

ADVICE TO STUDENTS ABOUT GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN CREATIVE WRITING

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1. There are about 180 graduate programs in Creative Writing in the U.S. Programs range from 1 year M.A. programs (like Boston University's) to 2-3 year M.F.A. programs, to 4-5 year Ph.D. programs (like Florida State University, University of Houston, or University of Missouri). This handout focuses on MFA degree programs.
2. You will have to pick a genre to apply under: poetry or fiction. Some schools have also started to offer M.F.A. programs in creative non-fiction. Some schools are adamant that you stay within your genre. Others encourage cross-genre experimentation and even offer courses in playwriting, screenwriting, and other areas.
3. Funding for programs varies wildly. Some schools fund every person they accept equally and fully, with a combination of fellowship money and stipends from teaching. Many schools fund candidates that they consider stronger than others with more fellowship money (aka, workshop members compete with each other for funding). Other schools expect students to take out loans to cover the cost of tuition and living expenses. Teaching appointments (in either creative writing, literature, or composition) generally come with a tuition waiver, and pay scales vary (for example, Bowling Green State University pays ~\$8700 per year, while University of Wisconsin-Madison pays ~\$10,500 per year; Virginia Tech pays \$15,000 per year; the Michener Center at UT Austin pays \$25,000 per year). Teaching loads also vary wildly. The fellowship and teaching packages at some schools include health insurance, while others do not.
4. There is also the option of a low-residency program (two noteworthy ones are Warren Wilson and Bennington College) where you can basically hold down a job, and only attend school for a few weekends a year and a few weeks in the summer to earn your MFA. These usually do not offer funding other than loans.
5. Things to consider when figuring out where to apply:

**SIZE:** How big is their program? University of Virginia only takes 5 poets each year, which means workshop is only 10 students. University of Iowa takes 15 poets each year, and there are two workshops of 15 students each. Do you want variety, or intimacy in your program?

**FACULTY:** Who is on their faculty? Big names on a faculty are always a big draw, but talk to students at each institution to get a sense of whether or not the writers there are good teachers as well as good writers. Most program administrators will give you email addresses and phone numbers of current students. Do the professors on faculty spend time advising their students, and reading their work? Will they write you recommendation letters? Are they at the program year-round, or are they absentee?

**LOCATION:** What kind of geography will feed your writing? Do you want an urban institution, or a school in a more rural area? Keep in mind that costs of living in places like New York City and San Francisco are high—most students in programs in expensive urban areas have to work additional jobs to cover their living expenses, which cuts into writing time.

**FUNDING:** Are you willing to go into debt for this degree? An M.F.A. in creative writing is not a professional degree in the same way that a Ph.D. is. When you finish your program, unless you've managed to publish a book in the course of your studies (and even if you have), it is extremely difficult to find a job teaching creative writing at the college level. It is best to think of this degree as two (or three) years of time to write and improve your writing, rather than as a means to some sort of professional end. **I recommend you only attend a program if you receive a funding package**

(unless you happen to have a gigantic trust fund). In other words, unless you're independently wealthy, **DON'T go into debt to do this degree**, as it's not going to provide you with job opportunities when you get out that are significantly different from the ones you had going in.

**PROGRAM LENGTH:** Do you want a quicker two-year program, or a full three years to work on your writing? More and more programs are switching to the three-year model, which means that students leave with extensive college-level teaching experience, and an extra year to finish and polish a book manuscript. The answer to this question will depend on your own background, goals, and methods of working. Do you want to get through a program as quickly as possible? Are you a student that's planning to go on for a PhD anyway, so you'd prefer only two years on a Masters? Are you a student who might want the extra time to write and get settled in a new location?

**TAKING TIME OFF:** Just as an aside, I generally don't recommend that students apply to MFA programs straight from their undergraduate institutions unless they are non-traditional students. The transition is difficult for most, and you'll also find that getting into programs tends to be a bit easier once you have some life experience under your belt. Teaching experience, in particular, will help your applications to places that ask you to teach in exchange for funding.

**GRE ALERT:** Many programs require the GREs. Be sure to take these in time for the application deadlines. Most CW programs don't give them much weight, but the universities themselves often require them from all graduate programs as a bureaucratic measure. Don't let this be a hindrance for you! Get a practice book or CD, take a few sample tests and figure out the patterns, and then sit for the exam. If you choose not to take the GREs, it will mean that your list of schools will be limited.

**RESOURCE:** This is the best current guide to programs (comparative guide) that I know about:

[http://www.pw.org/content/mfa\\_programs](http://www.pw.org/content/mfa_programs)

*Poets & Writers* has also just released their 2011 MFA Rankings:

[http://www.pw.org/content/2011\\_mfa\\_rankings\\_the\\_top\\_fifty\\_0](http://www.pw.org/content/2011_mfa_rankings_the_top_fifty_0)

**NOTE:** For some people, geography is most important to them when selecting a school. I tell students that if they're really serious about going to an MFA program, it's best to apply across the country, to the places with the best funding. It's to your advantage to have a professor familiar with your work (who's up-to-date on MFA programs) assist you with drawing up a list of places you might consider applying. You can also go to your local bookstore, and get a *Poets & Writers* magazine and check out the ads. Programs with funding will advertise it proudly. Also, visit here and poke around: <http://www.pw.org/mfa>

6. **RESOURCES:** Some books, publications, and websites you should be aware of:

**MAGAZINES:**

These have ads for MFA programs listing their faculty and funding, and also often have articles about the application process:

- *The Writer's Chronicle* (put out by the Associated Writing Programs)  
<http://www.awpwriter.org/magazine/index.htm>
- *Poets & Writers Magazine* - <http://www.pw.org/mag/>
- **A really helpful site with tons of info that Seth Abramson has compiled on top MFA programs with funding (see right sidebar links):** <http://sethabramson.blogspot.com/>

**BOOKS:**

- *The AWP Official Guide to Writing Programs 10th Edition*  
<http://www.awpwriter.org/bookshelf/guide.htm>
- *The Creative Writing MFA Handbook: A Guide for Prospective Graduate Students*  
by Tom Kealey: <http://tinyurl.com/yb37jh6>

#### DISCUSSION BOARDS & BLOGS:

- A blog started by students trying to get into MFA programs with helpful advice and lists of programs: <http://creative-writing-mfa-handbook.blogspot.com/>
- *Poets & Writers* Speakeasy Message Boards:  
<http://www.pw.org/speakeasy/gforum.cgi?forum=34;guest=2419004>

#### A NON-COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM LIST

Below are some well-known programs (not even close to a comprehensive list) that have good funding (although, again, not all programs give all their students the same funding within the program):

- Syracuse - <http://english.syr.edu/cwp/cwindex.htm>
- Indiana University - <http://www.indiana.edu/~mfawrite/>
- Florida State University - <http://english.fsu.edu/crw/>
- U of Arizona - [http://english.arizona.edu/index\\_site.php?id=100/mfaprogram.htm](http://english.arizona.edu/index_site.php?id=100/mfaprogram.htm)
- University of Iowa - <http://www.uiowa.edu/%7Eiww/>
- University of Utah - [http://www.english.utah.edu/graduate\\_studies/index.html](http://www.english.utah.edu/graduate_studies/index.html)
- University of Virginia - <http://www.engl.virginia.edu/creativewriting/admissions.shtml>
- University of Michigan - <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/english/grad/mfa/>
- University of Mississippi - <http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/english/mfa/home.htm>
- University of Houston - <http://www.class.uh.edu/cwp/>
- Purdue - <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/creativewriting/>
- Cornell - <http://www.arts.cornell.edu/english/graduate/mfa/>
- Washington U - <http://artsci.wustl.edu/~english/writingprogram/>
- U of Oregon - <http://www.uoregon.edu/~crwrweb/>
- Bowling Green State U - <http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/creative-writing/mfa.html>
- U of Arkansas - <http://www.uark.edu/depts/english/PCWT.html>
- See Seth Abramson's most recent list of top funded programs here:  
<http://sethabramson.blogspot.com/2009/01/creative-writing-mfa-rankings-2010.html>

Programs that encourage students to work in more than one genre and offer funding:

- Louisiana State University - <http://www.lsu.edu/creativewriting/>
- Arizona State University - <http://english.clas.asu.edu/creativewriting/>
- Ohio State University - <http://english.osu.edu/programs/creativewriting/default.cf>
- University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa - [http://www.as.ua.edu/english/08\\_cw/program.html](http://www.as.ua.edu/english/08_cw/program.html)
- UNC-Wilmington - <http://www.uncw.edu/writers/mfa.html>
- U of Wyoming - <http://www.uwyo.edu/creativewriting/>
- Western Michigan U - <http://www.wmich.edu/english/graduate/index.html>
- Michener Center for Writers at U of Texas-Austin - <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/mcw/>

Relatively Brand New Programs that Offer Funding:

Iowa State, Vanderbilt, U of Colorado Boulder, McNeese State, U of Wisconsin-Madison, Georgia College and State U, Temple University, Virginia Tech

Programs that don't require GREs:

U of Iowa, U Mass Amherst, Brown, Syracuse, UNC Wilmington, U of Arizona, Arizona State, UC Irvine, Virginia Tech, U of Michigan, Colorado State, U of Wisconsin-Madison, Hollins, Boise State, Oregon State, U of Oregon, U of New Mexico, Northern Michigan U, U of Idaho, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Minnesota SU @ Mankato, Wichita State

7. **ADVICE – CAST A WIDE NET:** If you definitely want to go to grad school in CW next year, cast a wide net (apply to 7-15 places with good funding and interesting faculty), so there's a better chance you'll get in—many of these programs get hundreds of applicants (like UVA) for 5 or 7 slots, and it all depends on whether or not they like your manuscript, which is HIGHLY subjective. Many of the programs vary

stylistically. For example, Brown is super-experimental (teachers are CD Wright, Forrest Gander), while UVA is more traditional (Greg Orr, Rita Dove, Charles Wright). As a side note, if you're earning less than a certain amount, many schools will waive their application fees. It doesn't hurt to ask.

8. **ADVICE – A NOTE ON THE ECONOMY AND THE COMPETITIVENESS OF MFA PROGRAMS:** Due to the economy and the subsequent difficulty of finding jobs, more people have been applying to graduate schools. Applications to MFA programs in the last 2 years have doubled or tripled in some places. This means that programs that, statistically, were difficult to get into are now nearly impossible. Some (sobering) statistics:
- UW-MADISON (2002): ~250 APPLICATIONS FOR 6 SPOTS
  - UW-MADISON (2010): 629 APPLICATIONS FOR 6 SPOTS
  - U OF MICHIGAN (1994): 350 APPLICATIONS FOR 12 SPOTS
  - U OF MICHIGAN (2010): 1100 APPLICATIONS FOR 22 SPOTS
  - U OF OREGON (2010): 728 APPLICATIONS FOR 12 SPOTS
  - UVA (2010): 800 APPLICATIONS FOR 10-12 SPOTS

This means, statistically, that you have a better chance of being accepted at Harvard law school (and Seth Abramson, advocate for MFA applicants, actually did the math on that). What this means, practically, is that, in addition to applying to MFA programs, you should have some sort of back-up plan that you are not unhappy with potentially having to implement.

9. **ADVICE – RECOMMENDATIONS LETTERS:** On asking for recommendation letters and preparing your application: It tends to be easier for your professors if you open a file for your rec letters, so that we only need to write one and send it to a letter service, and then they send it out for you to any of the schools you're applying to. (They also will keep them for you for a few years, and can send them out more quickly than we can.) Some schools provide this service for their students via the Career Services office. Virginia Tech does not; UCSC does. A private service that I like that will hold confidential rec letters and send them out for you is Interfoli ([www.interfolio.com](http://www.interfolio.com)). Please try to give us at least a month lead-time to write a good letter. 2-3 months is even more helpful. The best time to approach academics for recommendation letters is generally over the summer (May-August). Note: Many schools now accept or even require electronic rec letters. Once all schools do this, it should phase out the need to use a letter service, but we're not quite there yet. Also, generally for MFA programs, you'll want at least 2 letters from Creative Writing Professors. Your third letter might be from a literature professor, or an employer.

What professors will often ask for in order to write an informed letter are the following items:

- A copy of the manuscript/poems you're sending out with your application
- A copy of your personal statement, or at least a brief informal paragraph to them about why you want to do an MFA
- A list of the schools you're applying to (this way if they know anyone at any of them, they can drop them a quick email about you too)
- A resume or another quick paragraph about what you've been doing since you graduated job-wise, or anything your professor might not know about you (hobbies, extracurriculars, unique things, etc.—that way they can work some of that info into their rec letter)
- A brief note on recommendation letters and the professors who write them for you: If you go to the trouble of asking a professor to write you a letter for graduate programs, don't abandon the application process partway through, or change your list of schools that you've decided to apply to; if you do these things, be sure to notify your recommenders as soon as possible. Also, do write a thank you note to professors who spend time writing you letters or assisting you in the application process—it's common courtesy.

## **Timeline for applying to MFA Programs:**

### Spring Semester:

Before the end of the semester, when your professors/recommenders flee for the summer, try to sit down with them (or contact them by email) to have them give you pointers on any application materials and portfolio materials you've written or gathered together. Give them your materials and get a critique, if they're willing to do this, or have them select your strongest work from things you might have written for their class. If possible, go to the school writing lab or career service to have them check out your non-portfolio materials (Statement of Purpose, Resume). Also, see this wonderful article by Vince Gotera (U of Northern Iowa) on "How to Write a Great Statement of Purpose": <http://www.uni.edu/~gotera/gradapp/stmtpurpose.htm>

### Summer:

For the next 4-6 months, do some serious reading and a lot of writing and rewriting so you have some great stuff for your portfolio.

Over summer, consider going to a writing conference or taking a class at a local college or venue where you'll get some workshop and face time with real writing professors who teach in MFA programs. Tell them you're applying to MFAs in the fall and ask for tips on applying and on your portfolio materials. This is also a good way to scope out potential schools and professors. This might not always be financially or geographically feasible, I realize. There are also some good online courses these days (through Stanford, Gotham Writers Workshop, Kim Addonizio, Mid-American Review, etc.—Mid-American workshops are relatively cheap and get great reviews):

- <http://continuingstudies.stanford.edu/courses/onlinewriters.php>
- <http://www.kimaddonizio.com/workshops.html>
- <http://www.writingclasses.com/HomePages/indexOnline.php>
- <http://www.bgsu.edu/studentlife/organizations/midamericanreview/online.html>
- <http://www2.uclaextension.edu/writers/>

Take the GRE! If you didn't do this during the semester, start a study plan now so that you can take it by the end of summer. (Try to take it by Sept. 15, so you'll be sure to have the scores to send to schools.) You want at least a 4.5 (bare minimum) on the analytical/written section, and something in the (at least) 70<sup>th</sup> percentile for verbal scores. Programs generally overlook the Quantitative scores. If you test poorly, don't be afraid to take the GRE again to raise your score. Schools will look at the most recent scores.

Beginning in August or September, look at schools and spend significant time evaluating which ones are really for you and where you think you'll fit.

Get your portfolio stuff critiqued by good readers. If there's any way to get your old profs or recommenders to re-read your portfolio stuff, that would be great. If not, get somebody to read it who can help you.

Again, early Aug/Sept, take out that Statement of Purpose and the other non-portfolio materials and do a re-read and potentially an overhaul. Programs are looking for your development as a writer and reader, your particular writing interests, and what makes you interesting and unique.

Good luck.

p.s. A note on acceptances and rejections: please do let your recommenders know when you hear from the schools you've applied to. They've taken time to advise you, and want to share in your triumphs (and advise you on how to handle the let-downs and complications of the process as well). They will have advice on how to navigate wait-lists, multiple acceptances, and rejections. Here is also an excellent piece by Vince Gotera (U of Northern Iowa) entitled, "The Grad School Letter Arrives—Now What?": <http://www.uni.edu/~gotera/gradapp/results.htm>