of New Hampshire and curently teaches in Mississippi.

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makes you a writer—can lead to trouble.

Brian Tierney, who graduated from VCFA in 2005, learned that calling himself a novelist curtailed his creative output. "Though I have published poetry, nonfiction, and fiction, I had determined sometime after [receiving] my MFA that finishing my novel was the path for me." Bent on finishing what he'd started, Tierney was hit with a series of events—a move, house renovations, and an accident requiring surgery—that encroached upon his writing life. "In short, I made myself into a binge writer. That alone might not be a negative, but coupled with the box I put myself in, that I must only be working on a novel, I limited my output and missed many opportunities for writing about real life," says Tierney. "I no longer tell myself stories about what I am, which has freed me to be who I am. That has reopened in me a delicious wellspring of creativity. I still struggle with structured writing time, but only until I realize I am struggling—then I let it go and the work usually follows."

Slowly redevelop writing practice. Many students who graduate from MFA programs struggle with finding the balance between their writing lives and their professions and families. Poet Robin Behn suggests that graduates develop a practice similar to that of musicians, integrating daily practice into a normal routine. When I was an undergraduate at the Eastman School of Music, my voice teacher, mezzo-soprano Jan DeGaetani, taught me to be a student of myself by staying in the moment of the creative act and paying attention. I used to practice six days a week, usually in the early mornings, in small rooms outfitted with pianos and one square window, over which I taped a piece of paper for privacy—my own solitary world. I didn't mindlessly sing scales or whole arias. I practiced breathing and posture and then moved slowly through a line of a song, feeling the sensations as I produced sound, trying to figure out how to make each note sound as full, open, and pronounced as the one before it. Writing is a lot like this. "Figure out what makes that pitch work," Jan would say during a lesson, "and make it happen on the next one."

"I have to admit I don't feel like much of a writer these days," says nonfiction writer and poet Michelle Otero. After moving in with her partner and his children, Otero's writing schedule had to shift. "I still write in a journal almost every day, but my long, quiet mornings feel like a thing of the past." Otero tells me that she often wonders, "What is best for me, for my writing, for my relationship, my family? It is only through practice—the spiritual practice of writing, of living, of loving as a human being, a partner, and a parent—that answers come to me. This is my life. It looks nothing like it did a year ago. I work on the book in forty-five to ninety-minute spurts, sometimes longer.... I am learning something about stillness, about being present, about trusting my instincts. I am learning something of patience, which I thought I lacked, and something of faith."

Acquiring discipline is an uphill climb for me now too. I've written a thousand words every day. I've risen at 5 AM, five days a week. I've written at night after a long day. And then there are times when I slip, when I don't write at all. My husband once set up a "training" schedule for me, mimicking his cycling training routine. We all have to figure out how to fit writing into our lives in a way that allows us to produce and move forward in our writing. As poet, memoirist, and fiction writer Heather Sellers wrote, "Becoming a writer means being creative enough to find the time and the place in your life for writing."

"People go to MFA programs because they're hungry," says young adult novelist An Na. "Whatever it took to write, they did it. To feed that passion inside us we have to juggle, organize, be proactive to make sure the writing is our priority. Give it a place of honor and feed it."

Face your demons. We've all heard the stories about writers who, having felt so beat-up in an MFA program, graduate and never write again. Or those who worry about finding the time, or who, without the help of deadlines, stop writing all together. The bottom line is this: If you do nothing, nothing will happen. If you don't write, stories and essays and poems won't get explored or built. You won't learn anything about writing by not writing. (Though you may learn something if you write about not writing.)

"When I'm not writing, it's fear," said An Na during a panel discussion at VCFA. "You're beginning and beginning but not getting down to it. Face it. You have to figure out why you're not writing." Writing is hard work, and if you give yourself enough reasons not to write, you won't. So stop making excuses.

Stay connected to other writers. Do not underestimate the benefits of a writing community. It is one of the best things an MFA program can offer—and one of the most difficult to reproduce once you graduate. Fortunately, there are lots of ways to find like-minded writers. Check out your local or state writers guild or arts council. Usually these organizations offer classes, conferences, grant opportunities, and sometimes they sponsor writing

contests. Find an adult- or continuing-education department at a local college or university and sign up for workshops with visiting writers you admire. Take a local, nonacademic writing class or join an online workshop group. Attend readings at bookstores and college campuses, or those sponsored by local arts organizations. Make a commitment with one or two writers from your old MFA program to send each other pages regularly. Become a member of a literary organization. Attend conferences. Apply to artist colonies and retreats. Keep your subscriptions to literary magazines and trade journals current.

Join or start a writers group. During graduate school at the University of Arizona, I joined a group of writing teachers, all women, who met twice a month to write together and then read our rough drafts aloud. Our experience was so rewarding that we published a book about it, *Writing Together* (Perigee Press, 1997). Since then, I've been in groups that fizzle out and ones that thrive. Once I spent a weekend at a member's home on the coast of Maine. We wrote during long quiet spells, met for meals, read works-in-progress, and talked about life, art, and our writing.

Write to authors you admire. Read online journals, blogs, and other literary websites. Join a writers group at groups.pw.org. Start a blog. Launch your own literary journal. Read manuscripts for other literary journals. Review books. Interview writers. Do whatever you need to do to stay connected.

When you're ready, submit your work. While it may be true that not every writer needs to be published, serious writers write to be heard, and that means publication. Getting published is part of the business of the writing life—and it's also a good way to stay connected after attending an MFA program. At VCFA Bret Lott gave the best talk I ever heard on the subject of submitting work. He talked about the importance of setting up a system, about tracking your submissions with a spreadsheet and sending a rejected piece back out the day you receive word of its fate. He talked about how you must separate ego from the submission process. About how you should eschew intimidation mostly

by doing your homework: Read journals and discern if your work is a good match. He also encouraged us to send work to the best of the journals and magazines out there. If you are confident the work is ready, why shoot low?

The standard advice is good: Study journals and know your audience. Cultivate relationships with editors who like your work and whose work you like. Write short cover letters. Query editors. Cultivate readers to carefully consider your work before sending it out. Enter contests. While the process of submitting and receiving rejections is costly, frustrating, and often feels like a shot in the dark, it is necessary. Every time I receive a rejection, I am reminded that I am a working writer, that with each rejection letter I am closer to publication.

Find and relish inspiration. I tape lines of poetry, aphorisms, and advice to my laptop, to my desktop, and to the walls behind it. Today I read what's in front of me as I sit and revise this essay. "Challenge: Think about sentences. Have you ever been a student of the sentence?" And this line from Patricia Hampl: "It still comes as a shock to realize that I don't write about what I know: I write in order to find out what I know." And this one on my laptop: "If you are truly serious about doing distinctive work that will make its mark, slow down." And underneath it, this one from Lee Martin, who has been known to end his workshops with Isak Dinesen's words: "I write a little every day, without too much hope, too much despair."

On my writing desk is a photo of my son, taken one summer on the coast of Maine. He's perched atop a small rock surrounded by water. He holds his arms outstretched, the water glistening white, his whole body nearly black, a shadow against all that light. I wasn't there when this photo was taken. The angle of his shadowed body makes it hard to tell if he's facing the camera or looking out at the water, his arms reaching. It doesn't matter whether he's coming or going, what he's facing or leaving behind. In the second the camera clicked, he was simply *being*, fully present and alive, noticing everything.

May we all achieve such moments in our writing lives.

TWENTY-ONE OTHER WAYS TO GET THERE: AN ALTERNATIVE MAP TO A WRITER'S EDUCATION

The MFA is just one of many ways to develop your voice and your skills as a writer. If you're drawn to the idea of connecting with like-minded writers, learning from the authors you admire, or workshopping a manuscript—but don't necessarily want or need the MFA credential—consider the wealth of nondegree writing classes offered across the United States and online. Often taught by contemporary literature's biggest names and rising stars, quality writing classes can offer an afternoon of inspiration on a given topic, a season—or even a year—of sustained work on a project, or any number of lengths and styles of engagement in between. Look for classes with "workshop" in the title to find sessions in which you'll likely receive peer feedback. "Intensives" or "seminars" tend to be one-day events focused on a single topic, and "generative" classes mean you'll be putting pen to paper. Count on the organizations below for worthwhile classes led by top-notch faculty. Looking for even more options? Check your local library for free workshops, see if a literary magazine you admire offers classes, or look at a favorite writer's website or social media channels to see where they'll be teaching next.

PACIFIC COAST

Hugo House
Seattle, Washington
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
hugohouse.org

Literary Arts
Portland, Oregon
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
literary-arts.org/events

Tin House Seminars and Craft Intensives
Portland, Oregon
Online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
tinhouse.com/workshop

UCLA Extension
Los Angeles, California
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
uclaextension.edu/writing

Beyond Baroque
Venice, California
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available; some free classes
beyondbaroque.org/workshops.html

MIDWEST & MOUNTAIN WEST

Writers' League of Texas
Austin, Texas
Online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
writersleague.org/programs/classes

Lighthouse Writers Workshop
Denver, Colorado
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available

lighthousewriters.org/workshops

StoryStudio Chicago
Chicago, Illinois
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
storystudiochicago.org

The Loft
Minneapolis, Minnesota
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
loft.org/classes/about-classes

Madison Writers' Studio
Madison, Wisconsin
In-person and online
Fiction and nonfiction
Financial aid available
madisonwriters.com/schedule

NORTHEAST

GrubStreet
Boston, Massachusetts
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
grubstreet.org/find-a-class

Pioneer Valley Writers' Workshop
Northampton, Massachusetts
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
pioneervalleywriters.org

Thought Fox Writers Den
Stonington, Connecticut
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
thoughtfox.org/classes

Gotham Writers Workshop
New York, New York
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available; some free classes
writingclasses.com

Center for Fiction
Brooklyn, New York
In-person and online
Fiction and nonfiction
centerforfiction.org/writing-workshops

One Story
Brooklyn, New York
Online
Fiction
Financial aid available
one-story.com/learn/take-a-class

Sackett Street Writers' Workshop
Brooklyn, New York
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
sackettworkshop.com/writing

MID-ATLANTIC & SOUTHEAST

Blue Stoop
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
bluestoop.org/classes

WriterHouse
Charlottesville, Virginia
In-person and online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
writerhouse.org/classes

Hub City Writers Project
Spartanburg, South Carolina
Online
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
hubcity.org/workshops

Key West Literary Seminar
Key West, Florida
In-person
Poetry, fiction, and nonfiction
Financial aid available
kwls.org/writers_workshops

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CALLS FOR MANUSCRIPTS: BOOKS

BLUE LIGHT PRESS Book Award—Imagistic, inventive, honest poems that push the edge. Send 40-75 page manuscript, SASE, $20 reading fee to **Blue Light Press, P.O. Box 150300, San Rafael, CA 94915** by February 1, 2026. For guidelines, **bluelightpress@aol.com**. Website: **www.bluelightpress.com**. We read full-length manuscripts in the spring and chapbook manuscripts in the fall. For chapbook or full-length guidelines, write to **bluelightpress@aol.com**. Along with well-known poets we have published, we enjoy launching new poets with their first book. Send us your best work!

CALLS FOR MANUSCRIPTS: MAGAZINES

BLUELINE: A LITERARY MAGAZINE Dedicated to the Spirit of the Adirondacks seeks poems, stories, and nonfiction about the Adirondacks and regions similar in geography and spirit, focusing on nature's shaping influence. Submission period July 1 through November 30. Decisions mid-February. Payment in copies. Please identify simultaneous submissions; notify immediately if your submission is placed elsewhere. Electronic submissions encouraged, as Word files, to **blueline@potsdam.edu**. Please identify the genre in the subject line. Website: **www.bluelineadkmagazine.org.**

CONFERENCES

JOIN US IN TAOS, NM, for our 27th Annual Storytelling Festival on Saturday, October 11, 2025. Including a storytelling workshop, a community StorySwap, and the featured evening event with tellers Eldrina Douma, Sage Vogel, Celinda Kaelin, and musician Chuy Martinez accompanied by a traditional Northern New Mexico dinner. FMI: SOMOS, phone: **(575) 758-0081**; e-mail: **somos@somostaos.org**.

CONTESTS

THE 2025 BEST *Permafrost* Book Prize offers publication of a book of nonfiction, $1,000, and distribution through University of Alaska Press. Final judge: Alison Hawthorne Deming. Deadline October 1. Entry fee: $25. For complete guidelines, please visit: **https://www.uaf.edu/permafrostmag/annual-contests/index.php**.

2026 PRESS 53 Award for Short Fiction: Awarded to an outstanding, unpublished collection of stories. Reading fee: $30. Award: $1,000 advance, publication, 53 copies. Submit online with Submittable or by mail until December 31. Press 53 publisher Kevin Morgan Watson will serve as judge. Winner and finalists announced by May 3, 2026. Publication in May 2027. Details at **www.press53.com/award-for-short-fiction**.

GIFTED FICTION WRITERS! *Lilith Magazine*—independent, Jewish & frankly feminist—seeks quality short stories with heart, soul, and chutzpah, 3,000 words or under, for our Annual Fiction Contest. Open September 1–December 31. First prize: $300 and publication. We especially like fresh fiction with feminist and Jewish nuance and are eager to read submissions from writers of color and emerging writers of any age. Submit to **info@lilith.org** with the subject line "Fiction Contest" and your surname. INCLUDE FULL CONTACT INFO ON MS! Website: **www.lilith.org/contact/writing-for-lilith**. And check out *FRANKLY FEMINIST: Short Stories by Jewish Women from Lilith Magazine*, available now

wherever you buy books, or at **bit.ly/FranklyFeminist**.

I-70 REVIEW announces the Bill Hickok Humor Award for a poem. The winner receives $1,000, and the poem will appear in *I-70 Review 2026*. Submit 1 to 3 poems with a $15 entry fee to **i70review@gmail.com**. Reading period: January 1 to February 28, 2026. No submissions before January 1. Submissions will be eligible for publication in *I-70 Review*. The judge is Ted Kooser. For more information, visit **http://i70review.fieldinfoserve.com**.

THE INTERNATIONAL LAWRENCE DURRELL SOCIETY announces its 2025 White Mice Poetry Contest. Submit 1-2 poems focusing on "Home Port." No entry fee. Prizes: Reading invitation, online and print publication. Deadline: October 15. For further information, go to **lawrencedurrell.org** and click on "White Mice Poetry Contest."

JESSIE BRYCE NILES Chapbook Contest August 1–October 31: Prize: $1,000 and 50 author's copies. Judge: Georgia Popoff. Anonymous judging. $30 entry fee includes copy of winning chapbook. Submit manuscripts (25–34 pages of poetry) online via Submittable OR by USPS to ***Comstock Review* Chapbook, 4956 St. John Dr., Syracuse, NY 13215**. **NEW GUIDELINES!** No previously published collections or AI-assisted poems. For full guidelines, see **www.comstockreview.org** or **www.comstockreview.submittable.com/submit**.

SELECTED SHORTS' Stella Kupferberg Memorial Short Story Contest judged by author Simon Rich. Prize includes $1,000; publication on electricliterature.com; a 10-week course with Gotham Writers Workshop; and 2 tickets to a performance of Selected Shorts featuring your winning story. Max: 750 words. Fee: $25. Due: March 6, 2026. For complete guidelines, visit **www.selectedshorts.org**.

RENTALS/RETREATS

AUTUMN RETREAT in the Berkshires. The Vibrant Landscape of Writing with graduate-level instructor Page Lambert. 5 days. 7 writers. All genres. Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Luxurious private bedrooms. Beautiful 75-acre estate. Chef-inspired meals and candle-lit dinners. Group discussions and one-on-one private sessions. October 12-16. Private tour of Edith Wharton's The Mount. Website: **www.pagelambert.com**.

RESIDENCIES

DEADLINE FAST APPROACHING? Domestic hubbub? Prospect Street Writers House offers peace and quiet by the week or by the day. We'll find a spot for you. Website: **www.prospectstreet.org** or e-mail: **gclark@prospectstreet.org**.

JAMES MERRILL HOUSE invites writers of all genres to apply for Fall 2025–Summer 2026 residencies. Enjoy a stipend, living space, and access to James Merrill's National Historic Landmark home in Stonington, CT. Six residencies available. Apply from October 1, 2025, to January 12, 2026. Visit **jamesmerrillhouse.org/apply** for details.

SERVICES

45 YEARS OF PUBLISHING experience. Founder/former director of Paris Press, Jan Freeman provides astute manuscript consultations, development, and coaching for writers and poets. "Jan's ear and her perceptive questions and suggestions were right on the mark as I worked towards the completion of my memoir. I highly recommend her."—Rose Styron, *Beyond This Harbor* (Knopf). "My decision to work with Jan Freeman

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was one of the best decisions that I have ever made in preparing a poetry manuscript."—Glenis Redmond, *The Listening Skin*, (Four Way Books). Website: **www.janfreeman.net/editing-services.** E-mail: **janfreemaneditorial@gmail.com.**

ARE YOU SURE the time/cost of an MFA is right for you? Consider affordable, expert coaching, and workshops with a teacher/coach/editor to elevate and publish your writing! Practical, clear assessment and professional editing/writing from a published author/experienced editor/teacher makes all the difference. Manuscript evaluation, writing coaching, goal support, skill/craft building with Storyweaving Writing Coaching. Find what you need to thrive and grow! *P&W* readers get 10% discount for manuscript evaluation through September 30. E-mail: **cburbank@storyweaving.com**; website: **www.storyweaving.com**.

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AWARD-WINNING FICTION WRITER, graduate of Iowa Writers' Workshop, creative writing teacher of 35 years, provides personalized manuscript editing. I offer detailed editing, honest evaluation, and sensitive critique. I work with new and experienced writers, fiction and nonfiction. Contact Hugh Cook. E-mail: **hughcook212@gmail.com**. Website: **hugh-cook.ca**.

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WORKSHOPS

2026 IS YOUR MFA YEAR —let *ONLY POEMS* make it happen! Join the *ONLY POEMS* workshop "Kick Ass on Your MFA Application!" with our editors for a 2-hour virtual seminar on September 20 @ 12PM EST. We'll cover everything from program lists to portfolio prep. Fee: $75—use code MFA22 for 22% off! Register: **onlypoems.net/creative-writing-workshops.** Can't make it live? Book our *ONLY POEMS* "MFA Application Package" with one-on-one Zoom support that includes: custom program lists, brainstorming and developing your SOP, and in-depth feedback on your portfolio. So far, everyone who's worked with us has gotten in! Register: **onlypoems.net/mfa-application-help**.

ONLINE GENERATIVE WRITING WORKSHOPS. Energize your writing with online workshops in poetry, fiction, nonfiction, memoir and more. Write to inspiring prompts, get insightful feedback, and connect with a supportive community of writers without leaving the comfort of your home. Learn more and register: **www.stockton.edu/murphywriting**.

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